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ABSTRACT

THE REJECTED:

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLICAL PORTRAYALS

OF ESAU AND KING SAUL

In the present thesis I examine the biblical presentation of Esau and King Saul and their respective rejections within a Christian theological frame of reference. I do so in conversation with various significant interpreters past and present. In Part 1 I discuss the rejection of Esau in conversation with John Calvin and Jon D. Levenson. In Part 2 I offer an account of the rejection of Saul in conversation with Karl Barth and various contemporary tragic readings.

I suggest that Esau's exclusion from the line of promise is presented, through the ambiguous oracle of Genesis 25.23, in such a way as to limit confident human speech about divine decision making. As such, all discussion of Esau's rejection must take on a deeply provisional dimension. In terms of Saul's rejection, I argue that it is presented as the outcome of a responsive dynamic in YHWH's relationship with him. YHWH rejects Saul in response to his actions. The rejection of Esau can be read, in Christian theological terms, as displaying the transcendent dimension in God's decision making. By contrast, the rejection of Saul displays the immanent, responsive element in God's decision making. I conclude by suggesting that both are crucial in a responsible Christian account of divine rejection.

THE REJECTED:

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLICAL PORTRAYALS

OF ESAU AND KING SAUL

BY

RORY J. BALFOUR

SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

AT

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABS	Archaeology and Biblical Studies
<i>Ad. Rom.</i>	<i>Iohannis Calvini Commentarius in epistolam Pauli ad Romanos.</i> Edited by T.H.L. Parker. Leiden: Brill, 1981.
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDB	Brown, Francis, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.</i>
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>Creeds of Christendom.</i> Edited by Philip Schaff. 6th ed. 3 vols. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1919.
<i>CD</i>	Karl Barth. <i>Church Dogmatics.</i> Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance. Translated by G.W. Bromiley et al. 14 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010.
CNTC	<i>Calvin's New Testament Commentaries.</i> Edited by D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance. 12 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959-1972.
<i>CO</i>	<i>Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt Omina.</i> Edited by Wilhelm Braum, Edward Cunitz and Edward Reuss. 59 vols. Brunsvigae: C.A. Schwetckhe and Son, 1863-1900.

<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
CTS	<i>Calvin's Commentaries</i> . 45 vols. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-1856.
<i>DCH</i>	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . Edited by David J.A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993-2014.
<i>DSD</i>	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Edited by Emil Kautzsch. Translated by Arthur E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910.
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E.J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994-1999.
HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs
HBS	Herders Biblische Studien
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>Hul.</i>	<i>Hullin</i>
<i>IBHS</i>	<i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Inst.</i>	John Calvin. <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> . Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960.
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>ITQ</i>	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBA</i>	<i>Jewish Book Annual</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JBQ</i>	<i>Jewish Bible Quarterly</i>

<i>JES</i>	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
Joüion-Muraoka	Joüion, Paul. <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew</i> . Translated and Revised by T. Muraoka. 2nd ed. Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2006.
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JRT</i>	<i>Journal of Reformed Theology</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal for Theological Interpretation</i>
JTISup	Journal for Theological Interpretation, Supplements
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
<i>KD</i>	Karl Barth. <i>Die Kirchliche Dogmatik</i> . 14 vols. Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag A.G. Zollikon 1932-1970.
KHCAT	Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
<i>LQ</i>	<i>Lutheran Quarterly</i>
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Oudtestamentische Studiën
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
<i>PSB</i>	<i>Princeton Seminary Bulletin</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
<i>Šabb.</i>	<i>Shabbat</i>
SAIS	Studies in Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture

SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SHCT	Studies in the History of Christian Traditions
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
StBibLit	Studies in Biblical Literature (Lang)
<i>SVTQ</i>	<i>St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
SymS	Symposium Series
TA	<i>Tel Aviv</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry. Translated by David E. Green. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974-2006.
<i>TMJ</i>	The Torah U-Madda Journal
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

STATEMENT OF COPYRIGHT

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

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For Harry

A friend loves at all times,
and kinsfolk are born to share
adversity.
(Prov. 17.7)

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been a renewed interest in the topic of election in the Old Testament.¹ Perhaps as a corollary of this modest resurgence, we have also witnessed a series of fresh attempts to understand the Old Testament's account of the unchosen, non-elect or rejected figures. Sometimes these figures are considered as part of a wider account of election;² in other cases they have been granted sustained attention in their own right.³ Of course, interest in election in the Old Testament is longstanding and by no means the preserve of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.⁴ However, one of the distinctive elements in more recent work has been a sensitivity to the potentially distorting influence of traditional theological

¹ For book-length treatments covering a range of approaches, see Seock-Tae Sohn, *The Divine Election of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007); Joel N. Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation*, Siphut 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009); Hallvard Hagelia, *Divine Election in the Hebrew Bible*, HBM 84 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2019). Throughout I use the term "Old Testament" to describe the scriptures of ancient Israel in recognition of my position within the Christian tradition; the exception to this is when in conversation, at length, with those who approach the biblical text on different terms, in which case I use the term "Hebrew Bible."

² For instance, Kaminsky, *Jacob*, 111-136; Lohr, *Chosen*, 95-193; Hagelia, *Election*, 202-203, 218-238.

³ Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Bradford A. Anderson, *Brotherhood and Inheritance: A Canonical Reading of the Esau and Edom Traditions*, LHBOTS 556 (London: T&T Clark, 2011); Josef Sykora, *The Unfavored: Judah and Saul in the Narratives of Genesis and 1 Samuel*, Siphut 25 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2018). Monica Melanchthon treats the concept of Israel's rejection by attempting to chart its rise and history; Monica J. Melanchthon, *Rejection by God: The History and Significance of the Rejection Motif in the Hebrew Bible*, StBibLit 22 (New York: Lang, 2001).

⁴ See, for instance, W.J. Phythian-Adams, *The Call of Israel: An Introduction to the Study of Divine Election* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934); H.H. Rowley, *The Biblical Idea of Election* (London: Lutterworth, 1950); Peter Altmann, *Erwählungstheologie und Universalismus im Alten Testament*, BZAW 92 (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1964); Harry M. Orlinsky, "Nationalism-Universalism and Internationalism in Ancient Israel," in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament*, ed. Harry Frank and William Reed (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 206-236.

categories, often drawn from a certain kind of Christian milieu, on the ways in which both election and rejection in the Old Testament have been understood. Much of the recent work on the Old Testament's rejected figures has served to complicate our understanding and offer a more sympathetic portrait than has traditionally been the case.

There is much to be appreciated in this recent recasting of the issues around rejection. However, it also poses certain questions which, to this point, have only been addressed in fairly cursory ways. Central among these is a concern for those who wish to read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture and, therefore, wish to read it in deep conversation with the Christian tradition. If certain Christian categories, particularly those relating to rejection, have at times hampered our reading of the Old Testament, how might rejection in the Old Testament now be re-engaged within a Christian theological frame of reference?⁵

It is this question that I take up here by offering a theologically-oriented reading of two classic Old Testament rejection narratives: those of Esau and Saul. The narratives of Esau and Saul provide apt test cases for a fresh reading of the category of rejection not least because they each appear to display a different form of divine decision making. Esau, ostensibly at least, is rejected before birth, while Saul's rejection is pronounced in response to his purported disobedience. It is, among other things, this difference that I wish to probe in a theologically constructive way, alongside examining the dynamics of each portrayal in its own right.

⁵ Similar questions may arise for Jewish readers, although I suspect the issues will be of a rather different order. Cf. the comparison of rabbinic and Christian reception of elective ideas in Kaminsky, *Jacob*, 169-192.

In what follows, each narrative is read in conversation with significant interpreters who engage the theological and/or existential dynamics of the text and, thus, situate the text within a wider framework or tradition. My approach is to undertake intensive readings of each relevant conversation partner and offer some assessment, before turning to offer my own reading of the narratives of Esau and Saul respectively. However, I hold off drawing my observations in each chapter into a more constructive account until my conclusion when all the pieces are, as it were, in play.

In Part 1 I discuss the rejection of Esau. I begin in Chapter 1 by examining John Calvin's account of Esau's rejection in both his Genesis Commentary and the *Institutes*. In Chapter 2, I proceed to engage my second conversation partner, Jon Levenson; in particular, I work closely with his reading of Jacob and Esau in the wider context of his approach to election. In Chapter 3 I offer my own account of the Esau narrative (Gen. 25-36) and provide a reading which is alert to the issues raised by Calvin and Levenson. In Part 2 I discuss the rejection of Saul. Chapter 4 introduces Karl Barth's innovative account of Saul and David in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 and analyses his reading within its wider dogmatic framework. In Chapter 5 I introduce a series of studies of Saul by W. Lee Humphreys, David M. Gunn and J. Cheryl Exum which seek to understand Saul in light of the tragic tradition. With Chapter 6, I turn to my own reading of Saul's rejection (1 Sam. 13-15), again, remaining alert to the questions raised by Barth and the tragic readings. Finally, my conclusion offers a more substantive assessment of the questions raised throughout. Here I give an account of the rejections of Esau and Saul as well as offering wider reflections on how this account might inform broader Christian concerns around God's decision making as it relates to rejection.

In my approach to the biblical text, I seek to read with the grain of the received text, complex as this is at times. All biblical translations are my own. However, I have made use of the standard translations of the works of John Calvin and Karl Barth, while always also attending to the Latin and German texts respectively. Given the prominence of John Calvin and Karl Barth, the following study perhaps, at times, takes on a Reformed inflexion. However, it is my hope that the dangers and temptations of Christian parochialism will be offset through robust engagement with readers who have quite different religious and existential concerns. This may provide a way forward for careful and constructive theological engagement with the Old Testament's presentation of certain forms of rejection within a Christian frame of reference.

PART 1

THE REJECTION OF ESAU

Chapter 1

ESAU AND JOHN CALVIN

1. Introduction

To begin our account of the rejection of Esau, we turn to our first conversation partner, John Calvin. Calvin's name looms large in any discussion of election in Christian theology. Indeed, predestination has become in the minds of many, however rightly or wrongly, the defining feature of Calvin's thought.⁶ Still, while some of Calvin's overarching theological moves have been the subject of much discussion, equally significant has been his work as a supremely skilled exegete.⁷

In what follows, Calvin's concern with divine election and his work as a biblical exegete are drawn together as we attempt to evaluate Calvin's assessment of Esau. It becomes clear in his presentation of Jacob and Esau, particularly in the *Institutes* Book III, that, for Calvin, their narrative provides something of a paradigmatic example of the dynamics of divine election.⁸

Attempts to consider Calvin's theological thinking apart from his exegetical work (and *vice versa*) are essentially anachronistic. It is now clear that Calvin's exegetical work and his *Institutes* must be mutually informing.⁹ Of course,

⁶ Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 159; cf. Charles Raith II, "Predestination in Early Modern Thought," in *John Calvin in Context*, ed. R. Ward Holder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 249-257.

⁷ David Steinmetz, "John Calvin as an interpreter of the Bible," in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 282-91 (291); cf. T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 6-9.

⁸ *Inst.* 2:937-40; *CO* 2:691-93.

⁹ Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

this makes historical sense when we remember that between the publication of the first edition of the *Institutes* in 1536 and the final edition in 1559 Calvin published commentaries on Romans (1540), 1 and 2 Corinthians (1546), Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Timothy (1548), Hebrews (1549), Titus, Philemon, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, James (1550), 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John, Jude, Isaiah (1551), Acts (1552-1554), John (1553), Genesis (1554), Matthew, Mark, Luke (1555) and the Psalms (1557).¹⁰ This enormous exegetical enterprise undoubtedly had a formative impact on Calvin's work in the *Institutes*.¹¹ In addition to, or often combined with, this publishing process, Calvin would weekly be preaching and lecturing on the biblical text.¹²

Furthermore, to take Calvin's exegetical works and his *Institutes* as mutually informing makes most sense of Calvin's own explanation of his task. Famously, in his address to the reader, which first appeared in the *Institutes* in 1539 and remained with only minor changes thereafter, Calvin writes:

Moreover, it has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling. For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts (*religionis summam omnibus partibus*), and have arranged it in

¹⁰ See the overview in W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 93-107; it is probably best to understand the development of Calvin's thought as one of refinement. Calvin seems to have rarely, if ever, clearly changed his mind; Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 3.

¹¹ Muller, *Calvin*, 108.

¹² See T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 9-29; cf. Dawn DeVries, "Calvin's Preaching," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 106-24.

such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek (*quaerere*) in Scripture, and to what end (*scopum*) he ought to relate its contents. If, after this road has, as it were, been paved, I shall publish any interpretations of Scripture, I shall always condense them, because I shall have no need to undertake long doctrinal discussions (*dogmatibus longas disputationes instituere*), and to digress into commonplaces (*locos communes evagari*).¹³

Richard Muller argues, compellingly, that in light of this kind of self-assessment Calvin's *Institutes* must be understood as a "gathering of *loci*, but the contents of these *loci* must also be regarded as primarily exegetical *both* in origin *and* in their continuing frame of reference."¹⁴

Indeed, earlier in his discussion, Muller follows Elsie A. McKee in seeing the scriptural references in the *Institutes* as functioning almost as cross-references to the commentaries.¹⁵ If, as is often pointed out, "lucid brevity" (*perspicua brevitatis*) defines Calvin's style in his commentaries,¹⁶ then the "commonplaces" (*loci communes*) of the *Institutes* provide an opportunity to expand upon many of the theological questions raised, but not directly addressed, in the commentaries.¹⁷ All of which is to say that Calvin's work in the *Institutes* could be summarised

¹³ *Inst.* 1.5; *CO* 2:1-4.

¹⁴ Muller, *Calvin*, 112 (emphasis original).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107; cf. Elsie A. McKee, "Exegesis, Theology and Development in Calvin's *Institutio*: A Methodological Suggestion," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, ed. Brian G. Armstrong and Elsie A. McKee (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 154-72 (156).

¹⁶ Cf. *Comm. Rom.* (CNTC, vol.8), 1; *Ad. Rom.* 1; Richard C. Gamble, "Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," *WTJ* 47 (1985): 1-17; John L. Thompson, "Calvin as a Biblical Interpreter," in McKim, *John Calvin*, 58-73 (60-62).

¹⁷ On the rhetorical significance of the *Institutes*, see Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

hermeneutically as “there and back again.”¹⁸ The *Institutes* draw from Scripture, but also direct the reader back to a more accomplished reading of Scripture.¹⁹ Indeed, early in the twentieth century, Paul Jacobs pointed out how this dialectic principle worked to develop Calvin’s doctrine of election from the Romans Commentary (1539) through the Genesis Commentary (1554) to the final edition of the *Institutes* (1559).²⁰

This short account of Calvin’s *Institutes* and exegesis functions as something of a preamble which should provide some rationale for the following discussion’s structure. First, I examine Calvin’s Genesis commentary, with a particular focus on the oracle given to Rebekah in Genesis 25.23. The reasons for focussing on this particular verse are twofold. First, and primarily, because it seems to be the point in the story, in Calvin’s understanding at least, where the dynamics of election are most evident and as such it is also a text which is prominent in his discussion in the *Institutes*. Secondly, it seems that v.23 functions as a programmatic verse in Calvin’s reading of the Jacob-Esau cycle as a whole. The centrality of Genesis 25.23 in determining the shape of Calvin’s reading can be seen in part in his decidedly negative portrayal of Esau in Genesis 33. Calvin comments on Genesis 33.4:

That Esau meets his brother with unexpected benevolence and kindness, is the effect of the special favour of God. Therefore, by this method, God

¹⁸ An image drawn from Jonathan A. Linebaugh, “Introduction,” in *Reformation Readings of Paul: Explorations in History and Exegesis*, ed. Michael Allen and Jonathan A. Linebaugh (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 11-19 (18).

¹⁹ For an excellent account of this dynamic, see R. Ward Holder, *John Calvin and the Grounding of Interpretation: Calvin’s First Commentaries*, SHCT 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 68-81; cf. Randall C. Zachman, “Do You Understand What You Are Reading? Calvin’s Guidance for Reading Scripture,” *SJT* 59 (2001): 1-20.

²⁰ Paul Jacobs, *Prädestination und Verantwortlichkeit bei Calvin* (Neukirchen: Kr. Moers, 1937), 57-61.

proved that he has the hearts of men in his hand, to soften their hardness...

in short, that he tames them as wild beasts are wont to be tamed.²¹

Thus, in his exposition of Genesis 25 and especially v.23, Calvin offers us some of the fundamental moves he makes in his overall interpretation of the Jacob-Esau material.

Secondly, following the reading of the Genesis commentary, I examine Calvin's extended discussion of predestination in Book III of the *Institutes*.²² Here we grasp more of the central theological significance of the Jacob-Esau material for Calvin. Influenced as he is by Paul and Augustine,²³ Calvin reads the material of Genesis 25 and the following Jacob-Esau cycle as the paradigmatic example of the workings of divine election. Thus, in his discussion, it takes pride of place as the primary biblical exemplar.

2. John Calvin and Genesis 25

i. *Calvin's Approach*

When approaching the biblical text, the key concern of the commentator, as Calvin sees it, is to expound the mind of the author – human and divine.²⁴ But to do this successfully in any chapter or verse one must keep in mind the author's wider intentions.²⁵ Calvin sets out Moses's intention in the *Argumentum* which opens his Genesis commentary.²⁶ Here Calvin argues that Genesis directs the reader's

²¹ CTS 2:207; CO 23:449.

²² I do not discuss Calvin's treatise, *De aeterna Praedestinatione Dei* (CO 8:249-366). The substance of Calvin's thought for our purposes can be found in the Genesis Commentary and the *Institutes*.

²³ *Inst.* 2:941-43; CO 2:693-94.

²⁴ Hans-Joachim Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," *Int* 31 (1977): 8-18 (13).

²⁵ Randall C. Zachman, "Calvin as commentator on Genesis," in McKim, *Calvin and the Bible*, 1-29 (10-12).

²⁶ Calvin assumes Mosaic authorship; *ibid.*, 3.

attention towards a particular point, namely, “that the human race has been preserved by God in such a manner as to manifest his special care for his Church.”²⁷

In Calvin’s understanding this enterprise is carried out in Genesis through five stages. First, humanity is placed in God’s created world in order to behold God’s wonderful works. Secondly, all things are ordained for the use of humankind that they may dedicate themselves to obedience to God. Thirdly, humanity is granted understanding to distinguish them from the animals and to allow them to direct their attention to God. Fourthly, humanity is alienated from God through the fall of Adam and so is presented as “devoid of all good... and under sentence of eternal death.”²⁸ However, finally, following Adam’s fall, Moses recounts the providence of God in “governing and preserving” the Church and directing the attention of the reader to the true worship of God.²⁹

Once Moses’s intent is grasped, the reader can grow in their appreciation for the detail of the various parts of the book of Genesis. Moreover, it is the fifth point, the providence of God in preserving the Church and directing the reader to true worship, which Calvin emphasises as key to a correct understanding of the book. He writes of the salvation to which Genesis points:

...this is the basis of our salvation, this the origin of the Church, that we, being rescued out of profound darkness, have obtained a new life (*novam vitam obtinuimus*) by the mere grace of God (*mera Dei gratia*); that the Fathers... are by faith made partakers of this life (*fide factos esse*

²⁷ CTS 1:64; CO 23:11-12.

²⁸ CTS 1:65; CO 23:11-12.

²⁹ CTS 1:64-65; CO 23:11-12.

compotes); that this word itself was founded upon Christ; and that all the pious who have since lived were sustained by the very same promise of salvation by which Adam was first raised from the fall.³⁰

In this account of the progression of Genesis we see something of Calvin's understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.³¹ Calvin's thinking in this area has been widely documented and we need not linger over it here.³² For the present, T.H.L. Parker's gloss may serve, "In 'substance and reality' the Old Covenant is 'one and the same' with the New; but they are administered in different ways."³³ Given this understanding we should expect Calvin's reading of the "plain sense" of the Genesis text to be far removed from a contemporary account which might seek to establish the text in its historical context of origin.³⁴ Calvin remains firmly within the interpretive horizons of his age and, as such, the "plain sense" which concerns Calvin can include the sense taken on by any text within its role in the wider canonical movement of Scripture, as he evidences above in the *Argumentum*.³⁵

³⁰ CTS 1:65; CO 23:11-12.

³¹ Cf. *Inst.* 1:428-464; CO 2:313-340; for a contrast with Martin Luther's approach, see G. Sujin Pak, "A Break with Anti-Judaic Exegesis: John Calvin and the Unity of the Two Testaments," *CTJ* 46 (2011): 7-28 (15-17).

³² See Niesel, *Calvin*, 104-109; François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963), 208-215; Parker, *Old Testament*, 42-82; Holder, *Interpretation*, 50-58.

³³ Parker, *Old Testament*, 47.

³⁴ Cf. K.E. Greene-McCreight, *Ad Litteram: How Augustine, Calvin and Barth Read the 'Plain Sense' of Genesis 1-3*, *Issues in Systematic Theology* 5 (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 95-149; Barbara Pitkin, *Calvin, the Bible and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 5.

³⁵ Cf. Richard A. Muller, "The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment in Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament Prophecies of the Kingdom," in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 68-82 (69-70); David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 105; thus, Calvin demonstrates a striking continuity with large parts of medieval tradition; Pitkin, *Calvin*, 7, 21.

All of this is to say that in reading Calvin's analysis of Genesis 25 we must remain sensitive to the context in which Calvin is reading. Tempting as it has, at times, been to see Calvin as a precursor of "critical" exegesis, this is, at best, an oversimplification.³⁶ For Calvin, Genesis 25 is part of an Old Testament which witnesses to the same substance as the New Testament. This helps, particularly, to make sense of his incorporation of Romans 9 both in his Genesis commentary and in the *Institutes*.

ii. *Genesis 25.23*

Calvin's approach in his commentary on Genesis differs from that of many of his New Testament commentaries. When approaching a chapter, rather than translating and commenting on each verse, as he does, for example, in his commentary on Romans, he translates the chapter in full and then comments on points of particular significance. Consequently, his engagement with the second half of Genesis 25 centres on certain key points of interest. In these comments on Genesis 25.22-23, I follow Calvin's own particular interests.

In v.22 Calvin does not comment on the complex Hithpael, יִתְרַצֵּץ, but assumes that a "struggle" or collision (*collidebant*) is referred to.³⁷ He demonstrates a concern for the effect of this struggle on Rebekah and suggests that her despair is the result of insight into the struggle's significance, as opposed to impatience with its discomfort. Calvin then understands her seeking of the Lord as the appropriate response and one which points to her insight: "For she doubtless perceived (*sensit*) that this conflict did not arise from natural causes (*moveri*

³⁶ Muller, "Calvin's Exegesis," 81-82.

³⁷ CTS 2:42; CO 23:342, 348.

naturaliter), but was a prodigy portending some dreadful and tragic end.”³⁸ Calvin seems to read Genesis 25.22 in the shadow of v.23 and as he anticipates the oracle which perhaps explicates this “struggle,” so he sees Rebekah as grasping something similar.³⁹

The significance of Genesis 25.23 for Calvin is seen initially by the amount of time he spends examining it. His extensive analysis of the verse can be laid out in three phases. First, he outlines plainly what takes place in the verse. The verse relates the ordering of the imminent birth to the future fortunes of two nations.⁴⁰ Secondly, he discusses the nature of the victory described in the phrase, “the one people shall be stronger than the other people, the older shall serve the younger.”⁴¹ Finally, he enters into a discussion of Paul’s use of this verse in Romans 9.12. As we will see, this discussion proves decisive in Calvin’s final assessment of the oracle. Nevertheless, each of these phases in Calvin’s interpretation seems to build upon one another and so should be examined in turn.

In the first phase of his analysis Calvin highlights the startling nature of the oracle. God makes clear that the struggle in the womb has ramifications which reach far beyond the lives of the two brothers. In fact, the two brothers represent two nations and their current discord will extend to their “posterities” (*posterios*).⁴² Their separation is of course surprising. Calvin points out that one would not in the least expect two brothers “of one blood” to become the heads of “two distinct

³⁸ CTS 2:42; CO 23:348.

³⁹ On Calvin’s approach to Rebekah more generally, see John Lee Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of John Calvin, His Predecessors, and His Contemporaries* (Genève: Droz, 1992), 175-179.

⁴⁰ CTS 2:43; CO 23:349.

⁴¹ CTS 2:44-45; CO 23:349-50.

⁴² CTS 2:43; CO 23:349.

nations.”⁴³ Moreover, this disjunction between the brothers is not simply national, but also relates to their status, “victory would belong to one of these nations, forasmuch as this was the cause of the contest, that they could not be equal, but one was chosen (*eligebatur*) and the other rejected (*reiecto*).”⁴⁴ The final surprise is that not only are the twin brothers to be found separate and unequal, but the hierarchy is to be reversed, “the younger, who was inferior, should be the victor (*victorem*).”⁴⁵ Such is Calvin’s initial outline and assessment of the scenario.

Calvin, with his understanding of the younger as “victor,” now moves into the second phase of his discussion. If the younger is in fact to be the “victor” what kind of victory might be implied? Calvin proceeds to offer a reading which may seem curious to contemporary readers. As I intimated earlier in the discussion, Calvin’s method of reading the “plain sense” of the text tends to throw up certain surprises. Interestingly here Calvin does not consult the immediate context to discern the nature of the younger brother’s victory; a move certainly not beyond the bounds of Calvin’s exegetical method.⁴⁶ If he did so we might expect him to identify the winning of the birthright (25.29-34) and blessing (27.26-29) or the future subjugation Edom to Israel.⁴⁷ Yet here we find Calvin working in reference to the context formed by his wider understanding of the unity of the two Testaments.

In Book II, chapter X of his *Institutes*, Calvin writes,

⁴³ CTS 2:43-44; CO 23:349.

⁴⁴ CTS 2:44; CO 23:349.

⁴⁵ CTS 2:44; CO 23:349.

⁴⁶ Randall C. Zachman, “Gathering Meaning from the Context: Calvin’s Exegetical Method,” *JR* 82 (2002): 1-26 (6-9).

⁴⁷ Calvin does note that the “Idumaeans” were later cut off from the body of the Church, but says little beyond this; CTS 2:44; CO 23:349

we hold that carnal prosperity (*carnalem opulentiam*) and happiness (*felicitatem*) did not constitute the goal set before the Jews to which they were to aspire. Rather, they were adopted into the hope of immortality (*spem immortalitatis*).⁴⁸

This understanding of the Old Testament's promises is brought to bear directly on Genesis 25.23. Calvin notes:

They who restrict [the victory] to earthly riches (*terrenas divitias*) and wealth coldly trifle. Undoubtedly by this oracle Isaac and Rebekah were taught that the covenant of salvation (*foedus salutis*) would not be common to the two people, but would be reserved only for the posterity of Jacob.⁴⁹

So, in what now seems like a natural move, having connected the younger brother's victory with eternal salvation, Calvin sees in the posterity of Jacob the line which will constitute the Church. Thus, he picks up on the central point from the *Argumentum*. However, before he moves on to talk of the scope of this election, he first wishes to outline the terms of God's election. Indeed, his primary concern at this point is to establish the grounds for the younger brother's election, and by extension the grounds for the election of the Church. Simply put, there are none.⁵⁰

If we seek the cause of this distinction, it will not be found in nature (*natura*); for the origin of both nations was the same. It will not be found in

⁴⁸ *Inst.* 429; *CO* 2:314; cf. David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 37-38.

⁴⁹ *CTS* 2:44; *CO* 23:349.

⁵⁰ This concern to highlight the groundless nature of Jacob's election recurs throughout his comments on Gen. 25.24, 27, 28, 29. *CTS* 2:49; *CO* 23:352.

merit (*meritis*); because the heads of both nations were yet enclosed in their mother's womb when the contention began.⁵¹

Indeed, for Calvin, the very fact that Jacob is the younger brother points to the reality that it is God's intention to highlight the groundless nature of his election:

Why does he thus, designedly, invert the order appointed by himself, except to teach us that, without regard to dignity (*dignitatis*), Jacob, who was to be the heir of the promised benediction (*promissae benedictionis*), was gratuitously elected (*gratuito electum*)?⁵²

Calvin does not, at this point, reference the wider pattern in Genesis of favouring the younger son, although he does touch on it briefly in the *Institutes*.⁵³ However, there is here one further issue which requires attention before Calvin turns to tackle Paul's use of Genesis 25.23. This problem revolves around the scope of the election described in verse 23.

Here, Moses has described the election of an entire people, what Calvin describes as the "common adoption" (*communis adoptio*).⁵⁴ That is to say that the election Moses writes of seems to envisage the choosing of the "whole seed" (*totum semen*) of Jacob.⁵⁵ This common adoption is not to be identified with the "secret election" (*arcana electio*) which only relates to a few. Calvin's distinction between common adoption and secret election may cause some confusion and, in the interests of clarity, Calvin points us to his discussion of Genesis 17 and the

⁵¹ CTS 2:44; CO 23:349.

⁵² CTS 2:44-45; CO 23:349-50.

⁵³ *Inst.* 2:937-38; CO 2:691.

⁵⁴ CTS 2:45; CO 23:350. For more on Calvin's reading of general election in Genesis see his comments on Gen. 17.7; CTS 1:447-451; CO 23:237-239.

⁵⁵ CTS 2:45; CO 23:350.

covenant made with Abraham. In his comments on Genesis 17, Calvin outlines the notion of “distinct degrees of adoption.”⁵⁶ The central point which emerges from a complex discussion is seen in the two orders which Calvin identifies within the Church, and, as such, within the seed of Abraham:

Here, then, a twofold class of sons (*duplex filiorum ordo*) presents itself to us, in the Church; for since the whole body of the people is gathered together into the fold of God, by one and the same voice, all without exception, are, in this respect, accounted children; the name of the Church is applicable in common to them all: but in the innermost sanctuary of God, none others are reckoned the sons of God, than they in whom the promise is ratified by faith.⁵⁷

It appears, therefore, that Calvin envisages the election of Jacob as an extension of the election of Abraham which institutes the common adoption and is “attested by the sign of circumcision.”⁵⁸ Those, by contrast, who belong to the secret elect are marked by faith. However, Calvin’s concern here is not with the mark of election but with the “principle on which the distinction is made.”⁵⁹ The suggestion seems to be that the same principle governs both forms of election; both the common adoption and the secret election.⁶⁰ Still, a question is now raised which leads us to Calvin’s third and final phase of discussion. Moses appears to treat the common adoption, while Paul, in Romans 9, in his reading of Jacob and Esau, casts it in

⁵⁶ CTS 1:448; CO 23:237.

⁵⁷ CTS 1:449; CO 23:238.

⁵⁸ CTS 2:45; CO 23: 350.

⁵⁹ CTS 2:45; CO 23:350.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the various forms of election that Calvin envisages, see Wendel, *Calvin*, 279-280.

terms of a “secret” (*arcana*) or “peculiar election” (*peculiaris electio*). How are these two treatments to be related?

Of the three phases identified above, the reconciliation of Paul with Moses is Calvin’s longest. The central concern for Calvin at this point is not so much to read Genesis 25.23 in light of Paul, but to reconcile his reading of Moses with his reading of Paul. Again, Calvin’s reading at this point is complex. Still, a careful order can be discerned in Calvin’s discussion which seeks to relate Moses and Paul and yet refuses to conflate the two.

Calvin begins his constructive account of Paul’s reading by highlighting the issue which, he takes it, Paul is addressing; namely, the difficulty raised by God’s own chosen and holy people rejecting the Christ. Paul seeks to untangle how God’s chosen people might reject his Messiah:

Paul contends not that all who descend from Jacob, according to the flesh (*secundum carnem*), are true Israelites, because God, of his own good pleasure, may choose whom he will, as heirs of eternal salvation (*aeternae salutis haeredes*).⁶¹

In this move, Calvin discerns the transfer from the common adoption to the secret, or peculiar, election. Therefore, Calvin deduces, not all who are within the Church are true members of the Church.⁶² This is Paul’s point, that not all who are descendants of Jacob are true Israelites; but how, then, is one to justify Paul’s use of Genesis 25.23?

⁶¹ CTS 2:45-46; CO 23:351.

⁶² CTS 2:46; CO 23:351.

The answer, Calvin suggests, is that through the separation of the whole seed of Jacob, the particular separation of the Church is envisaged:

I answer, although the Lord separates the whole seed of Jacob from the race of Esau, it was done with a view to the Church, which was included in the posterity of Jacob. And, doubtless, the general election of the people had reference to this end, that God might have a Church separated (*segregatam*) from the rest of the world.⁶³

Thus, the separation of the whole seed functions as a necessary precursor to the separation of the true Church. Indeed, the manner of this later separation is, in a certain sense, latent in the example of Jacob and Esau used by Paul. So, Paul uses an example of the common adoption to speak of the secret election; yet the example of Jacob and Esau is singularly appropriate for two reasons. First, it is in the election of Jacob that the further election of the Church is signposted. Secondly, within the treatments of Jacob and Esau themselves we see the dynamics of the Lord's secret election at work as one is chosen as "an heir of life" and the other is passed over.

However, the key means whereby the concerns of Moses and Paul can be reconciled is found in their common concern for the principle which guides God's election.

Paul wisely considered the counsel of God, which was, in truth, that he had transferred the honour of primogeniture from the elder to the younger, in order that he might choose (*deligeret*) to himself a Church, according to his

⁶³ CTS 2:47; CO 23:351.

own will, out of the seed of Jacob; not on account of the merits of men, but as a matter of mere grace (*sed mera gratia*).⁶⁴

The “mere grace” which produces the distinction between Jacob and Esau provides the same principle for the forming of the Church, “God designed that the means by which the Church was to be collected should be common to the whole people...”⁶⁵

Calvin does not, then, conflate Paul’s discussion of election in Romans 9 with the depiction of Jacob’s primacy in Genesis 25.23. The distinction between the Old Testament’s discrete witness and the New Testament’s appropriation of the Old is a feature of much of Calvin’s exegetical work.⁶⁶ Here he maintains a distinction between the two forms of election; the one constitutes the common adoption whereby Jacob’s seed might constitute God’s own people; the other constitutes the secret election, marked by faith, by which some are reserved for salvation. However, the common adoption contains within it the secret election. Calvin seems to envision a kind of spiral of election whereby the initial, general, election of Jacob’s seed is then narrowed further, particularised, to those true members of God’s Church and thus true recipients of grace.⁶⁷ Yet the common principle governing each form of election remains the same, the mere grace of God.

From this understanding of Calvin’s reading of Genesis 25 three interpretive moves can be highlighted. First, Calvin’s key, initial observation is that the election of Jacob is grounded purely in God’s grace and has no reference to the

⁶⁴ CTS 2:47; CO 23:351.

⁶⁵ CTS 2:47; CO 23:351.

⁶⁶ See G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 79-81; Pitkin, *Calvin*, 21-22.

⁶⁷ François Wendel envisages up to three sorts of election; see Wendel, *Calvin*, 279.

merit of the younger son. Indeed, it is quite the reverse. The unifying concern of Calvin's winding discussion is to demonstrate this central principle of God's election. Secondly, Calvin wishes to construe the significance of the differentiation made in v.23 in ultimate terms. That is to say Jacob is elected as an "heir of life." Crucially, this also means that Esau is classed among the reprobate and suffers the prospect of damnation. This decision is not given full justification in his Genesis commentary. However, Calvin gives it further defence in the *Institutes*. Finally, Calvin is careful to still uphold the "general" nature of the promise of v.23. This general adoption, which in Genesis 25 is applied to the whole seed of Jacob, contains within it a secret election, which Paul will refer to the true recipients of grace who make up the true Church. Calvin is careful to find this qualification in Paul, and his reconciliation of Paul and Moses, rather than reading it directly from Genesis 25. Thus, we see that, while for Calvin Genesis 25.23 ultimately works towards, and is deeply congruous with, Paul's argument in Romans 9, its concerns hold some distinction from Paul's. On the basis of this reading of Calvin, the significance of Jacob and Esau is readily apparent. They offer an ideal example of the independent nature of God's decision making, unaffected by human merit. As we will see in the following section, their prominence comes through emphatically in the *Institutes*.

3. The Rejection of Esau in Calvin's *Institutes*

Calvin's defence of the doctrine of election is included in Book III with his doctrine of redemption.⁶⁸ Calvin's ordering of the *Institutes* is certainly deliberate and bears some interpretive significance. I have quoted above from Calvin's

⁶⁸ On the *Institutes*' development in relation to the doctrine of predestination, see Wendel, *Calvin*, 263-268.

preface to the *Institutes* and a portion of that quotation bears repeating. Calvin outlines his attempt to prepare the reader for “the reading of the divine Word” in these terms:

For I believe I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order (*ordine*), that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents.⁶⁹

The suggestion seems to be that part of the logic of Calvin’s thought is expressed in the logic of Calvin’s presentation.⁷⁰ If this can be said of the sum of the *Institutes*’ presentation, then we may reasonably take it also to be true of its constituent parts.⁷¹ Of course, we must avoid overloading the interpretive significance of Calvin’s structure but, at the same time, it seems inattentive to ignore it.⁷² Consequently, we begin here by taking due note of the order and structure of Calvin’s account of election in Book III, albeit in the form of a brief sketch. Only then do I seek to situate his handling of the Jacob-Esau material within the landscape of this broader argument. The hope is that a sketch of the progression of Calvin’s wider argument may help us to appreciate the force of Calvin’s use of the Jacob-Esau material and the exegetical-interpretive moves Calvin employs.

⁶⁹ *Inst.* 1:4-5; *CO* 2:1-4.

⁷⁰ The presentation of Calvin’s 1536 *Institutes* seems to follow a standard catechetical pattern similar to Luther’s *Small* and *Large Catechism*. By 1539, however, Calvin had moved beyond this more traditional formula and was making his own distinct innovations to the traditional order or, perhaps, rejecting it altogether. Cf. Muller, *Calvin*, 120.

⁷¹ Niesel, *Calvin*, 166; cf. Jacobs, *Prädestination*, 63.

⁷² David Gibson, *Reading the Decree: Exegesis, Election and Christology in Calvin and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 165.

David Gibson has shown, in some depth, how the structure of Book III relates Calvin's discussion of election to his understanding of Christology.⁷³ My present concern with regards to Jacob and Esau is rather more modest, but a number of Gibson's points are worth reiterating. First, Gibson draws our attention to the fact that Calvin's initial concern in Book III is to provide an explanation of faith and, in particular, an explanation which counters Roman Catholic accusations of moral laxity which may arise from the Reformed understanding of faith.⁷⁴ Secondly, the upshot of this observation, as Gibson sees it, is that Calvin's discussion of election is intended to be one more part of Calvin's explication of faith as something devoid of human contribution.⁷⁵

In Calvin's first chapter on election (XXI) in Book III he offers a brief explanation of how election relates to the nation of Israel and then to individuals.⁷⁶ He argues that election is attested, not only in the lives of individuals, but also "in the whole offspring of Abraham, to make it clear that in his choice rests the future condition of each nation."⁷⁷ Calvin identifies this election of Israel as an initial stage in God's elective purposes. In doing so he establishes the basis for this election in God's mercy, meaning that it is not tied "to the worthiness (*dignitati*) of men or to the merit of works (*operum meritis*)."⁷⁸ Of course, in this description we

⁷³ Ibid., 154-68.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 166-68; e.g. *Inst.* 1:545, 2:960; *CO* 2:399, 2:708.

⁷⁵ Gibson, *Decree*, 168; see Calvin's discussion of faith and the Spirit in *Inst.* 1:541; *CO* 2:399-400. Cf. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards," *WTJ* 65 (2003): 165-79 (172); Muller describes predestination as the "keystone of a doctrinal arch." Richard A. Muller *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1986; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 22.

⁷⁶ On Calvin's understanding of Israel's election, see Randall C. Zachman, *Reconsidering John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 71-77.

⁷⁷ *Inst.* 2:927; *CO* 2:683.

⁷⁸ *Inst.* 2:927; *CO* 2:683.

see Calvin follow through the trajectory of thought outlined by Gibson: the basis of God's mercy is not dependent upon human contribution.⁷⁹

In keeping with the spiral of election identified in Calvin's exegesis of Genesis 25, and with this meritless basis for election in place, we move to a "more limited degree of election."⁸⁰ Calvin's second stage of election identifies the distinction between individuals and, as such, evidences God's more special grace, for "from the same race of Abraham God rejected some but showed that he kept others among his sons by cherishing them in the church."⁸¹ Ishmael, Esau and Saul are all presented as rejected individuals. In his rejection of such individuals God demonstrates his freedom, Calvin famously states, "The very inequality (*inaequalitas*) of his grace proves that it is free."⁸²

Calvin moves to highlight that this election of individuals is the kind of enduring election which leads to eternal salvation. He explains that the covenant of God with a whole people is not always "firm and effectual" (*firma et rata*).⁸³ For God does not immediately give the "spirit of regeneration" (*spiritu[m] regenerationis*) to those with whom he makes a covenant. As it is then, God's "generous favour" is displayed in his election of Abraham's seed, but this favour is surpassed by a more "excellent power of grace" in those who belong to Christ.⁸⁴ Thus: "In short, that adoption of Abraham's seed in common was a visible image (*visibilis quaedam imago*) of the greater benefit that God bestowed on some out of

⁷⁹ Cf. Muller, *Christ*, 22-24.

⁸⁰ *Inst.* 2:929; *CO* 2:684.

⁸¹ *Inst.* 2:929; *CO* 2:684.

⁸² *Inst.* 2:929; *CO* 2:685.

⁸³ *Inst.* 2:930; *CO* 2:686.

⁸⁴ *Inst.* 2:930; *CO* 2:686.

the many.”⁸⁵ For Calvin, therefore, the election of Abraham’s descendants seems to function as a means of displaying God’s generous mercy. However, it is actually (and only) the election of individual members of the Church which is effective for salvation. The dynamic here seems to suggest that the basis of election remains consistent (God’s free grace), but the effect of election differs, with only the election of individuals as members of Christ being effective for salvation. Calvin sees explicit evidence for this dynamic in the Jacob-Esau saga, albeit mediated through Malachi 1.⁸⁶

In summary, then, the adoption of Abraham’s seed is the “outward change” (*externa mutatio*) which, without the working of “inner grace” (*interiori gratiae*), does not avail against the rejection of humanity. Rather, this “outward change” forms an intermediate stage between humanity’s rejection and “the election of a meagre number of the godly.”⁸⁷ Calvin can summarise:

The adoption was put in Abraham’s hands. Nevertheless, because many of his descendants were cut off as rotten members, we must, in order that election may be effectual (*efficax*) and truly enduring (*vere stabilis*), ascend to the Head, in whom the Heavenly Father has gathered his elect together, and has joined them to himself by an indissoluble bond. So, indeed, God’s generous favour, which he has denied to others, has been displayed in the adoption of the race of Abraham; yet in the members of

⁸⁵ *Inst.* 2:931; *CO* 2:686.

⁸⁶ *Inst.* 2:929-930; *CO* 2:685.

⁸⁷ *Inst.* 2:930-31; *CO* 2:686.

Christ a far more excellent power of grace appears, for, engrafted to their Head, they are never cut off from salvation.⁸⁸

We will have to return to Calvin's account of this distinction as we conclude, as it seems crucial for Calvin's reading of the election narratives of the Old Testament. There are two things to note at this stage, however. First, Jacob and Esau already appear as crucial figures in Calvin's account. Secondly, under this reading of Calvin's approach there are two forms of election taking place. The whole seed of Abraham is adopted on the basis of free grace to function as an image of God's election; but not all of Abraham's seed are united with Christ and ascend to salvation.⁸⁹ When we consider the election of Jacob and Esau in Calvin's reading of Genesis 25, we seem to have reason to see both of these forms of election taking place simultaneously. Jacob is elected as an heir to Abraham to further the calling of the adopted people and Jacob is elected as an individual to salvation. By contrast, the family of Esau is passed over as the heirs of Abraham and Esau as an individual is consigned to the number of the reprobate. As far as I can make out, Calvin never lays this dynamic out in quite these terms. Still, as we will see shortly, Calvin does highlight the double duty done by Jacob's election. He is not elected only as the heir of Abraham, to enjoy the earthly symbol of election. Rather, he is elected to eternal life.⁹⁰ That the same dynamic is on display in Esau's case is assumed.

As Calvin moves into his twenty-second chapter, he examines certain scriptural proofs that establish his argument. It is here that he gives his most

⁸⁸ *Inst.* 2:930; *CO* 2:685.

⁸⁹ Calvin speaks of God's secret election "ratifying" (*ratam... facit*) his adoption of Israel; *Inst.* 2:936; *CO* 2:690.

⁹⁰ *Inst.* 2:938; *CO* 2:691.

emphatic description of the nature of election. Calvin begins by rejecting the notion that individuals are chosen on the basis of any foreknowledge of merit. This is obviously a consistent theme in Calvin's promotion of election and here it is done primarily through appeal to Ephesians 1.4. With a brief account of Ephesians 1.4, Calvin counters the notion of foreknowledge of future holiness with the claim that individuals are elected to be holy.⁹¹

After this introductory discussion Calvin presents Romans 9-11 which provides the key text through which he seeks to clinch his argument. As we saw above, in his Genesis commentary Calvin moves from an initial discussion of Genesis 25.23, in the literary context of the Genesis narrative, to take up Paul's discussion in Romans 9-11 as the final interpretive context in which to see the Genesis text. In the *Institutes* Calvin makes the same move but in the opposite direction. An explanation of Romans 9-11 is offered and then Calvin moves to a discussion of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25 to demonstrate that the dynamics highlighted by Paul are, in fact, present in the Genesis narrative. Calvin's discussion of Romans 9-11 seeks to confirm his point that election finds its origin in God's free will rather than in the work of human beings:

If their own piety established some hope of salvation, and their own desertion disinherited others, it would be quite absurd for Paul to lift his readers to secret election (*arcanam usque electionem lectores eveheret*). Now if the will of God, the cause of which neither appears nor ought to be sought out of himself, distinguishes some from others, so that not all the

⁹¹ *Inst.* 2:935-36; *CO* 2:689.

sons of Israel are true Israelites, it is vain to pretend that every man's condition begins in himself.⁹²

Calvin's intention in bringing the case of Jacob and Esau into the discussion is to continue to refute any arguments in favour of divine preference based on works and thus to establish true freedom in the process of divine decision making. He presents the narrative of Jacob and Esau as something of a paradigm for the outworking of God's freedom. The key, therefore, is that the separation of the brothers cannot be dependent upon works because, "it was established between them before they were born."⁹³ And Calvin goes on, "In them all things are equal, yet God's judgement of each is different."⁹⁴ Indeed, the only distinction that could have been made was through primogeniture, but even that is overturned as God grants Jacob the status of the older brother.

Once the initial stages of his argument are made, Calvin spends some time defending his reading of Jacob's election as a "spiritual election" (*spiritualem electionem*), arguing that the honour of the first born, which Jacob receives, is a symbol of Jacob's spiritual election.⁹⁵ This is where it becomes quite clear that, for Calvin, there are two things going on in the election of Jacob. In defending his reading of Jacob's election, Calvin also sees himself as defending Paul's reading against those who argue that Paul "twisted Scripture to a foreign meaning."⁹⁶ In the argument of the *Institutes* the alternatives that Calvin offers are either that Jacob is only elected to the rights of primogeniture or that his election to the status of first-

⁹² *Inst.* 2:936; *CO* 2:690.

⁹³ *Inst.* 2:937; *CO* 2:691.

⁹⁴ *Inst.* 2:937; *CO* 2:691.

⁹⁵ *Inst.* 2:938; *CO* 2:691.

⁹⁶ *Inst.* 2:938; *CO* 2:691.

born functions as an “earthly symbol” (*terrenum symbolum*) of Jacob’s spiritual election. Calvin argues that to simply consider Jacob’s election in terms of earthly blessings (the rights of primogeniture) is absurd as, in earthly terms, Jacob’s election is no blessing at all. He notes:

For unless we refer the right of primogeniture granted him to the age to come, it would be an empty and absurd kind of blessing, since from it he obtained nothing but manifold hardships, troubles, sad exile, many sorrows, and bitter cares.⁹⁷

It is noteworthy that, having given such prominence to this move in his commentary, Calvin does not make the connection with Genesis 17 and the role of Jacob’s election in the overall adoption of Israel. It may be that this is implicit in Calvin’s discussion of the “outward blessing” which acts to confirm Jacob’s election, but, if so, this is unclear. Rather, the point is to connect the external blessing of the right of primogeniture to the eternal spiritual blessing of membership in Christ’s body.

Calvin closes his discussion of Jacob and Esau by incorporating other texts related to God’s foreknowledge into his discussion (Acts 2.23; 1 Pet. 1.2; 2 Tim. 2.19) and seeks to show how in each God’s power is active in shaping events rather than merely foreseeing them. Thus, Calvin’s handling of the Jacob and Esau oracle in Genesis 25.23, albeit read through the lens of Romans 9-11, forms a central section of his argument on election. We will return to quite why this text proves so

⁹⁷ *Inst.* 2:938; *CO* 2:691.

significant for Calvin once the remainder of his argument has been briefly sketched.

In the second half of chapter XXII Calvin furthers his argument from Scripture by highlighting the congruency between his own understanding of election and that presented in Christ's words in John's Gospel. Calvin particularly draws on John 6 and 17.⁹⁸ The point here is that Christ, as the author of election, knows those whom he has chosen and, as such, those who come to him come, not through their own merit, but through his decree.⁹⁹ With Christ's words set out, Calvin provides a brief summary of his position that "the intrinsic cause" of God's election is in himself.

All that Calvin has argued to this point is then buttressed through an appeal to Augustine. Calvin's adherence to an Augustinian account of election is clear. Yet, Calvin is careful to display Augustine's support as support for something already established. Augustine is introduced here more as an authority to support Calvin's reading, rather than a source for Calvin's conclusions.¹⁰⁰ This is characteristic of much of Calvin's use of the Fathers, particularly in the *Institutes*.¹⁰¹

Finally, he closes chapter XXII by beginning to counter some objections to his doctrine of election. This handling of objections continues through chapter XXIII. In particular, at the beginning of chapter XXIII, Calvin gives some attention to those who seek to deny reprobation. Calvin returns to Romans 9 to argue that

⁹⁸ *Inst.* 2:940; *CO* 2:693.

⁹⁹ *Inst.* 2:940-41; *CO* 2:693.

¹⁰⁰ *Inst.* 2:941-43; *CO* 2:693-94.

¹⁰¹ Anthony N.S. Lane, *John Calvin Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 3, 28-32.

election requires reprobation for it is in God's will to pass over some and elect others.¹⁰² In chapter XXIV he returns to his own constructive explanation of the doctrine. Here Calvin begins to apply his understanding of election to the lives of Christians. He addresses how God makes known his hidden election through the calling of believers; how faith is the outcome of election and thus must be considered the product of election rather than its antecedent. He points to how certainty of election is found in Christ:

If we seek salvation, life, and the immortality of the Heavenly Kingdom, then there is no other to whom we may flee, seeing that he alone is the fountain of life, the anchor of salvation, and the heir of the Kingdom of Heaven.¹⁰³

Thus, faith in Christ becomes evidence of election and provides the believer with assurance: "For those whom Christ has illumined with the knowledge of his name and has introduced into the bosom of his church, he is said to receive into his care and keeping."¹⁰⁴

In the latter half of chapter XXIV Calvin addresses the state of the reprobate and the development of the hardness of heart which characterises them.¹⁰⁵ Here we may have a further insight into Calvin's account of Esau. Calvin gives some consideration here to the Gentiles before the advent of Christ. He argues that their failure to see Christ's light can only be attributed to God's inscrutable purposes.¹⁰⁶ No mention is made of Esau and his case may be

¹⁰² *Inst.* 2:947-949; *CO* 2:698-699.

¹⁰³ *Inst.* 2:970; *CO* 2:715.

¹⁰⁴ *Inst.* 2:971; *CO* 2:716.

¹⁰⁵ *Inst.* 2:978-82; *CO* 2:722-725.

¹⁰⁶ *Inst.* 2:978; *CO* 2:722.

considered a bit more complex; still, here we see Calvin attempting to make sense of the Old Testament's presentation of the Gentiles within the context of his wider scheme of election. Calvin moves from here to provide further justification for his contention that the fate of the reprobate lies in God's hand. While they may be justly condemned because of their own disobedience, their ultimate condemnation lies in God's judgement.¹⁰⁷

In closing Calvin addresses certain passages which seem to counter his understanding of election (e.g. Ezek. 33.11; 1 Tim. 2.3-4) and addresses further objections, such as how the promises of the gospel could contradict God's eternal decree or how God, as Father of all, could forsake any but those most deserving of punishment.¹⁰⁸ With his refutations to these positions in place Calvin closes his discussion with a final return to Romans 9-11. In revisiting Paul's account, Calvin leaves the reader with two points; (a) salvation is to be ascribed only to God's mercy and (b) to look into election is to look into "so deep a mystery" (*ad tantam profunditatem*) that we must accept Paul's exclamation as our own, "Who are you, O man, to argue with God?" (Rom. 9.20).¹⁰⁹

In concluding chapter XXIV in this fashion Calvin draws our attention once again to the concern, highlighted by Gibson,¹¹⁰ which has been pressing upon his mind since the beginning of Book III: to demonstrate that salvation is gained through faith, faith devoid of human contribution, which originates in the freedom of the divine decision. In this overall plan we can see the central role of chapter XXII: Calvin's confirmation of the doctrine of election through scriptural

¹⁰⁷ *Inst.* 2:98182; *CO* 2:724-25.

¹⁰⁸ *Inst.* 2:982-87; *CO* 2:725-728.

¹⁰⁹ *Inst.* 2:987; *CO* 2:728.

¹¹⁰ Gibson, *Decree*, 166-68.

witnesses. Here, Romans 9-11 forms the centrepiece of the argument. Yet, Romans 9-11 is a complex and somewhat sprawling discussion in its own right. So, perhaps consequently, Calvin does not provide a close reading of these chapters (for this he would refer readers to his commentary), instead he focusses on what he perceives to be the key issue related to his argument: Paul's example of the election of Jacob and Esau and the grounds for this election. Calvin sees the example of Jacob and Esau as the decisive argument against those who propose "works" (*opera*) as necessary for God's favour. Hence, Calvin writes:

What will those who assign some place in election to works... use for a pretext to obscure these things? For this is directly to evade the apostle's contention that the distinction between the brothers depends not upon any basis of works but upon the mere calling of God, because it was established between them before they were born.¹¹¹

It is true that Jacob and Esau provide such a useful example for Calvin because he understands Jacob's election to be election to eternal salvation, but Calvin's primary concern here is not with the nature of Jacob's election, but with the nature of God's decision making. As we saw above, where Calvin does deal with the nature of Jacob's election his primary purpose seems to be to address the objection that Jacob's election is only to the privileged status of the first-born. Once this objection is met Calvin returns to his explanation of the nature of God's decision making. Thus, for Calvin, through his reading of Paul, the case of Jacob and Esau provides the classic example of God's freedom in decision making, establishing that salvation cannot, under any circumstances, be derived from merit.

¹¹¹ *Inst.* 2:937; *CO* 2:691.

The significance of the role of Jacob and Esau as the definitive example of divine decision making can also be seen in the way Calvin develops his argument following chapter XXII. As we saw above, with chapter XXII drawing to a close, Calvin turns his attention to objections to his proposal (ch. XXIII), the further implications of his argument in relation to the assurance of believers and the role of faith in Christ (ch. XXIV). Of course, constructive moves are still made in chapters XXIII and XXIV,¹¹² but Calvin's primary building blocks seem to be in place by this point. Indeed, the impression created is that through his handling of the scriptural witnesses, particularly Romans 9-11 and the sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel, Calvin has brought his primary, constructive, argument to a conclusion; what remains to be done is to anticipate objections and address implications.

The appearance of Jacob and Esau in III.XXII.4-7 highlights their significance for Calvin's thinking. But Calvin's use of Jacob and Esau in the *Institutes* and their positioning in the wider structure of Book III also sheds light on what he considers to be the central significance of Genesis 25: it highlights the nature of God's election as having no regard to the merit of individuals and, in this sense, it is a passage which explicates divine freedom.

4. Appraising Calvin

The discussion laid out above hopefully serves as an effective working account of Calvin's use of the case of Jacob and Esau in his wider understanding of election; both in his Genesis commentary and in the *Institutes*. There is much to be said for Calvin's theological engagement; in his commentary he seeks to handle the

¹¹² For instance, Calvin's comments on Adam's fall in God's purposes; *Inst.* 2:955-56; *CO* 2:704-705.

text in its literary context before moving to wider canonical contexts of interpretation; he provides a compelling account of the significance of the reversal of the right of primogeniture, in so far as it highlights God's inversion of human systems of merit; and he makes a thought-provoking case for seeing Genesis 25 as a key example of God's freedom in election. With this dynamic in play, Calvin seeks to articulate the relationship between the kind of election outlined in Genesis and that highlighted by Paul in Romans 9. In distinguishing between the adoption of Abraham's seed and the secret election, Calvin offers an imaginative attempt to reconcile Paul's usage of Genesis 25 with the text's original context. In this sense, Calvin's reading may rightly be held up as a brilliant example of thoughtful Christian theological exegesis.

Still, in spite of Calvin's astute theological reading, there are certain areas which we may need to rethink and reformulate. Two points in particular stand out. First, we might want to question whether the categories of the elect and the reprobate provide the most helpful scheme for reading Jacob and Esau. Secondly, there may be grounds within the text of Genesis 25 for allowing a certain provisionality to govern our reading which is absent from Calvin's account.

First, then, the elect and the reprobate; Calvin reads Jacob and Esau, both in his commentary and in the *Institutes*, as exemplars of the dynamic on display in God's election. There are some who are chosen to eternal life and some who are passed over. It is intriguing to note, as we have already seen, that Calvin appears to point to two forms of election taking place in Genesis 25. On one level Jacob is chosen as the father of the people of Israel who are the adopted of God. Not all those, in Calvin's estimation, who are so adopted receive membership of the secret election. However, Jacob receives both; he is affirmed as a child of Abraham to

continue the line of adoption and he is chosen as a member of the secret number of the elect. In other words, in Calvin's reading, the pronouncement in Genesis 25.23 does double duty; it pronounces both on the adoption of Jacob's line and the secret election of Jacob himself. Presumably, then, something similar is going on with regards to Esau. His line is passed over for adoption and he is passed over as a member of the secret number of the elect. We might question whether this two-tiered dynamic can really be upheld. Commentators often suggest that Paul's primary concern in Romans 9 is to highlight the dynamic of God's election on display in Israel's history.¹¹³ In other words, when reading Genesis 25, even with Romans 9 providing a background, we may wish to stay within the world of the adoption of Israel rather than importing any discussion of the secret election. Or, to put it differently, it is not immediately apparent, even with reference to Romans 9, that Esau's rejection should be read in terms of ultimate reprobation. This is not to say that election and reprobation are redundant categories when dealing with biblical figures. It is to say, rather, that when it comes to describing Esau's rejection, we may want to employ a good deal more reticence than is evident in Calvin's discussion.

This leads us, quite naturally, onto our second point. The reticence, or provisionality, that we may want to employ when speaking of Esau's rejection is not simply a means of avoiding difficult questions. One point which is not discussed in Calvin's reading, and which will form an extensive part of my own analysis, is the partial ambiguity of the oracle in Genesis 25.23. I will discuss this much more fully in my reading of Genesis 25-36. However, it is worth pointing out

¹¹³ For instance, John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 526-536.

at this stage that while I do not think that this ambiguity renders the oracle ineffectual in shaping the subsequent narrative, it does encourage a certain degree of reticence when it comes to speaking of YHWH's words and pronouncements. Of course, Calvin himself encourages reticence and provisionality in pronouncing on God's decree and insists on strict limits, determined by the Word, in any discussion of predestination.¹¹⁴ My suggestion is that the text of Genesis 25-36 itself encourages such an approach in its handling of the figure of Esau; but more on this in due course. First, we need to turn to address a contemporary figure of wide-ranging influence and a quite different voice to that of John Calvin, our second conversation partner, Jon D. Levenson.

¹¹⁴ See Calvin's opening comments in *Inst.* 2:923; *CO* 2:680; cf. Niesel, *Calvin*, 160-162; Muller, *Christ*, 25-27; Wendel, *Calvin*, 266, cf. 282-284.

Chapter 2

ESAU AND JON D. LEVENSON

1. Introduction

John Calvin offers a robust reading of Jacob and Esau in terms the elect and the reprobate. This classically Protestant reading has much to be said for it, as well as some notable shortcomings. Now we turn, with our second conversation partner, to a quite different approach. Jon D. Levenson, Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University, is, without doubt, one of the foremost contemporary scholars of the Hebrew Bible. His breadth of learning, lucid style and ruthless argumentation make him a refreshing and stimulating interpreter. Levenson has become well known for his examination of the interface and interplay between the biblical text and later Jewish exegesis; he has chided contemporary (Christian) scholarship for its failure to attend to the work of rabbinic literature,¹¹⁵ and he has become an established figure in Jewish-Christian dialogue.¹¹⁶

My purpose here is to engage Levenson on the question of election, particularly with reference to his reading of the patriarchal narratives in his seminal work, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*.¹¹⁷ Yet, to do so with any degree of skill requires some brief account of Levenson's approach to the task of

¹¹⁵ See Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 21.

¹¹⁶ This theme appears throughout Levenson's work, but for a range of engagement, see Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); idem, *Abraham between Torah and Gospel*, The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology 2011 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011); idem, *Hebrew Bible*, 82-105; on a more popular platform, idem, "How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Commentary* 112:5 (2001): 31-37.

¹¹⁷ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*.

biblical interpretation. However, as with many fresh interpreters, Levenson's approach eludes simple categorisation and, as such, here I seek to describe certain key characteristics of Levenson's work rather than attempting to locate it on a preconceived map of the scholarly field.¹¹⁸ As we will see, Levenson moves with some ease between diachronic and synchronic readings, utilising disciplines from archaeology to the history of theological interpretation to great effect, but rarely as an end in themselves. As such, Levenson's work always serves the broader theological and existential questions provoked by the Hebrew Bible.

2. Levenson's Approach

A key resource for delineating Levenson's approach is his collection of essays, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament and Historical Criticism*.¹¹⁹ This is the closest we get to a self-presenting rationale for Levenson's work. These essays are by no means a full-scale account of Levenson's methodology, but, through a careful reading, in the context of his later scholarly production, one does get a flavour of many of Levenson's key concerns. To this end, much of what follows draws initially from these essays.

Central to Levenson's outlook is what we might term a scholarly self-awareness. He clearly recognises scholarly objectivity as a pursuable, if not fully

¹¹⁸ Attempts to "map" Levenson in this way seem to lead to misunderstanding; a notable example of this may be James Barr's account of Levenson in relation to biblical theology, historical criticism and history of religions. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 291-302; cf. Levenson's response, Jon D. Levenson, "Negative Theology," *First Things* 100 (2000): 59-63.

¹¹⁹ Incidentally, it seems that a certain amount of Levenson's later work on method and hermeneutics has served to clarify misunderstandings of this collection. See Jon D. Levenson, "Is Brueggemann Really a Pluralist?" *HTR* 93 (2000): 265-294 (281); idem, "The Exodus and Biblical Theology: A Rejoinder to John J. Collins," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*, ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; *SymS* 8 (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 263-275, esp. 270-271.

realisable, virtue.¹²⁰ Yet, to this end, he is wary of a form of scholarship supposedly bereft of “prior commitments.”¹²¹ As such, while Levenson acknowledges the principles and realities of contemporary academic intellectual independence, these have not managed to move beyond the “social processes for the validation of knowledge.”¹²² It seems that, for Levenson, to be scholarly entails pursuing a certain form of intellectual excellence, perhaps too often glibly dubbed “objectivity.” Nevertheless, Levenson employs a practical wisdom highly sensitive to the manifold hurdles scholars must pass over in order to take up such a task.

We might put this slightly differently. Joel N. Lohr has noted that a key characteristic of Levenson’s work is his appeal to “intellectual integrity.”¹²³ This phrase is something of a *leitmotif* in Levenson’s work.¹²⁴ It appears regularly; though rarely receiving much explanation itself, it seems to stand as a shorthand for what might be seen as a primary characteristic of any good scholarly work. This is a kind of work which is in serious pursuit of “a not fully realizable objectivity” while remaining humbly self-aware. Intellectual integrity requires a balancing act between scholarly idealism and realism. But if this describes something of Levenson’s outlook, how does this work itself out in Levenson’s actual handling of the text?

¹²⁰ “Even if we do not subscribe to the naive positivism that claims the historian simply tells what really happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*), we can still differentiate scholars who strive after a not fully realizable objectivity from those who openly acknowledge their transcendent commitment and approach their work in the vivid hope of deepening and advancing it.” Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 37-38.

¹²¹ See his comments on John J. Collins in Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 119-120; and, additionally, on Brueggemann’s self-awareness in Levenson, “Is Brueggemann Really a Pluralist?” 292.

¹²² Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 121.

¹²³ Lohr, *Chosen*, 72.

¹²⁴ See the way Levenson outlines the constraints of intellectual honesty in Jon D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 143-169 (145-146).

On more than one occasion Levenson has been criticised for his approach to historical criticism.¹²⁵ This criticism may, in part, be due to Levenson's occasionally ruthless critiques of certain historical-critical practitioners.¹²⁶ However, what seems more likely is that it is Levenson's attempt to relativize the role of historical criticism within the wider discussion of the biblical documents which is the real issue.¹²⁷ For Levenson is by no means opposed to the principles and practices of historical inquiry, even if, as we have seen, he is occasionally critical of its practitioners.¹²⁸ Indeed, Levenson notes, "I do not reject historical criticism at all but view the sense of scripture that it uncovers and develops as indispensable."¹²⁹ A brief perusal of Levenson's corpus soon demonstrates this to be the case.¹³⁰ Still, Levenson is clearly concerned with more than a historical understanding of what the text might have meant at the various stages of its composition.

Two essays which seem to convey some sense of Levenson's overall project are "Why Jews are Not Interested in Biblical Theology" and "The Eight

¹²⁵ E.g. John J. Collins, "Historical Criticism and the State of Biblical Theology," *Christian Century* 110 (1993): 743-743 (745-747); Roland E. Murphy, "Reflections on a Critical Biblical Theology," in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim*, ed. H.T.C. Sun et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 265-274 (271-273); Barr, *Theology*, 291.

¹²⁶ See, for instance, Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 10-27.

¹²⁷ See Collins, "Historical Criticism," 746-747. On relativizing historical criticism, see Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 79.

¹²⁸ See this distinction in Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 96.

¹²⁹ Levenson, "Is Brueggemann Really a Pluralist?" 281.

¹³⁰ See the historical and comparative work that features throughout Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harper One, 1985); idem, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); idem, *Esther*, OTL (London: SCM, 1997), 23-27; idem, *The Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); cf. the survey of Levenson's earlier works in Marvin A. Sweeney, "Why Jews Are Interested in Biblical Theology: A Retrospective on the Work of Jon D. Levenson," *JBA* 55-56 (1997-1999): 142-176.

Principle of Judaism and the Literary Simultaneity of Scripture.”¹³¹ In the first of these Levenson argues that attempts towards theological systematisation are somewhat alien to Judaism. In Judaism, historically, systematisation has come in the form of law.¹³² In this sense, Judaism may, to some extent, be better positioned to deal with the “polydoxy” of the biblical text, given its traditional approach to the scriptures as a “*problem* with many facets” which seeks resolution.¹³³ This way of framing a Jewish approach to questions of biblical theology makes sense of Levenson’s own body of work. While profoundly concerned with broader theological questions, Levenson steers clear of a harmonising approach and instead allows his readings to engage creatively with the contradictions which the text seems to convey.¹³⁴ In this sense Levenson is willing to acknowledge, and regularly highlight, the fact that traditional Jewish and Christian readings may not correspond to the plain sense of elements of the biblical text. However, Levenson is relatively unconcerned by this point, for what he does seem to want to demonstrate is that traditional Jewish thinking evidences a certain consistency with significant parts of the biblical text.¹³⁵

Nevertheless, something still needs to be said about how this appropriation of the biblical polydoxy can be carried out without violating what seems to be the apparent historical meaning of the text. In other words, even if Levenson can

¹³¹ Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 33-61, 62-81.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 51.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 56 (emphasis original).

¹³⁴ A good example of this would be the way the tensions in the Hebrew Bible over child sacrifice provide much of the creative context for Levenson’s work in his writing on the beloved son. See Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 3-17.

¹³⁵ For example, Levenson writes of rabbinic attempts to find notions of resurrection in the Torah, “We do not pretend to validate the rabbinic interpretations of the verses we have examined in this chapter, but we do hope to show that the rabbis’ expectation of resurrection has far more continuities with their biblical predecessors’ thinking than has heretofore been recognized.” Levenson, *Restoration*, 34.

highlight a central consistency between the biblical text and traditional religious thought, why should this be taken as interpretation proper and not simply “pseudo-interpretation”?¹³⁶

In order to read the text theologically Levenson is willing to subordinate the processes of development in the text, which he readily acknowledges, to a wider “literary context” which facilitates meanings which may go beyond the author’s original intention. Here he is worth quoting at greater length:

A method of interpretation that took cognizance of the authorlessness of the received text and the inclusion in it of ‘meanings that no one ever meant’ would, like Maimonides’s eighth principle, work to preserve the entirety of the textual unity... rejecting the kind of eclecticism that fails to reckon with the systemic character of the text... Instead of denying historical investigation, the kind of interpretation I have in mind would relativize it. It would recognize that the cost of restoring textual units to their *historical* context can only be some loss to their *literary* context, and, faithful to what I take to be the real meaning of the eighth principle, it would hold that the foundation for the edifice that is rabbinic Judaism is not the several sources of the Torah in their respective historical settings but the Torah ‘presently in our possession’ in its integral, systemic wholeness.¹³⁷

In recognising the literary context of the text, Levenson highlights how the text now takes on a life of its own distinct from, although never divorced from, the

¹³⁶ A.H.J. Gunneweg, *Understanding the Old Testament*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 222; quoted in Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 29.

¹³⁷ Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 79 (emphasis original).

intentions of its original author. This more extensive literary context gives greater credence to claims on the text from traditional religious contexts. It is here that there may be an analogy (and only an analogy) with the work of Brevard Childs.¹³⁸ The kind of interpretation Levenson has in mind, and the kind of interpretation Levenson pursues in his scholarship, is patient of multiple contexts, the primary historical setting, the final literary setting and the wider canonical context.¹³⁹

What we find, then, in Levenson's approach is an attempt to take seriously the primary historical setting of the biblical text, and yet still move beyond this setting to wider literary and canonical contexts. For the Jewish reader, this final context includes the Oral Torah, a context which Levenson likens to the Christian New Testament.¹⁴⁰ These three contexts (original historical, final literary, subsequent theological) are then roughly balanced in Levenson's writing. They are only roughly balanced because it is fair to say that in much of his work the final literary context of the biblical text takes precedence, but this presumably reflects Levenson's primary skill set as a scholar of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴¹ It is with this rough sketch of the theory behind Levenson's approach that we may now turn to a major theme of Levenson's work, namely that of the election of Israel.

¹³⁸ See the comments in Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM, 1984), 62; cf. Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 79.

¹³⁹ Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 79.

¹⁴⁰ Levenson, "The Exodus," 268.

¹⁴¹ See Levenson's comments on the work of "biblical theologians," which one senses is surely self-descriptive, in Jon D. Levenson, "The Perils of Engaged Scholarship: A Rejoinder to Jorge Pixley," in Bellis and Kaminsky, *Hebrew Scriptures*, 239-246 (240).

3. Election in Levenson

Levenson has covered a range of theological issues throughout his written work, including, covenant,¹⁴² resurrection,¹⁴³ creation¹⁴⁴ and, most recently, the love of God.¹⁴⁵ However, the theme of Israel's particular election is one which emerges repeatedly as a concern for Levenson.¹⁴⁶ But there are two places where this concern for Israel's particularity comes through most clearly. The first is in an essay length discussion of the topic of election,¹⁴⁷ and the second in *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. A large part of Levenson's focus in both of these works is to complicate two particular polarities that have arisen in the subsequent traditions rooted in the Hebrew Bible. These are: the polarity between universalism and particularism and between grace and works. Levenson challenges both in imaginative ways through careful accounts of the biblical texts. We look now at each in turn.

i. *Universalism and Particularism*

In his significant essay, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," Levenson takes to task what he sees as an aged but severely deficient dichotomy. Levenson begins by observing that the notion of particularism (or election) is often

¹⁴² Levenson, *Sinai*; cf. the comparable themes in idem, *Theology of the Program of Restoration of Ezekiel 40-48*, HSM 10 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976).

¹⁴³ Levenson, *Restoration*.

¹⁴⁴ Levenson, *Creation*.

¹⁴⁵ Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹⁴⁶ See, for instance, the concern for Israel's particularity within Levenson's critique of certain liberationist readings of the Exodus. Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 127-159; idem, "Engaged Scholarship". The prominence of election in Levenson's work is highlighted by the fact that it was chosen as the theme for Levenson's *Festschrift*. See Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky, "Introduction," in *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 1-3.

¹⁴⁷ Levenson, "Universal Horizon," 143-69.

seen as negative by Jews, Christians and others, and so the concept is regularly marginalised in favour of the less grating notion of “universalism.”¹⁴⁸ In light of their apparent incompatibility, Levenson claims, these two concepts have traditionally been polarised in religious and scholarly thought. Yet, such a dichotomy is not only gravely misrepresentative of the biblical material, but also, historically at least, damaging for the Jewish people who have been caricatured as “parochial” and worse.¹⁴⁹ Levenson sets out, then, to complicate and nuance the picture of the Hebrew Bible’s particularism.

For Levenson the particularity of the Jewish people, as far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, does not connote the denigration of the rest of humanity. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible in its opening chapters is strikingly universal. He notes:

It is also highly significant that in both creation accounts at the beginning of Genesis (1.1-2.3 and 2.4-24), it is humanity in general and not any people in particular that is created. Israel is not primordial.¹⁵⁰

In this sense there are substantial resources in the Hebrew Bible for affirming shared human dignity. Thus, “All people are created equally in the divine image. The creation stories in Genesis serve as a powerful warrant for a Jewish doctrine of human solidarity and as a formidable obstacle to any attempt to mix Judaism and racism.”¹⁵¹ There is then a universal context and background to the choosing of Israel. Behind the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants lies the Noahide covenant, so

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 143.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 143.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 147.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 147.

esteemed in rabbinic thought, which affirms the presence of a relationship of grace and accountability between God and all peoples.¹⁵²

Levenson's explanation of the election of Israel stands, therefore, against a background of God's universal relationship with humanity. Yet, from the calling of Abram, Israel's election is unavoidable in the remainder of the Hebrew Bible. So, the question then arises, in what terms might God's relationship to Israel be described? Levenson generously entertains H.H. Rowley's ambitious statement that any election in the Hebrew Bible, "is always election to service."¹⁵³ There is, to be sure, a sense in which Israel is chosen to serve or bless the nations and to practice justice and righteousness (Gen. 18.19; Isa. 45.4, 6) and Levenson affirms such a notion.¹⁵⁴

However, he remains reluctant to go the whole way with Rowley. For, while there is a certain instrumentality in God's election of Israel, there is an equal degree of inexplicability in the affair. This is because, once any wider purpose has been accounted for, "the singling-out of Israel remains a mystery" (Deut. 7.7-8).¹⁵⁵ Therefore, Levenson comments:

There is, then, a duality in the Bible's concept of election. On the one hand, election is at times articulated in terms of larger purposes that it is to serve, and, of necessity, those purposes extend beyond the confines of the chosen people. On the other hand, God bears with Israel even when it fails in its mission. The purposes do not override the chosenness, and

¹⁵² Ibid., 147-8.

¹⁵³ Rowley, *Election*, 94.

¹⁵⁴ Levenson, "Universal Horizon," 154-155.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 156.

chosenness cannot be reduced merely to the commitment to certain values.¹⁵⁶

Levenson's account seems to nicely capture the universal elements of Israel's role and yet still maintain the distinctive privilege of Israel even within that role. Still, within this dynamic of service and mystery, a question may yet be posed about the boundaries of the chosen people.

One way to characterise a universalistic religion is as one which either seeks or accepts proselytes.¹⁵⁷ But the material in the Hebrew Bible relating to conversion is notoriously ambiguous. While some certainly participate in the life and worship of the people of Israel (e.g. Ruth), such participation is elsewhere strictly monitored (Deut. 23.4, 8-9) and it seems as though the identity of the foreigner or "alien" is never shed, or at least not in the legal material of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In assessing this situation, Levenson is typically judicious:

In short, like the dichotomy of insider-outsider, the dichotomy between a religion that accepts converts and one that does not is too simplistic to accommodate the complex and shifting realities of biblical Israel.¹⁵⁸

However, the initial complexity of the legal material is opened out interestingly elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Levenson notes a tendency in a certain prophetic-eschatological stream that "envisions the reorientation of the nations toward YHWH."¹⁵⁹ In such texts (e.g. Isa. 56.2-3, 6-8; 66.18-21) the picture, according to Levenson, is one of restoration. It seems that the situation evident in the primeval

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 156.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 145.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 162.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 164.

history has been reinstated; a united, monotheistic, YHWH-worshipping humanity is evident once more. However, whereas in the primeval history Israel was non-existent, in the eschatological future Israel retains its singularity. Levenson puts it nicely, “Israelite particularism, in this vision of things, is not destined to disappear. It is destined to reach its universal horizon.”¹⁶⁰

Levenson sketches, then, a broad picture of the complex dynamics of the biblical material on election. At each stage he treads a careful path between extremes, and we see an excellent application of the principles I outlined in the previous section. Moreover, in his closing reflections he successfully highlights how Christianity, according to its foundational texts, is just as, if not more, particularistic than Judaism,¹⁶¹ and in so doing he helpfully undermines the caricature which he initially sought to displace. Still, throughout the essay there are questions, pertinent to election, around how God relates to humanity in general which surface occasionally but are largely left unexplored; namely questions on the dynamics of divine initiative (or grace) and human responsibility and obedience (or works).¹⁶² These questions probably require a more detailed account and, in part, they receive such elsewhere in Levenson’s corpus.

ii. *Grace and Works*¹⁶³

Levenson’s best known and perhaps most influential work is *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. A number of reviewers and commentators have

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 164.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 165-168.

¹⁶² One place where these questions are engaged briefly is *ibid.*, 156-157.

¹⁶³ While the “grace-works” dichotomy reflects a Pauline-Protestant thought world, I use it here to introduce Levenson’s discussion as it is terminology which he seems happy to engage, if only in order to undermine the dichotomy the language supposedly represents. See, for example, Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 70-71.

noted how it functions, at least on one level, as a theology of election.¹⁶⁴ Levenson begins by entering into the long-standing debate on the place of child sacrifice in ancient Israel. He makes the striking argument that child sacrifice was, in fact, not considered repugnant in large parts of ancient Israelite tradition. This does not, of course, mean that child sacrifice was practiced as widely or as regularly as in other parts of the ancient world. Rather, Levenson proposes the notion that the law of Exodus 22.28, “You shall give Me the first-born among your sons,” may be taken as expressing a “theological or moral ideal” and should not always be taken as a means of establishing universal practice.¹⁶⁵

Still, Levenson feels sure that in ancient Israel child sacrifice could, and certainly was, practised and not always with the same denunciations that it received in parts of the prophetic literature (e.g. Jer. 29.5-6; Ezek. 20.25-26). It is also, however, equally clear, for Levenson, that child sacrifice was not a persistent practice in ancient Israel and that it was, at some stage, replaced by animal sacrifice.¹⁶⁶ Central to Levenson’s argument is the notion that this replacement was not a denunciation of child sacrifice due to increasing moral sensitivity. So, for example, Levenson forcefully rejects readings of Genesis 22 which find in it an etiology of the renunciation of child sacrifice.¹⁶⁷ Instead, Levenson argues, the sacrifice of the first-born was never rejected, rather it was transformed. He initially traces various cases in which the logic of the sacrifice of the first-born is maintained in different legal traditions, notably, in the paschal lamb, Levitical

¹⁶⁴ Lohr, *Chosen*, 71; R.W.L. Moberly, review of Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, *JR* 75 (1995): 262-263. Cf. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 59-60.

¹⁶⁵ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 1-17.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

service, monetary ransom, Naziritehood and, possibly, circumcision.¹⁶⁸ However, Levenson's work in the Pentateuchal legal material mostly functions as a prelude to his more extensive examination of the brotherhood narratives in Genesis. In these narratives Levenson identifies a certain trope whereby the beloved son (i.e. the chosen son) experiences some kind of death, either through a close encounter with death (e.g. Isaac) or through some kind of exile (e.g. Jacob, Joseph). It is in examining the dynamics of the chosen son's experience that Levenson works out much of the exegetical material which helps him to reflect on the dynamics of grace and works.

Levenson works through four accounts of brotherly inequality which he identifies in the Genesis narratives: Jacob and Esau, Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Joseph and his brothers. Levenson's engagement with the notions of chosenness and its corollaries seems to come out most clearly in the work that he does on Abraham and Isaac, and later on the story of Joseph.

In his twelfth chapter, "Isaac Unbound," Levenson gives a careful, thorough reading of the *Aqedah*, the narrative of Isaac's near sacrifice in Genesis 22. As Levenson builds his reading there are two aspects which are particularly worthy of note. First, he begins by engaging the accounts of Gerhard von Rad¹⁶⁹ and Søren Kierkegaard.¹⁷⁰ In doing so he calls into question what he identifies as their "Pauline-Lutheran" readings of the text, influenced by Hebrews 11.17-29, which locate Abraham's virtue in his faith that God will ultimately, somehow,

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 43-52.

¹⁶⁹ Gerhard von Rad, *Das Opfer des Abraham* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1971); idem, *Genesis: a commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972).

¹⁷⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

remain faithful to the promise which he has given Abraham in his child Isaac.¹⁷¹

Levenson's claim is that this kind of faith-oriented reading is unsustainable on the basis of the sparsity of the narrative's detail.¹⁷² This critique of von Rad and Kierkegaard forms something of an introduction for Levenson's own reading, as he consistently points out that rather than faith, it is obedience to God's command which renders Abraham praiseworthy in the *Aqedah*.¹⁷³

Secondly, Levenson, following a midrash from *Genesis Rabbah*, highlights the connections between Genesis 22 and Genesis 12, the initial calling of Abraham. In both chapters YHWH calls Abraham with the phrase אֵלֹהֵי אֱבְרָהָם (12.1; 22.2). And, again, in both chapters, there is what Levenson describes as a "step effect" to the nouns describing Isaac and those describing Abraham's homeland. So, in 12.1 Abraham is commanded to "go out from your land, from your kin and from your father's house" and in 22.2 Isaac is described as, "your son, your only son, whom you love." Finally, Levenson notes the further point that in both chapters the text does not name the destination to which Abraham is to travel. In 22.2 Abraham is to go to "one of the hills which I will point out to you" and in 12.1 it is, "the land which I will show you."¹⁷⁴

These two aspects of Levenson's reading take on significance as he draws towards the close of his account. As he turns to examine the second angelic speech to Abraham (22.15-18), Levenson again highlights the connection with Genesis 12.

¹⁷¹ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 124-126, 130-132.

¹⁷² For this point Levenson is dependent on the famous analysis of the *Aqedah* in Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 11-12; quoted in Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 132.

¹⁷³ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 136.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

It appears as though Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac constitutes the grounds for a renewal of God's original promise and blessing. Now, the initial promise in Genesis 12 was grounded, as Levenson puts it, "on pure grace."¹⁷⁵ However, while this may have been a cause for celebration in certain strands of the Christian tradition, in much Jewish thought this apparently arbitrary expression of grace causes problems. It opens God to the accusation of injustice and arbitrariness. The midrash from *Genesis Rabbah* (*Gen. Rab.* 55.1) seeks to defend God from this charge on the basis of Genesis 22. The essential point is that, through the trials of the righteous, the fairness of God's choice is validated. Those chosen, like Abraham, are able to pass the brutal tests set before them and, consequently, God's decision making is rendered fair: "The trials of the righteous mediate the contradiction between God's grace and his justice."¹⁷⁶

What we find then, according to Levenson, is that the second angelic oracle confirms the case of Kierkegaard that Abraham retains Isaac and the promise associated with him because he was willing to sacrifice him. However, the key point at which Levenson objects to Kierkegaard's reading is the rooting of Abraham's willingness in *faith* in the promise, rather than in Abraham's *obedience* to God's command. Levenson claims that this obedience could in theory function quite separately from any faith in the future fulfilment of God's promise.¹⁷⁷ We might observe, as an aside, that an obedience which displayed no inherent trust in the promises of God may well open God up to similar charges of capriciousness which the midrash sought to deflect. Levenson is surely right that Kierkegaard and von Rad import the language of faith which is not the language of the text.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 140-41.

However, it seems likely that some kind of trust, faith or confidence in the God who both promises such things to, and demands such things from, Abraham is inherent in the logic of the story.¹⁷⁸ In other words, perhaps Levenson could have been slightly more even-handed in his engagement with von Rad and Kierkegaard. Their language of faith is, in one sense, anachronistic; but, in another sense, it might be taken as attempting to articulate something of inherent significance in Abraham's interaction with YHWH, albeit in the terms of their own tradition.

In sum, Levenson's reading of the *Aqedah* highlights the nature of chosenness under YHWH; chosenness which apparently stems from "pure grace" and yet is legitimated through the trials of the righteous. It is, in fact, this element of legitimation which Levenson also sees as the crucial theme in the story of Joseph, another brother-rivalry narrative on which Levenson expends considerable exegetical energy.¹⁷⁹ On one level, the narrative legitimates Jacob's preference for Joseph, albeit in such a way that entails the transformation of both characters. Yet, in another sense, the text also legitimates God's choice of Joseph; Levenson writes:

The story of Joseph is also, to some extent, a legitimation of the favor God extends to the son of Jacob's old age. Earlier, we saw that the second angelic address after the binding of Isaac recasts the old promise of progeny to Abraham as a consequence of the father's willingness to give up his son as a burnt offering (Gen 22:15-18). The promise, it turns out, rests on more than grace alone; it is not a whim of an arbitrary Deity. Now

¹⁷⁸ Levenson would seem to suggest that this is the case when he later writes of Gen. 22.15-18, "Our people exists and perdures, the Israelite narrator seems to be saying, only because of the incomparable act of obedience and faith that the patriarch-to-be carried out on a certain unnamed mountain in the land of Moriah." *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

we can see that not only Jacob's but also God's favor to Joseph is not unrelated to the moral and intellectual mettle of the favored son himself... Joseph succeeds because of God's favor, but God's favor, comes to the man who, because of his mounting strength of character and self-knowledge, is able to put it to the proper use.¹⁸⁰

Again, here we see the dynamic of divine choice and human suitability clearly in play. It does seem that Levenson is willing to grant a greater weight to the divine choice than the human suitability; the scales are not necessarily evenly balanced.¹⁸¹ This might be seen in Levenson's persistent use of the language of the *vindication* or *legitimation* of the divine decision, rather than identifying the human agent's suitability as the *grounds* for the divine decision in the first place; but perhaps such distinctions are too fine. Either way, the concern to defend the Deity from any accusation of arbitrariness persists through Levenson's concluding reflections on the Joseph story and provides a consistent grounding for his engagement with the interrelationship between notions of grace and works.

It is the case then, as I mentioned at the outset, that Levenson's engagement with traditional issues surrounding the notions of election and rejection in the Hebrew Bible as well as in Christian or Jewish theology serves to complicate these categories. Neither universalism nor particularism are, in themselves, helpful categories for describing the outlook of the Hebrew Bible or the outlook of the subsequent religious traditions which it sired. Moreover, where a

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 167-8.

¹⁸¹ See particularly the comments of Dennis T. Olson, "Grace and Obedience in Levenson's Work," *Dialog* 34 (1995): 59-60; and Levenson's response, Jon D. Levenson, "Response to the Five Reviews of *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*," *Dialog* 34 (1995): 63-66. Here Levenson makes this imbalance a little more explicit.

dichotomy has, at times, existed in Christian thinking between grace and works, such a dichotomy is ill suited to application to the Hebrew Bible. Levenson claims a more subtle approach; one which is open to divine grace and initiative and yet still contains ample room for the necessity of human suitability to the divine calling.

iii. *Jacob and Esau*

With these wider thoughts in mind, we may now turn to the Jacob-Esau narrative and examine how Levenson's reading of this classic story of election sits within the wider categories we have been outlining. The Jacob-Esau narrative is the first to be examined by Levenson in his account of the phenomenon of the symbolic death of the favoured son in the Genesis narratives.¹⁸² This may be because it is the story which most obviously stands in tension with the Pentateuchal legal material on primogeniture. In the cases of Isaac and Joseph, they supplant sons of a different mother, a situation apparently challenged by Deuteronomy 21.15-17, but in other cases conceivably still congruous with the notion of the rights of primogeniture. Isaac and Joseph are in fact first-born sons, first-born sons through their mothers. In contrast, Jacob and Esau share a mother; thus, on any reckoning, Jacob is the second born.¹⁸³ Perhaps this narrative is, then, particularly fitting as a starting point. It is with Jacob and Esau that the inversion of birth order is most explicit.

The inversion of the brothers' birth order is, however, certainly not the only issue that the story raises. The means by which Jacob supplants his brother has the potential to evoke a certain amount of ethical anxiety among interpreters.

¹⁸² Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 61-68.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

Jacob takes advantage of Esau both in Genesis 25, to seize his birthright, and in Genesis 27, to take his blessing. It is notable, then, that Levenson is insistent that we do not succumb to “hasty moralization” in our reading of the Jacob-Esau narrative. Indeed, as far as Levenson is concerned, given the vivid portraits presented to us in Genesis 25-27, “only the dourest of readers could fail to be entertained by the story of the crafty younger twin’s supplantation of his brother.”¹⁸⁴ Now, we might question whether Levenson’s portrayal of “the dourest of readers” is really justified and, in fairness, Levenson does suggest that just such a moralizing reading is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Jer. 9.3-5).¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, Levenson’s slightly pointed critique of “hasty moralization” is made with a view to a significant insight. The narrative is unconcerned with the ethical shadows which Jacob’s actions cast. Instead, its very unconcern leads to a greater problem: Jacob’s behaviour is in the service of a higher purpose which is revealed in YHWH’s oracle of Genesis 25.23. Levenson notes: “We are faced as well with a Deity who disregards the principle of order of birth no less than [Rebekah and Jacob], even preferring the unscrupulous trickster over the uncouth first-born.”¹⁸⁶ At the outset of Levenson’s reading the issue of arbitrary divine preference is presented baldly.

What is more, for Levenson, this disparity between the statuses of Jacob and Esau is never resolved. While Jacob offers some form of “blessing” (ברכה) to Esau when they meet again (Gen. 33.10-11), no birthright (בכרה) is ever mentioned. Or, to put the matter slightly differently, the disparity divinely established in Genesis 25.23 has an ongoing significance for Jacob and Esau and their subsequent

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 62.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 62-63.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 63.

descendants.¹⁸⁷ The upshot of this, for Levenson, is that Jacob is divinely established as the first-born and beloved son and this reversed status is irreversible.

With Jacob fixed in the role of beloved son, Levenson can outline the patterns of humiliation and exaltation in his life; patterns which in his wider reading form much of the backbone of the beloved son's existence. Once Levenson transitions to the humiliation and exaltation of Jacob, Esau temporarily passes from view. Even so, this part of Levenson's reading advances his overall thesis succinctly, as Jacob's exile and service is read as a kind of humiliation and metaphorical death.¹⁸⁸ This part of Levenson's account features some of the kind of exegetical flourishes which characterise so much of his work: as soon as Jacob is promised the land he is forced into flight, Jacob is tricked out of inverting the order of Rachel and Leah's birth, and the one who was to have mastery of his brother becomes a servant.¹⁸⁹ During the course of this discussion Levenson alludes to the notion that Jacob's exile and humiliation might be interpreted as punishment for his trickery, but the allusion is brief and undeveloped:

The afflictions of that journey can be interpreted as punishment for his act of fraud, and so they in part are. But they can also be interpreted as a result of the transference of paternity from the human father, whose preference has now been irrevocably denied, to the divine father, whose mysterious plans for the trickster have only begun to unfold.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 65-66.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 65-66.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 65.

Levenson's reluctance to expand on this insight may be due to the silence of the text, or perhaps he is still wary of moralising the text. Either way, were such a notion explored further it might provide some resources to endorse Esau's tirade against his brother in Genesis 27.

Even if Jacob receives no punishment for his deception, the scenes of reconciliation which conclude the Jacob-Esau narrative point to a significant development in each character. Jacob and Esau are reconciled in the end; extraordinary as it might have seemed at the outset. Moreover, Levenson highlights that the reconciliation of the two brothers carries a hint of restitution. Jacob, who is repeatedly promised mastery over Esau (Gen. 25.23; 27.29), refers to himself before Esau as his "servant" (33.5). Similarly, again, he offers Esau a "blessing," perhaps as a kind of payment or restitution (33.11), and, in his turn, Esau is gracious and forgiving.¹⁹¹ Thus, having begun his reading by highlighting the uncompromised nature of God's preference for Jacob, Levenson closes by smoothing some of the sharp edges of this divine distinction:

Without ever giving up the birthright he assumed by deception, Jacob forgoes the hegemony it entails. Without reinstatement as the first-born, Esau forgoes the vengeance that nearly destroyed the family. The act of choosing, God and Rebekah's special preference for Jacob over Esau, has not proven fatal after all; at long last all involved seem able to accept it.¹⁹²

In sum, Levenson's reading of Jacob and Esau seems to fit into his wider thesis that those chosen are subject to humiliation in order to show forth the

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁹² Ibid., 68.

capacity of their character. Perhaps Jacob returns from exile as a more morally robust individual. If so, Levenson does not argue that Jacob's trials demonstrate his character. Instead, it seems here that Jacob's humiliation has a more formative, rather than demonstrative, effect.¹⁹³ In this sense, in Levenson's reading at least, there may be room to see formation in Esau's character as well.¹⁹⁴ To do so would fit Levenson's broader concerns with regards to election nicely. For, as we have seen, Levenson consistently wishes to prioritise and centralise notions of chosenness, without importing with them the notion that the unchosen are somehow disparaged. According to Levenson's reading, in stark contrast to Calvin, Esau seems just as responsible for the final reconciliation as Jacob.

4. Appraising Levenson

There is much to be learnt from Levenson's writing on Jacob and Esau as well as on election more generally. His reading is subtle and nuanced, combining interpretive imagination and exegetical care. He situates his work within larger conceptual and theological categories without being beholden to them. Levenson helpfully complicates well-worn categories, such as universalism and particularism or grace and works in the service of a richer understanding of the Hebrew Bible. There may be times, particularly when writing on the dialectic between grace and works, when Levenson seems to caricature the Christian tradition somewhat. We might have hoped for some engagement with the rich and subtle ways in which

¹⁹³ "If [Jacob] has undergone a symbolic death, as I believe he has in these narratives, the death is only symbolic, and from it he returns a better man, ready to assume the Patriarchal role with which he was blessed just before his flight for his life to Paddan-aram." *Ibid.*, 68. Cf. Levenson's comments on Joseph, "Joseph succeeds because of God's favor, but God's favor comes to the man who, because of his mounting strength of character and self-knowledge, is able to put it to proper use." *Ibid.*, 167-168. It seems to me that the humiliation of Jacob and Joseph may be functioning in different ways. If this is the case Levenson fails to highlight it.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Levenson's comments on Esau and Cain. *Ibid.*, 75.

Christians, both in the New Testament and beyond, have brought the notions of grace and works together in theologically suggestive ways. Still, Levenson's attempt to engage both Jewish and Christian reception of the Hebrew Bible is well effected.

Furthermore, as already suggested, Levenson's exegetical work is striking in its care and scope. In particular, in *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* his identification of the pattern of a metaphorical death and resurrection in the lives of the patriarchal brothers is masterful. I am inclined to agree with Levenson that the favoured son in Genesis tends to undergo some kind of death-like ordeal, only to emerge later in some form of resurrection. What is more, Levenson presents this pattern in a way which is theologically engaging. This is done through the function Levenson attributes to the pattern of symbolic death and resurrection: it serves to vindicate God's decision for the righteous.

As we have seen, this note of vindication is sounded most clearly in Levenson's reading of the second angelic announcement of Genesis 22.15-18.¹⁹⁵ Levenson writes of God's choices,

For those choices are not mere whims, evidence of the arbitrariness of providence, and the proof is that those chosen, like Abraham, for exaltation, are able to pass the brutal tests to which God subjects them and thus to vindicate the grace he has shown them. The trials that appear to be their humiliation are, in fact, the means of their exaltation, proof positive that their special destiny is based on other than caprice.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 139.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 139.

It would seem that this statement about the vindication of Abraham serves as a lens through which to read the other instances of humiliation traced by Levenson in Genesis. This has to be proposed with some caution because one has difficulty finding a point at which Levenson makes this explicit and that may be due to reasonable caution on his part. Still, one gets the impression that Levenson's reading of the patriarchal brother narratives builds to this flourishing identification of humiliation with vindication. This identification is borne out for Levenson by the shape of the Joseph story.¹⁹⁷

It is worth reflecting for a moment on the language Levenson uses at this point. It is not the language of causality, as some have mistakenly taken it to be.¹⁹⁸ Human obedience does not have an equal role with divine grace in God's initial decision in favour of the chosen son, individual or nation. Instead, Levenson typically uses the language of vindication and legitimation. In this sense, human obedience serves to subsequently justify God's decision by proving that, finally, the human object is a fitting recipient of divine favour.

One upshot of this move for Levenson seems to be that the Hebrew Bible defies the Christian dichotomy of grace and works. As such, as we have seen already, in conclusion to his discussion of Joseph, Levenson writes:

As always in the Hebrew Bible, we have here a theology too subtle to be done justice by the familiar Christian dichotomy of grace versus works.

Joseph succeeds because of God's favor, but God's favor comes to the man

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 167.

¹⁹⁸ Olson, "Grace," 60.

who, because of his mounting strength of character and self-knowledge, is able to put it to proper use.¹⁹⁹

The difficulty at this point seems to be that Levenson leaves some ambiguity about how the favoured individual's starting point (in any of the narratives discussed) and his end point relate to one another. In other words, on any reckoning it seems reasonable to suppose some transformation, or mounting strength of character, in each of the individuals Levenson examines. Even in Abraham this could be the case, although Levenson, curiously, does not emphasise Abraham's development.²⁰⁰ Abraham's transition from laughing doubter (Gen. 17.17) to obedient God-fearer (Gen. 22.12), Jacob's transition from insincere trickster (Gen. 27.36) to generous servant (Gen. 33.5), and Joseph's transition from brash favourite (Gen. 37.5-11) to humble master (Gen. 50.16-21) require some kind of explanation. Levenson makes a good case that these transitions and transformations are significant in the outworking of God's purposes in Genesis, but to present these "vindications" in a way which is incongruous with the notions of grace and works in the Christian tradition seems misguided. Or at least we might expect a distinction between the popularly perceived dichotomy of grace and works and the carefully nuanced interactions between divine mercy and human holiness which the Christian tradition has given rise to. Indeed, elsewhere Levenson seems to have admitted that a more careful account of this dynamic should have been given.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 167-168.

²⁰⁰ Levenson generally seems to lean toward a highly sympathetic reading of Abraham, see for example his comments on Abraham's flight to Egypt in Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 37-41.

²⁰¹ "Olson's critique has persuaded me that if I were going to touch on these matters at all, I should have spelled things out in some detail, even if so doing involved a digression from my major topic." Levenson, "Response," 66.

Surely the point must be that these narratives present accounts of transformation, vindication or legitimation but are tantalisingly light on comment. It would seem that some comment is offered in Genesis 22.15-18, perhaps this is why Levenson invests so much interpretive capital in these verses. But these three verses might be weighted differently in light of the wider arc of the Genesis narrative.²⁰² Given all this, it seems uncharacteristically hasty of Levenson to contrast the patterns of symbolic death, vindication and legitimation in Genesis with Christian notions of grace and works. Almost all brands of mainstream Christian theological reflection have taken human obedience as having a significant (if variously construed) relationship with divine grace.

The more pressing problem, however, seems to be that the language of vindication runs the risk of blurring into notions of explanation. This is seen most clearly when Levenson develops the midrash from *Genesis Rabbah* to defend the notion of God's justice.²⁰³ It seems here that the justification for God's decision in favour of Abraham is that Abraham is one who is able to pass God's tests. He has a character worthy of choosing. However, if God's testing, to some degree, serves to justify, or even offer a rationale, for God's decision making then there are limits to the stories in which this model works. The clear language of testing in Genesis 22.1 and the presence of 22.15-18 suggest that the chapter may serve to legitimate God's choice of Abraham. Yet, this reasoning buckles slightly when applied to the story of Jacob and Esau.

²⁰² R.W.L. Moberly, "The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah," *VT* 38 (1988): 302-323 (319-321).

²⁰³ Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 139.

In the story of Jacob and Esau the sense of, what Levenson might call, an “arbitrary” prenatal decision is difficult to shake.²⁰⁴ This is surely why it has proved such a fertile region for those, like Paul, Augustine and Calvin, wishing to emphasise the gracious (or inexplicable) nature of God’s decision making. Jacob is transformed in the story, to be sure. But is Esau not changed also? Is Jacob’s humble approach in Genesis 33 not matched by Esau’s gracious reception? If there is little to choose between the “unscrupulous trickster” and the “uncouth first-born” at the beginning of the tale,²⁰⁵ there seems to be an analogous difficulty in adjudicating between the two in terms of virtue by its end. Thus, one comes away with the impression that Levenson’s notion of “vindication,” masterfully portrayed and widely useful as it is, is not quite fit to explain the dynamics of the Jacob-Esau saga. To Levenson’s credit he does not explicitly put it to such a use. He does speak, however, of Jacob returning from his symbolic death in Paddan-aram “a better man, ready to assume the Patriarchal role with which he was blessed...”²⁰⁶ The suggestion here seems to be that Jacob’s time with Laban has formed and prepared him in certain ways for his elected role. Yet, if this is the case, it is unclear how Jacob has been formed, as his time with Laban, while at times trying, is also characterised by immense blessing. Moreover, while in Paddan-aram Jacob displays tendencies which seem remarkably congruous with his character as a trickster. How, then, does Jacob become a better man? In view of this question, it seems remarkable that Levenson does not comment on Jacob’s wrestling match at

²⁰⁴ As perhaps evidenced by Levenson’s analogy between the experience of Esau and Cain. *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

the Jabbok. This surely offers the best candidate for a transformative encounter in the Jacob narrative.

The substantive point here, then, is that the reading of the Jacob and Esau narrative offered by Levenson is typically thoughtful and illuminating. It is, however, faced with a certain intractable difficulty; namely, it appears as though the distinction between Jacob and Esau while perhaps not ultimately destructive, remains inscrutable right to the end of the narrative. If, at the outset of the story, it is difficult to distinguish between two unappealing brothers, at its conclusion it is difficult to distinguish between them in terms of their generosity. Levenson wishes to complicate the workings of grace, but it is hard to resist the sense of inscrutability in the workings of Jacob and Esau's fates.

Of course, as I have already mentioned, here I have perhaps gone beyond the explicit scope of Levenson's reading in my evaluation and this is part of the challenge for those who wish to appraise Levenson's work. His readings have a certain agility which makes them difficult to critique and easy to caricature. They seem to be patient of a variety of interpretive angles and, in this sense, perhaps Levenson has achieved the kind of Jewish theological interpretation which he sketched in his early essays; an approach which takes seriously the polydoxy of the biblical text and yet situates this text within larger contexts which also have a formative influence on the process of interpretation. Perhaps the most effective way to think through the implications of the readings of both Calvin and Levenson, and their significance for thinking theologically about the rejection of Esau, is to hold them firmly in mind as we turn to our own reading of the narratives of Jacob and Esau.

Chapter 3

ESAU IN GENESIS

1. Introduction

To this point we have been preoccupied with the ways in which two master exegetes, John Calvin and Jon D. Levenson, have sought to incorporate the Esau material into wider accounts of the dynamics of election and rejection. This has of course looked rather different in either case. Calvin seeks to interpret the Genesis text within the broad context of systematic Christian concerns. Levenson traces a wider theme in the Genesis narratives and complicates certain theological concepts. In what follows the concerns raised by Calvin and Levenson remain in play, even as more direct engagement with their readings is reserved for the conclusion.

Given the wide-ranging scope of the present project, the intention here is not to offer a comprehensive account of the so-called Jacob-Cycle (Gen. 25.19-36.43). Instead, the following chapter is structured around the careful selection of texts with particular significance for my broader concerns. The chosen sections are those which touch most directly on the role of Esau and his supposed rejection. Thus, we will look particularly at Genesis 25.19-34; 26.34-35; 27.1-28.9; 32.2-33.17 and 36.1-43. This selection is largely uncontroversial.²⁰⁷ These texts cover the primary actions and descriptions of Esau in Genesis. There is no doubt that in order to engage with each portion of text meaningfully, they will need to be related

²⁰⁷ See the similar selections in other recent examinations of Esau, e.g. R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12-36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah*, SemeiaSt 39 (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 97-137; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 18-155; Gerhard Langer, "Esau in der hebräischen Bibel," in *Esau: Bruder und Feind*, ed. Gerhard Langer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 17-30.

to the broader context of the Jacob narrative. However, this wider narrative will only be touched on as the context for these particular portions of text and, as such, significant parts of the Jacob story, most notably Jacob's stay with Laban, will remain at the periphery.

With a view to keeping engagement with Calvin and Levenson in focus, one particular area of concern in what follows will be the role of Genesis 25.23 in shaping the narrative. In particular, I take up the question of how the opening oracle relates to the end of the narrative, especially the climactic scenes of Genesis 32-33. In other words, a key concern will be how YHWH's pronouncement at the narrative's beginning shapes the concrete actions which animate the rest of the story. I take it that this kind of approach reflects some of the structural contours of the narrative itself. It is widely recognised that the interactions between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25-27 and 32-33 construct the broader arc which gives the narrative its shape.²⁰⁸ The consideration of this arc raises various difficulties and has produced numerous responses,²⁰⁹ surely providing one of the most intriguing elements of the Jacob-Esau narrative. Still, while this dynamic will prove central to my reading, there will, of course, be numerous other elements which require comment.

²⁰⁸ For a range of approaches documenting this structure, see Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 48-53; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 207-208; David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 256-260; Albert de Pury, "The Jacob Story and the Beginning of the Formation of the Pentateuch," in *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid, *SymS 34* (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 51-72 (56-58); Erhard Blum, "The Jacob Tradition," in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, David L. Petersen, *VTSup 152* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 181-211 (182-186).

²⁰⁹ For a brief summary, see Bradford A. Anderson, "Jacob, Esau and the Constructive Possibilities of the Other," *BTB* 49 (2019): 15-21.

With these broader considerations in mind, we can now turn to the central task of providing a theologically informed reading of the rejection of Esau.

2. Genesis 25.19-34

i. *Gen. 25.19-22*

The birth of Jacob and Esau appears in the middle of Genesis 25 following the accounts of Abraham's second marriage, his further offspring (25.11) and the family of Ishmael (25.12-18). Significantly, at this point Abraham's inheritance is made over to Isaac. Isaac is elevated as the sole heir of Abraham's wealth and is clearly distinguished from his brothers (25.6). There is no mention of the promise or blessing of Abraham here and Abraham's gift to Isaac is couched in general terms (ויתן אברהם את־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ לְיִצְחָק). Still, these closing comments on the life of Abraham may serve to prepare us for the following account which revolves so tightly around competition for inheritance, birthright and blessing.²¹⁰

The account of Jacob opens with the familiar, structural, תולדת formula.²¹¹ The introduction to Isaac's "generations/descendants" follows on sharply from the תולדת formula of Ishmael in vv.12-18.²¹² With the passing of Abraham, the question of who will succeed him is clarified for us once again through the תולדת formulas of Ishmael and Isaac. While the prioritising of Isaac has already been confirmed in

²¹⁰ Simone Paganini, "»Wir haben Wasser gefunden« Beobachtungen zur Erzählanalyse von Gen 25,19-26.35," ZAW 117 (2005): 21-35 (21).

²¹¹ On the formula's structural role, see Matthew A. Thomas, *These Are the Generations: Identity, Covenant, and the Toledot Formula*, LHBOTS 551 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), esp. 45-47, 114-117; cf. T. Desmond Alexander, "Genealogies, Seed and the Compositional Unity of Genesis," *TynBul* 44 (1993): 255-270; for the formula as introducing narrative, see Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 229.

²¹² For a variety of renderings of תולדת, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 410; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, WBC 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 171; E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, AB 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 193, 196.

Genesis 17 and noted once more in 25.5, he is highlighted again in 25.19 as Abraham's successor. The seemingly redundant phrase at the end of v.19, "Abraham begot (הוֹלִיד) Isaac,"²¹³ can probably be best explained as a further means of binding Isaac and his progeny to Abraham.²¹⁴ The phrase may well be illuminated by comparison with v.12, where a similar form is used: "These are the descendants of Ishmael, son of Abraham, whom Hagar the Egyptian bore (יָלְדָה)." Whereas Ishmael is bound to Hagar, Isaac is connected once again to Abraham. The introduction of Isaac's descendants, therefore, serves to relate Isaac and the subsequent characters more tightly to the figure of Abraham and the narratives which surround him.²¹⁵

Isaac's marriage to Rebekah in v.20 completes the scene for the birth of Jacob and Esau. Yet the narrative cannot progress smoothly to the birth scene as two significant difficulties are first addressed. Both troubles relate to Rebekah's experience of pregnancy; the first being her infertility and the second her pain during pregnancy.

Rebekah's infertility roots the story conceptually within the wider generative dynamics of the patriarchal narratives.²¹⁶ The reader familiar with the

²¹³ Elie Assis, *Identity in Conflict: The Struggle Between Esau and Jacob, Edom and Israel*, Siphrut 19 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 20.

²¹⁴ John E. Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and YHWH's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle*, Siphrut 5 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 52; Paul D. Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth: An Examination into the Nature and Role of Material Possessions in the Jacob-Cycle (Gen 25:19-35:29)*, VTSup 146 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 40.

²¹⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 178.

²¹⁶ On this conceptual link, see James G. Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type-Scenes," *JSOT* 17 (1980): 107-119. The diachronic relationship between such motifs is inevitably more complicated, although the notion that a popular motif circulated in originally separate stories is plausible, for instance, Jon Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 281; cf. Ronald S. Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 39-42.

stories of Abraham and Sarah and Jacob, Leah and Rachel is struck by the similarity in the plight of Sarah (11.30), Rebekah and, subsequently, Rachel (29.31). Yet, while Abraham and Sarah's struggle to conceive dominated their narrative, and Rachel's difficulties play into her ongoing strife with Leah, Rebekah's infertility is handled with remarkable brevity.²¹⁷ The tension is resolved with notable ease. Indeed, it is barely permitted to arise in the first place, introduced as it is through Isaac's plea (עֵתָר).²¹⁸

Once she has conceived, Rebekah faces a second trial. For the first time, in v.22, we are informed that she is to be the mother of more than one son. While the announcement of twins (תּוֹמָם) is reserved for v.24, it is anticipated by the description of the sons' "struggle" in the womb. This unique note on the difficulties of a pregnancy, employing the abrasive verb רָצַץ, surely prefigures the strife that will characterise so much of the siblings' shared life.²¹⁹ Moreover, given the pace at which the narrative moves over the problem of Rebekah's infertility, this note on the difficulties of the pregnancy directs our attention away from the issue of succession from one generation to another and towards the issue of intra-generational rivalry.²²⁰ Rebekah's infertility is invoked as a motif which sets the story in reasonable continuity with the narrative of Abraham, but the theme of sibling rivalry, introduced here, takes the reader in a different direction.²²¹

²¹⁷ On the peculiarity of this move, see Kaminsky, *Jacob*, 43.

²¹⁸ On the עֵתָר word play, see S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 15th ed. (London: Methuen, 1948), 245; on the wider use of עֵתָר, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 175.

²¹⁹ Skinner proposes certain ancient parallels, but this incident is unique in the Old Testament. John Skinner, *A Critical Commentary on Genesis*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1910), 359.

²²⁰ Westermann, *Genesis*, 407.

²²¹ Frederick E. Greenspahn argues that 25.22 introduces the theme of conflict but does not relate to the sequence of birth; given that the brothers' subsequent conflict revolves around birth status this distinction seems unnecessary. Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers*

Rebekah responds to the ongoing struggle within her with a fragmented cry: “If so, why am I this...?” The present syntactical arrangement resists any clear rendering. As such, a number of proposals have been offered to account for a statement which, apparently, in its present form “hardly makes any sense.”²²² The difficulty of these words often leads commentators to propose some form of emendation, perhaps offering an alternative along the lines, “If so, why do I live?”²²³ Some form of corruption has probably affected the text’s present form, although beyond that we seem to be able to say relatively little.²²⁴ The point, however, is of little material significance. In its present form and context Rebekah’s cry can be read as an inarticulate attempt to express her pain and anxiety. Rebekah cries out and seeks YHWH presumably to find some word of comfort or instruction.

To this point we have sought to identify certain features which provide the backdrop for the introduction of the Jacob and Esau narrative. Two key points are clear at this stage. The story is set in the context of the preceding Abraham narratives. The note that “Abraham begot Isaac” in v.19 reminds us that Isaac, not Ishmael, will inherit the promises made to Abraham.²²⁵ Moreover, with the motif of

Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 117.

²²² Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 288.

²²³ Speiser, *Genesis*, 194; Sarna, *Genesis*, 179; Arnold, *Genesis*, 232; Westermann, *Genesis*, 411, 413.

²²⁴ Many commentators follow the Syriac and insert ויהי; the LXX also seems to have struggled with the verse. LXX reads, Εἰ οὕτως μοι μέλλει γίνεσθαι, ἵνα τί μοι τοῦτο; perhaps reflecting an attempt to make sense of the Hebrew text as we have it in MT or a different *Vorlage*.

²²⁵ The association of 25.19 with a wider P redaction perhaps enforces the suggestion that the introductory תולדת formula deliberately binds the Jacob-Cycle to the Abraham stories. On P’s genealogical framework, see Carr, *Fractures*, 93-99; Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, WMANT 57 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), 66-67, 432-446.

the infertile wife (25.21) a further conceptual link is made with one of the Abraham story's defining dilemmas. However, while some elements in vv.19-22 suggest continuity with the Abraham story, another note directs the dynamics of the narrative in a slightly different direction. By highlighting the strife between the brothers within the womb, the text perhaps suggests that the tension in the forthcoming narrative will be found primarily in intra-generational rivalry, rather than in cross-generational progress.

ii. *Gen. 25.23-28*

The oracle offered to Rebekah in v.23 is widely understood as central to the development of the subsequent story.²²⁶ Its significance is surely without doubt. The question, though, is quite what role it plays within the narrative. One approach is to see the oracle casting the brothers' futures in clear terms and essentially resolving the result of their struggle at the outset. The main challenge to this kind of reading comes from those who wish to read the oracle in more ambiguous terms.²²⁷ On this reading the oracle indicates certain elements of the family's future (e.g. internal strife) but leaves more or less open the question of who will

²²⁶ Wenham, *Genesis*, 180; von Rad, *Genesis*, 265; J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975), 94; Peter D. Miscall, "The Jacob and Joseph Stories as Analogies," *JSOT* 3 (1978): 28-40 (32); Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Biographical Patterns in Biblical Narrative," *JSOT* 6 (1981): 27-46 (39-40); Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 215. For an alternative account which still takes the oracle seriously, see Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, JSOTSup 96 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 119-124.

²²⁷ The oracle's ambiguity is noted, if not examined in detail, by a number of commentators, see, for instance, B. Jacob, *Das Erste Buch Der Tora: Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1934), 543; David W. Cotter, *Genesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 188-189.

triumph.²²⁸ To try and grasp the significance of the whole oracle more effectively we will address its most ambiguous element first, namely: ורב יעבד צעיר (v.23bβ).

R. Christopher Heard has set out the ambiguity of v.23bβ in some detail.²²⁹ Heard begins with the admission that the traditional translation of v.23bβ, “The older will serve the younger,” is widespread.²³⁰ Nevertheless, he points out that such a rendering fails to grapple with the ambiguous form of the clause.²³¹

Heard offers four points which render the clause ambiguous on syntactical grounds. First, as is common in Hebrew poetry, there are no object markers in the clause to guide the reader in determining subject and object. Secondly, both רב and צעיר agree with the verb יעבד in number and gender and, as such, do little to clarify their own function in the clause. Thirdly, in the case of a *noun-verb-noun* clause, the ordering *subject-verb-object* (“the older will serve the younger”) would be somewhat unusual in Hebrew.²³² The ordering *object-verb-subject* would be slightly more common. Fourthly, it could be that the line begins with a nominative absolute (*casus pendens*).²³³ However, if this is the case, it lacks the regular markers which help to identify a nominative absolute.²³⁴

The nominative absolute, or, more traditionally, the *casus pendens*, is a means of highlighting a particular element in the main clause. Emphasis is created

²²⁸ See Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), 111-112; Yair Zakovitch, *Jacob: Unexpected Patriarch*, trans. Valerie Zakovitch (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 16-17; Heard, *Dynamics*, 98-101.

²²⁹ Heard, *Dynamics*, 98-101.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

²³² On word order see GKC, §142.

²³³ Heard, *Dynamics*, 99.

²³⁴ See GKC, §143; Joüon-Muraoka, §156; *IBHS*, §4.7.

by placing the nominative noun at the beginning of the clause; but, to avoid confusion, certain markers are placed later in the clause to highlight the fact that the opening noun is the clause's nominative. The nominative absolute is usually marked in a clause by either a resumptive pronoun,²³⁵ or a separate verbal clause.²³⁶ Presumably, then, were v.23b β to be marked as a nominative absolute it might read: ורב יעבד צעירו ("as for the greater, he will serve his lesser one"). Of course, as Heard readily points out, neither of these markers are necessary for constructing a nominative absolute clause, but their absence leaves a degree of ambiguity.

The point, then, is that when read in isolation it is simply not clear from the syntax of the clause whether רב or צעיר is the subject; it is unclear who will serve whom.

Now, of course, such syntactical ambiguity is by no means uncommon in biblical Hebrew. Often, however, context serves to restrict the semantic range of the confusing clause or construction. Yet, in this instance, Heard suggests that neither the immediate nor the wider context helps to clarify the issue. So, for example, the immediate parallelism of the oracle does not help to ground a conclusion. Even though, in both v.23a γ and v.23b α , the subject stands at the beginning of the clause, the different placement of the verb, at the end of the clause in both instances, resists a direct comparison with v.23b β . Heard notes:

In v.23b β , the verb appears between the two nouns and it is precisely the shift of the verb that ambiguates the phrase... As well as rendering the

²³⁵ E.g. Nah. 1.3: יהוה בסופה ובשערה דרבן ("As for the LORD his way is in the whirlwind and the storm").

²³⁶ E.g. Isa. 9.1: העם ההלכים בחשך ראו אור גדול ("As for the people who are walking in darkness, they see a great light").

clause ambiguous in isolation, the shift of the verb to the middle of the line rather than its end introduces the possibility that v.23bβ may depart from the other three lines in its placement of the subject as well.²³⁷

Heard helpfully sets out the genuine grammatical ambiguity in v.23bβ. Thanks, in part, to Heard's exposition, the difficulties of the oracle's conclusion have been taken up in wider discussions of election/rejection within the Jacob-Esau cycle. While the grammatical ambiguity is present, one way in which commentators have attempted to move past it is through an appeal to the wider context of the stories of Genesis and the persistent motif of favouring the younger son.²³⁸ This is helpful, as far as it goes, although, as Heard points out, it does not resolve all ambiguity within the story of Jacob and Esau.²³⁹ Ambiguity, therefore, appears to be a key feature of Genesis 25.23. With the concerns raised by Heard firmly in play, we might now turn to a reading of the oracle as a whole.

The oracle sets up a number of issues before it arrives at its ambiguous final phrase. Rebekah's pain offers a foretaste of a conflict which will encompass many besides the twin brothers: "Two nations (שני גיִים)²⁴⁰ are in your womb, and two peoples (ושני לאמים) will be separated from within you (יפרדו ממעיד)." The context envisioned is one far beyond Rebekah's present family concerns. However,

²³⁷ Heard, *Dynamics*, 99-100.

²³⁸ Bradford Anderson makes this move, albeit tentatively; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 32; cf. Kaminsky, *Jacob*, 44. Kaminsky is responding to Friedman, *Disappearance*, 111-112; on the younger son's pre-eminence more generally, see Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 55-169; Roger Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives*, JSOTSup 133 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

²³⁹ Heard, *Dynamics*, 100.

²⁴⁰ MT's *Qere* is גיִים.

although the introduction of national concerns here may be surprising, the general sense of the opening line is uncontroversial.²⁴¹

The conflict that is to ensue, or even that is already taking place, will not be characterised by equilibrium in terms of strength: “But one people will be stronger than the other people (וְלֵאמֹר מִלְּאָם יֵאֲמָר).” Here we remain within the realm of future national strife. To this point though little is clear other than that the nations of which Rebekah is mother will be at odds with one another and that their conflict will not be equal. Of course, within the framework of the story, all that is said about these two nations is also, to some degree, said of the two brothers. To try and distinguish too sharply between the characters Jacob and Esau and the nations they will father is perhaps to miss the point. Richard J. Clifford puts the matter helpfully:

The national meaning of the Genesis stories of the ancestors becomes clear only when the drama of the individual actors is taken seriously on its own terms. The stories are not allegories with a one-to-one correspondence of individual and nation. The human actors, however, are ancestors who somehow include and prefigure their descendants.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Whether or not the oracle is a *vaticinium ex eventu* seems irrelevant for our purposes. Cf. J. Alberto Soggin, *Das Buch Genesis: Kommentar*, trans. Thomas Frauenlob (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 1997), 341; Westermann, *Genesis*, 413; John J. Scullion, *Genesis: A Commentary for Students, Teachers, and Preachers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 196-197.

²⁴² Richard J. Clifford, “Genesis 25.19-34,” *Int* 45 (1991): 397-401 (397-398); cf. Gary A. Anderson, *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 75-76; Erhard Blum, “Die Komplexität der Überlieferung: Zur diachronen und synchronen Auslegung von Gen 32,23-33,” in Erhard Blum, *Textgestalt und Komposition*, ed. Wolfgang Oswald, FAT 69 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 43-84 (56); John Van Seters slightly overstates the case: “The various scenes in 25.21-34 concerning the eponymous ancestors of Israel and Edom are intended to be immediately transparent images of the future relationship between these two

To read the concerns of the oracle well will require keeping both the subsequent national and the immediate individual dimensions in view.

Before the oracle reaches its climax, therefore, we know that the ongoing struggle within Rebekah's womb is indicative of an upcoming struggle between two nations which will be fathered by her twins.²⁴³ This struggle will not be equal, but one nation/child will be stronger than the other. At this point questions of birth order are not in view; rather it is a question of comparable strength within the conflict.

In light of all this, what is to be made of the enigmatic phrase: *ורב יעבד צעיר*? We may begin with an observation regarding Heard's reading. Heard reads for ambiguity.²⁴⁴ This is not to say that Heard creates ambiguity or finds it where it is not reasonably present. It is to say, however, that the ambiguous features in the biblical text receive presentational priority in his reading. This means that interpretive decisions are held off and the text left open ended. Thus, he translates 25.23bβ: "the older the younger will serve."²⁴⁵ Heard claims that this translation is designed to safeguard the ambiguity of the clause and to some degree he is successful.²⁴⁶ Technically, given the uninflected nature of the English language, in this rendering both "the older" and "the younger" could act as subject. We will return to Heard's translation in due course. However, at this point it is simply worth pointing out that settling with ambiguity is not our only option. Heard reads for ambiguity, but those with concerns which differ from Heard's may legitimately

nations." John Van Seters, *The Yahwist: A Historian of Israelite Origins* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 43.

²⁴³ On strife in the Jacob-Cycle, see Turner, *Announcements*, 128-129.

²⁴⁴ Heard, *Dynamics*, 4-7.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 98; cf. Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 23.

²⁴⁶ Heard, *Dynamics*, 99.

wish for more precision when it comes to an account of 25.23 and its role within the wider narrative. Such precision may be elusive, but there are resources within the text which can be drawn upon to aid a tighter reading.

There are two primary points which are worth considering if we wish to temper some of the oracle's ambiguity. The first relates to the immediate grammar of the oracle and the second, as we have already briefly seen, relates to the wider context of chapter 25.

First, then, we may ask whether the ambiguity in 25.23b β is final or whether the construction may be used to steer the reader in a particular direction. If this is the case, then the ambiguity would be suggestive rather than impenetrable.

As Heard points out, 25.23b β introduces a peculiar word order. The alteration of word order is typically indicative of some particular emphasis. This emphasis is usually achieved by placing the highlighted noun (subject or object) at the beginning of the clause.²⁴⁷ As such, the positioning of the רַב at the beginning of the clause draws this particular party to our attention; but to what end? The emphasis could of course be construed as emphatic or even triumphant: "And one people will be stronger than the other, and it is the greater whom the lesser will serve!" But this reading carries the disadvantage of sitting more uncomfortably than any other with the ambiguity identified by Heard. Why seek to emphasise the obvious in an ambiguous way?

Alternatively, and perhaps more plausibly, the clause may highlight the רַב for us in a subversive sense. Given that, in the strict context of the oracle, only the

²⁴⁷ GKC, §142 *a, f*; cf. Gen. 3.13, the woman emphasises the serpent's role: ותאמר האשה: הַנָּחֹשׁ הַשִּׂיאֲנִי וְאָכַל.

relationship of two nations is in view,²⁴⁸ and we have already been informed (v.23b α) that one nation will be stronger than the other, we may well expect to hear that the stronger, or larger, nation will prevail. However, the subsequent syntax is arresting and רב is located for us in a conspicuous position. We might be led to believe, then, that, all ambiguity acknowledged, the final clause subverts our typical understanding of the role of the רב.²⁴⁹

Under this reading the ambiguous placement of רב leads us to expect a peculiar relationship between the רב and what follows in the clause. The ambiguously emphatic placement of רב at the beginning of the clause perhaps (and only perhaps) suggests that this noun will relate to the subsequent verb (יעבד) in a surprising way. In this case the clause may be suggestive of some subversion of the traditional roles of the רב and צעיר. Will the greater, indeed, serve the lesser?

We may return at this point to Heard's rendering of 25.23b β . As we have seen, Heard's translation, "the older the younger will serve," opens the possibility of either "the older" or "the younger" acting as subject. This would seem to resolve the translational issues of 25.23b β . However, it is not quite that straightforward. For "the older" to function as subject in Heard's translation, it would have to do so while separated from the verb. The convention of fore-fronting the subject in an English clause, and thus separating it from the verb, is an archaism and even then something of a poetic convention.²⁵⁰ For many contemporary readers, therefore, the

²⁴⁸ Although, for the suggestion that רב and צעיר might refer to two brothers, see Speiser, *Genesis*, 194-195; cf. Wenham, *Genesis*, 176.

²⁴⁹ An analogous point is made by Naomi Steinberg; Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 89-90.

²⁵⁰ Typical would be the opening of Canto IV of *The Rape of Lock*:
"But anxious cares the pensive nymph oppressed,
And secret passions laboured in her breast."

instinct will likely be to read the noun which directly precedes the verb as the subject, in this case “the younger.” Thus, Heard’s translation runs the risk of steering the reader, familiar with contemporary English idiom, away from the traditional reading and towards one which views the younger as the servant. We have seen that the enigmatic syntax of the Hebrew clause may lead us to suspect that the רַב functions as the surprising subject of יַעֲבֹד . Heard’s translation, intentionally or otherwise, may well lead in the opposite direction and is, then, less satisfactory than it first appears.

In sum, the point is not that the clause lacks the ambiguity outlined by Heard, but rather that the ambiguity itself is more patient of the traditional rendering than any alternative. As such, were we, simply on the basis of the oracle’s form and syntax, to make an interpretive decision over v.23b β , we may well choose to render it as something akin to an unmarked nominative absolute which has legitimately omitted the resumptive pronoun.²⁵¹ This would also suggest that the instincts of traditional translators have been more or less accurate when rendering v.23b β .²⁵² It would also seem that this reading is corroborated by the wider context of chapter 25.

Secondly, then, we need to seek to make sense of 25.23’s ambiguity in the wider context of chapter 25. The oracle is introduced in response to the conflict in

Here the second line is required to clarify that it is, in fact, the “anxious cares” which are functioning as the subject of line 1; without the clarity of line 2, the contemporary reader may assume the opposite. Alexander Pope, “The Rape of Lock,” in *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 77-100 (91).

²⁵¹ *IBHS*, §4.7b.

²⁵² LXX reads: $\text{καὶ ὁ μείζων δουλεύσει τῷ ἐλάσσονι}$. Vulgate reads: *et maior minori seruiet*. For an account of some of the issues in the oracle’s reception and how they might affect its construal, see Robert A. Kraft, “A Note on the Oracle of Rebecca (Gen. XXV.23),” *JTS* 13 (1962): 318-320.

Rebekah's womb.²⁵³ As such, the oracle offers some form of pronouncement on the nature and outcome of this conflict. In other words, whatever ultimate conflict may ensue between the infant nations, the oracle's placement in response to a very immediate conflict is surely of some consequence.²⁵⁴

If vv.22-23 set out some of the key dynamics of the conflict, perhaps vv.25-26 offer some insight into the state of the conflict. The first infant is introduced in terms of appearance: "The first (הראשון) one came out red (אדמוני), all of him like a mantle of hair (כאדרת שער), and they called his name Esau." The allusions here to the nation of Edom are clear. There is a word play on Edom with "red" (אדמוני) and on Seir, a region often associated with Esau (Gen. 32.3; 36.8; cf. Deut. 2.4), with "hair" (שער).²⁵⁵ Such linguistic allusion is typical of biblical naming narratives. It is peculiar that the name Esau (עשו) is not given an explicit etymology, although this omission does serve to focus the narrative attention on the connection between Esau and Edom, which may be unsurprising given the language of גוים and לאמים in v.23. Moreover, if we consider the way in which biblical etymologies often hold loosely to strict lexical identification, functioning more by means of allusion and alliteration, the account of Esau's naming is hardly exceptional.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Paganini, "«Wir haben Wasser gefunden»" 30.

²⁵⁴ On conflict in Gen. 25.19-34, see Syrén, *First-Born*, 81; that conflict is an overarching theme of the Jacob-Esau narratives is widely acknowledged, see, for instance, Jakob Wöhrle, "Koexistenz durch Unterwerfung: Zur Entstehung und politischen Intention der vorpriesterlichen Jakoberzählung," in *The Politics of the Ancestors*, ed. Mark G. Brett and Jakob Wöhrle, FAT 124 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 307-327 (310).

²⁵⁵ On the potential historical relationship between Esau and Seir, see Bert Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist: The Role of Edom in Biblical Prophecy and Story*, JSOTSup 169 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 137-156.

²⁵⁶ On the etymological issue, see Westermann, *Genesis*, 414; Skinner, *Genesis*, 360; Sarna, *Genesis*, 180; Arnold, *Genesis*, 232-233. On biblical etymologies more generally, see Herbert Marks, "Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology," *JBL* 114 (1995): 21-42.

The second son is introduced through a description of his behaviour, rather than his appearance: “his brother came out grasping (אֶהֱזֹת) the heel (בְּעֵקֶב) of Esau and they called his name Jacob (יַעֲקֹב)” (v.26). The play on Jacob’s name will be taken up later in the story (27.36). However, at this point, reading v.26 in light of vv.22-23, we are struck by a possible allusion to the conflict which has characterised Jacob and Esau’s time in the womb.²⁵⁷ To be sure, אֶהֱזֹ is a relatively neutral term and does not necessarily denote conflict, although it can be used to do so (e.g. 2 Sam. 2.21; Isa. 5.29; Job 16.12). But, in the context of the brothers’ struggle in the womb, and the oracle, which seems to allude to some kind of strife (אֶמְצֵ; פָּרַד), surely Jacob’s grasping here reflects the last attempt to prevail in the prenatal struggle.²⁵⁸

Furthermore, it is notable that the root עֵקֶב is related to conflict throughout Genesis. For example, its first use in 3.15 is famously indicative of the ongoing strife between the serpent and Eve’s offspring. Moreover, it appears twice in the chapter 49, both times in conflict contexts. First, in a way strikingly reminiscent of 3.15, Dan is described in 49.17 as a “serpent (נָחָשׁ) upon the road, a viper (שִׁפִּיפֹן) upon the path, biting the horse’s heel (עֵקֶב־יִסּוּס).” Just a few verses later in 49.19 we read, “As for Gad, raiders shall raid him, but he will raid at the heel (עֵקֶב).” Of course, when Esau explicitly references the word play in Jacob’s name in 27.36, he

²⁵⁷ There seems to be no reason to accept Greenspahn’s suggestion that וַיִּמְלֵאוּ יְמֵיהָ לְלִדְתָהּ (25.24a) serves to separate the birth order from the prenatal conflict. Greenspahn, *Brothers*, 116; cf. Joachim J. Krause, “Tradition, History, and Our Story: Some Observations on Jacob and Esau in the Books of Obadiah and Malachi,” *JSOT* 32 (2008): 475-486 (476).

²⁵⁸ See Terence E. Fretheim, “The Jacob Traditions: Theology and Hermeneutic,” *Int* 26 (1972): 419-436 (422); Zakovitch, *Jacob*, 17-18; Hos. 12.4 seems to follow this line; on Hosea and Genesis, see Steven L. McKenzie, “The Jacob Tradition in Hosea XII 4-5,” *VT* 36 (1986): 311-322; William D. Whitt, “The Jacob Traditions in Hosea and their Relation to Genesis,” *ZAW* 103 (1991): 18-43.

appears to emphasise Jacob's trickery in taking away his birthright and blessing.²⁵⁹ Still, it seems possible that themes of conflict may orbit the root and we would be well advised to keep them in mind as we hear the name יַעֲקֹב pronounced.²⁶⁰ The theme of conflict, first introduced in 25.22 and upheld through 25.23, continues into the birth account proper.²⁶¹

With all this in mind, it seems peculiar that some might suggest that God's oracle makes little sense as a response to Rebekah's plea.²⁶² Much more natural, it would seem, would be to see strife and conflict as central to the opening of the Jacob-Esau narrative.²⁶³ To this end, then, part of the point of the oracle, in its present context, must surely be to shed light on the difficulties experienced by Rebekah and outlined in 25.22. As Jacob leaves the womb, we gain some insight into the struggle that Jacob and Esau have participated in up to this point. Whatever else may have characterised the brothers' battle in the womb, it seems, at least in part, to be presented to us as a struggle for primacy in birth order. In this sense, if

²⁵⁹ Struggle and strife are ongoing themes in the Jacob-Cycle, see George W. Coats, "Strife Without Reconciliation: A Narrative Theme in the Jacob Traditions," in *Werden und Wirken des Alten Testaments: Festschrift für Claus Westermann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Rainer Albertz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 83-106; Frederick C. Holmgren, "Holding Your Own Against God! Genesis 32.22-32 (In the Context of Genesis 31-33)," *Int* 44 (1990): 5-17 (5-6).

²⁶⁰ On the connection between Gen. 3.15 and 25.23, see Thomas L. Thompson, "Memories of Esau and Narrative Reiteration: Themes of Conflict and Reconciliation," *SJOT* 25 (2011): 174-200 (186).

²⁶¹ This appears to be a more natural way to read than the suggestion of S.H. Smith, "'Heel' and 'Thigh': The Concept of Sexuality in the Jacob-Esau Narratives," *VT* 4 (1990): 464-473; note the response in M. Malul, "'ĀQĒB 'Heel' and 'ĀQAB 'To Supplant' and the Concept of Succession in the Jacob Narratives," *VT* 46 (1996): 190-212.

²⁶² Anderson, *Trickster*, 67-68.

²⁶³ Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 88-89; John G. Gammie, "Theological Interpretation by Way of Literary and Tradition Analysis: Genesis 25-36," in *Encounter with the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Martin J. Buss, Semeia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 117-134 (118-120).

one brother is to be identified as the רב at this stage, then it will surely be the victor in the prenatal struggle, that is, Esau.²⁶⁴

In light of this reading the translation of certain aspects of the oracle becomes less pressing. For example, we do not need to translate רב as “older” in order to see in it a reference to Esau. Indeed, if, as I suggest, the struggle is presented as a struggle for primacy in birth order, then the categories of “greater” and “older” can be conflated. Or, put slightly differently, part of what we see in v.26 is Esau’s victory; he is the “older” precisely because he is the “greater.” He takes on the status of first-born because he has conquered Jacob within the womb and found pre-eminence. Yet, as the oracle itself may suggest, perhaps this pre-eminence comes with a price.

To this point we have seen how the context of Genesis 25.22-26 has helped us add some interpretive texture to our reading of the oracle in v.23. By situating the oracle in the wider context of conflict, and by paying careful attention to the dynamics of that conflict, we are able to see Esau, in his early pre-eminence, taking on the role of the רב. However, if we can identify Esau as the “greater” (רב) and Jacob as the “lesser” (צעיר), then the question still remains who will serve whom? Who will gain the upper hand? As we turn to the account of Esau’s sale of his birthright some light is shed upon this question.

The narrative progresses with a brief description of the early years of Jacob and Esau. They grow up and find occupations (25.27). Esau is a man “skilled at hunting (ידע ציד), a man of the field (שדה).” By contrast Jacob is a “quiet man (איש

²⁶⁴ Susan Niditch suggests that Esau’s hairiness may associate him with strength, perhaps to be expected from the רב; Susan Niditch, *“My Brother Esau is a Hairy Man”*: Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 115.

תה), dwelling at the tents.” The brothers find opposite occupations, but it is not quite clear at this point what significance this contrast should have.²⁶⁵

Jacob’s description (איש תה) is particularly puzzling. Given the general reluctance of the biblical authors to employ descriptive terms it seems crucial to our understanding of the story, and yet its significance is difficult to grasp. The adjective תה is certainly used elsewhere to denote moral excellence.²⁶⁶ However, a translation of תה in Genesis 25.27 which reflects its moral dimension appears to sit awkwardly in the context of the contrast with Esau as “a man of the field,” even allowing for its longstanding history in interpretation.²⁶⁷

The contrast with Esau does, then, seem to be key in understanding Jacob’s characterisation here.²⁶⁸ The contrast is less one of ethical aptitude, but rather occupational interest. As such, if Jacob’s location in the tents contrasts with Esau’s exploits in the field, then Jacob’s description as תה may be best read in light of Esau’s description as an איש ציד.²⁶⁹ Thus, we might settle for a translation such as, “quiet,” “settled,” or “content.” In other words, Jacob’s description as תה does not serve primarily to present him as a morally superior figure but furthers the contrast between himself and Esau.

While the contrast between the two brothers in v.27 may be broadly neutral, this does not prevent the parents from displaying some real partisanship. In a note which anticipates Genesis 27 we learn that “Isaac loved Esau for the game

²⁶⁵ Ronald Hendel’s argument for a contrast between the barbarous (Esau) and civilised (Jacob) is difficult to substantiate; Ronald Hendel, “Politics and Poetics in the Ancestral Narratives,” in Brett and Wöhrle, *Politics*, 11-34 (25-29).

²⁶⁶ On the תמה word group see B. Kedar-Kopstein, “תמה,” *TDOT* 15:699-711; cf. Job 1.8; 2.3.

²⁶⁷ Anderson gives an excellent account of this history; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 38.

²⁶⁸ Skinner, *Genesis*, 361; Speiser, *Genesis*, 195; Wenham, *Genesis*, 177.

²⁶⁹ Heard, *Dynamics*, 103, n.3.

[he set] in his mouth, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” With this note the contrast between the brothers is set up and space created for further conflict in the ensuing verses.²⁷⁰ However, an indication is still required as to whether our instincts regarding ורב יעבד צעיר are correct.

iii. *Gen. 25.29-34*

The scene now changes and we are introduced to the famous transaction between Jacob and Esau for the birthright. The introduction in v.29 follows on naturally from the description of the two brothers offered in v.27: “And Jacob was cooking (ויזד) a dish (נזיד) and Esau came from the field and he was exhausted (עיף).” The form ויזד most probably comes from the root זיד.²⁷¹ When, as here, זיד appears in the Hiphil it is usually rendered “to act arrogantly or presumptuously” (e.g. Exod. 21.14; Deut. 18.20; Neh. 9.10). In this instance, however, its relationship to the derivative noun נזיד is emphasised and its sense “to cook” is employed which is, perhaps, more original.²⁷² Nevertheless, the verb’s association with notions of presumption, arrogance or even rebellion can still be interestingly brought into play.²⁷³ Perhaps the use of זיד in v.29 alerts the reader to the usurpation which is to follow.

Esau requests some of the dish that Jacob is cooking.²⁷⁴ There are two features of this verse which have traditionally been read as markers of Esau’s crude nature. The first is the peculiar, indeed unique, verb לעט. Here we have the only

²⁷⁰ Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 68.

²⁷¹ Although some suggest זוד, e.g. Westermann, *Genesis*, 416; Jacob, *Genesis*, 545.

²⁷² Hamilton, *Genesis*, 182.

²⁷³ See Hugh C. White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 211-212.

²⁷⁴ The use of נא probably softens the imperative הלעיטני.

occurrence of the verb in the Old Testament; although it is often noted that in rabbinic usage it tends to denote the feeding of animals.²⁷⁵ Consequently, commentators often read the verb as a crude, impolite form of consumption, perhaps comparable to the German verb *fressen*.²⁷⁶ The ancient reading which sees Esau's crude nature expressed in this request thus offers a plausible option. We may, however, wish to resist allowing this verb to shape our reading too strongly. As we will see, a central aspect of Esau's characterisation here seems to be his desperation rather than simple crudity.

The second feature of this verse which has been taken as a pointer of Esau's nature is his description of Jacob's food as, "the red, this red" (מִן־הָאֵדָם הַזֶּה), which produces a second association between Esau and Edom. The syntax here is certainly clumsy. Thus, unsurprisingly, some are inclined to take this as an indication of Esau's boorish, unintelligent nature.²⁷⁷ Again, this is a plausible suggestion. However, we might point out that earlier in the chapter (v.22) Rebekah's clumsy expression indicated pain and bewilderment, rather than stupidity. Something similar could well be taking place here.²⁷⁸

The reader is uninformed about the nature of the dish until the end of the exchange (v.34) and Esau may be as well. In this sense, Esau's clumsy attempt to identify אֵדָם may have less to do with his general stupidity and more to do with his

²⁷⁵ Sarna, *Genesis*, 182; Sarna directs the reader to, among others, *Šabb.* 155b and *Hul.* 55b, 58b.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Horst Seebass, *Genesis II: Vätergeschichte II (23,1-36,43)* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999), 273. Jacob translates לעַט, *schlingen*, Jacob, *Genesis*, 545; see, also, Skinner, *Genesis*, 361; Driver, *Genesis*, 248; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 182; Speiser, *Genesis*, 195.

²⁷⁷ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 291; Westermann, *Genesis*, 418.

²⁷⁸ This may be supported by Esau's question in v.32 which seems to echo elements of v.22.

unfamiliarity with the dish on offer.²⁷⁹ Of course, this may in part be due to the fact that he is not in his traditional domain. He has left the field and entered Jacob's quarters in the tent. He is exhausted and, so, both out of his natural environment and at the end of his natural resources. In other words, Esau is vulnerable and potentially exposed. Whatever disregard Esau later shows for his birthright, and he does seem to show some genuine disdain, here he appears to parallel Isaac in Genesis 27 in frailty and exposure.²⁸⁰

Jacob does not answer Esau's question directly; instead, he transforms the encounter into one of exchange. He sets out his request bluntly, "Sell your birthright (בכרתך) to me today." The nature of the בכרה in the Jacob-Esau narrative has been much discussed, partly in relation to its association with the "blessing" (ברכה) in Genesis 27. We need not go into the extensive historical discussions around the בכרה here; the stipulations in Deuteronomy 21.15-17 perhaps offer some insight into how the customs around the בכרה were supposed to function.²⁸¹ However, it does seem to be clear that the בכרה, in both ancient Israel and the surrounding societies, served to deposit the majority of the family inheritance upon the eldest son.²⁸² With this in mind, the bartering over inheritance here tacitly directs our attention back to 25.5 and the association of Isaac's reception of Abraham's inheritance with his status as the recipient of Abraham's legacy. It is not clear at this stage whether the inheritance of YHWH's promises is in view.

²⁷⁹ Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 266.

²⁸⁰ Jacob's ability to deceive both Esau and Isaac in their respective states of frailty is highlighted by Assis, *Identity*, 25.

²⁸¹ Anderson suggests that Deut. 21.15-17 functions to bridle some of the confusion produced by the inversion of birth order in the Genesis narratives. Bradford A. Anderson, "The Inversion of the Birth Order and the Title of the Firstborn," *VT* 60 (2010): 655-658.

²⁸² See Syrén, *First-Born*, 88-89; Eryl W. Davies, "The Inheritance of the First-Born in Israel and the Ancient Near East," *JSS* 38 (1993): 175-191; Greenspahn, *Brothers*, 48-69; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 41; Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*, 48-51.

However, in light of the comments on Isaac at the beginning of the chapter (25.5; cf. 25.19), it is inevitable that the question of who will inherit the promises of Abraham works its way into view once more general questions of inheritance are engaged. In other words, as Jacob moves to take Esau's birthright, we sense that, intentionally or otherwise, he is also moving to position himself as heir of the promises. Indeed, the reminder that Esau is also called Edom (v.30), suggests that questions of national, as well as familial, inheritance are in play in this short scene.

Esau's desperation is highlighted for us once more in his emphatic response to Jacob (v.32). He stands on the point of death, what need is there for a birthright? Jacob, however, is not prepared to move on without an oath from Esau. It is only at the end of the scene (v.34) that we find out that Jacob's stew is made from lentils (עֲדָשִׁים), perhaps a contrast with the game (עֵיד) which Esau would give to Isaac (25.28). It is unclear whether this is an ironic twist in which Esau hands over his entire birthright for a lentil stew or simply additional description. The significance of food in the transference of the בְּרִיחָה in chapter 27 perhaps suggests the former. The four verbs which close off v.34 possibly capture something of Esau's rashness in passing off his birthright so cheaply. The narrator's comment that "Esau disdained (וַיִּבֹז) the birthright" offers a rare comment on the action.²⁸³ It surely suggests that Esau's behaviour here has been inappropriate.²⁸⁴ Esau, the one who has naturally fitted characterisation as the רֵב to this point, the greater of the two brothers by all accounts, has been usurped by the lesser, and younger, Jacob. The צַעִיר has triumphed over the רֵב, perhaps bolstering our suggestion that the emphasis on the רֵב in 25.23bβ has a subversive force.

²⁸³ On בֹּזֵה see Malul, "‘*ĀQĒB* ‘Heel’ and ‘*ĀQAB* ‘To Supplant,’” 205-206.

²⁸⁴ Contra Heard, *Dynamics*, 106-108.

What we have seen, then, in Genesis 25.19-34 is the prediction and outworking of a particular conflict. Rebekah experiences conflict within her womb and an oracle is offered to explain the nature of that conflict; it is more far-reaching than Rebekah perhaps realises. In a very real sense, the oracle of 25.23 comments on and explains the narrative context in which it is placed. However, our understanding of v.23 is not straightforward. There is genuine syntactical ambiguity in the oracle's final phrase. This ambiguity does not render the oracle meaningless. It does, however, mean that we have to look beyond the oracle to grasp its full significance and any judgements we do make have an element of provisionality to them. In other words, the narrative context explains and comments on the content of the oracle. In this sense there is an interpretive dialectic between the oracle and its narrative context. The oracle defines and determines the events of the subsequent narrative. The subsequent narrative offers an account of the content of the oracle. The one cannot be fully understood without the other.

3. Genesis 26.34-35

Once Esau has departed, following the sale of his birthright, the narrative seems to lay down its concern with the two brothers and offers a presentation of various events in the life of Isaac.²⁸⁵ My present concern, however, is not with Genesis 26 as a whole, but rather with the two verses that close the chapter (26.34-35).

²⁸⁵ A classic account of Gen. 26, reading it as an interlude paralleling Gen. 34, is found in Fishbane, *Texture*, 46-48; idem, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25.19-35.22)," *JJS* 26 (1975): 15-38 (23-25).

In 26.34-35 Esau reappears after his departure in 25.34. We are given information concerning his marriage to two Hittite women.²⁸⁶ Genesis 26 is widely held to be a composite text of varying materials and, as such, vv.34-35 are typically taken to be a redactional insertion. They are often read together with 27.46 and 28.1-9 which, in differing ways, revisit the theme of Esau's marriages, and tend to be attributed to P.²⁸⁷ One of the commonly noted complexities of 26.34-35 is their relationship with 36.2-3. In 36.2-3 the names of Esau's wives differ from those given here.²⁸⁸ This is not the place to seek to resolve the difficulties of 26.34-35's provenance or the nature of their relationship to 36.2-3. Rather, the task here is to highlight the ways in which these verses are tied into the subsequent story through their position and their potential relationship to 27.46 and 28.1-9. Gordon Wenham is surely right to point to וַיָּהִי, at the start of v.34, as the beginning of a significant new section which will run through to 28.9.²⁸⁹ As such, in what follows we shall examine how the final positioning of 26.34-35 fits into the wider story of Jacob and Esau and the narrative movement of 26.34-28.9.

Nahum Sarna's interpretation of Esau's marriage seems to capture a general move in the wider scholarship on 26.34-35. Sarna notes that, "the passage

²⁸⁶ In MT, the father of Esau's second wife, Basemath, is described as הַחִיטִּי; the Samaritan Pentateuch, LXX and Syriac, all read Hivite, perhaps to harmonise with 36.2.

²⁸⁷ Carr, *Fractures*, 85-87; Westerman, *Genesis*, 429; Speiser, *Genesis*, 202; von Rad, *Genesis*, 273; Driver, *Genesis*, 254; Skinner, *Genesis*, 430.

²⁸⁸ Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 148-152; for an attempt to resolve the issue, see Jed H. Abraham, "A Literary Solution to the Name Variations of Esau's Wives," *TMJ* 7 (1997): 1-14; for attempts to find a solution along source critical lines, see Skinner, *Genesis*, 429-430; Speiser, *Genesis*, 281; Sarna, *Genesis*, 248.

²⁸⁹ Wenham, *Genesis*, 202; Megan Warner highlights ways in which 26.34-35 may relate to the context of chap. 26; perhaps these verses form a bridge between chap. 26 and 27. Megan Warner, *Re-Imagining Abraham: A Re-Assessment of the Influence of Deuteronomism in Genesis*, OTS 72 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 50-55.

reinforces the idea of Esau's unworthiness to be Isaac's heir..."²⁹⁰ This line of reasoning is normally followed up with the judgement that due to his careless marriage practices Esau has rendered himself unfit to inherit the blessing.²⁹¹ In other words, so the reasoning goes, by placing this note on Esau's marriage directly before the events of chapter 27, the narrative further dissociates Esau from the promise and blessing that will ensue and implicitly exonerates Rebekah and Jacob. In his readiness to marry inhabitants of the land Esau renders himself unfit to inherit the blessing.

There have been a number of scholars in more recent years who have disputed this reading. Megan Warner, for example, points out that there is little in the text to connect the bitterness experienced by Isaac and Rebekah and the nationality of Esau's wives.²⁹² Laurence Turner seems to suggest that readers should in fact invert this traditional reading entirely. He argues, with some irony, that Esau may have transcended his father and grandfather, at least in ethical terms:

Esau's Hittite wives reveal his remarkably open-minded spirit when compared to his grandfather and father... It is one thing for Isaac to offer his wife to foreigners, quite another for Esau to take his wives from foreigners.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Sarna, *Genesis*, 189. Sarna is followed explicitly by Hamilton, *Genesis*, 210; and more implicitly by Cotter, *Genesis*, 199; Dicou, *Edom*, 122. Wenham lays blame on both Isaac and Esau; Wenham, *Genesis*, 205.

²⁹¹ See James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 133; White, *Narration*, 214-21; Dicou, *Edom*, 122; Blum *Vätergeschichte*, 264; Coats, *Genesis*, 199-200.

²⁹² Warner, *Abraham*, 51; similarly, Heard, *Dynamics*, 110; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 152; Tami J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 52.

²⁹³ Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 115.

Turner's account probably represents one of the more emphatic endorsements of Esau. More commonly, it seems, commentators who wish to challenge a traditionally negative account of Esau's behaviour in 26.34-35 claim Esau's innocence and seek to distance him from any kind of deliberate rebellion. It is pointed out, for example, that Esau does not appear to realise that his marriages displeased his parents until 28.8-9 and thus he acted innocently, if ignorantly, in 26.34-35.²⁹⁴

It is probably true that to see Esau's behaviour in 26.34-35 as an act of rebellion against a familial norm or the express wishes of his parents goes too far. Still, the position of these verses directly before the account of the blessing surely has some narrative force. We noticed above in 25.19 that Isaac is distinguished from Ishmael as the son and inheritor of Abraham. It is striking that when the theme of Esau's wives is picked up again in 28.6-9, he is connected with Ishmael. In the same way that in Isaac and Ishmael two lines are set up, one (Isaac's) as the inheritor of Abraham, the other (Ishmael's) not; so in 28.6-9 Esau is quietly associated with the latter line, the Ishmaelite line, one which carries with it certain privileges, but not the Abrahamic promise.²⁹⁵ Therefore, if in 28.6-9 Esau's marriages serve to distance him from the chosen line, albeit subtly, we might expect something similar to be taking place in 26.34-35, as the two pericopes appear to frame the events of chapter 27.

Genesis 26.34-28.9 does not seem to be particularly concerned with the question of whether Esau deliberately rebelled against his parents' wishes or a family custom. To find such a concern one would have to carry over the force of

²⁹⁴ Heard, *Dynamics*, 109; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 152.

²⁹⁵ On the comparison between Ishmael and Esau, see Syrén, *First-Born*, 68-69.

Abraham's instructions in 24.3 and apply it to 26.34-35.²⁹⁶ If one does wish to connect the two, one has to explain why the issue of Canaanite marriage is only raised in 28.1-9. Of course, Esau's wives "grieved" (וַתְּהִי מֵרַת רוּחַ) Isaac and Rebekah, but this grief could quite conceivably have been caused through Esau's ignorance, rather than a rebellious spirit. What we may see here, then, is a kind of providential side-lining. In marrying Hittite wives in 26.35 and in aligning himself with the family of Ishmael in 28.6-9, Esau is steadily being shifted out of the Abrahamic line of blessing. In attempting to locate Esau's unworthiness in a rebellious decision to marry against his parents' will, readers perhaps run the risk of overlooking some of the providential dynamics of the story which were set in motion in chapter 25.

4. Genesis 27.1-28.9

With the opening of chapter 27 all the actors of 25.19-34 come back into view. The chapter raises any number of issues, only a few of which can be engaged in depth here. In what follows we will be primarily concerned with the nature of the blessings which Isaac delivers to Jacob (27.27-29) and Esau (27.39-40). This should lend some focus to the discussion and keep the questions around the place of Esau front and centre.

As mentioned above, Genesis 26 provides something of an interlude between Genesis 25 and 27. With the opening of Genesis 27 the story resumes from chapter 25. However, the relationship between the two chapters provokes certain questions. It seems that some time has passed in the interlude; Isaac is now

²⁹⁶ E.g. Wenham, *Genesis*, 205.

old, unable to see (v.1) and he seems to be approaching his death (v.4).²⁹⁷ Further, there is some question as to how the events of Genesis 27 interact with those of Genesis 25. Of course, to some degree, the final form of the text assumes that Genesis 27 is a continuation of Genesis 25. So, Esau references 25.26 in 27.36, his hairiness plays a key role (27.11-12, 21-23; cf. 25.25), Esau's skill as a hunter is assumed (27.3-4; cf. 25.27) and the parental preferences mentioned in 25.28 inform the dynamics of the chapter (27.4; cf. 25.28).²⁹⁸ Still, a number of elements remain unclear. For instance, to what extent are Rebekah's actions a response to the oracle of 25.23 or are they merely an outworking of her favouritism? What does Isaac know about the events of chapter 25? And, finally, what relation is there between the birthright of chapter 25 and the blessing of chapter 27?

Some of these tensions have shaped the various diachronic proposals that have been put forward for the chapters' relationship. While it is widely argued that the chapters originated in separate traditions,²⁹⁹ chapter 27's deliberate interaction with the themes of chapter 25 needs to be explained somehow.³⁰⁰ It seems that, on any reckoning, a dependence on 25.21-34 is deeply rooted in Genesis 27.³⁰¹

²⁹⁷ Isaac's old age, in contrast to Abraham's, seems to have disastrous consequences; see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 349-350.

²⁹⁸ Johannes Taschner, *Verheißung und Erfüllung in der Jakoberzählung (Gen 25,19-33,17): eine analyse ihres Spannungsbogens*, HBS 27 (Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 38; Martin Leuenberger, *Segen und Segenstheologie im alten Israel: Untersuchungen zu ihren religions- und theologiegeschichtlichen Kostellation und Transformationen*, ATANT 90 (Zürich: TVZ, 2008), 229.

²⁹⁹ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306; Greenspahn, *Brothers*, 125; Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 86-88.

³⁰⁰ For attempted explanations, see Van Seters, *Prologue*, 283-288; Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 79-86; Carr offers little by way of explanation as to the chapters' provenance, but reckons that their relationship is longstanding, Carr, *Fractures*, 224.

³⁰¹ For useful overviews of some of the source-critical proposals on these chapters, see Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 83; Kevin Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown: The Presence and Absence of God in the Jacob Narrative* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 100-102, 110-111.

More pressing, however, for our purposes, is the conceptual relationship between the birthright of 25.29-34 and the blessing of Genesis 27. I intend to take this question up again towards the end of the discussion, where I should be able to say something slightly more substantive; but at this stage a couple of preliminary observations might be useful. First, minimal explanation is given as to the significance of either rite. As such, it may well be that the finer technical details of the birthright and the blessing are assumed to be either common knowledge for the implied reader, or of less import for the narrative's overarching thrust than might be thought. Secondly, the juxtaposition of these two rights here is anomalous in the Old Testament and, thus, perhaps encourages the reader to look beyond the immediate context for some insights. Bradford Anderson seems to offer us a suitably judicious starting point:

There is, then, in the world of the text, some sort of symbiotic relationship between the birthright and the blessing: both are aspects of Esau's displacement, even if the text is not completely clear on the details.³⁰²

Something of this relationship may be clarified as we turn to look at the text in a little more detail.

Esau's departure to hunt for game (27.2-4) grants Rebekah and Jacob the opportunity to trick the elderly Isaac (27.6-17). Jacob enters Isaac's presence roughly disguised as his brother and through a combination of lies (27.19-20, 24) and disguise (27.22, 27) manages to convince Isaac that he is, in fact, Esau. Once Isaac smells the scent of Esau's clothes his lingering fears seem to be laid to rest and he begins his blessing. The extent of Isaac's deception is probably seen by his

³⁰² Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 86.

opening exclamation in 27.27: “See the scent of my son is like the scent of the field (שדה) which YHWH has blessed.” Esau has always been associated with the שדה, now the scent of Esau leads to the blessing of Jacob’s field. The main body of Isaac’s blessing reads:

²⁸ May God give to you of the dew (מטל) of the heavens and the fat (ומשמני) of the earth, and abundance of grain and wine (רב דגן ותירש);

²⁹ May the peoples serve you (יעבדוך עמים) and nations bow down to you (וישתחו לך לאמים);

Be lord (גביר) over your brothers (לאחריך) and may the sons of your mother bow down to you (וישתחו לך);

Cursed be whoever curses you and blessed be whoever blesses you (ארריך). (ארור ומברכך ברוך).

Two competing factors are initially striking. On the one hand, we notice how general the terms of the blessing are.³⁰³ This may be expected, but still leads some commentators to dismiss its direct relevance to the life of Jacob. Instead, they see it as referring either to future descendants or later national concerns (or both).³⁰⁴ For example, John Skinner suggests, on the basis of the language of עמים and לאמים, that the blessing is not concerned with the “personal history” of Jacob, but rather with the “future greatness” of Israel.³⁰⁵ Relatedly, the blessing, certain similarities notwithstanding, is noticeably distinct from other blessings in the preceding and subsequent narratives in Genesis.³⁰⁶

³⁰³ The language and form of the blessing is often likened to Gen. 49 and Deut. 33.

³⁰⁴ Greenspahn, *Brothers*, 119.

³⁰⁵ Skinner, *Genesis*, 371; cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 192; Westermann, *Genesis*, 441.

³⁰⁶ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 278; Carr, *Fractures*, 224.

Still, on the other hand, certain textual resonances with 25.19-34 and, possibly, 12.3 cannot be overlooked. For instance, the re-emergence of the verb עבד, of such pressing significance in 25.23b β , alerts us to the potential interpretive significance of 27.28-29.³⁰⁷ This impression is heightened when the verses' parallelism seems to narrow the readers' attention towards the familial dimension in v.29b. Here we have an explicit reference to "your brothers" (אחריך) and the "sons of you mother" (בני אמך). The repetition of וישתחוו binds the two clauses together.³⁰⁸ As such, הוה גביר in v.29b α restates, or perhaps intensifies, the sense of יעבדוך in v.29a α . All this is to say that the issues raised in 25.23 and its surrounding narratives are evoked by the linguistic features of Isaac's blessing. Of course, the plural forms in v.29 set the blessing as a whole at some remove from the relationship of Jacob and Esau. This point is emphasised by those who would see the blessing as primarily concerned with subsequent national affairs.

However, it is worth bearing in mind the point we raised earlier with regards to chapter 25, that when reading the Jacob-Esau narratives we should allow their function in Israel's wider self-understanding to inform rather than override our reading of the story. As such, the national/political language in Isaac's blessing, as well as the plural familial language, serves to impress upon the reader the full significance of Jacob's coup, rather than confine the significance of the blessing to future national affairs. Thus, the broad scope of the blessing should be read with full seriousness, but it should be taken so within its narrative context; that is, the lives of Jacob and Esau.

³⁰⁷ Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*, 89.

³⁰⁸ There is slight variation in the MT between the two lines, although this is redressed by the MT's *Qere*, which corrects ישתחו in v.29a β to וישתחו; this seems to have been followed by the Samaritan Pentateuch.

If the language of service and family is reminiscent of the context of Genesis 25, then the final clause of the blessing could evoke the wider promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12.1-3. We can see the similarity below:

Genesis 12.3a: וְאֶבְרָהָם מְבָרְכִיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אָאֵר

Genesis 27.29c: אֲרַרְיֶיךָ אֲרוּרָיְךָ וּמְבָרְכֶיךָ בְּרוּךְ

There are certainly lexical resonances here. Yet the resonances themselves are not as emphatic as has sometimes been claimed.³⁰⁹ Of course, there may be good reason for the syntactic difference; for example, in Genesis 27.29, and its analogue in Numbers 24.9b, a human is the speaker rather than God, thus making the impersonal formulation more appropriate. Nevertheless, given the absence of the other elements of the Abrahamic promise in 27.28-29, namely, the promise of a nation, a blessing and a great name, we might hold off importing too much of the context of the Abrahamic promise into this final line.³¹⁰ A better strategy may be to allow the resonance to linger in our mind as suggestive of the trajectory of the story. Jacob is being positioned as the one to inherit Abraham's promise, although he is yet to receive a promise of quite the kind of 12.1-3.

Jacob is clearly placed in a position of supremacy through vv.28-29. As the younger, perhaps weaker or lesser (צעיר), brother he is placed by the unwitting Isaac in a position of dominion. He not only receives a blessing of abundant wealth (27.28), but also a blessing of supremacy in terms of national, political and familial

³⁰⁹ The clause's similarity with Num. 24.9b (מְבָרְכֶיךָ בְּרוּךְ וְאֲרַרְיֶיךָ אֲרוּרָיְךָ) highlights some of the dissimilarities with Gen. 12.3; although the significance of Num. 24.9b is unclear. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis*, 441.

³¹⁰ Thus, Fokkelman probably goes too far, Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 110; cf. also, Van Seters, *Prologue*, 288; Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "To Bless" in the Old Testament*, SBLDS 95 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 81.

status. As Jacob goes out from Isaac's presence, Esau returns from his hunt. The impression is that the two barely miss each other and Jacob only narrowly escapes with the blessing (v.30).

Whatever readers' sympathies to this point, with the entrance of Esau the narrative seems to emphasise the extreme distress experienced by Jacob's older brother and father.³¹¹ On any reckoning the distress of Isaac and Esau is not the primary concern of Genesis 27. It is, then, striking how much space is afforded to their conversation and consequent dismay.

When Esau arrives before Isaac, the craftiness of Jacob's deception is perhaps alluded to in the fact that Esau greets his father in 27.31 with language clearly reminiscent of Jacob's (cf. 27.19).³¹² However, the parallel is not maintained for long, as it soon becomes apparent what exactly has happened. In 27.33 we see the almost inexpressible distress of Isaac as he realises his error. The opening phrase of v.33, "And Isaac was overcome with an extraordinarily great trembling (ויחרד יצחק חרדה גדלה עד־מאד)" is distinctly emphatic. Esau's response is equally so, "he let out a great and exceedingly bitter cry (ויצעק צעקה גדלה ומרה עד־מאד)." (מאד)."

Once Esau and Isaac ascertain what Jacob has done, Esau in his bitterness invokes the word play on Jacob's name and likens Jacob's deception here to his behaviour in 25.29-34. Thus, Esau distinguishes between the birthright, which he has apparently already given over, perhaps the double portion allotted to the eldest

³¹¹ This would draw into question Susan Niditch's point that Gen. 27 suggests that God's sympathies are with the "wise" (i.e. Jacob); Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 101.

³¹² On the rhetorical use of repetition in Gen. 27, see *ibid.*, 85-86.

son (cf. Deut. 21.15-17), and the blessing which remains open to him, perhaps as the eldest son or perhaps simply as his father's favourite.³¹³ Nevertheless, in spite of Esau's bitterness, the blessing appears to be irrevocable (27.33).³¹⁴

Before Isaac responds to Esau's plea for a remaining blessing he lays out the full implications of the event in 27.36 by importing the terms of the blessing directly into the relationship of Esau and Jacob: "See, I have set him as a lord (גביר) over you and I have given all his brothers to him as servants (ואת-כל-אחיו נתתי לו) (לעבדים) and with grain (ודגן) and wine (ותירש) I have sustained him." (27.37) The point here is probably not to deny the possibility of a further blessing, but to highlight that no blessing which Isaac may now dispense can overturn the order which has been instituted through Jacob's deception. In this sense 27.37b should probably be taken to question the efficacy of any further blessing that Isaac may offer, rather than the possibility of any further blessing as such.³¹⁵

Eventually, at the end of their discussion, Isaac offers Esau a rather muted blessing. That some have seen this pronouncement as tantamount to a curse highlights its impoverished nature in comparison with vv.28-29.³¹⁶ Isaac pronounces:

³¹³ On the complications around the status of the בכר more generally see Greenspahn, *Brothers*, 59-81.

³¹⁴ Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings," *JTS* 25 (1974): 283-299, esp. 293-296.

³¹⁵ Contra von Rad, *Genesis*, 279.

³¹⁶ An "anti-blessing," Cotter, *Genesis*, 204; "scarcely a blessing," Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 234; a "non-blessing," Scullion, *Genesis*, 206; "virtually a curse," Skinner, *Genesis*, 373; For Blum, Esau's "success" in attaining a blessing only amounts to a "curse" (*Fluch*), Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 82; cf. Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*, 95; McKeown, *Genesis*, 137; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 228; Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 111.

³⁹ Behold from the fat of the earth (משמני הארץ) will be your dwelling and from the dew of the heavens on high (ומטל השמים מעל),³¹⁷

⁴⁰ And by your sword (הרבך) you will live, and you will serve your brother (ואת־אחִיךָ תַעֲבֹד);

And it will be when you roam (והיה כאשר תריד), you will tear away his yoke from your neck.

There has been much debate about the nature of the particle מן in v.39b.

The discussion essentially centres on whether the מן is taken to be “privative” (“away from”) or “partitive” (“from, of” i.e. “sharing in”).³¹⁸ The opening line of Esau’s blessing echoes v.28a, where the מן is universally taken as partitive. A good number of scholars wish to retain this sense in v.39b as well.³¹⁹ Unfortunately the issue resists any syntactical resolution. In theory, at least in this construction, מן could take either sense.³²⁰ It is the context, then, which is decisive, and it is the context which has split commentators. The various positions taken have been well documented elsewhere, and need not be revised here.³²¹ Instead, I offer my own reading, which will engage some of the difficulties as it progresses.³²² Again, as with 25.23, we will find that examining one point of syntactical ambiguity helps to open up the wider significance of the blessing.

³¹⁷ I have deliberately left the syntax of this opening clause clumsy to allow for a more careful analysis of the controversial מן below.

³¹⁸ Sarna, *Genesis*, 194; Seebass, *Vätergeschichte II*, 303; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 66-68; on מן see GKC, §119w-y.

³¹⁹ Jacob, *Genesis*, 570; I. Willi-Plein, “Genesis 27 als Rebekkageschichte: zu einem historiographischen Kunstgriff der biblischen Vätergeschichte,” *TZ* 45 (1989): 315-334 (320-322); Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 143.

³²⁰ Heard, *Dynamics*, 115-116.

³²¹ See Heard, *Dynamics*, 115-117; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 66-68.

³²² Initially, at least, my reading is similar to Dicou, *Edom*, 119-120.

The primary issue for those who wish to read v.39 with the same sense as v.28 is the significant difference in subject in each verse. In v.28 Jacob is told, “God will give to you from... (ויתן־לך האלהים)” the introduction of the verb נתן with האלהים as subject makes the partitive sense of the מן explicit. In v.39, however, the subject and verb suggest a wholly different sense; Esau is told, “Away from the fat of the earth your dwelling will be (יהיה מושבך), and away from the dew of the heavens above.” The introduction of a locational subject (מושבך) suggests that the sense of the overall clause will relate to location rather than reception.³²³ The next line potentially supports this suggestion. If Esau is unable to live by the “fat of the land,” then he will resort to living by his sword, although it remains unspecified as to whether this would involve hunting or raiding.³²⁴

Heard points out that a possible alternative to my suggested reading would be to take into account the characterisation of Esau to this point as an “outdoorsman.”³²⁵ According to Heard, “the prior characterizations of Esau as an outdoorsman lend credence to the partitive reading and makes a description of Esau’s ‘dwelling’ as ‘part of the bounty of the earth... and part of the dew of heaven’ plausible.”³²⁶ What we see, however, is that an examination of the rhetorical logic of the remainder of the blessing does not seem to uphold Heard’s suggestion and lends its support to a privative reading.

³²³ This general distinction would also apply to the proposed parallel use of מן in Deut. 33.13, where YHWH is the subject. This distinction between 27.28 and 27.39 seems much more important than the reversal of the ordering of מטל השמים and משמני הארץ which has received attention. Cf. Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 111.

³²⁴ Dicou, *Edom*, 119.

³²⁵ Heard, *Dynamics*, 116.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

The introduction of a new temporal clause with perfect והיה and *waw* consecutive (והיה) in v.40b suggests a contrast with what goes before. Indeed, it seems likely that this final line offers a contrast with all that has gone before; especially as from ומטל השמים מעל until just before והיה we have a string of simple compounds (ואת-; ועל-), suggesting a chain of concepts. If we accept that the blessing's final line offers a contrast with what precedes then it surely makes most sense for the opening lines to express a sense congruous with "and you will serve your brother," and be broadly disheartening. If this is so, then the privative sense in the first line makes best sense.

Read thus, the blessing does not need to be categorised as a curse. Rather, it opens with a discouraging acknowledgement that, because of Jacob's trickery, Esau's life will be marked by potential hardship. Still, the blessing remains, as Esau's sobering future is tempered by the promise that he will find a way from under Jacob's yoke.³²⁷ Quite what form this liberation will take is unclear, although some have been inclined to relate it to Edom's rebellion against Israel recorded in 2 Kings 8.20-22.³²⁸

The opening of the final line of Esau's blessing employs an obscure verb. We read, "And it will be when you become restless (תריד), and you will tear away his yoke from upon your neck." The ancient versions offer diverse accounts of the verb תריד, which in the MT seems to be a Hiphil Imperfect of רוד, "to wander." The

³²⁷ This appears to be the only conditional element of either blessing; Leuenberger, *Segen*, 236.

³²⁸ Westermann, *Genesis*, 443; Soggin, *Genesis*, 357-358; John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites*, JSOTSup 77 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 85; idem, "Edom in the Nonprophetic Corpus," in *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite For He is Your Brother: Edom and Seir in History and Tradition*, ed. Diana Vikander Edelman, ABS 3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 13-21 (17).

Samaritan Pentateuch offers תאדר, whose root is unclear, but could relate to אדר, “you will be exalted.” The LXX offers κατέλῃς (from καθαιρέω; “to take down, destroy”).³²⁹ The obscurity of the verb is compounded somewhat by the fact that the other appearance of the Hiphil form is contested.³³⁰ However, in spite of the various complications, we do still have a workable reading in MT, even if some conjecture is required to catch the precise nuance of the form. This workable reading is reflected in the broad agreement in proposed translations.³³¹ What seems to be envisaged is a time of emancipation for Esau and possibly his descendants when he is able to throw off the yoke of Jacob and experience a degree of unprecedented freedom. Quite when and how this will occur remains unclear. Indeed, the nature of Jacob’s lordship itself is unclear as we proceed, and this will pose fresh problems as we move into chapters 32-33.

We may now review some of what we have seen in the two blessings of Genesis 27. In language which seems to evoke scenes from Genesis 25, Jacob receives a promise of pre-eminence and dominion over his brother(s). The blessing clearly has some relation to the immediate situation of Jacob and Esau even while it also pushes beyond the boundaries of the patriarchal story through the language of “peoples” (עמים) and “nations” (לאמים). The resonances with the preceding story are clear and there may be an obscure allusion to the earlier promises to Abraham in the final line (ארריך ארור ומברכך ברוך). Of course, the blessing in 27.27-29 looks

³²⁹ It is unclear whether Vulgate (*tempusque veniet cum excutias*) follows MT or LXX. For discussion, see Hamilton, *Genesis*, 225.

³³⁰ Ps. 55.3 [Eng. 55.2]. Cf. BDB, 923; *HALOT*, 3:1194; *DCH*, 7:426; Jacob, *Genesis*, 570-571.

³³¹ “As you grow restive,” Speiser, *Genesis*, 208; “But when you grow restive,” Sarna, *Genesis*, 194; “and when you grow restless,” Wenham, *Genesis*, 199; “But when you become restless,” Hamilton, *Genesis*, 225; “wenn du dich ausweitest,” Seebass, *Vätergeschichte II*, 295.

different to the other patriarchal blessings, but to try and separate it too sharply from the other blessings in Genesis is unhelpful.³³² The narrative of Jacob's theft of the blessing is flanked with accounts which explicitly appeal to the patriarchal promises/blessing (26.1-33; 28.3-4, 13-15). Within this frame, Genesis 27 plays a part in the outworking of Jacob's pre-eminence and the steady associating of Jacob with the blessing of Abraham. Whether Isaac thought that he was imparting the Abrahamic blessing or not is perhaps beside the point. Isaac has been characterised in Genesis 26.1-33 as the recipient of Abraham's blessing.³³³ Thus, for those attentive to the wider framework of chapter 27, Jacob's blessing, even if it lacks the explicit wording of the typical Abrahamic blessings, positions him to bear the promises of Abraham into the next generation.

Once Jacob's blessing in Genesis 27 is placed in the wider framework of Genesis 26-28 a number of things become apparent. To begin with, we can return to the question of the relationship between the birthright (25.29-34) and the blessing (27.1-40). As already noted, the way the two categories relate is unclear in the Genesis text, but within the wider narrative arc they seem to serve a similar function.³³⁴ That is, they both give content to the pronouncement of Genesis 25.23. They are two instances of Jacob's pre-eminence, and they serve as links within a wider chain of events which will establish Jacob as the one who will inherit Abraham's blessing (cf. 28.3-4, 13-15).³³⁵

³³² Contra Terence E. Fretheim, "Which Blessing Does Isaac Give Jacob?" in Bellis and Kaminsky, *Hebrew Scriptures*, 279-292.

³³³ Carr, *Fractures*, 205.

³³⁴ Van Seters, *Yahwist*, 43; Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 275.

³³⁵ Anderson, *Trickster*, 85; Van Seters, *Yahwist*, 44.

What, then, of Esau's rejection? In chapter 25 Esau seems to be presented as unfit for the honour of the birthright; he "despises" (בִּזָּה) it and this is perhaps compounded further in 26.34-35 through his inappropriate marriages. However, in chapter 27 Esau seems to be portrayed more generously. His distress at forfeiting Isaac's blessing is acute; and while his memory of the birthright incident seems selective (27.36), and his rage against Jacob is fearsome (27.41), there seems to be some genuine sympathy evoked through the pathos of Esau's plight. The text makes no attempt to exonerate Jacob, as some later interpreters would.³³⁶ Yet, part of what evokes sympathy with Esau is his very helplessness. While almost all that Jacob does in chapter 27 seems to run roughshod over even the most basic ethical categories, he persistently succeeds.³³⁷ YHWH is distinctly absent from chapter 27, his name is invoked (27.7, 20), but he is apparently not visible in the action. Still, the narrative moves in one persistent direction – it cultivates Jacob's success. Rebekah manages to overhear Isaac's conversation with Esau (27.5), Jacob and Esau just miss each other once Jacob has deceived Isaac (27.30) and, again, Rebekah fortuitously hears (or is told) of Esau's plot to kill Jacob (27.42). Luck, as some would call it, seems to be on Jacob's side. Or, put differently, the providential dynamics of the story appear to be working against Esau. This is not to make a judgement on the rights or wrongs of Jacob's behaviour.³³⁸ It is, instead, to make a

³³⁶ Cf. James Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 208-209.

³³⁷ It is unclear what we are to make the ethical dimension to Jacob's behaviour. Classically Gunkel understood the narrative as humorous, Gunkel, *Genesis*, 305; the most notable objection to Gunkel here comes from von Rad, *Genesis*, 279-281; cf. Kaminsky's reading of humour and Isaac; Joel S. Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope: Isaac as a Humorous Figure," *Int* 54 (2000): 363-375.

³³⁸ Craig Smith seems to be right that the text is not particularly concerned with drawing attention to Jacob's behaviour, although his wider thesis about the role of Isaac seems harder to substantiate; Craig A. Smith, "Reinstating Isaac: The Centrality of Abraham's Son in the 'Jacob-Esau' Narrative of Genesis 27," *BTB* 31 (2001): 130-134.

broader point. If, in 25.28-34 we saw Esau despising his birthright and therefore subjecting himself to Jacob, and in 26.34-35 we saw the subtle manoeuvring of Esau away from the blessed line, then here again, in Genesis 27, we see Esau providentially dissociated from the position of pre-eminence. This dissociation does not seem to be necessarily dependent on any of Esau's characteristics. Rather, it is perhaps part of the outworking of something instilled in the narrative, albeit with some ambiguity, from the outset (25.23).

However, all this said, some hope is offered to Esau. He is to find some relief from his subjection to Jacob. It is unclear when this will take place or what becoming "restless" might entail. What does seem apparent, however, is that Esau will have some agency in the enactment of his own relief. The second person singular forms (תריד; ופרקת) position Esau as subject and, as such, it can be expected that Esau will have some role in his own emancipation.

The narrative leaves Esau now as Jacob flees and heads to his uncle Laban. Jacob's relationship with Laban is characterised by many of the same features as his relationship with Esau. However, in spite of his exile and servitude, when the time comes for Jacob to return to his family (31.3) he returns wealthy and prosperous. Nevertheless, his prospective meeting with Esau, naturally, still evokes fear and anxiety.

5. Genesis 32.2-33.20

Jacob leaves Laban with an extensive family (29.15-30.24), many flocks, herds, possessions (30.43) and a promise of blessing from God (28.13-15; 31.3). Yet, for all his success in Paddan-aram, he returns to an unresolved situation with Esau.

Thus, Genesis 32-33 takes up again the central themes of Genesis 25-27.³³⁹ The scene of Jacob's reunion with Esau appears in Genesis 33, but first, in Genesis 32, Jacob makes various preparations for the long-awaited meeting.³⁴⁰ So, while the main event of these chapters takes place in Genesis 33, when Jacob meets Esau once again, to fully engage the subtleties of this meeting we have to offer some account of its prelude in Genesis 32.

As we will see, Genesis 32 situates the encounter between Jacob and Esau within the context of the brothers' wider history. Yet there are certain arresting elements to this account which recast their relationship in unexpected ways.³⁴¹ All this plays into the characterisation of Esau and his status which we find in these closing chapters. While there are certainly elements of continuity with Jacob's deceptive behaviour in chapter 27, Jacob's deference to his brother is unprecedented.³⁴²

Some account, therefore, must be given of Jacob's characterisation in order to grasp the significance of these final chapters for the whole Jacob-Esau cycle. With this in mind, in what follows, we will pay particular attention in Genesis 32 to Jacob's meeting at Mahanaim (32.2-3), Jacob's message and prayer (32.4-12),

³³⁹ The connections are well documented; Wenham, *Genesis*, 288; Fishbane, *Texture*, 48-55; Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986), 59-62; Konrad Schmid, "Die Versöhnung zwischen Jakob und Esau (Genesis 33,1-11)," in *Jacob: Commentaire à plusieurs voix de Ein mehrstimmiger Kommentar zu A Plural Commentary Gen. 25-36*, ed. Jean-Daniel Macchi and Thomas Römer (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2001), 211-226 (214-217).

³⁴⁰ See the structural summary in Sarna, *Genesis*, 223.

³⁴¹ On the issues raised by this recasting, see Edward J. Bridge, "The 'Slave' is the 'Master': Jacob's Servile Language to Esau in Genesis 33.1-17," *JSOT* 38 (2014): 263-278 (264-267).

³⁴² For an attempt to tease out the theological significance of Jacob's deference, drawing on some of the moves made here, see Rory J. Balfour, "'Heavy is the Head': Election, Grace and Humility in the Climax of the Jacob-Esau Cycle (Genesis 32-33)," *JTI* (forthcoming).

Jacob's gift and its purported purpose (32.13-21) and Jacob's name change (32.22-31).³⁴³

i. *Gen. 32.2-3*

The opening verses of Genesis 32 are confusing.³⁴⁴ As such, the reflections offered below constitute attempts to follow the sparse allusions which may be detected within these two verses; for there are elements within 32.2-3 which are interpretively suggestive.

Given the confusing nature of 32.2-3 it is no wonder that interpretations vary significantly. Some read Jacob's encounter as a hostile one in which he faces significant opposition.³⁴⁵ Others argue that his meeting constitutes an act of divine endorsement; Jacob is encouraged that God is with him.³⁴⁶ In conventional modern scholarship the passage has been read as a fragment, either of an earlier, more detailed story,³⁴⁷ or as part of the dual etiological explanation for Mahanaim that appears in the chapter (cf. 32.11b).³⁴⁸ Still, one observation which does seem to command widespread support is that Jacob's encounter at Mahanaim offers some form of parallel with his experience at Bethel in Genesis 28.³⁴⁹

³⁴³ There is some variation in the versification between MT and English translations in chapter 32, my verse references follow MT.

³⁴⁴ For a frank assessment, see Gunkel, *Genesis*, 342.

³⁴⁵ Sartell Prentice, "The Angels of God at Mahanaim," *JBL* 36 (1917): 151-157 (156-157).

³⁴⁶ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 261-262; Westermann, *Genesis*, 505.

³⁴⁷ Skinner describes the passage as the "torso" of a previous legend. Skinner, *Genesis*, 405; cf. Westermann, *Genesis*, 505.

³⁴⁸ Josef Schreiner, "Das Gebet Jakobs (Gen 32,10-13)," in *Die Väter Israels: Beiträge zur Theologie der Patriarchenüberlieferungen im Alten Testament*, ed. Manfred Görg (Stuttgart: Verl. Kath. Bibelwerk, 1989), 287-303 (301).

³⁴⁹ Coats, *Genesis*, 223; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 317; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 261; Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 197; Sarna, *Genesis*, 223.

The initial impetus for this comparison comes from an article by Cornelius Houtman who recognises a number of parallels.³⁵⁰ First, in Genesis 28.12 the text refers to the מלאכי אלהים; the only two occurrences of this form in the Old Testament appear in 28.12 and 32.2. Secondly, the use of הזה/זה in 28.16-17 seems to be mirrored in the phrasing זה מחנה אלהים זה in 32.3. Thirdly, the formula ויקרא את־שם־המקום ההוא in 28.19 is reminiscent of the comparable formula in 32.3. Finally, the verb פגע with the preposition ב appears in both 28.11 and 32.2.³⁵¹

These parallels are widely recognised and acknowledged. What is more, it seems quite possible that the Bethel and Mahanaim encounters carry some kind of framing function. Both encounters occur as Jacob crosses the boundary of the land of promise. At Bethel Jacob receives the ancestral promises emphatically and unreservedly (28.13). As such, the allusions to the Bethel incident in 32.2-3 may well, on one level at least, serve to remind readers of these promises and situate Jacob once more within the landscape of the ancestral promises. In this sense, the Mahanaim encounter has a point of reference situated earlier in the Jacob narrative.

If 32.2-3 alludes, albeit faintly, to the Bethel incident of Genesis 28, then, as we look forward to Genesis 32-33, there may be some kind of linguistic resonance in that direction also. Jacob names the place Mahanaim (מחנים; “two camps”).³⁵² The notion of different camps will become significant as the narrative progresses (32.8, 10; 33.8), but at this point it is worth noting the potential resonance between מחנה and the terms “gift” (מנחה) and “favour/grace” (חן) which

³⁵⁰ Cornelius Houtman, “Jacob at Mahanaim: Some Remarks on Genesis 32.2-3,” *VT* 28 (1978): 37-44.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 39; cf. Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 140-141.

³⁵² מחנים is generally taken as a dual form of מחנה; see Hamilton, *Genesis*, 316-317; Houtman, “Mahanaim,” 41.

are so crucial later in the narrative.³⁵³ Caution must guide our reading at this point, but it is suggestive that through textual allusion this little episode at Mahanaim resonates both with the promise Jacob receives at the moment of his initial flight from Esau and with the means by which he will carry out his reunion with Esau. Perhaps this suggests that Jacob's reunion with Esau is perfectly consonant with his reception of the promise as described earlier.

ii. *Gen. 32.4-13*

The narrative moves on abruptly from Jacob's meeting at Mahanaim. If certain resonances in the preceding verses have reminded us of the promises that Jacob has received, what follows thrusts before us once again the severity of Jacob's situation and the painful dynamics which led to Jacob's hurried departure in Genesis 28. The history of Jacob's relationship with Esau is alluded to in a number of ways at the beginning of Genesis 32. However, the terms in which it is described bear a distinctive imprint.

In 32.4 Jacob sends messengers ahead of him to Esau. A number of pointers in this verse seem to allude to the narratives of Genesis 25 and 27. Esau is described as "his brother" (אחי) and so the central conflict of these earlier chapters is recalled. Furthermore, the direction to the messengers in 32.4 is expanded such that they are sent, "towards the land of Seir, the field of Edom." Of course, the terms "Seir" (שעיר) and "Edom" (אדום) have been alluded to already in Esau's description in 25.25. We remember that Esau was born "red" (אדמוני) and covered with "hair" (שער). Again, the name "Edom" is a familiar one from the story of the

³⁵³ See Wenham, *Genesis*, 288-289; Taschner, *Verheissung*, 145; Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 142.

birthright where Esau's request for the "red" (הָאָדָם) stew which Jacob is cooking leads to an etymology for his association with Edom (25.30). Still, the names themselves are not the only allusions to Esau's prior identification in this verse. It is intriguing that "the land of Seir" is paralleled with the "field (שָׂדֵה) of Edom". Esau has been associated with the שָׂדֵה in both Genesis 25 and 27. In 25.27 Esau is described as a "man of the field" (אִישׁ שָׂדֵה) and in 27.4 and 5 he is sent out to the field to hunt Isaac's meal.³⁵⁴

Now, on one level, this introduction to Esau is merely descriptive. It instructs the messengers in whom they are looking for and where they might find him. However, on another level, it also serves to evoke for the reader the various scenes of conflict between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25 and 27. As Jacob prepares to meet Esau and face whatever consequences may await him, we are reminded of the various reasons Jacob has to be nervous before his brother.

These allusions to Esau's previous characterisation in 32.4 are not the only ways in which the events of Genesis 25 and 27 are recalled. The function of the terms אָה, שְׂעִיר, שָׂדֵה and אָדָם in 32.4 is relatively straightforward, or at least explicable. However, the terms which evoke Genesis 25 and 27 in 32.5 are more arresting. In v.5 Jacob instructs his messengers as to the communication they are to carry to Esau, he says, "Thus you shall say to my lord (לְאֲדֹנָי), to Esau, 'Thus says your servant (עַבְדְּךָ) Jacob...'" We are familiar with the language of lordship and service from 25.23 and particularly 27.29. To be sure, the term אָדָם has not been

³⁵⁴ There may be various historical explanations for the phrase שָׂדֵה אָדָם, and its relation to Judg. 5.4, but they have little bearing on the phrase's resonances within the final form of Gen. 32. Cf. the brief comments in Diana Vikander Edelman, "Edom: A Historical Geography," in Edelman, *You Shall Not Abhor*, 1-11 (10); Bartlett, *Edom*, 43; idem, "The Land of Seir and the Brotherhood of Edom," *JTS* 20 (1969): 1-20 (9-12).

used thus far in the narrative, but the concept it conveys is similar enough to the one captured in 27.29: “Be lord (הוה גביר) over your brothers.” The root עבד is all too familiar from 25.23 and 27.29 and 37. The puzzling thing, however, is not the presence of these terms, but their use. All indications to this point have suggested that Jacob is to be the one who will have dominion over Esau and now he presents himself as Esau’s servant.³⁵⁵ This little speech to the messengers introduces one of the most intriguing themes of Genesis 32-33, that is, the apparent reversal of the roles envisaged to this point.³⁵⁶ This seeming reversal has led a number of scholars to accuse Jacob of insincerity or continued trickery at this point.³⁵⁷ This approach has the advantage of maintaining a certain continuity with Jacob’s previous slippery behaviour, but remains open to significant questions.³⁵⁸

Jacob’s initial plan to “find favour” (למצא־חן) with Esau meets with an ambiguous response. The messengers return with no message from Esau, only the report that he is coming to meet Jacob accompanied by four hundred men. We never find out whether this group of men is an army or militia, although Robert Alter suggests that four hundred is the standard number of a raiding party or

³⁵⁵ Edward Bridge points out the incongruence of a social equal (e.g. a brother) using such deferential language. Bridge, “The ‘Slave’ is the ‘Master,’” 272.

³⁵⁶ The tension produced by this reversal has been picked in historical-critical terms; Jakob Wöhrle suggests that Gen. 32-33 are composed to draw together the previous Jacob-Esau and Jacob-Laban traditions and proposes the beginning of the seventh century as a date for this (pre-priestly) composition. See Wöhrle, “Koexistenz durch Unterwerfung,” 307-327. For alternative dating accounts, see (8th Century) Israel Finkelstein and Thomas Römer, “Comments on the Historical Background of the Jacob Narrative in Genesis,” *ZAW* 126 (2014): 317-338; Blum, “Jacob Tradition,” 207-208; Carr, *Fractures*, 264-268; (6th Century) Nadav Na’aman, “The Jacob Story and the Formation of Biblical Israel,” *TA* 41 (2014): 95-125; Dicou, *Edom*, 198-204.

³⁵⁷ So, Anderson, *Trickster*, 140-146; Turner, *Genesis*, 139-140; Brueggemann is slightly more even-handed, but still sees Jacob’s deference as part of his “strategy.” Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 263.

³⁵⁸ See Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 200-201; Victor H. Matthews and Frances Mims, “Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant: A Literary Interpretation,” *PRSt* 12 (1985): 185-195 (193).

regiment in 1-2 Samuel.³⁵⁹ What is clear is that Jacob interprets this news in the most threatening of ways. He is exceedingly afraid and anxious (וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיִּצַר; 32.8) and quickly acts to try and minimise the potential danger by dividing his family and his possessions into two camps (מַחֲנֵי).

Once he has taken steps to try and minimise the potential damage that Esau could cause (32.9), Jacob prays to YHWH for the first time.³⁶⁰ There seems to be little reason to doubt the honesty of Jacob's prayer, especially when we consider the tone that Jacob himself takes.³⁶¹

Jacob's prayer is filled with resonances from the previous chapters. He highlights his own obedience to YHWH's command in 31.3 by reminding YHWH of this command with a near verbatim repetition. Then, in v.11, Jacob makes a statement of striking modesty: "I am not worth (קַטְנֹתִי) all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which you have shown your servant (עַבְדְּךָ)." The adjective קַטָּן has already been used to describe Jacob in 27.15 and 27.42.³⁶² The verbal form is rare in the Old Testament, but here it seems to imply that Jacob is unfit for the benefits that he has received from God.³⁶³ It seems telling, however, that this root appears here, in a prayer which supplicates God for deliverance from Jacob's brother. In a

³⁵⁹ Alter, *Genesis*, 178; cf. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 322; Syrén, *First-Born*, 100; Westermann, *Genesis*, 507; Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 331.

³⁶⁰ Josef Schreiner notes the rarity of direct prayers in the patriarchal narratives; Schreiner, "Das Gebet Jakobs," 287.

³⁶¹ Contra Frank Anthony Spina, "The 'Face of God': Esau in Canonical Context," in *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. C.A. Evans and S. Talmon (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 3-25 (14); Serge Frolov, "The Other Side of the Jabbok: Genesis 32 as a Fiasco of Patriarchy," *JSOT* 91 (2000): 41-59 (50).

³⁶² Cf. the description of Rachel in 29.16 and 18.

³⁶³ See Walter Brueggemann, "Amos' Intercessory Formula," *VT* 19 (1969): 385-399 (387-388); cf. Sarna's note that Jacob's prayer is rooted in God's "steadfast fealty" rather than Jacob's "merit." Sarna, *Genesis*, 225.

narrative which consistently displaces the younger and the older, here Jacob appears to align himself, in one sense at least, with his younger status.³⁶⁴ This alignment would fit with the move made by Jacob earlier when he describes himself as a “servant” (32.5). Thus, the servant language which we have already encountered fits well with Jacob’s plea before God. Jacob has humbled himself before Esau and, now, he humbles himself before God. Whatever else may be going on in this passage, there is a clear inversion of Jacob’s previous pattern of behaviour. If previously Jacob strove to displace his elder brother through hard bargaining and trickery, now he more readily identifies himself with the younger position. What is more, he does this both before Esau (32.5) and before God (32.11).

To this point, then, Jacob’s disposition, on the surface at least, appears radically different to that found earlier in the narrative. If the ambiguity of 25.23 encouraged some tentativeness on the reader’s part in gauging the direction of the oracle, then Jacob’s depiction at the beginning of Genesis 32 would seem to suggest that this inference was well made. Already, Jacob’s deference and simple fear present Esau in these closing chapters as the dominant party.

iii. *Gen. 32.14-22*

Once he has prayed Jacob proceeds with further arrangements for the placation of Esau (32.14-22). Some see Jacob’s gift (32.14) as little more than a thinly veiled bribe.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ Identifying this resonance does not discount the translation “not worth/unworthy”; contra Anderson, *Trickster*, 145.

³⁶⁵ Anderson, *Trickster*, 140; David L. Petersen, “Genesis and Family Values,” *JBL* 124 (2005): 5-24 (20); cf. the more general disparaging comments in Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 97.

There is an obvious logic to this point as, in a certain sense, Jacob is seeking to purchase Esau's favour.³⁶⁶ It is regularly noted that throughout the Old Testament, and in the ancient Near East more broadly, it is common to send a present or gift to a great or powerful figure.³⁶⁷ Yet, this is not the primary reason given by Jacob for his gift. Roger Syrén, for instance, points out the “juridical-sacrificial” element to Jacob's gift giving.³⁶⁸ In 32.21 Jacob seems to reflect to himself on the aim of his gift: “I may appease him (אכפרה פניו) with the gift (במנחה) which goes before me and after this I will see his face, perhaps he will accept me (נשא פני).” Syrén points out that terms such as כפר, מנחה and נשא פני among others, are rooted in conceptualities of atonement. Syrén notes, therefore:

Jacob's intention here is obviously to avert Esau's revenge, by producing a gift as compensation... Thus, Jacob confesses himself to be the offending party and expects Esau to raise a case against him.³⁶⁹

Syrén's comments help us to recognise two key points. First, part of the language which Jacob uses to conceptualise his gift is the language of atonement.³⁷⁰ As such, restitution seems to be implicit in Jacob's motivations; this point comes out further as we press into chapter 33.³⁷¹ Secondly, the wider sacral terminology in 32.21 adds to the sense that Jacob is seeking not only to appease his brother, but to atone in some sense.³⁷² This dimension of Jacob's approach

³⁶⁶ Paul R. Noble, “Esau, Tamar, and Joseph: Criteria for Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions,” *VT* 52 (2002): 219-252 (236).

³⁶⁷ Wenham, *Genesis*, 291; Skinner, *Genesis*, 407; Driver, *Genesis*, 293; Seebass, *Vätegeschichte II*, 389-399.

³⁶⁸ Syrén, *First-Born*, 104-106.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁷⁰ A possible parallel where the language of restitution and atonement come together is Num. 5.5-10.

³⁷¹ As we will see, this does not imply that Jacob's gift is a return of the blessing; cf. Bridge, “The ‘Slave’ is the ‘Master,’” 267.

³⁷² Wenham, *Genesis*, 292.

implicitly lowers Jacob's status, that is to say, it humbles him before Esau. If he is not openly penitent, he may at least recognise some need for restitution.

Of course, at this point it could be objected that Jacob, finding himself trapped, is doing all he can to extricate himself from a dangerous position of his own making and, as such, he remains insincere, seeking only his own self-preservation. There are certainly problems with Jacob's behaviour in Genesis 32-33. There are elements which strike the contemporary reader as distasteful. We might be struck by his seemingly calculated manoeuvres in 32.8, seeking to save some, if not all. We surely find particularly unsettling the way he seems to place his wives and children between himself and Esau in 32.23 or the ordering that he gives to his wives, concubines and children in 33.1-2.³⁷³ All this seems to be beyond contestation. Nonetheless, this does not mean that we need to dismiss the elements of genuine-seeming obeisance to God and Esau which appear within Genesis 32 as they may provide important insights into what is going on in Jacob's meeting with his brother.

What does become clear, as we progress through the chapter, is that Jacob's concern with humbling himself finds expression in a comprehensive range of statements which seem to intensify in trustworthiness as the chapter progresses. Jacob begins by humbling himself with the language of servanthood before Esau (32.5); in the form of prayer, he then speaks of his unworthiness (32.11) to receive God's loving-kindness and faithfulness; finally, in the form of inward speech,³⁷⁴

³⁷³ Frolov, "Other Side," 56; Heard, *Dynamics*, 127.

³⁷⁴ Robert Alter notes, "With the report of inward speech, we enter the realm of relative certainty about character: there is certainty, in any case, about the character's conscious intentions..." Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 117; cf. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 37-38.

Jacob indicates his intention to use the gift to make some kind of atonement (32.21) to Esau. This does not then constitute an instance of emphatic repentance, but it does suggest a recognition of some wrong in Jacob's dealings with Esau and an uneasiness with their relationship that goes beyond a trite concern for his own wellbeing.³⁷⁵

It is with this picture of Jacob, perhaps seeking to offer some kind of restitution, in place that we turn to the most famous episode of the Jacob story: his night-time wrestle at the Jabbok.

iv. *Gen. 32.23-33*

Unsurprisingly the literature on Jacob's night-time wrestle is vast. While initially the figure that Jacob wrestles is unidentified, ultimately the text associates him with God himself: "for I have seen God face to face" (כִּי־רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פְּנִים אֶל־פְּנִים) (33.31). Still, the initial ambiguity, not to mention the simple strangeness of the story, has led to a plethora of suggestions as to the original identity of Jacob's opponent. Gunkel, von Rad and Westermann all suggest that, in an early form of the story at least, the figure was a kind of river demon.³⁷⁶ Some link the story with the terse description of events at Mahanaim, suggesting that Jacob's opponent is a representative of the angels of God mentioned in 32.2.³⁷⁷ Of course, for my purposes here, much of what has been written on these verses is of no direct import. Consequently, we will focus on the implications this little narrative has for

³⁷⁵ Noble, "Esau, Tamar," 237.

³⁷⁶ Gunkel, *Genesis*, 352; von Rad, *Genesis*, 321; Westermann, *Genesis*, 515; Sarna, in line with rabbinic tradition (*Gen. Rab.* 77.3), identifies the figure as Esau's "celestial patron"; Sarna, *Genesis*, 404.

³⁷⁷ Tzemah Yoreh, "Jacob's Struggle," *ZAW* 117 (2004): 95-97; cf. Arnold, *Genesis*, 280; Jeremy Hutton, "Jacob's 'Two Camps' and Transjordanian Geography: Wrestling with Order in Genesis 32," *ZAW* 122 (2010): 20-32.

the figure of Jacob and his meeting with, and the presentation of, Esau. With this focus in mind there are three elements in the story that need addressing: (a) the reappearance of the theme of Jacob as wrestler; (b) the renaming of Jacob; (c) the motif of the face in Jacob's encounter.

The beginning of this mysterious scene opens thus: "And Jacob remained alone, and a man wrestled (ויאבק איש) with him until dawn rose" (32.25). Here a theme is revisited which we have found laced throughout the Jacob-Esau narrative in its various stages. As we have seen, throughout Jacob's relationship with Esau his name has been alluded to in order to evoke the themes of strife which have hemmed in the brotherly relationship (25.26; 27.36). The play on Jacob's name seems to be taken up again here. The meeting with the mysterious figure takes place at the Jabbok (יבק) and the challenge is described as a wrestle (אבק).³⁷⁸ It is regularly noted that the verb אבק is only used here and, as such, seems to have been brought in deliberately.³⁷⁹ It is telling, then, that both יבק and אבק share key consonants with יעקב. The deliberate resonance with Jacob's name seems especially likely as אבק is replaced by שרה later in the passage. Once again, then, Jacob's name is matched with a form of wrestling, once again it is related to the enactment of strife. Quite how this new wrestling relates to what has gone before needs to be teased out in due course.

³⁷⁸ On אבק, see Esther J. Hamori, "When Gods Were Men": *The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature*, BZAW 384 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 97; cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 408.

³⁷⁹ Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 210; Soggin, *Genesis*, 397; Allen P. Ross, "Studies in the Life of Jacob Part 2: Jacob at the Jabbok, Israel at Peniel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (1985): 338-354 (342).

As the struggle continues Jacob's assailant realises that he may not be able to overcome Jacob and therefore employs an obscure move to disable him.³⁸⁰ However, the unidentified man is still unable to force himself free and so requests that Jacob release him; Jacob refuses to do so unless this man blesses him. Again, the theme of blessing, which has been so central to Jacob's dealings with both Esau and Laban, resurfaces here and girds this idiosyncratic narrative into the wider structure of the Jacob-Cycle. But this blessing appears to take on a distinctive form.³⁸¹ Jacob's opponent does not pronounce a formula describing the various means of success that Jacob is to meet with, as was the case in 27.27-29 or 28.3-4, 13-15. In contrast, here Jacob receives a change of name. Thus, the man pronounces in 32.29: "You will no longer be called 'Jacob,' instead your name will be 'Israel,' for you have striven with God and with men and you have succeeded." Of course, as we have come to expect the etymological association of ישראל with שרית עם־אלהים ועם־אנשים is inexact, but this is in keeping with the other naming accounts that have appeared thus far in the Jacob-Cycle.³⁸² The significance of 32.29 surely lies less in its historical-philological value and more in its conceptual-theological significance. The name giving seems to play a dual role.

On the one hand, the man's pronouncement offers a rationale for Jacob's life up unto this point: "you have striven with God and with men." Jacob's life has, indeed, been one of strife; this may be the first indication that we receive that Jacob's striving has been with God as well as with men, but the notion that Jacob's life has been one marked by conflict is familiar. On the other hand, this naming

³⁸⁰ On נגע, see Hamori, *When Gods*, 97.

³⁸¹ Hamori may go too far in identifying this blessing with the birthright of Gen. 25. Ibid., 101.

³⁸² On the uncertainty of the meaning of שרית, see Skinner, *Genesis*, 409.

seems to grant Jacob and the reader a sense of resolution. The man pronounces, “and you have succeeded” (וּתְּוַכַּח). In other words, Jacob’s life has not simply been defined by strife, but that strife has in some meaningful sense been resolved. The verb יָכַל may carry a relatively wide range of semantic possibilities. While it usually denotes something to the effect of “to be able,” it can carry a more definitive sense. Indeed, it has already been used in the Jacob-Cycle in a way comparable to that found here. In 30.8, at the birth of Naphtali, Rachel cries out, “With mighty wrestlings (נִפְתּוּלֵי אֱלֹהִים) I have wrestled with my sister, see I have even prevailed (גַּם־יִכַּלְתִּי).” In the same way that the birth of Rachel’s son suggests some kind of resolution to the struggles she experienced, so here, Jacob’s strivings seem to be ended with the name change of v.29.

The upshot, then, of this reading is that the man’s blessing, which results in the name change from Jacob to Israel, suggests a significant continuity with the preceding events of Jacob’s life but also a telling sense of transition. In the biblical corpus name changes are often freighted with existential significance in a way which is difficult to define.³⁸³ We think, for instance, of the name change undergone by Abram in Genesis 17 as he becomes Abraham, “the father of a multitude.”³⁸⁴ Jacob’s renaming, however, is distinct from Abraham’s in three ways. First, Jacob’s name change is more radical. Even as the conceptual element of wrestling remains central, the actual phonetic elements are completely overhauled. Secondly, Jacob’s name change is less consistent. While, in significant ways, Jacob may now be “Israel,” he is still referred to as Jacob throughout much

³⁸³ Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 106.

³⁸⁴ Sarai also has her name changed in Gen. 17, although the significance of the change to Sarah is less immediately obvious.

of the rest of his life and throughout much of the rest of the biblical canon.³⁸⁵

Thirdly, Jacob's name change is more far-reaching. Jacob's new name, Israel, becomes the primary designation for the nation which is promised to Abraham, Isaac, and himself. Between the word play on Jacob's name with the root אִבְק and the complete name change from Jacob to יִשְׂרָאֵל, we see some of the ways in which this encounter at the Jabbok is bound into the preceding narrative and, in equal measure, distinct from what has gone before.

A final observation on the Jabbok encounter relates to Jacob's own analysis of the event. In 32.31 we read: "And Jacob called the name of that place 'Peniel' because 'I saw God face to face and my life was delivered.'" Here some insight into the character of Jacob's opponent is granted; Jacob understands his encounter to have been with God himself and, thus, Jacob's observation corroborates the man's statement in 32.29 ("you have striven with God and with men..."). The notion alluded to here, that to look on God is to enter into an encounter of life-threatening proportions, is a common one in the Old Testament.³⁸⁶ As such, Jacob rightly speaks of his life being preserved through this encounter; in the presence of a face which should command fear and terror Jacob finds that he is preserved and even blessed. As we will see, this is a theme which re-emerges in chapter 33 through Jacob's encounter with Esau's face.

What, then, are we to do with these observations? It is surely uncontroversial to describe Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok in career defining terms.³⁸⁷ Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok is bound quite firmly to his previous life

³⁸⁵ Blum points out that this actually parallels the use of "Esau/Edom" in the Genesis narratives and subsequent biblical traditions; Blum, "Komplexität," 50.

³⁸⁶ Exod. 33.20; Judg. 13.22; Isa. 6.5.

³⁸⁷ Von Rad describes it as having "programmatic significance." Von Rad, *Genesis*, 316.

of wrestling and striving, that is to say, there is real continuity. Yet, with Jacob's renaming he is set on a new footing; things are resolved (יכל) and a sense of discontinuity is created. Things will never quite be the same for Jacob once he crosses back over the Jabbok. We might think of the comparable experience for Abraham at Mount Moriah. In certain ways little changes for Abraham, the promises that God has made to bless and multiply him are restated, not re-formed. Yet, they are restated on a new footing, one in which Abraham is a participant and not merely a recipient.³⁸⁸ It may be that something similar, if a little more elusive, is taking place at the Jabbok. As Jacob prepares to face Esau, the blessing, indeed, the inheritance of a nation, which has been in view since the beginning of the story and which Jacob has been striving for is settled on him. No comment is made about the propriety of Jacob's previous wrestling, but what is clear is that Jacob need wrestle no longer. If, at the Jabbok, Jacob leaves behind a mode of behaviour which was previously so prominent in his life, namely wrestling, then this may open up means of viewing his reception of God's blessing and, perhaps, his relationship with Esau in fresh ways (33.5, 11).

As we stand back and look at the broad portrayal that appears from Genesis 32 a couple of things seem to come into focus. First, there are numerous elements which bind this chapter into the stories found in Genesis 25 and 27. The mirroring of Bethel at Mahanaim, the allusions to Edom and Seir, the language of servant and lord, the fear that Jacob experiences before Esau, the theme of wrestling and the notion of blessing all ground the reader firmly in conceptual

³⁸⁸ See Moberly, "Earliest Commentary," 320-321.

categories familiar from earlier in the narrative. Following Jacob's sojourn with Laban, we are now thrust back into his ongoing conflict with Esau.

Secondly, however, we see that, for all the ostensible familiarity, Jacob's language throughout the chapter appears in a different register. His vocabulary is that of humility (עבד; קתן) and, possibly, atonement (כפר). Moreover, this language appears consistently in different layers of discourse. That is to say, it appears in Jacob's message to Esau (human-human [עבד]), in his prayer for deliverance (human-divine [קתן]) and in his own internal speech (human-internal [כפר]). Of course, this kind of language can be read suspiciously; perhaps Jacob is seeking to trick Esau one final time and perhaps his language of humiliation is born more of desperation than sorrow. Yet, it seems more likely, once this change in register is added to the sense of resolution created by Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok, that the narrative is shifting into a new phase.³⁸⁹ Genesis 25 and 27 have shaped our understanding of the present situation. However, it may be that the problems set out in those two chapters are resolved in surprising ways, as we will see in Genesis 33.³⁹⁰

Now, our focus remains on Esau and his experience of rejection, but it is to be hoped that this discussion of Jacob's behaviour in Genesis 32 helps to set up the issues that will appear in chapter 33. Moreover, Jacob's experience as the recipient of the promise should work to reflect some of Esau's experience as the one rejected

³⁸⁹ While importing the language of repentance is both unhelpful and, in certain ways, extraneous to the story, speaking of Jacob's desire to seek amendment as well as his newfound humility seems to make best sense of the linguistic detail and overarching trajectory of the narrative. For an account which reads Jacob's portrayal in Gen. 32 as consistent with his portrayal in Gen. 25 and 27, see Holmgren, "Holding Your Own," 5-17, esp., 10-13.

³⁹⁰ Cf. Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis*, Siphrut 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 165-169.

from the promise. In our examination of Genesis 25 and 27 we saw certain ways in which the providential dynamics of the story served to position Jacob as the one who would receive pre-eminence. Jacob returns now as the one who has the promise very much in his possession, there is no suggestion that it could reside with anyone else. Still, the shift in Jacob's presentation between Genesis 25-27 and Genesis 32 suggests that the workings of providence which were initiated with the oracle of 25.23, which worked through chapter 27 and, in one sense, culminated with 28.13-15, have not foreclosed the particulars of Jacob's pre-eminence. To put the matter slightly differently, the end point of Jacob and Esau's conflict was *identified*, albeit ambiguously, in 25.23, but it was not *reached* as such. The development of Jacob's presentation, at least as I have sought to outline it here, testifies to the organic elements within the story. As we turn to Genesis 33, it remains to be seen whether the same can be said for Esau.

v. *Gen. 33.1-20*

The narrative transitions abruptly from Jacob's departure from Peniel, presumably at dawn, to Esau's arrival. Esau appears with the four hundred men that have been reported and Jacob responds in accordance with his fear. In light of the threat that Esau's company poses, Jacob appears to place those least dear to him at the front, giving the most prized members of his family, Rachel and Joseph, the best chance of escape. This move is certainly unpalatable.³⁹¹ Still, however unfitting Jacob's arrangement may appear, it does not nullify the simple fact that Jacob goes on ahead. In what follows we will consider Esau's initial greeting (33.4-5), Jacob and

³⁹¹ Richard J. Clifford, "Genesis 37-50: Joseph Story or Jacob Story?" in Evans, Lohr and Petersen, *The Book of Genesis*, 213-229 (217 n.12).

Esau's exchange over the gift (33.8-11) and Jacob's departure from his brother (33.12-17).

Jacob approaches in the most elaborate fashion, bowing to the ground seven times as he comes up to his brother.³⁹² Jacob Wöhrle points out that his sevenfold prostration may echo the blessing of Jacob in 27.29 through the reuse of the verb *חָוָה*.³⁹³ Again, as we saw in Genesis 32, Jacob appears to place himself in a subservient position, in stark contrast to all that has preceded in Genesis 25 and 27.³⁹⁴ This startling behaviour is overshadowed, however, by Esau's extraordinary greeting.³⁹⁵

One of the last things Esau did in the narrative was to weep in 27.38. There Esau weeps in light of Jacob's deceitful theft of his blessing. Here, in 33.4, Esau weeps again, but in an entirely different context. Esau's greeting of Jacob is quite unexpected; it is a warm welcome of the most emphatic kind.³⁹⁶ Esau runs to meet Jacob and embraces him, falls on his neck and kisses him;³⁹⁷ finally the two brothers weep together (*ויבכו*).³⁹⁸ There are a number of elements here that require comment. First, whatever Jacob's previous fears, Esau responds in a way wholly out of keeping with his earlier designs (27.41). It is unlikely that the reference to

³⁹² Westermann relates this to ancient Near Eastern court rituals; Westermann, *Genesis*, 524-525; also, Sarna, *Genesis*, 229; but cf. the comments in Wöhrle, "Koexistenz durch Unterwerfung," 319; Bridge, "The 'Slave' is the 'Master,'" 271.

³⁹³ Wöhrle, "Koexistenz durch Unterwerfung," 318; cf. Wenham, *Genesis*, 298.

³⁹⁴ Fokkelman sees this change as one towards humility; Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 223.

³⁹⁵ Esau's greeting is often interpreted positively, although not without exception. Gunkel argues that Esau is portrayed as a "good-natured buffoon" won over by speeches and gifts. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 354; cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 412.

³⁹⁶ R.W.L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 98.

³⁹⁷ In MT the verb *נִשָּׂק* is marked with "extraordinary points" (GKC, §5n); for the rabbinic interpretation of these, see Mois A. Navon, "The Kiss of Esau," *JBQ* 35 (2007): 127-131.

³⁹⁸ For the links with this verse and previous sections of the Jacob-Cycle, see Turner, *Genesis*, 144; Sarna, *Genesis*, 229.

the “neck” (צוואר) in 33.4 constitutes an allusion to promise of 27.40bβ; but even so, Esau seems to be free from any form of subjection to his brother.

Secondly, it is telling that while it is Esau who runs, embraces, falls and kisses, both Jacob and Esau weep together. Whatever follows in the chapter, the picture given here, at least, is one of heartfelt reconciliation.

Finally, it is unclear what has served to cause this response. It seems unlikely that it was Jacob’s gift, as this seems to be a source of puzzlement to Esau (33.8-9). It may be that Jacob’s humble attitude has affected his brother.

Alternatively, it could be that Esau has either forgotten the offense or prospered so much in Jacob’s absence that his theft has become inconsequential or forgivable.³⁹⁹ At best we may speculate, the text gives very few hints, and yet Esau’s merciful response opens up a fascinating little dialogue.

Esau enquires into the succession of flocks and herds that he has met in the run up to Jacob’s arrival: “And [Esau] said, ‘What do you mean by all this company (כל־המחנה) which I have met?’ [Jacob] said, ‘To find favour (למצא־חן) in your eyes, my lord.’” It is telling that here Jacob makes clear that the purpose of the מחנה was to find חן. In v.5, Jacob has attributed his extensive family to God’s gracious dealings with him (אשר־חנן אלהים את־עבדך), but not to God’s blessing.⁴⁰⁰ Here in v.8 Jacob is seeking Esau’s favour, that is, Jacob is hoping to have Esau play a role comparable to God’s.⁴⁰¹

This makes some sense of Jacob’s statement in v.10:

³⁹⁹ Assis, *Identity*, 51.

⁴⁰⁰ Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 115; Westermann, *Genesis*, 525.

⁴⁰¹ On חן, see Carsten Ziegert, “A Case for Grace? Case-Grammar, Frame Semantics, and Biblical Hebrew חן,” *VT* 71 (2021): 133-150.

No, please, if I have found favour (מצאתי חן) in your eyes, then take my offering (מנחת) from my hand for then I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you will accept me (ראיתי פניך כראת פני אלהים) (ותרצני).⁴⁰²

There is here a subtle if clearly perceptible identification with Esau and God;⁴⁰³ Esau and God both dispense favour and seeing Esau's face is like seeing the face of God.⁴⁰⁴ Of course, there may well be a rhetorical element to Jacob's language here.⁴⁰⁵ He may still be seeking to appease Esau by means of flattery. But, even if this were so, there is surely still more going on. For the reader at this point, Jacob's allusion to the "face of God" points back to his mysterious encounter at the Jabbok; this allusion is presumably lost on Esau. Nevertheless, what we find is that Esau's association with God at this point may go some way to recasting the terms of Jacob's relationship with Esau. Just as Jacob wrestled with God and with men, so Jacob receives favour from God and from Esau.⁴⁰⁶

Much of the language that Jacob uses in 33.10 is unfamiliar to the earlier parts of the narrative. However, in v.11 we find the recurrence of the key term "blessing" (ברכה). As Jacob presses Esau to take his "gift" (מנחה), he says: "Please take my blessing (ברכת) which is brought to you, for God has favoured me (כי־הנני

⁴⁰² The root רצה has sacral associations, in addition to מנחה and כפר noted above (cf. Lev. 1.4; 7.18; 22.23, 25, 27). Wenham, *Genesis*, 292.

⁴⁰³ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 327.

⁴⁰⁴ Konrad Schmid notes, "die Szene der Versöhnung zwischen Jakob und Esau deutlich mit der Gottesbegegnung Jakbos am Jabbok parallelisiert." Schmid, "Die Versöhnung," 214-215, cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 414.

⁴⁰⁵ Bridge, "The 'Slave' is the 'Master,'" 263-278.

⁴⁰⁶ Anderson notes a further possible connection between Esau and God in the rhyme between אבק and חבק. Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 110; cf. Wenham, *Genesis*, 118; see also further connections in Balfour, "Heavy is the Head".

אלהים) and because I have everything I need.”⁴⁰⁷ It remains unclear how the blessing of 33.11 relates to that of Genesis 27 or, indeed, to the gift of Genesis 32-33. It is possible that Jacob’s attempt to appease Esau is bound up with a partial return of the blessing.⁴⁰⁸ Yet, the blessing referenced in 33.11 is undefined. It seems quite clear that Jacob does not revoke his position of privilege under God. For Jacob’s position as one favoured by God is precisely what enables him to extend the blessing to Esau (“for God has favoured me and I have everything I need”).⁴⁰⁹ Yet, at the same time, it is not clear what gift Jacob could offer Esau, besides the stolen blessing, that would be meaningful. The allusion to the blessing, then, is both laced with significance and too opaque to give any clear direction to the conclusion of the story. Perhaps it is best to read it as part of the wider reconciliation between the two brothers without finding in 33.11 anything that will dramatically change their relationship to God’s promises.

It may be useful to step back at this point and survey what we have seen in Genesis 33 before offering some conclusions. First, after all the fear that has characterised Jacob’s approach to Esau (32.8), Esau meets Jacob in the most welcoming way possible (33.4). Jacob has sought favour in Esau’s eyes (32.6; 33.8) and he has seemingly found it. Secondly, there are resonances throughout the passage which seem to present points of subtle contact between Jacob’s attitude towards Esau and his attitude towards God (32.29; 33.10-11). Thirdly, Jacob seeks Esau’s favour through the offering of a “gift” (מנחה)/“blessing” (ברכה) and Jacob

⁴⁰⁷ Paul Noble sees in Jacob’s urging a failure to accept Esau’s goodwill for free, rather Jacob, in keeping with his character, must strive for all that he gets. Noble, “Esau, Tamar,” 243. Noble seems to lay too much weight on Jacob’s insistence, without taking due note of the wider implications of Gen. 32-33 for Jacob’s presentation.

⁴⁰⁸ Sarna, *Genesis*, 230.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 227-228; Schmid, quoting from an earlier passage in Fokkelman, perhaps presses this renunciation too far; Schmid, “Die Versöhnung,” 216.

insists on the acceptance of this blessing precisely because God has shown him so much favour (33.11).

The tenor of the story seems to have changed. Jacob remains supremely prosperous; he will pass on into, and purchase part of, the land of promise at the end of the chapter (33.18-20) and there is no denial of God's favour. Esau is likewise prosperous, but his wealth (33.9) is not attributed to God. What we may be viewing is a reconceptualising of the terms of Jacob's supremacy. Jacob's wrestling and striving have ceased; he need no longer disguise himself in order to receive blessing. Instead, he openly acknowledges that his prosperity is conditional upon the favour of God.⁴¹⁰

Similarly, then, Esau's relationship with Jacob is reconceived. Jacob no longer strives against Esau but receives favour from him. Of course, throughout the story Esau has been removed from the line of promise, sometimes subtly (26.34-35) and sometimes more emphatically (25.29-34; 27), but this does not mean that Esau's role is simply to be one of degradation. His role here as one who gives favour opens the possibility of dignity and also highlights for the reader the notion that for all Jacob's scheming, ultimately it is favour which has brought him to the point where he may act as a recipient of the promise. At the start of his life Jacob receives the favour of Rebekah, at the end the favour of Esau, and throughout the overarching favour of God. Part, at least, of Esau's role in Genesis 32-33 is to highlight this dynamic of the story. Esau serves to point up something of the helplessness of Jacob and, as such, the overarching providential aspect of his rise. In a very real sense, then, in Genesis 32-33, Jacob is the "servant" of Esau; Esau is

⁴¹⁰ Westermann, *Genesis*, 530.

in the position of relative power, but this dynamic in these two chapters serves, perhaps, to illuminate the fact that Jacob has never really been the master of his fate. We noted how the ambiguity of the oracle in 25.23 injects an element of provisionality into the story of Jacob and Esau. This seems to be confirmed through the surprising ways in which their roles are reconfigured in Genesis 32-33. This reconfiguration does not overturn the pronouncement of 25.23. It does, however, serve as a warning to the reader that access to the divine decision and pronouncement is always granted with a qualifying clarification of the distance between the ways of YHWH and human ways.

The scene of reconciliation ends with Esau's offer to accompany Jacob (33.12); presumably Esau's suggestion is that he accompany Jacob to Seir, although it is Jacob who initially names the place (33.14; cf. 33.16). Jacob refuses to join Esau. He offers a careful excuse, pleading the weakness and fragility of his party in comparison with Esau and his four hundred men (33.13). However, Jacob does not go on to join Esau in Seir; instead he journeys to Succoth.⁴¹¹ This may indicate a loss of nerve on Jacob's part, a failure to trust his brother's good will and a further attempt at self-preservation.⁴¹² It is worth remembering, however, that within the wider context of the final form of the Genesis text the nature of Jacob and Esau's ultimate separation is somewhat opaque. For example, as we will see, in 36.7, the reason for their separation is the abundance of each brothers' possessions, rather than any enmity. It is difficult to square this note with the seeming logic of Genesis 32-33, where Esau already seems to be in Seir. However, the alternative option in 36.7 actually highlights the ambiguity resident in chapter 33; no clear

⁴¹¹ On the location of Succoth, see Wenham, *Genesis*, 300; cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 231.

⁴¹² Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 353; Kaminsky, *Jacob*, 55; Coats, "Strife Without Reconciliation," 103.

reason is given in the text for Jacob's decision to move to Succoth. One obvious, overarching, reading does come to mind, however: Jacob, as inheritor of the promised land, cannot go with Esau to Seir.⁴¹³ However it is contrived, he must remain in the land.

6. Genesis 36

Following his separation from Jacob in 33.16 Esau disappears from the ensuing narrative. Apart from his reappearance at the burial of Isaac in 35.29, he plays no further role in the Genesis story. However, Genesis 36 provides an entire chapter dedicated to his genealogy and the kingdom he sired. Here we consider what contribution this extensive chapter makes to the presentation of Esau in the book of Genesis. I am not concerned with the various questions of historical significance which surround the chapter; these are discussed elsewhere.⁴¹⁴ As such, my comments here are limited.

The chapter is initially somewhat disorienting in its layout. There are sections of genealogy (36.1-5, 9-14, 20-28) and narrative (36.6-8), as well as lists of "clans" (אֱלוֹפִים; 36.15-19; 40-43) and kings (36.31-39).⁴¹⁵ Moreover, the names in the lists produce various points of confusion. For example, many of the names are repeated for reasons which are not immediately apparent (cf. 36.1-5, 9-14).⁴¹⁶

⁴¹³ Arnold, *Genesis*, 309.

⁴¹⁴ Bartlett, *Edom*, 86-90, 94-102; Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 167-183; Ernst A. Knauf, "Alter und Herkunft der edomitischen Königsliste Gen 36,31-39," *ZAW* 97 (1985): 245-253.

⁴¹⁵ Questions around the compositional history of the chapter are complex and remain highly contested. Most see the hand of P at work at some stage, but quite where this contribution fits into the chapter's history is unclear. For a variety of proposals, see Coats, *Genesis*, 246; Carr, *Fractures*, 96; Wilson, *Genealogy*, 168; Blum, *Vätergeschichte*, 448-451; Skinner, *Genesis*, 428; Westermann, *Genesis*, 561. Ernst Axel Knauf, "Genesis 36,1-43," in Jean-Daniel Macchi and Thomas Römer, *Jacob*, 291-300.

⁴¹⁶ Cf. the suggestion of Speiser, *Genesis*, 282.

Still, in spite of this initial confusion, many interpreters find a discernible structure throughout the chapter.⁴¹⁷

While particular structural theories vary, it is clear that the chapter as a whole is bracketed by statements identifying Esau with Edom (36.1, 43).⁴¹⁸ Indeed, throughout the chapter the clarifying note הוּא אֵדוּם (or some such variant) appears and binds the character Esau to the nation being described (cf. 36.1, 8, 19, 43).⁴¹⁹ Whatever other function these notes may serve, they go some way to directing us to the purpose of Genesis 36 in its wider context. The analogy between Genesis 36 and 25.12-18, is regularly drawn, even though Genesis 36 offers a much more extensive genealogy.⁴²⁰ In the same way that the account of Ishmael's genealogy in Genesis 25 served to draw his part in the story of the chosen family to a close and direct the reader's attention away from the unchosen son, so here Esau's genealogy brings his part in the story to a close and prepares the reader for the story of Jacob's family which will begin in Genesis 37.⁴²¹

Here I consider three particular elements of Genesis 36 which seem to have a bearing on the characterisation of Esau. The continued association of Esau with

⁴¹⁷ On the structuring role of הוּא, see Anderson; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 132; for structural proposals, see Bartlett, *Edom*, 84; Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 131; Wilson, *Genealogy*, 167; Wenham, *Genesis*, 334.

⁴¹⁸ Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 132; Dustin Nash, "Edom, Judah, and Converse Constructions of Israeliteness in Genesis 36," *VT* 68 (2018): 111-128 (114-115).

⁴¹⁹ Nash, "Edom, Judah," 116.

⁴²⁰ See Sarna, *Genesis*, 246; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 391; Knauf, "Genesis 36,1-43," 291-292.

⁴²¹ Arnold, *Genesis*, 308-309. Westermann's suggestion that the structure of Esau's genealogy mirrors the history of Israel, passing from family, to tribe, to kingdom seems quite possible. Westermann, *Genesis*, 568. Less plausible is the suggestion that the genealogy of Esau mirrors the twelve tribes of Israel in the numbering of Esau's sons and grandsons. See Syrén, *First-Born*, 129; Skinner, *Genesis*, 431; cf. Hamilton's critique, Hamilton, *Genesis*, 394.

Edom, the reintroduction of Esau's wives and the note on Amalek in Esau's genealogy.

First, then, as already noted, Esau is continually identified with the nation Edom (36.1, 8, 9, 19, 43). Indeed, only here in the Old Testament is Esau described as אבֵי אֲדוּמִים (36.9, 43). This association picks up a theme which was introduced implicitly in 25.25 and more explicitly 25.30. Yet, once it is introduced in chapter 25 the theme is then more or less dropped in the subsequent narrative, with the locating of Esau in the land of Edom in 32.3 as the one exception. Here, however, the theme is picked up once again and Esau is emphatically bound to the nation of Edom. This association most probably serves to confirm the opening dynamics of the story. Esau has been removed from the chosen line; he has gone on to father another nation, but not the chosen nation.⁴²² This theme set the trajectory of the narrative in 25.23. Here, in Genesis 36, the initial claim about Esau's significance is borne out: Esau has fathered a nation. However, that nation will not benefit from God's special promises.

Secondly, and briefly, we find another reference to Esau's wives. As I have already argued, Esau's marriage to women outside the chosen family serves as an outworking of his rejection. The reintroduction of the theme here serves a similar purpose to his association with Edom. Esau's marriage to Canaanite women, as in 26.34-35, serves as an expression of his rejection.⁴²³

⁴²² Bartlett, *Edom*, 86.

⁴²³ Sarna may well be right in seeing the appellation "Canaanite" as derogatory or polemical. Sarna, *Genesis*, 247; cf. Arnold, *Genesis*, 309.

Finally, we need to consider the inclusion in Esau's genealogy of the name "Amalek." In 36.12 we read, "Timnah was the concubine of Eliphaz, son of Esau, and she bore Amalek to Eliphaz." Again, in 36.15-16 we read,

These are the chiefs of the sons of Esau. The sons of Eliphaz, the firstborn of Esau: the chiefs... Korah, Gatam and Amalek. These are the chiefs of Eliphaz in the land of Edom, these are the sons of Adah.

Any association with Amalek in the Old Testament offers cause for concern. The Amalekites constitute one of the great enemies of the Israelites. Crucially, in Exodus 17, the Amalekites, apparently unprovoked, come out to wage war against the Israelites. Following their defeat YHWH vows to "utterly wipe out (מחה) the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven" (Exod. 17.14). Subsequently every reference to Amalek is profoundly negative, often pointing back to this incident.⁴²⁴ As such, this association of Esau with Amalek could constitute the most emphatic and negative means of highlighting Esau's rejection and even of establishing his hostility towards his fraternal neighbour.⁴²⁵

However, Bradford Anderson suggests that this wholly negative understanding of the Amalek reference need not be the only option available, or even the most plausible. Anderson, within a wider reading which seeks to see Esau in a more positive light, suggests the following approach to 36.12:

⁴²⁴ Num. 24.20; Deut. 25.17-19; 1 Sam. 15; Ps. 83.7. See Kaminsky, *Jacob*, 115-116; Jon D. Levenson, "Is There a Counterpart in the Hebrew Bible to New Testament Antisemitism," *JES* 22 (1985): 242-260, esp. 248-252.

⁴²⁵ It is unclear where the association of Amalek and Edom arises from, Wenham points out the rarity of this association in the Old Testament; Wenham, *Genesis*, 338; Levenson sees the negative portrayal of Edom elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as reflective of Esau's connection with Amalek; Levenson, "Is There a Counterpart," 251.

... the reference to Amalek is somewhat mitigated by its context in Gen 36. In v.10 we are told that Eliphaz is Esau's son via Adah, and in v.11, the sons of Eliphaz are listed. In v.12, however, the textual flow is interrupted, and we are told that Timnah was a concubine of Eliphaz, and that she bore Amalek... To be sure, the reference to Amalek may imply that one of Israel's worst enemies came from none other than Esau. Yet, syntactically and grammatically, the text may be mitigating this by drawing a distinction between the descendants of Esau and Amalek.⁴²⁶

Now, Anderson is rightly tentative in his suggestion, but even so there seems to be good reason to doubt the legitimacy of attempts to assuage the force of the association with Amalek.

To begin with, if one wishes to give interpretive weight to the status of Amalek's mother, Timnah, as a concubine, one should be able to offer some kind of explanation for the subsequent role of Amalek in the chapter. In 36.16 Amalek is listed as one of the "clans" of Esau, through Eliphaz. No differentiation is made between Amalek and the other sons of Eliphaz. Of course, one could argue that the clan list of 36.15-19 comes from a different tradition to that of the genealogy 36.9-14, but this would not suit Anderson's preferred approach. It would seem on the basis of 36.16 that Amalek's parentage had little impact on his supposed status. Indeed, his placement seventh in the list might rather serve to highlight his role, perhaps on the basis of his subsequent infamy in Israel's history.⁴²⁷ Given this difficulty, a more likely explanation for the note of 36.12 may well be that it serves

⁴²⁶ Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 143; cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 250.

⁴²⁷ Arnold, *Genesis*, 311; Jack M. Sasson, "Genealogical 'Convention' in Biblical Chronography," *ZAW* 90 (1978): 171-185 (178-179).

to lower Amalek in the esteem of the reader and call Esau's family further into question by association.

The upshot, then, is that, as Esau's part in the story of the patriarchs concludes, a sinister slant is given to his history. Perhaps this points to the future of hostility between the two nations, which is so well documented in the rest of the Old Testament.⁴²⁸ There is little doubt that Genesis 36 is a complex chapter; yet one thing it does make quite clear: Esau, whatever roles he may play along the way and however he is mobilised within God plans, remains a rejected figure and his progeny's relationship with Israel bears this out.

There are many points to reflect on from our account of Esau and his handling by Calvin and Levenson. However, sustained reflection on all that we have seen with regards to Esau will need to wait until our conclusion, when I take these concerns up again and offer some reflections on this reading in light of the work of Calvin and Levinson. At this point we leave Esau and turn to our second rejected figure, Saul.

⁴²⁸ See Johanna Stiebert, "The Maligned Patriarch: Prophetic Ideology and the 'Bad Press' of Esau," in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*, ed. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies, JSOTSup 348 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 33-48.

PART 2

THE REJECTION OF SAUL

Chapter 4

SAUL AND KARL BARTH

1. Introduction

I begin my discussion of the figure of Saul by turning to consider Karl Barth. In his account of election, Barth offers one of the twentieth century's most well-known readings of Saul and David. Barth's take on 1-2 Samuel comes as the second of three exegetical excursions within §35 of *CD II/2*, "The Election of the Individual". The other two passages examined are Leviticus 14 and 16 and 1 Kings 13. However, of these three texts Barth seems to grant special significance to 1-2 Samuel. Barth has viewed the legislation of Leviticus 14 and 16 as a kind of commentary (*der Kommentar*) on the distinctions made between the elect and the rejected in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis.⁴²⁹ Yet, for Barth, it is the narratives of Saul and David which take on a special significance. He writes:

We can clarify the problem and solution of the differentiating choice (*unterscheidenden Wählens*) of God in that section of the Old Testament where it re-emerges historically with a distinctness which in contrast gives all the corresponding material in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis the appearance of mere intimation (*bloße Andeutung*) – namely, in the opposition of the figures of Saul and David which constitutes the theme of both Books of Samuel.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁹ *CD II/2*, 363; *KD II/2*, 401.

⁴³⁰ *CD II/2*, 366; *KD II/2*, 404.

In approaching Barth's handling of Saul and David, then, we take up what Barth understood to be the central exemplar of election and rejection in the Old Testament.

Engaging Barth in any discussion is a weighty task which requires some care. Barth's diligence in attempting to produce a dogmatics shaped by biblical exegesis means that his exegetical work cannot be separated from his wider dogmatic framework. As such, in order to competently handle Barth, this chapter falls into three sections.

The first section offers a sketch of the distinctively christological nature of Barth's doctrine of election. Here I offer an account of two of the distinctive innovations of *CD II/2*. This opening section should provide background to Barth's reading of Saul and David.

Secondly, I provide a close reading of Barth's exegesis of 1-2 Samuel. This section seeks to highlight certain key moves which Barth makes and to note some of the essential assumptions that shape his reading.

Finally, I close with an appraisal of Barth's reading. In doing so I draw together some of the insights of sections one and two. This concluding section offers an assessment of Barth's overall reading strategy, an analysis of some of his particular exegetical decisions and some reflections on how Barth's wider theological framework informs his reading.

We begin, then, by tracing some of the central themes of Barth's most innovative theological contribution: his doctrine of election.

2. Karl Barth and the Election of Grace

“Jesus Christ is Himself the divine election of grace.”⁴³¹ These words form part of Barth’s introduction to §33 of *CD II/2*, “The Election of Jesus Christ.”⁴³² They are a fitting starting point for our discussion of Barth’s account of the election of grace. For Barth, the central point to emphasise is that it is the figure and work of Jesus Christ that provides the focal point for the entire reorientation of the doctrine of election which he seeks to effect.⁴³³ The traditional categories of the electing God and elected man and the elect and the rejected are to be located in the person of Jesus Christ.⁴³⁴ Barth’s doctrine of election is, in a particular sense, thoroughly christocentric.⁴³⁵ Of course, the unrelenting nature of Barth’s emphasis on the centrality of Christ, here, as elsewhere, will have significant implications for his exegetical endeavours.⁴³⁶ Thus, Barth’s hermeneutical approach is, what David Gibson has called, “christologically intensive.”⁴³⁷ So, in order to take Barth’s Old Testament exegesis on its own terms, we must take it within the terms of Barth’s distinctive christocentric account of election.

⁴³¹ *CD II/2*, 95; *KD II/2*, 102.

⁴³² *CD II/2*, 94-194; *KD II/2*, 101-214.

⁴³³ In all areas Barth seems to have wanted to “develop everything anew,” but this is especially clear in relation to election. See Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*, trans. Victoria J. Barnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 362.

⁴³⁴ For the influence here of Pierre Maury, see Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectic Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 455-458.

⁴³⁵ For a helpful discussion of the kind of “christocentrism” which Barth’s theology embodied, see *ibid.*, 454-455.

⁴³⁶ Richard Muller speaks of Barth’s doctrine of election as christologically “principlial.” That is to say that “the Christ-idea must be used as the interpretive key to understanding and elucidating all doctrinal topics.” R.A. Muller, “A Note on ‘Christocentrism’ and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology,” *WTJ* 68 (2006): 253-260 (256); cf. *idem*, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 97-98.

⁴³⁷ Gibson, *Decree*, 15-16, 178-194.

Fortunately, Barth's doctrine of election has received widespread treatment and explanation. And, while this treatment contains points of serious contention,⁴³⁸ there is no need here to provide another detailed explanation of Barth's handling of the doctrine.⁴³⁹ Here, therefore, I highlight the way Barth reconfigures two central elements of the classic doctrine of election: (a) the *decretum absolutum* and (b) the notion of double predestination. Barth highlights Jesus Christ respectively as (a) the electing God and elected Man and as (b) the elected and rejected One.

i. *Jesus Christ: Electing and Elected*

It is no exaggeration to say that as we come to Barth's doctrine of election, we approach the heart of his theology. Matthias Grebe notes, "The doctrine of the election of grace is the key to Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, indeed the key to his entire theology."⁴⁴⁰ Of course, we need not tie ourselves to Grebe's claim in the strictest sense to see why readers of Barth place such an emphasis on his doctrine of election. For Barth, it seems, God's decision for humanity through the election

⁴³⁸ For instance, concerns around the ontological implications of Barth's doctrine of election for his understanding of the Trinity; see the essays of Bruce McCormack, Paul D. Molnar and Kevin W. Hector in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Paul T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

⁴³⁹ See, for example, G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Harry R. Boer (London: Paternoster, 1956), 89-122; Colin Gunton, "Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election as Part of his Doctrine of God," *JTS* 25 (1974): 381-92; Douglas R. Sharp, *The Hermeneutics of Election: The Significance of the Doctrine in Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990); Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being: the role of God's election in Karl Barth's theological ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110; Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 159-197; George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 179-198; Gibson, *Decree*, 41-57, 76-80; Matthias Grebe, *Election, Atonement, and the Holy Spirit: Through and Beyond Barth's Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Cambridge: James Clark, 2015), 10-65.

⁴⁴⁰ Grebe, *Election*, 10; cf. Gerhard Gloege, "Zur Prädestinationslehre Karl Barths," *Kerygma und Dogma* 2 (1956): 193-217 (194); Sharp, *Election*, 1; John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000), 88.

of grace is the definitive decision.⁴⁴¹ What is more, Barth struggles to see how one can separate God's decision for humanity (i.e. his election) from the name of Jesus Christ.⁴⁴²

Barth is initially concerned with overturning, or reconfiguring, the classic concept of the *decretum absolutum*. Part of his central criticism of the Reformed tradition is its failure to give Jesus Christ sufficient weight in its account of election. Barth goes to some lengths to show that the traditional exponents of the doctrine of election, while taking Christ seriously, have, nevertheless, failed to make the name of Jesus Christ the basis (*der Grund*) of the doctrine.⁴⁴³ Indeed, even as Barth's predecessors have pointed to Jesus Christ as the focal point of election, they do not allow the name of Christ to be the first and last word in the discussion. Rather, in so far as the ground of election is rooted in a *decretum absolutum*, there is some "higher truth" behind the person of Jesus Christ which is, to some degree, "independent" of him.⁴⁴⁴

On these grounds, Barth challenges a long tradition which includes Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and the other Reformers as well as the later formulators of Reformed orthodoxy. However, it is the name of John Calvin which surfaces again and again as central in Barth's discussion. It is to the work of Calvin, and his successors, that the notion of the *decretum absolutum* is most emphatically attached.⁴⁴⁵ Speaking in reference to Calvin's emphasis on the pre-

⁴⁴¹ Cf. R.H. Roberts, "Barth's Doctrine of Time: Its Nature and Implications," in *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 88-146 (118).

⁴⁴² *CD* II/2, 95; *KD* II/2, 102.

⁴⁴³ See *CD* II/2, 60-76; *KD* II/2, 64-82.

⁴⁴⁴ *CD* II/2, 63-64; *KD* II/2, 68.

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. Muller, *After Calvin*, 99-100.

temporal election of the Father, Barth writes, “It was inevitable, then, that in spite of the christological reference the main emphasis in Calvinistic doctrine should come to rest in effect upon this reference to the secret *electio Patris*.”⁴⁴⁶ As an alternative, Barth wishes to establish Jesus Christ as the true foundation of election.

Central to Barth’s claim that Jesus Christ, rather than a more abstract *decretum absolutum*, is the substance of God’s election “in the beginning” is his extended exegesis of John 1.1-2.⁴⁴⁷ Here he attempts to demonstrate that the notion of a decision which might predate (in some sense) the decision in Jesus Christ is unfounded. However, Barth’s attempt to recast the doctrine of election not only has implications for the divine decision’s location, but it also impacts the outworking of this decision.

Through his christocentric reading of election Barth emphasises the role of Christ in the process of divine election. That is to say, Christ is the electing God or, as Tom Greggs puts it, Christ himself is the *decretum absolutum*.⁴⁴⁸

God anticipated and determined within Himself... that the goal (*das Ziel*) and meaning (*den Sinn*) of all His dealings with the as yet non-existent universe should be the fact that in His Son He would be gracious towards man, uniting Himself with him.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ *CD* II/2, 67; *KD* II/2, 71-72. For some of the ways in which Barth potentially misunderstands Calvin at this point, see Gibson, *Decree*, 40-41.

⁴⁴⁷ *CD* II/2, 95-99; *KD* II/2, 102-106; see Wesley Hill, “The Logos is Jesus Christ: Karl Barth on the Johannine Prologue,” in *Freedom Under the Word: Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, ed. Ben Rhodes and Martin Westerholm (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 113-125 (116-122).

⁴⁴⁸ Tom Greggs, *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25.

⁴⁴⁹ *CD* II/2, 101; *KD* II/2, 108-109.

Election, for Barth, seems to be contained in the notion that Christ is. With the reality of Christ, God determines to be gracious towards humanity.⁴⁵⁰ But, perhaps more significant still, Barth emphasises the role of Christ, not only as electing, but also as elected. He highlights his passive, as well as his active, role in the work of election. The notion that Christ is elect is one which is found throughout the Reformed tradition.⁴⁵¹ However, Barth casts it in a radical new light.

Barth moves away from the Reformed tradition by affirming that Jesus Christ is not just one of the elect, an elect man or the first of the elect, but that he is *the* elect man. “Jesus Christ is not merely one object of the divine good-pleasure side by side with others... He is the sole object of this good-pleasure...”⁴⁵² If Barth establishes the significance of Christ’s work “in the beginning” through an examination of John 1.1-2, then Ephesians 1.4 becomes central to his understanding of Jesus Christ as the elected man.⁴⁵³

Thus, in Barth’s understanding, there is a certain simultaneity in Christ’s role – Christ is both electing God and elected Man. This simultaneity relocates the traditional notion of the *decretum absolutum* in Christ’s role as the subject and object of election. However, such a relocation raises additional questions about how Barth’s construal impacts other aspects of the traditional formulation of election, especially the particularity of election as traditionally understood in terms of the elect and rejected.

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. Gunton, “Election,” 385-86

⁴⁵¹ McCormack, “Grace,” 94.

⁴⁵² *CD* II/2, 104; *KD* II/2, 112.

⁴⁵³ See how Barth uses Eph. 1.4 to launch part of his earlier critique of the historic doctrine in *CD* II/2, 60-76; *KD* II/2, 64-82; See Stephen Fowl, “Karl Barth on Ephesians 1:4,” in Rhodes and Westerholm, *Freedom*, 127-136; cf. Grebe, *Election*, 34.

ii. *Jesus Christ: Elected and Rejected*

We have seen that Barth relocates the notion of the *decretum absolutum* in the person of Jesus Christ in a way that essentially abandons the concept as it was historically understood.⁴⁵⁴ A similar kind of relocation takes place for the notion of double predestination, as manifested in the categories of the elect and rejected. In Barth's construal these categories are relocated in the person of Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ is the elected and the rejected one.⁴⁵⁵ So, Barth states, "He is the Rejected, as and because He is the Elect. In view of His election, there is no other rejected but Himself."⁴⁵⁶

In other words, it is through the election and rejection of Jesus of Nazareth that God establishes his "Yes" to humanity and builds his covenant with humanity.⁴⁵⁷ Thus, while God's election is ultimately manifested in Jesus Christ, so also his rejection is ultimately borne by Jesus Christ. Hence the only true rejection that can be recognised is the rejection of Jesus Christ. Such a suggestion has of course led to widespread discussion of Barth's potential "universalism."⁴⁵⁸ This discussion has been historically complex and, perhaps, less than fruitful in assessing the nature of Barth's doctrine of election.⁴⁵⁹ However, for our present purposes the question of Barth's universalism is not primary and can be set to one side. More pressing is the hermeneutical role that his concept of Christ as the

⁴⁵⁴ Cf. *CD* II/2, 103; *KD* II/2, 110.

⁴⁵⁵ *CD* II/2, 123; *KD* II/2, 132.

⁴⁵⁶ *CD* II/2, 353; *KD* II/2, 389.

⁴⁵⁷ *CD* II/2, 205; *KD* II/2, 226.

⁴⁵⁸ As an example of Barth's ambiguity on this point, see, *CD* II/2, 421-423; *KD* II/2, 466-468. Cf. Timothy Scheuers, "Some Aspects of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 22 (2011): 161-173 (167-172).

⁴⁵⁹ See the nuanced accounts in J.D. Bettis, "Is Karl Barth a Universalist?" *SJT* 15 (1967): 423-436; Greggs, *Barth*, 30-31.

rejected one plays in his exegesis of rejected figures in Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament.

The significance of Barth's understanding of the rejection of Jesus can be appreciated in light of his reconceptualization of the nature of rejection. If Barth is to take Jesus Christ as the rejected one, then to retain the notion of rejected human beings he also has to rework this category. To this end, Barth categorises the rejection of human beings in terms of "calling" (*die Berufung*).⁴⁶⁰ In this sense both the "rejected" and the "elect" are called to witness to Christ as he who is both elected and rejected:

If [the elect] testify (*bezeugen*) by their truthful witness to what God wills, [the rejected] no less expressively testify by their lying witness (*Lügenzeugnis*) to what God does not will. Thus both serve the revelation of the divine will and decree which by nature are wholly light, but which cannot be revealed or recognised except as light and shade.⁴⁶¹

This notion of both the rejected and the elect testifying to the divine will of course shapes Barth's biblical exegesis. For example, this notion comes through in his reading of Romans 9-11 in §34.⁴⁶² Here Barth argues for a twofold form of community witnessing to both the rejection and election that is ultimately seen in Christ. As such, Israel's rejection of the Messiah is expressed in terms of a distinct calling which complements the role of the Church in witnessing to the Messiah.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶⁰ *CD* II/2, 345; *KD* II/2, 380; cf. Colin Gunton, *The Barth Lectures* ed. P.H. Brazier (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 120.

⁴⁶¹ *CD* II/2, 347; *KD* II/2, 382.

⁴⁶² *CD* II/2, 213-33; *KD* II/2, 235-56.

⁴⁶³ *CD* II/2, 224-225; *KD* II/2, 246-247; cf. Angus Paddison, "Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of Romans 9-11 in the Light of Jewish-Christian Understanding," *JSNT* 28 (2006): 469-488.

The upshot of this move is that Barth interprets Romans 9 in a radical way seeing both Israel and the Church as, in part, two forms of witness to the same reality.⁴⁶⁴

It is no surprise, then, that Barth's radical re-reading of double predestination also has implications for his understanding of rejected figures in the Old Testament. For Barth, ultimately, the accounts of election and rejection in the Old Testament can only make sense in so far as they are taken to point to Christ. The rejected and elect figures of the Old Testament both witness, as prophecy (*die Weissagung*), to Christ.⁴⁶⁵

To this point we have identified two key aspects of Barth's understanding of election which will prove significant for our engagement with his reading of Saul and David. First, for Barth, Jesus Christ is both the subject and the object of election. He is the electing God and the elected Man. Consequently, Barth's understanding of election is located entirely within the figure of Christ. Secondly, I have noted how Barth also relocates the roles of the elect and the rejected into the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is, simultaneously, the Elect and Rejected One. Within Barth's understanding there is no rejected person apart from Jesus Christ. Hence, he reworks the roles of the elect and the rejected into roles of witness or calling.

Given the force with which Barth reworks the doctrine of election we may already begin to feel the hermeneutical significance of these two alterations to the

⁴⁶⁴ See the critical engagement with Barth's reading in David Gibson, "The Day of God's Mercy: Romans 9-11 in Barth's Doctrine of Election," in *Engaging with Barth*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 136-167; for an alternative critique, see Susannah Ticciati, "Israel and the Church: Barth's Exegesis in Romans 9-11," in Rhodes and Westerholm, *Freedom*, 151-171.

⁴⁶⁵ See, in relation to Lev. 14 and 16, *CD* II/2, 366; *KD* II/2, 403-404.

doctrine. Their importance becomes still more apparent when we turn our attention to Barth's reading of 1-2 Samuel.

3. The Rejection of Saul in *Church Dogmatics*

I have now laid out some of the key structural pillars of Barth's doctrine of election. With these in place, we can focus our attention on Barth's actual reading of the Saul and David material. Yet one further word may be said by way of introduction. To this point I have, more or less, held off addressing the complex question of Barth's hermeneutical approach to biblical exegesis. There is good reason for doing so. Barth's concerns for exegesis, and for rooting dogmatics in exegesis, are well known.⁴⁶⁶ From early on Barth was certainly aware of the complex questions surrounding hermeneutical method. However, he always chose to prioritise the importance of actual exegesis over the discussion of method. Or, to put it differently, Barth was concerned that the discussion of hermeneutical method might endlessly prevent the application of good hermeneutical practice, that is to say, good exegesis.⁴⁶⁷ As such, it may be most profitable to prioritise a close reading of his exegesis and comment on hermeneutical matters as and when they arise.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁶ See Barth's parting advice to students at Bonn; Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1976), 259; Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principals of the Römerbrief Period*, WUNT 145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 30.

⁴⁶⁷ Busch, *Barth*, 349; cf. Otto Bächli, *Das Alte Testament in der Kirchlichen Dogmatik von Karl Barth* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1987), 269.

⁴⁶⁸ One question which I refrain from addressing is the oft-discussed topic of Barth's relationship to historical criticism. It seems clear, at least, that Barth did not intend to do historical criticism and, more or less, took many historical-critical conclusions as assumed (cf. *CD* II/2, 375; *KD* II/2, 414); see Barth's comments in the "Preface to the Second Edition" of *Der Römerbrief*, Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 7. For assessments of Barth's use (or otherwise) of historical-criticism, see Bruce McCormack, "Historical-Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," *LQ* 5

i. *Charting A Reading: The Four Pictures*

Reading Barth's exegesis can be a disorienting experience. In his assessment of Saul and David, Barth does not progress through the passage systematically, but rather weaves a web of connections across the whole corpus of 1-2 Samuel and, indeed, beyond. It is, therefore, helpful at the outset to sketch some of the structural markers of Barth's reading, opaque as they may be.

A helpful grid in which to place Barth's reading is that of his concept of the four pictures (*vier Bilder*). The four pictures are introduced in his exegesis of Leviticus 14 and 16, which directly precedes his account of Saul and David.⁴⁶⁹ As Barth begins to move towards his christological appropriation of Leviticus 14 and 16, he describes how the witness of Old Testament election points to a unity in God's gracious decision, a unity which is inscrutable and can only be expressed in two words, two words which, due to their fluidity, are rather four:

Always in these stories [of the elect and rejected] the one figure represents the elect of God, used by Him, and the other only the rejected of God, not used by Him. But then there are, of course, the intersections, in virtue of which the relationship seems suddenly to be reversed (*umzukehren*), and suddenly and in spite of everything God reveals Himself to the rejected and the unused.⁴⁷⁰

(1991): 211-225; Mary Kathleen Cunningham, *What is Theological Exegesis?* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1995), 50-67; Burnett, *Exegesis*, 230-240; Hans W. Frei, "Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism," in *Thy Word is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 49-63.

⁴⁶⁹ *CD* II/2, 357-366; *KD* II/2, 393-404. On Barth's exegesis of Lev. 14 and 16, see Bächli, *Alte Testament*, 170-174; Grebe, *Election*, 46-62; Kathryn Greene-McCreight, "'A Type of the One to Come': Leviticus 14 and 16 in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*," in Hunsinger, *Word*, 67-85.

⁴⁷⁰ *CD* II/2, 363; *KD* II/2, 400.

For Barth, the Old Testament figures of the elect and the rejected form two pictures, two witnesses to one unity.⁴⁷¹ That is, both point to the one will and way of God with humanity. This way is ultimately revealed in the election and rejection of Jesus Christ. Thus, the elect and rejected figures of the Old Testament function as two pictures which witness to the inscrutable unity of election and rejection in Christ. However, as witnesses to an inscrutable unity each Old Testament picture contains two aspects (*zwei Gestalten*); each at times witnesses to the opposite of their state, the rejected to the elect and the elect to the rejected: four pictures.

If we take this schema as a heuristic grid within which to read Barth's exegesis of Saul and David, the structure of Barth's thought may be elucidated. For Barth, the key starting point in his assessment of both Saul and David is 1 Samuel 8 and the people's request at Ramah.⁴⁷² If "a great wrong" (*ein großes Unrecht*) begins the Israelite monarchy, how does this wrong relate to the kingships of Saul and David? Barth traces the two aspects of Saul and David from 1 Samuel 8. He begins by tracing how Saul is presented as one "very different" from the ideal expressed by the Israelites at Ramah.⁴⁷³ Yet, once these traits are identified in Saul, Barth retraces his character, again from the point of view of 1 Samuel 8, and in this analysis sees Saul as one who "stands in shadow" (*im Schatten steht*).⁴⁷⁴ Barth takes a similar approach to the figure of David.⁴⁷⁵ David, like Saul, is a figure containing "two differing sets of traits," a "dual character" (*einen doppelten*

⁴⁷¹ See David Ford, *Barth and God's Story: Biblical Narrative and the Theological Method of Karl Barth in Church Dogmatics* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1981), 79; see, also, on 1 Kings 13, Paul Hedley Jones, *Anonymous Prophets and Archetypal Kings: Reading 1 Kings 13*, LHBOTS 704 (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 11-50, esp. 22-29.

⁴⁷² *CD* II/2, 367; *KD* II/2, 404-405.

⁴⁷³ *CD* II/2, 367-369; *KD* II/2, 405-407.

⁴⁷⁴ *CD* II/2, 369-372; *KD* II/2, 407-410.

⁴⁷⁵ *CD* II/2, 372-377, 377-384; *KD* II/2, 410-416, 416-424.

Charakter).⁴⁷⁶ It is on the basis of these differing traits that Barth seems to structure his reading. As such, in attempting to follow Barth's train of thought, the following section is structured around the four pictures which Barth identifies in the dual characters of Saul and David. We begin with Barth's positive portrayal of Saul then move to his shadow aspect. Likewise, with David, we begin with the features of his election and then turn to see how Barth portrays David's Saul-aspect (*Saulsseite*).

ii. *Picture One: Saul – im Licht*

As I noted above, Barth wishes to begin his discussions of Saul and David with 1 Samuel 8, the people of Israel's request for a king at Ramah. From the outset Barth is concerned to show that 1 Samuel 8 does not suppose that the creation of the monarchy was opposed to the will of God.⁴⁷⁷ Yet Barth initially substantiates this point in a slightly peculiar fashion. The "tradition" (*die Überlieferung*), Barth argues, records with such clarity the transition between God's previous means of dealing with Israel and what will take place from 1 Samuel 8 onwards in God's dealing with the king, that the institution of the monarchy cannot be contrary to God's will. Barth's suggestion seems to be that God's consistent engagement with the kings of Judah and Israel throughout the rest of the Old Testament establishes the point that the initiation of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8 must have been according to God's will (*dem Willen Gottes*).⁴⁷⁸

Of course, such a rendering of the purpose of 1 Samuel 8 leaves open the question of why the chapter casts the people's request in such a negative light.

Barth tackles this question by describing "the folly of the nation" (*die Torheit des*

⁴⁷⁶ CD II/2, 372; KD II/2, 410.

⁴⁷⁷ CD II/2, 367; KD II/2, 405.

⁴⁷⁸ CD II/2, 367; KD II/2, 405.

Volkes) as the means by which God reveals his will. The effect of this move allows Barth to argue that, while the people's folly remains real, the king they desire is chosen for them at the command of God. Barth describes this dynamic:

Against his judgement, Samuel will give them the king chosen and desired by them, according to their godlessness, but also – be it noted – according to the command (*dem Befehl*) and ordinance (*der Anordnung*) of God.⁴⁷⁹

Essentially this reading of the dynamics of 1 Samuel 8 allows Barth to introduce Saul in a more positive light. He manages to separate, if only partially, Saul from the wrong committed at Ramah.

Thus, when Barth first introduces Saul, he maintains that there is no “irony” (*die Ironie*) in the initially positive portrayal of Saul and in the positive work of God through Saul. Saul's heart is in fact changed (1 Sam. 10.9), the Spirit of God does come upon him (1 Sam. 10.10; 11.6; 19.23) and there is nothing peculiar in the notion that Saul was among the prophets (1 Sam. 10.12; 19.23). This, for Barth, is “manifestly the positive will of God for Saul. This is God's plan for him, and it cannot fail.”⁴⁸⁰ As such, those who despise him on the day of his election really are “good-for-nothings” (*Nichtswürdige*).

In drawing out the ways in which Saul is, in some sense, elect of God, Barth goes to some lengths to emphasise his positive attributes and accomplishments. Barth highlights that Saul does defeat the Ammonites, the Amalekites and the Philistines, he extirpates soothsayers and wizards from the land (1 Sam. 28.9) and after he has sinned, he is no less sincere than David in his

⁴⁷⁹ *CD* II/2, 367; *KD* II/2, 405.

⁴⁸⁰ *CD* II/2, 367; *KD* II/2, 405-406.

confession (1 Sam. 15.24; 24.17-21; 26.21). If anything, Saul shows too much urgency in accomplishing proper sacrifices and displays a tendency towards a ritual severity which is too extreme.⁴⁸¹ Even when Samuel must tell Saul that God has withdrawn His hand from him, Samuel still honours him as king (1 Sam. 15.30-31). Indeed, ultimately, David witnesses to the elect status of Saul when he consistently recognises him as the Lord's anointed (1 Sam. 24.7; 26.9-11). Barth, therefore, can summarise his initial presentation of Saul by simply stating:

He does, in fact accomplish everything that Israel could expect of its king, according to the will of God. And nowhere does he conduct or exhibit himself as a godless man (*ein Gottloser*).⁴⁸²

On the basis of this initial rendering of Saul, Barth returns to reflect on Israel's request at Ramah. Barth contends that the Israelites' folly does not lie in their request for a king, but in their request for a king like those of the nations, who will be "so totally different from the one God wills them to have."⁴⁸³ The Israelites want a hero, a symbol of power. Barth argues that the striking fact is that,

they did not simply get this man at Ramah... Saul is very different from the kings of the nations. He is different from the ideal king who was the theme of Ramah. He goes his way expressly as one who is elect (*Erwählter*) and marked (*Bezeichneter*) by God...⁴⁸⁴

When read against the background of 1 Samuel 8, for Barth, "the right of kings" (*das Recht des Königs*), threatened at Ramah, is conspicuously absent from Saul's

⁴⁸¹ CD II/2, 368; KD II/2, 406.

⁴⁸² CD II/2, 368; KD II/2, 406.

⁴⁸³ CD II/2, 368; KD II/2, 406-407.

⁴⁸⁴ CD II/2, 368-369; KD II/2, 407.

reign. Indeed, Barth argues that the biblical authors “seem to have understood Saul’s reign throughout, not as a mere failure, but, in its non-fulfilment of that threat, as a proof in its own way of the grace of God to His people.”⁴⁸⁵ Thus, as he closes his discussion of the first aspect of Saul, Barth sees in the giving of Saul to Israel a gift of “something other and much better (*Anderes und viel Besseres*) than it had wished for itself.”⁴⁸⁶ Barth is willing to find in the figure of Saul an instance of the grace of God.⁴⁸⁷

iii. *Picture Two: Saul – im Schatten*

In highlighting the positive aspect of Saul, Barth, nevertheless, refuses to offer an apology for his character. For he turns, almost directly, from a discussion of God’s grace in Saul’s election, to note:

...it certainly cannot be denied that the figure of Saul stands in shadow (*im Schatten steht*), and more in shadow than in the light (*als in jenem Licht*) which is also there. He is not yet the true king of Israel.⁴⁸⁸

Barth admits that there seems to be a moment where Saul is offered the opportunity to show himself to be the true king of Israel. Presumably here Barth is referring to 1 Samuel 13.13 where Samuel intimates that Saul’s household might have been established “forever” (עַד־עוֹלָם). However, if this is the case Barth never cites 1 Samuel 13.13 and, instead, only touches on this possibility briefly.

Instead of entertaining this possibility at greater length, Barth moves on to highlight that Saul in fact fails to make “proper use of the opportunity (*Raum*) and

⁴⁸⁵ *CD* II/2, 369; *KD* II/2, 407.

⁴⁸⁶ *CD* II/2, 369; *KD* II/2, 407.

⁴⁸⁷ *CD* II/2, 369; *KD* II/2, 407.

⁴⁸⁸ *CD* II/2, 369; *KD* II/2, 407.

possibility (*Möglichkeit*).⁴⁸⁹ As such, he can never be more than a “representative” (*ein Stellvertreter*) or “regent” (*ein Platzhalter*) for David. However, his very failure to grasp the opportunity of an alternative future appears, in Barth’s reading, to be “God-intended and God-ordained” (*Gott gewollt und angeordnet*).⁴⁹⁰

There are a number of obscure elements in Barth’s account at this point. It is somewhat unclear whether Barth really believes in the possibility supposedly set before Saul. Perhaps Barth is suggesting that while Saul’s rise to the status of “the true king” is a possibility, its significance as a possibility hardly needs attention as it only ever remains within the realm of possibility. As such, it never enters into the reality of God’s purpose. Barth wants to move briskly past these questions to the central point which is found in God’s real intention for Saul. That is, Saul’s role as a witness to God’s grace:

The holiness of God requires that the revelation of His grace, victorious over all human sin, should not take place without the revelation of His judgement upon sin... The instrument (*Das Mittel*) of this aspect (*Seite*) of God’s revelation of His grace is the person of Saul the Benjamite.⁴⁹¹

In this account, the possibility of Saul’s progression to a status comparable with David’s subsequent status is side-lined. Saul witnesses to the revelation of a particular aspect (*Seite*) of God’s grace and in this role he foregoes any future kingdom.

⁴⁸⁹ *CD* II/2, 369; *KD* II/2, 408.

⁴⁹⁰ *CD* II/2, 369; *KD* II/2, 408.

⁴⁹¹ *CD* II/2, 369; *KD* II/2, 408.

However, in assessing Saul's role Barth remains somewhat sympathetic. Barth's sympathy for Saul comes through most strongly in his account of Saul's sin and rejection in 1 Samuel 13 and 15. Barth argues that throughout the course of 1-2 Samuel there is no attempt to hide the reality that Saul's sins are in fact "microscopic sins" (*mikroskopische Sünden*). Moreover, Barth writes, "To this very day we find it difficult to stifle the sympathy (*Sympathie*) and approval (*Billigung*) which are more readily felt than their opposite in relation to what Saul does."⁴⁹² With these striking words Barth turns to describe Saul's sin in 1 Samuel 13 and 15.

The key to understanding these two accounts, for Barth, is the fact that, "everything that can really be said against Saul emerges in these two sins."⁴⁹³ Thus, the departure of the Spirit of the Lord from Saul and the coming of the evil spirit are effects of Saul's rejection and not to be regarded as part of the sin for which Saul is rejected. It is Saul's rejection, then, a rejection on the basis of two "microscopic sins," which leads to his eventual fall.

Saul's rejection is the cause of his subsequent misery. However, the question with which Barth closes his account of Saul is a simple one: "Why this particular career?" (*Warum dieser Lauf?*).⁴⁹⁴ Why does Saul's life take this remarkable shape? In response to this question, Barth drives home the significance of construing Saul's sins as "microscopic." For, it is in contrast with David's "crimson sins" (*blutroten Sünde*) that Saul's are seen to be "microscopic" and his rejection becomes all the more inexplicable.

⁴⁹² CD II/2, 370; KD II/2, 408,

⁴⁹³ CD II/2, 370; KD II/2, 408.

⁴⁹⁴ CD II/2, 370; KD II/2, 409.

To respond to the problem of this contrast, Barth takes us back to Ramah and 1 Samuel 8. Having already highlighted how Saul is quite different from the ideal proposed by the Israelites, Barth now shows how Saul is also what the nation hoped for and expected. He quotes from 1 Samuel 9.2, “he stood head and shoulders above everyone else.” In this capacity, as Israel’s ideal, Saul “is a sinner and must fall and die.”⁴⁹⁵

Consequently, although Saul is only rejected as the representative of the Israelites’ “no” to the kingship of God, his role as representative of this “no” is seen in the sins he commits. As such, “Saul himself will sacrifice. Saul himself will represent the reconciliation between God and His people. Saul himself will furnish the conditions for a prosperous national existence...”⁴⁹⁶ In other words, Saul’s sins are representative, in their own “microscopic” way, of the rebellion enacted at Ramah. “These personal sins, the microscopic sins which he commits, suffice to make it clear that Saul shares the guilt of Israel’s ‘great wrong.’”⁴⁹⁷

Barth closes his reading of Saul, then, with an opposing picture to the one first presented. Saul is both one wholly different from the king requested at Ramah, and the one who represents the king requested at Ramah. Within Saul are two pictures: a light and a shade. But ultimately, for Barth, Saul’s figure stands “more in shadow than in the light which is also there.”⁴⁹⁸ He is rejected as a witness to the judgement of God’s grace.⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁵ *CD* II/2, 371; *KD* II/2, 409.

⁴⁹⁶ *CD* II/2, 371; *KD* II/2, 409.

⁴⁹⁷ *CD* II/2, 371; *KD* II/2, 410.

⁴⁹⁸ *CD* II/2, 369; *KD* II/2, 407.

⁴⁹⁹ *CD* II/2, 372; *KD* II/2, 410.

iv. *Picture Three: David – eine Lichtgestalt*

Barth opens his account of David with the programmatic declaration that David also, like Saul, is a “dual character” (*einen doppelten Charakter*) presenting “two differing sets of traits.” Yet, in contrast to Saul, David is still “unambiguously a figure of light” (*eine eindeutige Lichtgestalt*).⁵⁰⁰ At the outset Barth returns our attention to the four pictures:

There is something of Saul (*Saulsseite*) in David, just as there is something of David (*Davidseite*) in Saul. We must undoubtedly see both in each, and therefore in the total picture (*Gesambild*) of these so sharply distinguished individual portraits we have to see twice two (*zweimal zwei*) and therefore four figures (*vier Gestalten*) in order to see what the Old Testament seeks to show us in this total picture.⁵⁰¹

Barth begins his account of David by highlighting the ways in which he is the elect of God.

The initial point which Barth draws our attention to is the obscurity of David’s beginnings. Of course, in the grand scheme, David is the elect of God, but to begin with he is concealed behind Saul. In contrast to Saul, David does not stand head and shoulders above all others, and even if David is celebrated as a warrior, this does not testify to his future kingship.⁵⁰² Yet, this concealment points to the will of God. David is only suitable because of his obscurity. As an obscure figure

⁵⁰⁰ *CD II/2, 372; KD II/2, 410.*

⁵⁰¹ *CD II/2, 372; KD II/2, 410.*

⁵⁰² *CD II/2, 372; KD II/2, 411.*

he is quite the reverse of “the ideal picture” (*das Idealbild*) which Israel envisaged at Ramah.⁵⁰³

The gravity of David comes, then, in the lowliness of his origins. Or, for Barth, put positively, he is the one who, in his role as the “most humble” (*höchst demütigen*) shepherd, could also be the shepherd of Israel.⁵⁰⁴

It is the pattern of secret election followed by public recognition which sets the course, according to Barth, for David’s whole life. The persecution of David in the wilderness is, therefore, necessarily part of his election. Likewise, his honouring of Saul is a corollary of his elect status.⁵⁰⁵ To put this slightly differently, it seems that, for Barth, the frailty of David’s beginnings points to the legitimacy of his claim to election.

Yet, even while identifying these traits of David’s elect status, Barth construes the true locus of David’s election as God’s decision: “the fullest statement of his selection to be king is that the Lord is with him.”⁵⁰⁶ Therefore, because God is with him, David’s life can take on a radically different shape to that of the rejected Saul. The pattern of humiliation leading to exaltation will animate David’s life in a way wholly different to Saul’s because God is with him. Barth highlights the contrast with Saul when David plays the lyre for him and relieves him from the evil spirit. “It is not, then, with the sword but with the harp in his hand that the tradition sees the elect justified before the rejected...”⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰³ *CD* II/2, 373; *KD* II/2, 412.

⁵⁰⁴ *CD* II/2, 373; *KD* II/2, 412.

⁵⁰⁵ *CD* II/2, 374; *KD* II/2, 412.

⁵⁰⁶ *CD* II/2, 374; *KD* II/2, 413.

⁵⁰⁷ *CD* II/2, 375; *KD* II/2, 414.

It is in light of this humiliation-exaltation pattern and David's role as minstrel that Barth reads David's subsequent military success. Barth takes David's statement in 1 Samuel 17.45 as programmatic for all David's military engagement: "You come to me with a sword and a spear and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." David's military prowess evinces the glory of God and not the glory of David. Barth enforces this point by highlighting how David's military role seems to fade behind Joab after 2 Samuel 10. In this, Barth suggests, the narrative portrays David as both a great warrior and, yet, no warrior at all. To this end, the light that proceeds from David's victories does not actually reflect back on him, but on God, whose wars David fights.⁵⁰⁸

But even in all of the lustre of his glory, David is only a "dim prototype" (*blasses Vorbild*) of his more resplendent son, Solomon. Thus, David's glory is only partial. He is to Solomon as the Church militant is to the Church triumphant.⁵⁰⁹

Nevertheless, Barth ends his account of David as a "figure of light" by drawing our attention once again to the splendour of David's kingdom and election. The great lustre of David's kingdom is seen most clearly, for Barth, in 2 Samuel 5-8. But Barth highlights that, "most fittingly," there is attached to this account the story of David's loyalty to Jonathan shown through his mercy to Jonathan's son. Barth suggests that David's lustre now reflects onto the family of Saul and, thus, onto Saul himself.⁵¹⁰ At the climax of David's life the figure of Saul

⁵⁰⁸ *CD* II/2, 375; *KD* II/2, 414.

⁵⁰⁹ *CD* II/2, 377; *KD* II/2, 416.

⁵¹⁰ *CD* II/2, 377; *KD* II/2, 416.

is unwaveringly present. It is in this context, presumably, that Barth then asks us to see a somewhat elusive correspondence to the transfiguration of the Gospels. Here it may be worth quoting Barth at length:

For if we may see in this climax a correspondence to the transfiguration narrative of the Gospels, then even more definitely may it be seen and said that the radiant figure of David... is always related to Saul... that it is only to be understood together with this other figure (*dieser anderen Gestalt*), and therefore only in the shadow which this casts upon it.⁵¹¹

Barth leaves us here to fill in a good number of gaps. It may be that he envisages the lustre of Christ's transfiguration to be inseparable from the rejection of his passion. In which case the reintroduction of Saul's family, at the climax of David's glory, would, perhaps, mirror this duality in the Gospel narratives. All this remains unclear, however. What is apparent is that, as far as Barth is concerned, even at the height of David's glory, at the pinnacle of his elect status, he remains inseparable from Saul, from the rejected. It is with this reflection firmly in play that Barth turns his attention to David's "Saul-aspect."

v. *Picture Four: David – Saulsseite*

Barth opens his account of David's *Saulsseite* by highlighting again the difference between Saul and David. "God is with him – as from first to last He was not, and could not possibly be, with Saul..."⁵¹² Nevertheless, it is in light of this very difference that Barth goes about addressing David's *Saulsseite*.

⁵¹¹ *CD* II/2, 377; *KD* II/2, 416.

⁵¹² *CD* II/2, 377; *KD* II/2, 416.

The first instance in which Barth attempts to trace David's Saul-aspect is found in David's relationship with Jonathan. Barth describes this relationship as a "covenant" (*der Bund*), reflecting something of God's covenant with Israel. It is on the basis of this analogy that Barth's interpretation of the relationship of David and Jonathan plays itself out. Barth points out that within the relationship it is Jonathan who "loves first" and David who is "first loved." Jonathan takes all the initiative in the relationship.

At this point Barth draws Saul back into the picture. He first contrasts Jonathan with Saul and then brings them together to identify with one another. So, Barth writes, "As Saul the father hates and persecutes David, so Jonathan the son of this father loves and rescues him."⁵¹³ It is as Saul's son (*der Sohn dieses Vaters*) that Barth portrays Jonathan in his friendship and covenant with David. Saul's son, who shares all the destiny of his father, is David's active comforter and helper.⁵¹⁴

It seems, then, that even as Jonathan is distinct from Saul, he is bound to him in Barth's reading. However, the key point for Barth continues to be the role Jonathan plays in his covenant with David. If Jonathan represents the active party, then, in Barth's analogy with the LORD and Israel, Jonathan plays the part of the LORD and David the part of Israel.⁵¹⁵

In terms of Barth's concern to identify David's Saul-aspect, the significance of this dynamic in the Jonathan-David relationship is not immediately apparent. Indeed, this is one of the most obscure sections in Barth's reading. Still, a likely reading seems to be that as David stands in the role of sinful Israel, he, by

⁵¹³ *CD* II/2, 377; *KD* II/2, 417.

⁵¹⁴ *CD* II/2, 377; *KD* II/2, 417.

⁵¹⁵ *CD* II/2, 378; *KD* II/2, 417.

extension, stands in the role of Saul and the “forgiveness of sins” (*die Vergebung der Sünden*) that is extended to him is extended by Jonathan, *der Sohn dieses Vaters*. Momentarily the roles of Saul and David may be reversed. Or, put differently, they stand in the same place.⁵¹⁶

Following this ambitious interpretive move, Barth points to another example of the “forgiveness of sins” (*Sündenvergebung*) in the favour David shows Meribaal, Jonathan’s son, who represents the “dangerous and living blood of Saul.” Again, discerning the exact significance of forgiveness for Barth here is challenging. However, the implication seems to be that in the forgiveness extended by Saul’s house in Jonathan to David and the forgiveness extended by David to Saul’s house in Meribaal, we see the inseparability of the election of Saul and David. To this end Barth concludes his paragraph on the relationship of Jonathan and David:

David, then, is elected together with Saul. David represents the Divine Yes where Saul can exhibit only the divine No... inevitably there falls on David something of the shadow that lies on Saul.⁵¹⁷

It is worth observing here that Barth seems to read Jonathan and Saul as so closely united that the favour exchanged between David and Jonathan reflects back onto the figure of Saul. In this sense, the intertwining of David’s career with the family of Saul is suggestive of a dual aspect. David’s life is inseparable from the life of Saul.

⁵¹⁶ *CD* II/2, 378; *KD* II/2, 417.

⁵¹⁷ *CD* II/2, 378; *KD* II/2, 417.

Barth's next move is to draw our attention to the fact that, as Saul is a regent for David, so David lives under a "Not yet" (*Noch nicht*). David is the regent and representative of another. Here Barth focusses on 2 Samuel 7 and the promises made to David; promises which ultimately point beyond David and focus on his son. Indeed, for Barth, it is arresting how scrupulously the tradition has maintained the distinction between David and his son. David is not to build the temple; that is the task of his son.⁵¹⁸

A further way in which David experiences a "not yet" or limitation is with regards to his inability to forego his life for others. Barth highlights three instances where David seems to have offered his life for others and where he had his offer refused (2 Sam. 12.5; 17.3; 24.17). Barth associates David with other Old Testament figures who face the prospect of giving up their lives, such as Isaac and Jehoshaphat, only to have that demand removed.⁵¹⁹ Barth reads David's failure to give his life up for others as indicative of a general limit fixed for all in the Old Testament.

After this digression to discuss David's limitation, Barth returns more explicitly to David's Saul-aspect with a discussion of the account of Uriah the Hittite and Bathsheba. Barth carefully reads Nathan's rebuke in 2 Samuel 12 and points out how, at the point of his sin, David has reached the height of his power: "From this it can be seen that the sin of David is that now he has arrived at the summit of his life he has forgotten the Lord who made him king and led him to this height."⁵²⁰ Here Barth makes a subtle conceptual link between David's sin with

⁵¹⁸ *CD* II/2, 380; *KD* II/2, 419.

⁵¹⁹ *CD* II/2, 381; *KD* II/2, 420.

⁵²⁰ *CD* II/2, 381; *KD* II/2, 421.

Uriah and Bathsheba and the “rights of kings” (*Königsrecht*) described in 1 Samuel

8. He notes:

It is not Saul, but David, who has here realised the possibilities of all human kingship indicated in the threatened ‘rights of kings’ of 1 Samuel 8 – the grasping by the king at that which belongs to his people...⁵²¹

Barth describes, at some length, how shocking it is for David, the one elected by God’s grace, to act in this way. The impossibility and flagrancy of David’s sin is then given interpretive value by Barth in a fresh approach to the analogy with Saul:

There can be no doubt that what Saul had once done along the same lines is far exceeded (*weit überboten*) by what David has done here. If we had to do with a mere difference between more or less serious, grosser or more refined sins (*grober und feiner Sünde*), David would surely be the rejected and Saul the elect.⁵²²

Through the account of David’s sin in 2 Samuel 11 Barth presses home his point on the identification of Saul and David. He argues that there must be a reason for David’s sin to be portrayed in such stark terms.⁵²³ For, in presenting David as such, the text seems to almost merge him with Saul:

It is plain enough, at least, that here we see David at his nearest to Saul; so near, in fact, that we might well ask if here he is not more of a Saul than Saul himself had ever been. The inner solidarity (*die innere Solidarität*) of

⁵²¹ *CD* II/2, 381-382; *KD* II/2, 421.

⁵²² *CD* II/2, 382; *KD* II/2, 422.

⁵²³ *CD* II/2, 382; *KD* II/2, 422.

the two figures is at this point an incontrovertible fact

(*unwidersprechlichen Tatsache*)...⁵²⁴

The point which becomes central for Barth is that if David was chosen in place of Saul, he certainly was not chosen because “he was hewn from another kind of wood (*anderem Holz*).”⁵²⁵ In this sense, Saul and David stand under similar signs (*Zeichen*). David’s sin makes the point that, for all the light he demonstrates, he shares in a much greater shadow which none of the figures of “secular history” (*Profanhistorie*) can escape. To perhaps put the matter most starkly, for Barth, there is no substantive moral difference between Saul and David.

This recognition leads Barth to offer some reflections on the nature of David’s election and the nature of election in the Old Testament more broadly. In sum, election is not oriented around the distinctions of any individual. For Barth, as it is depicted in the Old Testament, the election of a man is that in spite of himself God makes this kind of man a witness to His will (*Zeigen seines Willens*), the will of His grace.⁵²⁶ Hence, the preference for David only serves to highlight that election is rooted in God’s purpose to use him as a witness to Himself. Through the frailty of the witness of David, it is clear that God alone is king and David, as a human king, is only a witness.⁵²⁷

For Barth, then, the Saul-aspect of David’s character serves to establish the solidarity of Saul and David. Both contain something of the other. The conclusion then must be that the light in which David is presented is from a source wholly

⁵²⁴ *CD* II/2, 382; *KD* II/2, 422.

⁵²⁵ *CD* II/2, 382; *KD* II/2, 422.

⁵²⁶ *CD* II/2, 383; *KD* II/2, 423.

⁵²⁷ *CD* II/2, 384; *KD* II/2, 424.

other than David himself. The election of David is rooted in the purposes of God; for there is no material distinction between himself and Saul beyond the simple, and yet all important, fact that God is with him. To this end, David is also a dual character. He contains within himself two pictures: the elect and the rejected. Having worked through his reading of the two figures Barth turns to reflect on the implications of the witnesses he has identified.

vi. *Christ: das Rätsel aller Rätsel*

As Barth reflects on the reading he has presented, he points to two matters of obscurity (*die Dunkelheit*) which need to be addressed: (a) obscurity in the matter (*die Sache*) and (b) obscurity in the unity (*die Einheit*) of the matter.⁵²⁸

First, the matter of the story is obscure, for Barth, because it is unclear what the texts actually refer to. Why is it that the promise given to David is a promise for the future and not one gifted to David in the present? What does this promise refer to? In a related vein: how would these texts have been considered edifying (*erbaulich*) to the post-exilic community? Given its subsequent history, how could the monarchy in Jerusalem ever really be considered the will of God? Faced with these questions Barth suggests that the post-exilic community, as well as the subsequent Jewish community, can only read these texts “eschatologically” (*eschatologisch*) and “as prophecy” (*die Weissagung*). Even so, “the great obscurity” remains: who is the subject of this prophecy?⁵²⁹

Secondly, the obscurity of these texts relates not only to their matter, but also to their unity. The difficulty of the texts’ unity relates to the claim that Barth

⁵²⁸ *CD* II/2, 384; *KD* II/2, 424-425.

⁵²⁹ *CD* II/2, 386; *KD* II/2, 426.

has put forward that both Saul and David are dual characters; that in the two pictures there are really four. Why is Saul chosen, endowed with the Spirit and anointed by Samuel only to have all such benefits removed?⁵³⁰

All of which raises the question for Barth: what is God's purpose in this story? What is God's purpose for the monarchy?⁵³¹ Or, in other words, what is one to do with the complexity that is caused by the dual characters of Saul and David? Most pressingly, for Barth, if these texts are to be counted as prophecy (and Barth notes that they appear among the "*nebiim*"), who or what could be the subject (*der Gegenstand*) which the community glimpsed, or attempted to glimpse, in them?

It is at this point that Barth introduces what he sees to be the New Testament's answer to this question. He notes, with reference to Acts (Acts 2.25-36; 13.16-41), that the New Testament affirms that the Old Testament history of kingship did have a subject – Jesus Christ. However, Barth is at pains to point out that whether we recognise the subject as Jesus Christ or not is a question of faith and not exegesis. It cannot be settled by the Old Testament passages. The passages offer us the difficulty in answer to which, in faith, we may acknowledge Jesus Christ.⁵³² With the assumption of faith, then, that Jesus Christ is the subject of this history, Barth sees the texts in a new light. He looks back over them, reading the individual kings as witnesses to Jesus Christ. The Israelite monarchy is the "type" (*der Typus*) or "prototype" (*das Vorbild*) of Jesus Christ.

⁵³⁰ *CD* II/2, 387; *KD* II/2, 428.

⁵³¹ *CD* II/2, 387-388; *KD* II/2, 428.

⁵³² *CD* II/2, 389; *KD* II/2, 428.

Before taking up his assessment of the elect and rejected kings specifically, Barth highlights three ways in which the Israelite monarchy as a whole witnesses to the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

First, he sees the act of judgement at Ramah, which contains within it God's grace, as a precursor of the fate of Jesus Christ as one who is rejected for the sin of all people. He is the sacrificial offering given for sinful humanity, but even in this capacity he is placed at the right hand of God. Thus, as at Ramah, in the death of Christ grace and judgement are intertwined. Secondly, the transitory nature of the Israelite kingdom, where the promise made to David always seems to be located in the future, is a prototype of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. For the kingdom of Jesus Christ is also a matter of promise and of faith. Finally, Barth finds a correlation between the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Jesus Christ in the finality of each. The kingdom of Israel came to an end and similarly the kingdom of Jesus Christ has a limit and a goal to which it heads.⁵³³

Barth returns, however, to Saul and David in his summary. He draws out how Saul, as rejected, and David, as elect, are both a "prototype" of Jesus Christ.

The king of Israel rejected by God... is the prototype and copy (*Nachbild*) of Jesus Christ... Saul is therefore legitimately and in all seriousness among the prophets... [Saul and his successors] prophesy and exhibit the King who, himself innocent, has interposed himself as a Leader and Representative (*Haupt und Vertreter*) at the head of all sinful men...⁵³⁴

⁵³³ CD II/2, 389-390; KD II/2, 430-431.

⁵³⁴ CD II/2, 390; KD II/2, 431.

Saul, then, is a witness to Jesus Christ as a rejected king. But even in his role as a rejected king, he also bears the signs of God's grace. Barth goes on to say:

A reflection of the splendour of God's grace lies and is seen to be on [the rejected] too. For He who died a criminal's death on Golgotha is as such, overtaken by the divine rejection, the legitimate bearer of this glory, and the King of grace.⁵³⁵

The will of God is not self-contradictory after all, for the kind of duality apparent in Saul witnesses to the rejection of Christ; one who in his rejection bears the divine glory.

Again, with regards to David, if we look at him from the point of Jesus Christ we realise, according to Barth, why the Old Testament accepts and emphasises the negative aspects of the elect king so strongly. The limitation of David, in his sin and the promise extended to him, is crowded out by the goodness and faithfulness of God. In this sense, if Saul expressed the death of Christ, in the life of David we see "the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ, the revelation of His eternal divinity in the now glorified weakness of our human nature."⁵³⁶

Throughout, however, the merging of the pictures of the rejected and the elect remains important. It is imperative, as Barth understands it, that the elect king maintains something of the rejected in him. In seeing the elements of David's *Saulsseite*, we are constantly reminded of what it is that is overcome by Jesus Christ. Barth notes the significance of the merged pictures of David and Saul in writing on the picture of David:

⁵³⁵ *CD* II/2, 390-391; *KD* II/2, 431-432.

⁵³⁶ *CD* II/2, 391; *KD* II/2, 432.

For if the proper and positive character of this picture (*der eigentliche und positive Gehalt dieses Bild*)... unquestionably places before our eyes the meaning and power of the divine election itself... we are reminded by the negative aspect (*das Negative*)... who it is that God has chosen, and what kind of people it is whose King is so great and glorious. We are reminded that it is composed of lost sinners who are justified and saved by Him.⁵³⁷

It appears, then, that the complex interconnection of the four pictures expressed in the lives of Saul and David, traced so carefully by Barth, is explained finally by the person and work of Christ. In this sense the history of these kings is prophecy. In the end Barth refuses to back away from the complexity and “wonder” (*die Verwunderung*) which these texts evoke. They remain a “riddle” (*das Rätsel*). However, they find their subject in the “riddle of all riddles” (*das Rätsel aller Rätsel*).

We cannot avoid either the rejection of Saul or the fact that he is not altogether abandoned by God; either the election of David or the fact that he does not seem unambiguously or definitely to be God’s true king. Every easy solution of these difficulties is rendered impossible for us if we follow the example of the apostolic witnesses and assume that all this had to take place as it did because Jesus Christ is the King of Israel elected by God. For then He, and the grace of God for lost sinners manifested in Him, is the riddle of all riddles.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁷ *CD* II/2, 391-392; *KD* II/2, 433.

⁵³⁸ *CD* II/2, 392; *KD* II/2, 434.

Barth closes his reading by laying down the gauntlet. If any can find a more satisfactory answer to the problem of the elect king of the Books of Samuel, then let them.

4. Appraising Barth

To this point I have offered little in terms of evaluation of Barth's reading. However, now that Barth's exposition has been examined in some depth, we can turn our attention to an appraisal. I apply my comments, mostly, to Barth's interpretation of the figure of Saul, given my concern with rejection. What follows is structured around the strengths of Barth's reading and, then, some of its more significant weaknesses. Yet, in both instances we need to keep two broader questions in mind. First, does Barth's reading elucidate the text of 1-2 Samuel as we have it? Secondly, how does Barth's exegesis correlate to the wider conceptual framework within which he works? Assuming that Barth's theological and hermeneutical assumptions inform his reading, do they do so helpfully?

i. *Strengths of Barth's Reading*

There are, as we will see, a number of strengths to Barth's reading; he offers numerous astute insights. There are three exegetical strengths which are worth noting to begin with.

First, there is the obvious point that Barth is sensitive to the key pressure points of the text. Like any good reader, Barth is attentive to the pace and tenor of the narrative. Generally speaking, the points to which Barth pays most attention are the points which seem decisive in determining the narrative's overall shape. This is seen particularly with Barth's handling of 1 Samuel 8. The scene at Ramah forms

the starting point, and continuing point of reference, for Barth's understanding of both Saul and David. The foregrounding of 1 Samuel 8 effectively helps Barth to engage questions of what God's intentions for the monarchy are and how the institution of Saul and David relates to God's will. A similar care is evident in Barth's attention to 1 Samuel 13 and 15, 2 Samuel 5-8 and 2 Samuel 11-12. We may well dispute certain points of Barth's reading, but Barth's reading engages enough of the central texts of the overall narrative to be initially stimulating.

Secondly, perhaps the greatest strength of Barth's reading is that it refuses to fall into unhelpful caricature. Neither Saul nor David is reduced to playing the role of villain or hero. In this sense Barth allows space for the confusion and puzzlement the story evokes. This tendency in Barth's reading is most apparent in his positive account of Saul which constitutes the first of his four pictures. Barth allows the promising beginning offered to Saul to stand without excuse.

Likewise, Barth refuses to temper his stinging assessment of David's sin. Barth's striking construal of David's failure allows his reading to play host to many of the complications and tensions of the narrative. The fact that in 1-2 Samuel both Saul and David possess significant weaknesses is a point that must be reckoned with and Barth engages with this facet of the text directly. Indeed, his acceptance of the moral ambiguity of both David and Saul leads to one or two of his most evocative insights. For example, in his assessment of David's sin with Bathsheba, Barth highlights a telling conceptual link between Nathan's parable in 2 Samuel 12.1-6 and the rights of kings as described in 1 Samuel 8.11-18.⁵³⁹ As we have

⁵³⁹ *CD* II/2, 381-382; *KD* II/2, 425.

seen, what this tendency amounts to in Barth's conclusions is an uncompromised locating of the distinction between Saul and David in the will of God.⁵⁴⁰

Third, and finally, Barth recognises that the narratives of Saul and David cannot be separated from the narratives of their families. In this sense Barth grasps something of the big picture of the narrative which further complicates the portrayal of both kings. Barth draws Jonathan into the picture to fill out the portrayal of Saul and his family. Further, in closing his reading Barth argues that, from the point of view of the "secular historian" (*Profanhistoriker*), the end of David's house, drawn out as it is over the centuries, is hardly different from the end of Saul's.⁵⁴¹ Barth's sensitivity to the wider dynastic implications of election within these narratives adds a depth to his reading. He resists the temptation to read these two characters in individualistic terms but places them in the wider context of the canonical account of Israel's story.

In summary, then, we may characterise the strengths of Barth's reading as strengths of shape. Barth seems to be at his best when portraying the Old Testament narrative in broad brush strokes. He effectively identifies the interpretive pressure points of the narrative. He grasps and engages the theological questions the text raises and the wider implications these questions have for the Old Testament more generally. Moreover, in handling these broader contours of the text, Barth makes space for the difficulties seemingly inherent in the presentation of Saul and David. However, all this said, if Barth's reading seems to

⁵⁴⁰ *CD* II/2, 377; *KD* II/2, 416.

⁵⁴¹ *CD* II/2, 383; *KD* II/2, 422.

be at its best when worked out at a certain level of abstraction, when we look at the closer detail of his reading particular problems arise.

ii. *Weaknesses of Barth's Reading*

Some of the weaknesses of Barth's account can be found in the interpretive decisions he makes (or fails to make) in his handling of individual passages. The main issue here is that precisely because Barth effectively identifies the key interpretive pressure points of the narrative, the decisions he makes with regards to these points will have significant repercussions for his wider conclusions.

There are three concerns with Barth's reading which I wish to focus on here. The first is Barth reading of the rejection of Saul in 1 Samuel 13 and 15. The second is Barth's analysis of the character of Jonathan. Finally, once these observations have been laid out, I close my appraisal of Barth's exegesis with some reflections on Barth's engagement with 1-2 Samuel as a narrative.

First, then, the most telling instance of Barth's exegetical oversight surely appears in his reading of 1 Samuel 13 and 15. To begin with, it is striking that when discussing the sin of Saul, Barth never discusses 1 Samuel 13 and 15 separately. Rather, they are presented as a pair. This is seen most clearly when Barth turns to examine the two chapters directly in his discussion. Both events seem to be combined to comprise Saul's *mikroskopische Sünden*; Barth introduces 1 Samuel 13 as "the first occasion" (*das erste Mal*) and 1 Samuel 15, likewise, as "the second occasion" (*das zweite Mal*).⁵⁴² The problem, of course, is not so much that Barth discusses the two chapters together, but that he does not attempt to

⁵⁴² *CD* II/2, 369-370; *KD* II/2, 408.

engage the ways in which the two accounts differ. For example, might it not be significant that in 1 Samuel 13 it seems that Saul's dynasty is rejected (13.13-15), whereas in 1 Samuel 15 it seems to be that Saul himself is rejected (15.13, 26)? As such, Barth seems to do little to try and gauge the force of Saul's sin in each passage. He fails to address the complications of each chapter on their own terms.

Because Barth spends so little time investigating Saul's sin, his characterisation of his sin as "microscopic" remains opaque. It is never quite clear whether Barth intends the term "microscopic" to characterise the reader's understanding of Saul's sin or the presentation of Saul's sin as it is found in 1 Samuel. This means that when Barth contrasts David's crimson sin with Saul's microscopic sin it is somewhat unclear, at one level, exactly how this contrast is functioning. Is the contrast between Saul and David's sin of inherent significance to the overall force of the narrative? If so, why is this not made more explicit? Is the contrast one which strikes the reader but is largely left unrecognised in the text? If so, how is this impression to be accommodated? How does Samuel's verdict in 1 Samuel 15.22-23, that Saul has been rejected for disobedience, fit within Barth's reading? The point here is not to try and underplay the confusion evoked by Saul's rejection. It is, rather, to highlight that there are surely dynamics in these two crucial chapters which Barth does not engage.

Further to this point, as I have already intimated, Barth makes little of the potentiality of Saul's kingdom. He hardly engages the possibility that Saul's kingdom might be established forever (1 Sam. 13.13). This is all the more significant, surely, as this possibility provides a notable parallel to the promise offered to David in 2 Samuel 7. David is promised that the kingdom established with his son will be a kingdom established forever (2 Sam. 7.13). This is a

possibility which Barth, with his concern for Saul to function as a witness to the judgement of grace, never fully entertains. Indeed, the closest he comes to doing so is in one of the passages where he champions the apparent determinism of Saul's role most emphatically. So, after noting that there seems to be one point where Saul has an opportunity to show himself as the true king of Israel, Barth writes:

The holiness of God requires (*verlangt*) that the revelation of His grace, victorious over all human sin, should not take place without the revelation of His judgement upon sin; in this case, upon that 'great wrong.' The instrument (*Das Mittel*) of this aspect of God's revelation of His grace is the person of Saul the Benjamite.⁵⁴³

This handling of 1 Samuel 13 and 15 is, surely, the key exegetical oversight in Barth's reading and, as we see, it has implications for his whole characterisation of the figure of Saul. We will need to return to it when we come to consider Barth's handling of the narrative shape of 1-2 Samuel.

Secondly, then, we turn to another point where Barth's reading appears strained. Barth intends to read both Saul and David as a "dual-character" (*einen doppelten Charakter*); each reflecting an aspect of the other. There are points when Barth's attempt to find a dual aspect in each figure leads to difficulties. This is arguably most apparent in Barth's reading of the relationship of David and Jonathan.

Generally speaking, throughout his account, Barth fails to distinguish sharply between Saul and Jonathan. He makes little use of 1 Samuel 14, where

⁵⁴³ *CD* II/2, 369; *KD* II/2, 408.

Jonathan's boldness seems to be contrasted with his father's timidity of the chapter before.⁵⁴⁴ The conspicuous absence of any contrast between Saul and Jonathan in Barth's reading may explain some curious comments that Barth makes at times. For example, when closing his discussion of David's positive aspect, Barth argues that the mercy David shows to Meribaal in 2 Samuel 9 actually reflects back onto Saul, "The lustre of David is now reflected upon the family of Saul and therefore upon Saul himself..."⁵⁴⁵ Barth mentions that Meribaal is Jonathan's son, but beyond that makes little attempt to explore whether David's mercy is predicated upon Meribaal's relationship to Jonathan or his relationship to Saul. The former surely seems more likely (2 Sam. 9.1, 7). This general tendency in his reading leads one to wonder whether, for Barth, Jonathan is distinguished from Saul in any meaningful sense, or whether he is, rather, subsumed in the portrayal of Saul.

We see something of this difficulty again in Barth's discussion of David's Saul-aspect. Here Barth addresses the relationship of Jonathan and David. In so doing he identifies Jonathan as one who grants grace to David. In the covenant enacted between the two, Jonathan takes on the role of the initiator, that is the role of the LORD. Yet, in this capacity Jonathan is characterised, primarily (if not exclusively), by his identification with Saul.⁵⁴⁶ Barth takes no account of the fact that Jonathan and David's relationship appears to be situated in the context of opposition to Saul (1 Sam. 20). Rather, it seems as though Jonathan's character is brought in to help fill out the picture of Saul.

⁵⁴⁴ Barth's only substantive reference to 1 Sam. 14 highlights Saul's "ritual severity". *CD* II/2, 368; *KD* II/2, 406.

⁵⁴⁵ *CD* II/2, 377; *KD* II/2, 416.

⁵⁴⁶ *CD* II/2, 377; *KD* II/2, 417.

The difficulty here, then, is that on account of his concern to identify a two-fold typology in the characters of Saul and David, Barth flattens elements of the text and seems unwilling to explore the nexus of relationships which surround the rejection of Saul. The critique here is not that there are suggestive elements of the text that Barth has failed to explore or that there are possibilities which have been closed down by Barth's theological concerns. Of course, any reading of a text as suggestive and complex as 1-2 Samuel necessarily has to make decisions which close off possibilities. The difficulty comes in the fact that Barth's reading seems to have overlooked a key component in the presentation of Saul and David; that is the characterisation of Jonathan over against his father. Barth's overall schema, for all that it may be theologically suggestive, seems to run the risk of flattening out key features of the narrative. This brings us to my final point of concern regarding Barth's reading.

Finally, then, we take up how Barth handles 1-2 Samuel as a narrative. I have highlighted how Barth's wider theological concerns are mediated in his reading through the application of the four pictures. This structuring device gives Barth's reading its peculiar shape. However, it also seems to hinder attention to the particular narrative shape of the story of Saul and David. I have noted that Barth is helpfully attuned to the particular pressure points of the narrative. Yet, he often fails to examine how each individual text forms part of the overall whole of the Saul and David narrative.

The upshot of this tendency is that Barth appears to overlook the distinctive features of Saul's narrative arc. Again, this is most obvious in relation to 1 Samuel 15 which seems to constitute something of a crisis point, especially when juxtaposed with 1 Samuel 16 and the introduction of Saul's successor. But, as we have seen,

Barth downplays the significance of 1 Samuel 15 and loads 1 Samuel 8 with the theological significance of the moment of determination for Saul's rejection. Barth does, of course, note that Saul's subsequent failings result from his rejection, but there is little else to encourage us to pay close attention to the trajectory of the narrative.

Indeed, we might reflect for a moment on the metaphor of a "picture" (*das Bild*) which Barth uses so frequently. The picture metaphor has an element of stasis inherent to it. The suggestion by which the reader is directed seems to be that both individuals are presented in 1-2 Samuel as if they bear, simultaneously, the positive and negative aspects of the elect and the rejected. This has a clear advantage for Barth, as he ultimately reads both kings as witnesses to the One who is simultaneously rejected and elect. However, to lean on the picture metaphor means that the fluid nature of the narrative becomes somewhat static. This is all the more striking as it is often noted that Barth has a particular propensity for narrative in his biblical exegesis.⁵⁴⁷ If we do wish to remain open to the moral ambiguity in Saul and David, which Barth so readily identifies, then we may benefit by being more attentive to how each character's presentation seems to shift as the narrative progresses.

There is, still, a wider point here and now we might take up again the discussion of Barth's doctrine of election which occupied us in the opening section. It is by now more or less clear that Barth's christologically intensive hermeneutic shapes his reading of the Saul and David narratives. While it seems to be somewhat tangential to criticise Barth for his failure to engage more fully with historical-critical

⁵⁴⁷ See Ford, *Barth*; George Hunsinger, "Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation: Rudolf Smend on Karl Barth," in Hunsinger, *Word*, 29-48 (33).

theories,⁵⁴⁸ there do seem to be grounds for criticising the ways in which Barth's wider framework skews his reading.

The most pressing issue appears to be the fact that within Barth's framework there could never be space for considering Saul's sin as narrative-defining. We may well question the nature of Saul's sin; we might question whether it received a legitimate penalty or consider its comparative relationship with David's later career. However, it seems as though Saul is held responsible in the narrative for a redirection of his career in a substantial sense. It is not clear how Barth's understanding of election would take account of this. It is at times unclear in Barth's reading how Saul's actual sins, microscopic or otherwise, relate to his rejection. Instead, we learn of how Saul's rejection furnishes his capacity as a witness to Jesus Christ. Does Saul, then, on Gilboa face the consequences of some *decretum absolutum*, albeit in a different form? Barth has a sophisticated and nuanced account of how human freedom functions under the sovereignty of grace and this is not the place to enter into it.⁵⁴⁹ The point is that it is difficult to see how any of these concerns enter Barth's reading of Saul and his reading seems to be impoverished as a result.

It would seem, then, that a good place to begin in seeking to offer a Christian account of rejection rooted in the narrative of Saul and David is to show a greater concern for the particular relationship between Saul's sin and his rejection. Barth has, undoubtedly, thrown down the gauntlet in terms of reading the narrative of 1-2

⁵⁴⁸ This seems to me to be part of the issue with Paul Capetz's criticism of Barth; Paul E. Capetz, "The Old Testament as a Witness to Jesus Christ: Historical Criticism and Theological Exegesis of the Bible according to Karl Barth," *JR* 90 (2010): 475-506; idem, "The Old Testament and the Question of Judaism in Reformed Theology: Calvin, Schleiermacher and Barth," *JRT* 8 (2014): 121-168.

⁵⁴⁹ See Colin E. Gunton, "The triune God and the freedom of the creature," in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 46-68.

Samuel within a Christian frame of reference. At times, however, he has done so in a way which blurs the particularity of the biblical text in view of his own wider framework. Thus, the crucial moment of Saul's rejection remains under-read and under-utilised. But before I address these particular questions in my own reading, we must first turn to another account of Saul's rejection which seeks to read Saul's narrative in a different context, that of the literary traditions of tragedy.

Chapter 5

SAUL AND TRAGEDY

1. Introduction

In this chapter we take a somewhat different approach to the story of Saul's rejection. While Karl Barth offers a rigorous theological reading of Saul, in the context of a wider doctrine of election, here we take up an approach to Saul's rejection which is, at least initially, non-theological in outlook. The discussion of Saul's story as an exemplar of biblical tragedy is long standing.⁵⁵⁰ So, even while some have expressed doubts about the Hebrew Bible's tragic credentials,⁵⁵¹ the tragic dimension of the story of Saul has long been recognised.

My purpose here, however, is to focus primarily on a body of literature produced in the latter decades of the twentieth century which addresses the tragic dimension of Saul's story in some depth. W. Lee Humphreys produced three essays in 1978, 1980 and 1982 in which he sought to identify a core narrative concerning the tragedy of Saul.⁵⁵² These essays were followed by a short monograph in 1985

⁵⁵⁰ See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 2:325; Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1982), 181-182; Edwin Good sees the tragic reading of Saul as all but unanimous; Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), 56.

⁵⁵¹ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 4.

⁵⁵² W. Lee Humphreys, "The Tragedy of King Saul: A Study of the Structure of 1 Samuel 9-31," *JSOT* 6 (1978): 18-27; idem, "The Rise and Fall of King Saul: A Study of an Ancient Narrative Stratum in 1 Samuel," *JSOT* 18 (1980): 74-80; idem, "From Tragic Hero to Villain: A Study of the Figure of Saul and the Development of 1 Samuel," *JSOT* 22 (1982): 95-117.

which examined tragedy and the Hebrew Bible more broadly, with Saul's narrative remaining central.⁵⁵³

Perhaps the most well-known reading of Saul's story in light of its purported tragic elements comes from David M. Gunn.⁵⁵⁴ Gunn offers his reading to those who have "been gripped by Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, or Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*..."⁵⁵⁵ and wish for another classic story in this vein.

Finally, in 1992 J. Cheryl Exum offered a study of tragedy and the Hebrew Bible in which Saul's narrative played a prominent role.⁵⁵⁶ Exum explicitly builds on the work of Humphreys and Gunn, even while diverging from them at certain points.

Of course, there are other studies which require reference and some brief comment. Still, these three scholars stand as primary contributors to a discussion of the potential tragic elements in Saul's presentation. This chapter is structured in two sections. In the first section, I offer an account of the arguments, claims and moves of each of these studies. In the second section, I take up the task of offering an assessment of their readings and their engagement with wider tragic theory.

⁵⁵³ W. Lee Humphreys, *The Tragic Vision and the Hebrew Tradition*, OBT 18 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

⁵⁵⁴ David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story*, JSOTSup 14 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980).

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁵⁶ J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

2. Saul's Tragedy

i. *W. Lee Humphreys*

W. Lee Humphreys begins his discussion of Saul's tragic narrative with a brief article (1978) which seeks to uncover "a significant structure" in 1 Samuel 9-31.⁵⁵⁷ For Humphreys, this structure consists of a short introduction (9.1-2) with the following material falling into two acts (chapters 9-14 and 15-27). These two parts are then succeeded by the finale (chapters 28-31). The two central acts follow the same pattern:

...private encounters between Saul and Samuel (9.3-10.15; 15.1-35), in which the fate of the former is announced, are followed by two scenes, the first constructive (10.17-11.15; 16.14-19.10) and the second destructive (13.1-14.46; 19.11-28.2), in which that fate is realized.⁵⁵⁸

With this structure identified, Humphreys turns his attention to the question of its possible composition.⁵⁵⁹ In his second article (1980), Humphreys argues that the structure identified in 1 Samuel 9-31 is the result of an older work as this best explains its consistent return to Saul as the focal point, even if the narrative concerning Saul is at times disrupted.⁵⁶⁰ To explain the ways in which his Saul-structure is broken up, Humphreys proposes two later circles who utilise and adapt the Saul material. One of these later groups was northern and prophetic, apparently tracing its roots to Samuel. As such, it found in Saul a model of all that was misguided in Israel's kings and brought Samuel forward to be the dominant

⁵⁵⁷ Humphreys, "Tragedy," 18.

⁵⁵⁸ Humphreys, "Rise," 74.

⁵⁵⁹ Of course, Humphreys insists that this structure is made up of "once independent and quite varied materials." Humphreys, "Tragedy," 25; idem, "Rise," 77.

⁵⁶⁰ Humphreys, "Rise," 75.

figure in 1 Samuel 10.17-25; 12; 13.8-15a; 15.⁵⁶¹ The other circle is a southern, Davidic group interested in certifying David's claims to the kingship. For this group, David is presented as one chosen by YHWH and he is set against the divinely rejected Saul (1 Sam. 16-31).⁵⁶²

Once the distinction between these three different forms of material has been made, Humphreys returns to re-examine the distinctiveness of the Saul-structure which lies beneath 1 Samuel 9-31. Humphreys distinguishes the Saul-structure through three characteristics which mark it out from parallel material in 1 Samuel and in the wider Hebrew Bible. First, Humphreys points to the material's concern for personality and "the inner psychic dimensions of a man's life."⁵⁶³ The Saul material shows a detailed concern for human character and the dynamics of inner turmoil which is rarely evidenced elsewhere in ancient Israelite narrative.⁵⁶⁴ Secondly, the Saul narrative has a distinctive emphasis on interpersonal relationships and the correlative themes of trust, loyalty and friendship. Finally, Humphreys points to the tragic dimension of the Saul story. For Humphreys, this is seen in two key conflicts: the conflict between Saul's setting and his character, and between Saul and his god.

First, then, Humphreys points to Saul's tragic position, situated as he is between the pre-monarchic system and the advent of a fully-fledged monarchy. Saul is asked to be king when the political and social realities required for monarchy to function are "not fully born."⁵⁶⁵ In other words, Saul is asked to be

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁶² Ibid., 76.

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 79.

king in a context in which monarchy will not work.⁵⁶⁶ When this is combined with Saul's inherent greatness and unique potential, we have the ingredients for a tragic narrative.⁵⁶⁷

Secondly, a similar dynamic is at work in Saul's relationship with his god. Humphreys's describes this relationship in stark terms:

Saul appears first as a man apparently set apart by his god for greatness, one for whom a special fate has been fixed... But then events turn, and he is set on a course of destruction, a course he resolutely pursues as his god becomes ominously silent (14.18, 27; 28.6) and even hostile (15; 16.14; 19.9; 28.16, 19).⁵⁶⁸

Both these dynamics mark this older narrative structure off as a tragedy of sorts. Even if one is cautious of describing Saul's story as a definitive tragedy, Humphreys maintains that it contains a tragic dimension. This tragic dimension sets the story apart from much of the normative religious understanding of ancient Israel and is, perhaps, more akin to ancient Greek or Hittite traditions.⁵⁶⁹

Of particular importance for Humphreys at this point are 1 Samuel 28 and 31 as they bring the tragic elements of Saul's career into sharpest focus. Here we find specific elements which Humphreys believes recall aspects of ancient Greek and Hittite tradition.⁵⁷⁰ The first of these elements is the summoning of Samuel by the woman at Endor in 1 Samuel 28. Humphreys points out that while this account is unique in the Hebrew Bible there are various parallels in ancient Greek and

⁵⁶⁶ Cf. Humphreys, "Hero," 98.

⁵⁶⁷ Humphreys, "Rise," 78-79.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

Hittite literature.⁵⁷¹ The second element Humphreys highlights is Saul's suicide. Given the extreme rarity of suicides in the Hebrew Bible, Humphreys seeks to make sense of the narrative significance of Saul's death and the tension between Saul's total isolation at his death and the fact that his suicide receives no overt condemnation.⁵⁷² Humphreys mines Greek tradition for examples of individuals receiving praise for taking their own lives in order to avoid dishonour.⁵⁷³ It appears that Saul's death to avoid the humiliation of Philistine capture fits this pattern. Finally, Humphreys points to the cremation of Saul and his sons. Cremation is not evidenced elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and there is little to suggest that it was practised in ancient Israel. However, Humphreys finds several instances of cremation as a means of honouring fallen warriors or deceased kings particularly in Greek tradition.⁵⁷⁴

In sum, then, Humphreys identifies the tragic elements of Saul's narrative in an older Saul structure which underlies the current form of 1 Samuel 9-31.⁵⁷⁵ This earlier narrative was re-utilised by later circles and, in Humphreys's view, each later re-utilisation "blunted" the tragic thrust of the older narrative.⁵⁷⁶ Still, there are times when, Humphreys suggests, the tragic dimension of Saul's narrative retains its original force; perhaps this is most notably the case in 1 Samuel 28 and 31.⁵⁷⁷

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 81-82.

⁵⁷² Ibid., 83.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 83-84.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 85.

⁵⁷⁵ See summary table in Humphreys, "Hero," 97.

⁵⁷⁶ Humphreys, "Rise," 86.

⁵⁷⁷ Humphreys dates his original Saul narrative to the Solomonic period; Humphreys, "Hero," 95, 111. For an indication of how far scholarship has moved since, see Klaus-Peter Adam, "Saul as a Tragic Hero: Greek Drama and Its Influence on Hebrew Scripture in 1 Samuel 14,24-46 (10,8; 13,7-13a; 10,17-27)," in *For and Against David: Story and History in the Books of Samuel*, ed. A. Graeme Auld and Erik Eynikel, BETL 232 (Leuven: Peeters,

In his third and final essay (1982), Humphreys looks in greater detail at the theological implications of the early tragedy of Saul and expands on how this narrative was recast in ways which blunt its tragic dimension. The key element in the story's tragic depiction of Saul is the interplay of fate and flaw. Humphreys notes:

It is the essence of the tragic vision that it presents fate and flaw in careful interaction, combining the two to bring down a heroic figure who presses to the boundaries of human potential.⁵⁷⁸

Saul is trapped in an inhospitable context,⁵⁷⁹ which offers him no way out, and a god who abandons him on minimal grounds. This god is all powerful, yet distant and ultimately, for Humphreys, savage.⁵⁸⁰ Saul is caught in a web of flawed decisions and fated outcomes:

The tension between human guilt and accountability on the one hand, and divine order and control on the other that informs the classical vision of the tragic informs this narrative as well. Saul is fated even as he fails; failure and fate together necessitate his fall.⁵⁸¹

Humphreys wishes to situate this remarkable account of Saul's narrative in the wider context of the Solomonic period. In Humphreys's view this period is one in which god's freedom to direct and dispose human affairs and humanity's

2010), 123-183. Adam suggests a smaller tragic element, but one which receives Greek influence in the Persian or Hellenistic period; cf. Flemming A.J. Nielsen, *The Tragedy in History: Herodotus and the Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 251 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 114-164.

⁵⁷⁸ Humphreys, "Hero," 100.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 100; the theme of god's hostility or ambivalence recurs in studies of Saul and tragedy; cf. Sarah Nicholson, *Three Faces of Saul: An Intertextual Approach to Biblical Tragedy*, JSOTSup 339 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 77-110.

⁵⁸¹ Humphreys, "Hero," 100-101.

limitations in the face of that freedom are duly recognised. However, this outlook is tempered by the deep trust that the ways of god do, ultimately, work towards human good. The distinct thing about Saul's tragedy, when set in this period, is that such an assurance is nowhere to be found: "His story must temper all assertions of beneficent divine order or of justice, of divine benevolence toward humankind."⁵⁸²

What then, in Humphreys's view, are the theological implications of the old tragedy of Saul? The primary category in which we might place Humphreys's assessment seems to be that of challenge. The early tragedy of Saul appears to function as a challenge to theological systems. It does not offer a system in itself, it is rather "a deeply felt expression of a primal chaos in the face of which all assertions of order for good or for justice in this world must be made."⁵⁸³

Before we move on from Humphreys's assessment of the tragedy of Saul, we must attend briefly to Humphreys's 1985 monograph. In this slim volume Humphreys takes a much broader look at tragic elements in the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁸⁴ Much of what Humphreys has to say about the tragedy of Saul is drawn quite directly from his earlier articles and need not be repeated. It will be useful, however, to take account of Humphreys's wider comments about the nature of tragedy which introduce and conclude the book.

Humphreys points out that he is broadly in agreement with the traditional consensus that the Hebrew tradition did not produce fertile soil for tragic narratives.⁵⁸⁵ However, this traditional outlook does not justify the disinterest

⁵⁸² Ibid., 101-102.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁸⁴ Humphreys examines "flirtations" with the tragic in the Samson narrative, Gen. 2-3, Gen. 4, Gen. 22, 2 Sam. 24, Jeremiah and Job; Humphreys, *Tragic*, 67-93, 94-123.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 2, 134.

typically shown to the tragic in Hebrew Bible scholarship. In laying out his own approach, Humphreys wishes to distinguish between the classic literary form of tragedy, given its essential definition by Aristotle, and what Humphreys terms “the tragic vision.”⁵⁸⁶ This is a significant phrase for Humphreys, and others, and is drawn from Richard B. Sewall’s, *The Vision of Tragedy*.⁵⁸⁷ The significance of Sewall’s concept, at least for Humphreys’s purposes, is that it seeks to identify tragedy in terms which seem almost intuitive. The tragic vision is “fleeting,” it is a “sense of life,” not something that can be tightly defined.⁵⁸⁸

But, while Humphreys wishes to remain relatively circumspect when it comes to defining the tragic vision, he does give us some indications of its essential content. Humphreys identifies its roots in:

...ancient stories and rituals that lament the death of nature... giving expression to profoundly articulated terrors and hopes of human beings inexorably bound to a nexus of forces that sustain them even as they overpower them.⁵⁸⁹

Humphreys continues with two further characteristics of the tragic element in any narrative. The first is that tragedy concerns suffering. However, for tragedy to take shape in any meaningful way, this suffering must be confronted by the narrative’s hero, such that the hero exists at the “very edge of human power and potential, thereby defining these limits with new sharpness...”⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁸⁷ Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Humphreys, *Tragic*, 2.

⁵⁸⁸ Sewall, *Vision*, 4.

⁵⁸⁹ Humphreys, *Tragic*, 2.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 3.

The second aspect of the tragic, identified by Humphreys, is one we have already come across, namely, the tension, or balance, between fate and flaw. Thus, while on the one hand the tragic figure is trapped by “dark forces” that are entirely beyond their control; on the other hand, there has to remain the recognition that the tragic hero is not passive.⁵⁹¹ This balance between fate and flaw has obvious theological resonances and Humphreys draws these out quite explicitly: “To utilize some standard theological categories, the tragic vision seems to affirm and hold in tension both a pattern of determinism and an essential element of freedom in human being.”⁵⁹²

Still, Humphreys wishes to define the notion of “flaw” with some care. He intends to resist the temptation to see this flaw as a blunder, sin or error. Instead, Humphreys follows numerous predecessors in using the category of hubris to describe the tragic hero’s central flaw. Hubris is the hero’s attempt to impose their world of meaning, their understanding of the good, onto an imperfect world.⁵⁹³ In this sense, the tragic hero exemplifies the human dilemma: “earthbound and finite, yet within this mortal shell having an imagination, a symbolic self, that can reach out to infinity and dream of immortality.”⁵⁹⁴

Overall, then, Humphreys takes a sympathetic view of the tragic hero. The tragic hero strains to expand the limits of human power and potential and their ultimate failing is aspiration rather than any other discernible sin. They are concerned to accomplish their vision of the good and yet they are overwhelmed by the “dark forces” which are ultimately as powerful as they are arbitrary and

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 3-7.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 6-7.

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 8.

inscrutable. This, of course, leads Humphreys to offer a largely sympathetic reading of Saul, at least as far as the older narrative is concerned.⁵⁹⁵ Saul's specific actions are read in a strikingly positive light, and this orients Humphreys's reading away from 1 Samuel 13-15 and towards 1 Samuel 28 and 30 as the narrative's heart.⁵⁹⁶

Finally, Humphreys remains alert to the potential theological significance of his reading. We have seen how Humphreys has cast the tragic vision as a challenge to systems of philosophy or theology. In his later monograph he borrows the phrase *agent provocateur* from Murray Krieger.⁵⁹⁷ Humphreys applies this phrase to the role of the tragic in the Hebrew Bible and the traditions for which the Hebrew Bible is a source. Humphreys sees the tragic as a stone in the path of Judaism, Christianity or Islam, challenging the notion of a just, good god. Yet, at their best, these traditions maintain an awareness of the tragic as central. For Humphreys, where the cross sits at the core of the Christian's faith or the exile and bondage in Egypt at the heart of the Jew's then the tragic vision has been rightly incorporated.⁵⁹⁸

ii. *David M. Gunn*

Perhaps the most influential of the studies we examine in this chapter comes from David M. Gunn. Gunn's 1980 study, *The Fate of King Saul*, forms a later counterpart to his significant work on King David.⁵⁹⁹ In contrast with Humphreys,

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁹⁷ Murray Krieger, *The Tragic Vision: Variations on a Theme in Literary Interpretation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1960); Humphreys, *Tragic*, 138.

⁵⁹⁸ Humphreys, *Tragic*, 140.

⁵⁹⁹ David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation*, JSOTSup 6 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978); cf. Gunn, *Fate*, 12-13.

Gunn offers a self-consciously literary approach. While careful not to dismiss the importance of historical, political or theological elements within, or behind, the text, Gunn's primary concern is with the biblical narrative as "art" or "serious entertainment."⁶⁰⁰ The significance of serious entertainment is that it "grips one and challenges one to self- or social-reassessment. It has... a moral dimension."⁶⁰¹ As such, Gunn's reading of Saul is almost exclusively concerned with the text's final form (1 Sam. 9-31).

Once introductory matters of method are dealt with, Gunn's work falls into three parts. "Part One: Setting the Scene" consists of three chapters and highlights some of the factors which are key to Gunn's reading as a whole. The first chapter examines the relationship between sin and tragedy; the second and third give in depth readings of 1 Samuel 13 and 15 respectively and form the crux of Gunn's reading. In "Part Two: The Story", Gunn offers a light reading of 1 Samuel 9-31 with references back to his exegesis of chapters 13 and 15 where appropriate. Finally, "Part Three: Reflections" offers some conclusions particularly on the relationship between Saul and YHWH and the dynamic of fate and flaw.

Given our own concerns, as I offer an account of Gunn's book, parts one and three will require particular attention. These form the central pillars of Gunn's argument and his reading in part two largely flows from his observations in part one.

In contrast to Humphreys and Exum, Gunn does not give much, if any, space to a discussion of tragic theory. His reading largely assumes that elements within the Saul narrative can be reasonably associated with the tragic category.

⁶⁰⁰ Gunn, *Fate*, 11.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

This, presumably, fits with his pragmatic interest in providing a reading which “stays with a reader on subsequent readings of the text.”⁶⁰² Gunn’s opening chapter, “Sin and Tragedy”, begins by highlighting the various ways in which Saul has been presented in the most negative of terms in Christian tradition.⁶⁰³ These negative readings often turn on Saul’s particular failing, sin or disobedience.⁶⁰⁴ In this sense, they lend themselves to seeing Saul’s narrative as a tragedy of flaw. However, at the outset Gunn suggests that even within those readings which seek to present Saul’s tragedy in these terms, there is an “unresolved tension” which maintains a transcendent element to Saul’s narrative alongside his guilt. In other words, readings of Saul’s narrative cannot exclude the dynamics of fate.⁶⁰⁵ Yet, as soon as one introduces the element of fate into one’s reading, God becomes the only reasonable candidate, within the world of the narrative, for the controller of this fate.⁶⁰⁶ The crux, then, of the story is the “question of the cause or causes of the fall.”⁶⁰⁷ Is Saul responsible or is YHWH?

This tension sets the scene for Gunn. Of course, while the logical reconciliation of fate and flaw may be impossible, the presentation of both in a work of art is not.⁶⁰⁸ Gunn’s study constitutes an attempt to test this tension between fate and flaw.

As we come, therefore, to an account of Saul’s career, part of the task, for Gunn, is to identify some flaw on Saul’s part which might legitimate his rejection. The rejection scenes of chapters 13 and 15 are the most obvious places to find

⁶⁰² Ibid., 17.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 23-27.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 31.

evidence of such a flaw. Gunn's reading of chapter 13 opens with a fairly standard assessment of the various attempts made by scholars to resolve the issue of Saul's disobedience and identify the "command" (13.13) he is supposed to have broken.⁶⁰⁹ The major issue with the interpretations Gunn surveys, in his view, is that they refuse to allow the obvious reading of the text (that Saul does fulfil Samuel's command to wait seven days) to shape their understanding. Gunn is interested to see what might happen if a sympathetic reading of Saul in chapter 13 is allowed to shape our wider approach to the narrative.⁶¹⁰ Thus, "Is there another way forward which takes seriously the 'sympathetic' portrayal of Saul and yet recognizes the earnestness of Samuel's accusation and condemnation?"⁶¹¹

For Gunn, the resolution to this question is found in the wording of Samuel's initial instruction in 10.8. Following W.G. Blaikie,⁶¹² Gunn suggests that the seven days set out by Samuel are "merely an approximate indication of the time that Saul should allow to elapse before expecting Samuel."⁶¹³ Thus, the heart of the instruction is not the seven days, but the arrival of Samuel. The upshot, then, is that the instruction for Saul to wait is ambiguous. Under Samuel's understanding of the instruction, Saul should have waited until his arrival; therefore, he has broken the commandment. On Saul's interpretation, he only had to wait the seven days, at the end of which he was free to act as he saw fit.⁶¹⁴

Under Gunn's reading this ambiguity leads to a certain arbitrariness in YHWH's condemnation of Saul. YHWH requires of Saul a particular interpretation

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 33-38.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., 39.

⁶¹² W.G. Blaikie, *The First Book of Samuel* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1888), 211.

⁶¹³ Gunn, *Fate*, 39.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 39.

of the command given through Samuel; Saul fails to interpret correctly and is rejected. Gunn's approach provokes further questions which provide much of the impetus for his subsequent account; central among these is: "Does the real cause of Saul's rejection lie, not in his action in chapter 13, but in the attitude of Yahweh towards him, or perhaps to something he represents?"⁶¹⁵ It is with this question in mind that Gunn moves on to 1 Samuel 15.

Identifying Saul's flaw in 1 Samuel 15 is a good deal easier than in 1 Samuel 13. The central problem revolves around Saul's failure to completely destroy the Amalekites. Yet, there also appears to be some discrepancy between the severity of the purported sin and the punishment inflicted.⁶¹⁶

Gunn identifies the category of *חרם* as central to the chapter's sense. He takes "to devote to a god by destruction" as a rough gloss for the term *חרם*. Crucially, however, he then notes, "Clearly, then, it is something akin to the notion of 'sacrifice' (*zbbh*)."⁶¹⁷ This connection allows Gunn to identify two forms of destruction in the chapter. Saul devotes most of the Amalekite people and property to destruction on the battlefield, but he sees it as more appropriate to devote the best of the livestock in sacrifice to YHWH.⁶¹⁸ Crucial is Saul's insistence that he has obeyed YHWH. When pressed by Samuel he insists that his sparing of Agag and the reservation of the best of the livestock for sacrifice is consistent with God's original command. Were Saul knowingly disobedient, we might expect him to cloak the facts in some way. Instead, Saul offers an unabashed account of his

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 41-44.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 47.

dealings with the Amalekites, seemingly unaware that his actions have rendered him culpable in any way.

The question now comes, for Gunn, whether *הָרַם* plainly means “to destroy on the spot” and whether this is clearly incompatible with sacrifice (*זָבַח*). The reactions of both Samuel and YHWH seem to suggest that the two forms of destruction are incompatible. It is no longer apparent to us quite why *הָרַם* and *זָבַח* were reckoned incompatible, but that they were considered so, seems clear.⁶¹⁹

The difficulty, however, is that as things stand in the narrative, neither Saul nor the people seem to have had any awareness of this incompatibility. That Saul and the people genuinely intended to offer the spoil in sacrifice seems to be confirmed, for Gunn, by their journey to Gilgal, which is such a significant sacrificial site in the Saul narrative.⁶²⁰ The actions of Saul and the people only make sense if they see no great incompatibility between *הָרַם* and *זָבַח*.⁶²¹

The possible difficulty in this reading is the presence of Agag. If Saul brought the Amalekite spoil to Gilgal in order to offer sacrifice to YHWH, then what purpose does Agag serve? Gunn’s response to this difficulty is to point out that while Saul may have intended to spare Agag, we are given no positive hint that this is the case. Without such a hint we surely will do well to assume that Saul intends to dispose of Agag and complete the destruction of Amalek at Gilgal. Quite why Saul feels the need to bring Agag to Gilgal we are not told.⁶²² In other words, for Gunn, the issues relating to Agag mirror those relating to the livestock. Saul

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 50.

⁶²² Ibid., 50.

disposed of neither the Amalekite king on the battlefield nor the Amalekite livestock, but he seems to have fully intended to dispose of both in due course.⁶²³

The upshot of this reading for Gunn is that Saul is guilty either of ignorance of some technical implication of the concepts of *הרם* and *זבח* or that he wrongly evaluated the significance of this implication, if he was aware of it.⁶²⁴ We are left wondering, then, what Saul's great sin might be. He has acted in "good faith," his cannot really be classed a "*moral* failure" as his disobedience is "neither wilful nor flagrant."⁶²⁵ Therefore, seeking an underlying reason for Saul's disobedience (greed or lack of faith, for instance) misses the point. Saul's depiction in chapter 15 mirrors that of chapter 13 in that "there is essentially no failure on Saul's part to be accounted for, no failure, that is to say, for which he can be held seriously culpable."⁶²⁶ According to Gunn, Samuel essentially ignores Saul's protestations and explanations. This leads the reader to suppose that the real point of the scene must be that Saul, in some way, is already doomed.⁶²⁷

At the heart, then, of Gunn's reading of 1 Samuel 13 and 15 is the contention that Saul acts, in both instances, in good faith and that there is no significant reason for his rejection. On the contrary, his rejection must surely have been established before any substantial testing took place.⁶²⁸ It is this conclusion which shapes the remainder of Gunn's reading. At each point, the controlling factor, for Gunn, is the fate which has been imposed upon Saul. Saul may struggle

⁶²³ Ibid., 51.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁶²⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁶²⁸ Ibid., 71.

against this fate and, indeed, he does, but ultimately he is unable to wrest the outcome from YHWH.⁶²⁹

The central thrust of Gunn's overall reading is established through his exegesis of 1 Samuel 13 and 15. Gunn then sees, in the remainder of his account, Saul's life being worked out according to the forces of fate which have been identified in 1 Samuel 13 and 15. We need not document the remainder of Gunn's reading in full; some well-chosen examples should sufficiently display this tendency.

Gunn begins his reading in 1 Samuel 8 and here we find intimations towards the fateful dynamics of the story. In Gunn's view, YHWH's "strong sense of grievance" combined with his willingness to permit the people's request carries a hint of irony.⁶³⁰ Central to Gunn's reading of 1 Samuel 8 is YHWH's statement in 8.7: "they have rejected (סאמ) me from being king over them." Gunn draws the link between 8.7 and 15.23, the next point where the verb סאמ appears. Thus, Saul's rejection is formally linked with YHWH's sense of grievance.⁶³¹ YHWH permits the people's request but does so in a foreboding way.⁶³² In Gunn's view this interpretation presses itself upon the reader and sets up the story of Saul with two hugely influential figures (YHWH and Samuel) seemingly bearing a grievance against the people, their request and perhaps the institution of kingship itself. All of which suggests that this enterprise will not "be an unmitigated success."⁶³³

⁶²⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 60-61.

⁶³¹ Ibid., 60, 125.

⁶³² Ibid., 61.

⁶³³ Gunn highlights a similarly negative undertone in 10.17-27; Ibid., 61, 63.

Once Saul's rejection is announced in 1 Samuel 15, we continue to see how Saul's life is in the grip of forces beyond his control. Gunn points to Saul's relationship with David as a telling example of this. In 18.8 Saul experiences an outburst of jealousy and laments David's success on the battlefield. From this point on Saul becomes locked in a battle with fate manifested in his attempt to destroy David. What Saul does not, perhaps, realise at first is that David is "the man after God's own heart." In contending with David, he is contending with fate and such a battle is too much for him.⁶³⁴ Thus, whatever Saul's failings, and Gunn allows that they may be many, he is ultimately a victim of forces beyond himself.⁶³⁵

Finally, in a climactic example, Gunn comments on David's clash with Amalek in 1 Samuel 30. We are struck by the fact that David carries off spoil from this campaign (30.19-20) and decides how this spoil is to be divided (30.23-25). Under Gunn's reading the contrast with 1 Samuel 15 is striking.⁶³⁶ Gunn's concluding reflections on this episode serve as a fitting summary for much of his reading:

Good and evil come from God. He makes smooth the path of some; the path of others he strews with obstacles. He has his favourites; he has his victims. The reasons, if reasons exist, lie hidden in the obscurity of God's own being. Saul is one of God's victims.⁶³⁷

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 80-81.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 84-85.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 110.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 111.

With a conclusion as striking as this, questions are of course raised. It is natural, then, that Gunn turns in his final chapter to examine the relationship between Saul and YHWH.

This final chapter commences by returning to the question: is the story of Saul a tragedy of fate or flaw?⁶³⁸ Gunn's answer to this question is clear, "From the moment of [Saul's] anointing the future is loaded against him... it is as though fate has become his active antagonist..."⁶³⁹ Still, while this way of framing things lacks some nuance, Gunn takes the remainder of the chapter to complexify matters. While Gunn has no intention of jettisoning the determining role of fate in the story, he still spends some time exposing the complexity of Saul's depiction. His final chapter is made up two sections: one discussing the character of Saul and the other the character of YHWH.

In his concluding examination of Saul, Gunn focuses on two characteristics which have a central place in Saul's depiction: his jealousy and his knowledge. First, there seems little doubt that Saul's jealous pursuit of David can only be read as a flaw in his character. Gunn teases out the significance of this trait through an intriguing comparison with *Othello* and *Macbeth*. He highlights how, while in the two Shakespearean plays the character flaw (jealousy/ambition) is closely linked with the protagonist's ultimate fall, in Saul's case his jealousy does not lead to his death. Rather, it serves to highlight the focal point of Saul's tragic experience – his replacement.⁶⁴⁰ Saul's jealousy is a significant factor not because it leads to his tragic destiny, but because it highlights his tragic destiny.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 115, cf. 30-31.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 118-119.

However, Gunn's approach to Saul's jealousy leads to a second set of questions relating to Saul's knowledge. Saul's knowledge of his own rejection complexifies the presentation of his jealousy. Saul is alerted to his status as a rejected king, but he receives no indication as to who his replacement is to be. In other words, Saul's paranoia with regards to his royal status may at least in part be due to the fact that the fragility of his position is at the forefront of his mind.⁶⁴¹ Saul's jealous persecution of David is difficult to untangle, morally speaking, from YHWH's provocation through his rejection.⁶⁴² What emerges, therefore, is how entangled Saul is in YHWH's purposes, such that, whichever way we read the story, we find ourselves led back to the role of YHWH and "the question of why Saul is rejected."⁶⁴³

What then are we to make of the role of YHWH? Where does his seeming ambivalence towards Saul come from? To address these questions, Gunn returns to 1 Samuel 8. For Gunn, 1 Samuel 8 produces an initial antagonism between YHWH and the people which shapes the rest of Saul's narrative. Thus, while YHWH responds to the people's request, he does so, through Saul, in a way which is designed to showcase kingship's inherent weakness: "Saul, therefore, is kingship's scapegoat."⁶⁴⁴

This dynamic switches with the election of David. Whereas YHWH instructed Samuel to establish a king "for [the people]" (8.22), in David YHWH establishes a king "for [himself]" (16.1).⁶⁴⁵ David has a status before YHWH which

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 120.

⁶⁴² Gunn also notes that the manner of the announcement of his replacement ("no names, no places, no dates, not even any certainty about whether rejection meant life or death") constitutes "a recipe for suspicion and jealousy." Ibid., 120.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 120.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 125.

Saul could never attain. These observations lead towards Gunn's final analysis of the character of YHWH. Gunn has already made plain that any evaluation of the "moral/theological" aspects of the text depends not upon the text itself, but on the stance of the reader.⁶⁴⁶ Gunn now comes to his own "moral/theological" evaluation and his evaluation is frank: "Yahweh manipulates Saul mercilessly... we might say that here we see the dark side of God."⁶⁴⁷ Under Gunn's reading, YHWH's manipulative treatment of Saul is confirmed through the sending of the evil spirit (16.14).⁶⁴⁸ Gunn finds analogues to God's "dark side," as seen in his treatment of Saul, elsewhere in the Old Testament most obviously in the book of Job and 1 Kings 22.⁶⁴⁹

Still, in spite of his urgent proposal to see YHWH's "dark side" in his treatment of Saul, Gunn ultimately has to temper this conclusion in light of the subsequent traditions stemming from the Old Testament. Gunn seems to want to dismiss what he calls "the 'optimistic' God of Christian theology."⁶⁵⁰ Such a God threatens to flatten his reading of Saul's manipulation. However, Gunn, like Humphreys, has to contextualise his reading of the "dark side" of God in a minority situation in view of the wider story of David. Thus, he concludes:

Perhaps in the final analysis, even in this story, the 'light side' may be seen as dominating the picture... But the 'Story of the Fate of King Saul' shows that God *does* have a dark side. David knows only one side of his God.

Saul experiences the other.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 123.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 129.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 131 (emphasis original).

Perhaps Gunn tacitly alludes here to what was explicit in Humphreys reading, namely, that to read in sympathy with Saul and perceive God's "dark side" one has to read round the text, mute some major chords and heighten some minor notes.

iii. *J. Cheryl Exum*

We move now from Gunn's pragmatic approach to the story of Saul to a more overarching attempt to engage with the tragic category in the Hebrew Bible. J. Cheryl Exum provides us with perhaps the most nimble and sophisticated theoretical account of tragedy in the Hebrew Bible that we will examine. Exum engages a range of biblical narratives which appear to have a "tragic dimension" to them.⁶⁵² These include readings of the story of Jephthah and David and his dynasty,⁶⁵³ as well as a comparison of Saul and Samson.⁶⁵⁴ I confine my analysis to Exum's assessment of Saul. However, before turning to Exum's reading, we should consider her introductory comments which set up the study's hermeneutical context.

Exum spends the major part of her introductory chapter outlining how she intends to use the language of tragedy and what she understands by it. There are two points to note here. First, Exum seeks to distance herself from a more technically restrictive notion of tragedy shaped by a tightly defined literary genre.⁶⁵⁵ Instead, she takes a more expansive view of how one might designate texts as tragic:

⁶⁵² Exum, *Arrows*, 2.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*, 45-69, 120-149

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-44, 70-119.

⁶⁵⁵ See further J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," *Semeia* 32 (1984): 5-40 (5-6).

My use of the term ‘tragedy’ is heuristic: it provides a way of looking at texts that brings to the foreground neglected and unsettling aspects, nagging questions that are threatening precisely because they have no answers.⁶⁵⁶

The danger, as Exum sees it, of defining tragedy too formally, is that one ultimately cannot come up with a technical framework which can reasonably encompass all that might be considered tragic.⁶⁵⁷ Like Humphreys, then, Exum finds the category of the “tragic vision” a useful one.⁶⁵⁸

However, if Exum intends to hold loosely to the traditional, Aristotelian-inflected, understandings of tragic form, what does she see as the content of a text’s tragic dimensions? This question leads to the second point of Exum’s introduction. In her definition of the tragic we come across various features which are now becoming familiar. Exum sees the tragic hero’s rise and fall as constituting the heart of the tragic narrative. In other words, tragedies build to a catastrophe and once the catastrophe takes place its consequences are “irreparable and irreversible.”⁶⁵⁹

Moreover, the sense of the “irreparable and irreversible” comes, in the tragic vision, in the victimhood of the tragic hero in the face of forces and ambiguities which are entirely beyond their control. The tragic hero, however, does not submit to these forces quietly; rather, they seek to take control and strive

⁶⁵⁶ Exum, *Arrows*, 2.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2; elsewhere Exum reflects on how this view of tragedy affects her engagement with the text, “My readings of the biblical texts proceed inductively, allowing the texts themselves to inform our understanding of the tragic.” *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁵⁸ Exum references Sewall, *Vision* and Humphreys, *Tragic*; Exum, *Arrows*, 4-5.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

against the forces of fate.⁶⁶⁰ Thus, once again, the dynamics of the tragic vision are formed through the combination of fate and flaw.⁶⁶¹ Exum resists defining these terms too narrowly but sees both as quite necessary.⁶⁶²

Exum situates this vision within the context of the biblical material by suggesting that while some parts of the Bible may seek to depict a world in which slowly, over time, justice works out, other parts depict a quite different world. In much of the Bible, both good and evil are associated with God.⁶⁶³ It is this combination which provides the context for the tragic vision.

We can turn now to Exum's reading of Saul. Exum takes a distinctive approach; her reading offers less in the way of specific exegesis and instead provides an overarching comparison between the narratives of Saul and Samson. This is presented as a conscious attempt to differentiate her reading from those of Humphreys and Gunn.⁶⁶⁴ At the outset Exum praises Gunn's analysis, and broadly follows his reading of 1 Samuel 13 and 15. She takes issue, however, with Gunn's distinction between a tragedy of fate or flaw, instead of seeing the two working in combination.⁶⁶⁵

The comparison with Samson is an appropriate one for Exum as both Samson and Saul are called to wage war on the Philistines, both ostensibly fail in their task and both die "ignominious deaths at the hands of their oppressors."⁶⁶⁶ Nevertheless, at the heart of Exum's discussion is the claim that Saul reaches tragic

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁶² Ibid., 10.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 7-9.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., 17-18.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 18.

depths that remain alien to Samson. In this sense the two stories, for all their similarities, present contrasting views of reality. Saul's story displays the tragic, while Samson's the comic.⁶⁶⁷ The crucial distinction between Saul's narrative and Samson's is that Samson's story does not ultimately challenge "our assumptions about the nature of things."⁶⁶⁸

Central to Exum's comparison of the two narratives is the way they end. In the penultimate scenes of each story both Samson and Saul are at the low point of their experience. However, the resolution to each story differs markedly. In his closing moments, Samson calls out to YHWH, his relationship with the deity is restored and his life is reincorporated into God's purposes.⁶⁶⁹ In contrast, Saul's experience at Endor is consistent with the downward trajectory which has been at work since 1 Samuel 8; Saul's downward spiral is compounded by his rejection in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 and these dramatic scenes are congruent with Saul's isolation and despair in 1 Samuel 28 and 31.⁶⁷⁰

Exum's discussion moves backwards and forwards across Saul's narrative as she compares it with Samson's. Yet, while Exum's analysis is sometimes hard to follow, she returns a number of times to 1 Samuel 28 and 31. Indeed, it is in the conclusion to Saul's story that we see its differentiation from Samson's narrative most starkly.

For Exum, Saul's meeting with the woman at Endor in 1 Samuel 28 captures something crucial about the tragic dimension of the story. The chapter

⁶⁶⁷ Exum uses the term "the classic vision" interchangeably with "the comic vision" to offset the idea that the comic necessarily refers to something humorous. *Ibid.*, 18, 37.

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

highlights for us the “anguished state” that Saul experiences.⁶⁷¹ Furthermore, this whole scene is set at night. The night not only hides Saul from observation but also, in Exum’s view, provides some symbolism of the forthcoming, ultimate darkness of death.⁶⁷² However, while 1 Samuel 28 creates a sombre picture, Saul remains a tragic hero, rather than a merely pathetic figure. He does not passively accept the silence, despair and ambiguity of his position, but instead presses the deity for answers: “Not content to let his tragic destiny unfold, the tragic hero stalks it.”⁶⁷³ The tragedy of the Endor scene is tempered slightly by the care of the woman who prepares a meal for Saul and eventually persuades him to eat. However, with the conclusion of this scene, we finally see where Saul’s fate will lead him.⁶⁷⁴

If the tragic vision is tempered somewhat by the woman’s kindness in 1 Samuel 28, then in 1 Samuel 31 “the narrative yields fully to the tragic vision.”⁶⁷⁵ As Saul faces humiliation and death, he cannot call on God and so he must take matters into his own hands. While Samson’s death was part of a larger resolution, Saul’s death “stands in tragic isolation.”⁶⁷⁶ But even in these final stages, Saul still seeks to wrest from his fate, what Exum calls, “its final meaning.”⁶⁷⁷ The point, presumably, is that Saul will not allow his end to be conducted on anyone’s terms but his own. Yet he is unable to find any reconciliation or resolution in his death; YHWH remains apart from him.⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁷² Ibid., 22.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 26.

Later in her discussion Exum returns to 1 Samuel 31 to pick over its narrative features and the ways in which these contribute to its tragic air. Whereas Judges 16 delights in word play and irony, the account of Saul's final hours is terse and austere.⁶⁷⁹ Still, though the style is sparse and no restoration is found, some relief appears in 1 Samuel 31 which echoes the woman's hospitality in 1 Samuel 28. Again, the relief comes through human, rather than divine, intervention. The inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead recover Saul's body in an *inclusio* which recalls 1 Samuel 11. But it is an *inclusio* which highlights Saul's downward spiral; Saul delivered Jabesh-Gilead in the morning; they recover his body under cover of night.⁶⁸⁰

As we have seen, Exum broadly endorses Gunn's reading of 1 Samuel 13 and 15 and, as such, these chapters play less of a role in her discussion. However, an examination of Saul's tragedy cannot pass without some comment on these central chapters. In Exum's account of 1 Samuel 13 and 15 repetition plays a crucial role. While there is much that is ambiguous in 1 Samuel 13, and perhaps a suggestion that there is more than mere chance at work in Saul's misfortune, 1 Samuel 15 appears to reinforce and make explicit what is tentatively hinted at in the previous rejection scene.⁶⁸¹ Through the relative clarity offered in 1 Samuel 15, we perhaps also see more deeply into Saul's character. Exum follows Gunn in seeing Saul's "good faith" in his decision to travel to Gilgal to offer sacrifices. Yet, try as Saul might to please YHWH, he fails repeatedly; as such, his intentions are irrelevant, Saul is "frustrated at every turn."⁶⁸²

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, 28-29.

In light of this evaluation of Saul's moral efforts, it is hardly surprising that Exum, like Humphreys and Gunn, turns to examine what both these commentators have seen as central to the tragic vision: the dark side of YHWH. Behind so many of the differences between Samson and Saul, for Exum, is the fact that with regards to Saul, YHWH's intentions and motivations are ambiguous.⁶⁸³ This ambiguity is seen from the outset in that, while YHWH prophesies that Saul will deliver the Israelites from the Philistines, this does not in fact occur. Perhaps this betrays some hint of divine unreliability?⁶⁸⁴ This ambiguity is only highlighted further as the narrative progresses.⁶⁸⁵

Again, as with 1 Samuel 13 and 15, Exum seems to broadly endorse Gunn's reading of divine ambivalence, although with a significant qualification. Exum appears to follow Gunn in seeing YHWH's sense of rejection in 1 Samuel 8 as determinative for YHWH's relationship with Saul. Consequently, "Saul becomes kingship's scapegoat."⁶⁸⁶ However, before furthering her discussion of divine ambivalence, Exum does wish to offer a more complex picture of Saul than has perhaps been laid out by Gunn. For, while YHWH's intentions appear ambiguous, Saul's own ambiguity is also determinative for the narrative's effect.⁶⁸⁷ Saul is a picture of contradictions: he responds with bravery in 1 Samuel 11 and yet wavers in later dangerous situations (1 Sam. 13); he does not appear to desire the kingship to begin with and then desperately fights to hold onto it; at times he is

⁶⁸³ Ibid., 34-35.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 35; cf. Nicholson, *Faces*, 78; for a discussion of the ambivalent portrayal of Saul, with comments on tragic readings, see Walter Dietrich, *Die Samuelbücher im deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk: Studien zu den Geschichtsüberlieferungen des Alten Testaments II*, BWANT 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012), 131-139.

⁶⁸⁶ Exum, *Arrows*, 35.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., 35-36.

merciful and magnanimous (11.13) and at others rigid and inflexible (1 Sam. 14).⁶⁸⁸ This ambiguity sets Saul up as a demonstrably tragic figure; his gifts and status set him above the reader and yet his failures allow us to see in his “*hamartia* our own potential to make similarly destructive... errors of judgment.”⁶⁸⁹

One final element of Saul’s characterisation which positions him in the tragic role is his isolation and marginality.⁶⁹⁰ Two features of Saul’s character point to this marginal status. The first, as Exum has already noted, borrowing the phrase from Gunn, is Saul’s role as kingship’s scapegoat.⁶⁹¹ The second relates to Saul’s pursuit of David. Exum notes, “In pursuing their nemesis, tragic heroes usually take a course that isolates them from others.”⁶⁹² Saul’s pursuit of David is tinged with the tragic. David is both a comfort and a threat to Saul. His presence feeds Saul’s paranoia and ultimately isolates Saul even from his own family.⁶⁹³

The upshot of this analysis, for Exum, seems to be that any account of Saul’s tragic status has to reckon with his own complexity and complicity in his own demise. This is the primary way in which Exum distinguishes her work from Gunn’s.⁶⁹⁴

Still, Exum seems reluctant to conclude her reading without a further examination of God’s hostility. It is this, so it appears, which has to have the final say in any tragic reading of Saul. The paragraphs which open the final comments on Saul’s narrative seem significant for the whole thrust of Exum’s reading:

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 35, 38.

⁶⁹² Ibid., 39.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., 18.

The tragic hero is haunted by demonic forces from both within and without. We witness as Saul, driven by petty fears and jealousies, becomes a disintegrated personality, but most disturbing is the realization that the evil spirit which torments him and makes his plight even more desperate is the agent of none other than Yhwh. In this acknowledgment of the root of Saul's distress, we discover why Saul alone of biblical heroes attains a truly tragic stature, and we reach the core of the tragic vision: the problem of evil... In no other biblical story is the problem of evil so pressing and so uncompromising as in the story of Saul. Saul's downfall is of his own making; and in more than one instance he has incurred divine wrath. But whereas Saul is guilty, he is not really wicked. The tragic vision gives rise to the uneasy awareness that the hero's punishment exceeds any guilt. The question is not why Saul is rejected... The question is why there is no forgiveness.⁶⁹⁵

Saul does not simply experience the absence of God's presence, he experiences YHWH's "persecuting presence" through an evil spirit.⁶⁹⁶ Here Exum introduces insights from Paul Ricoeur to discuss the central theme of "predestination to evil" in the tragic vision.⁶⁹⁷ Under the tragic reading, Saul's rejection and death seem predetermined in some "undefinable and irreducible sense."⁶⁹⁸ Saul may delay his fate, but he cannot ultimately overcome it.⁶⁹⁹

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., 41; quoting Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 218.

⁶⁹⁸ Exum, *Arrows*, 41.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., 41; cf. Ricoeur, *Symbolism*, 220-221.

The differences which have arisen between the three studies surveyed here are meaningful and notable. However, what is perhaps more striking, is the extent to which common themes recur throughout the works of Humphreys, Gunn and Exum. These include the desire to hold loosely to strict definitions of tragedy, the conviction that fate and flaw are key components of the tragic vision, the identification of the “dark” side of God as central to Saul’s tragedy and the suggestion that Saul’s tragedy provides something of a counter current within the wider corpus of the Hebrew Bible. As we turn to evaluate these readings, we will consider these broader moves alongside more specific exegetical decisions.

3. Appraising Readings of Saul’s Tragedy

The three accounts offered by Humphreys, Gunn and Exum provide much that is thought provoking in terms of a reading of Saul’s narrative as tragedy. There are, of course, meaningful differences between these three readings, many of which I have already highlighted. Still, as noted above, I take it that there are also consistent themes and points of similarity which recur. These similarities, both theoretical and exegetical, can be meaningfully assessed together without blurring the subtleties of each reading. I begin this final section by highlighting two key strengths common to all three readings, before moving to offer some more critical reflections.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the approach championed by Humphreys, Gunn and Exum is their commitment to highlighting the sheer brutality of Saul’s end. While all three readers tend to see Saul’s death by his own hand as an act of some dignity,⁷⁰⁰ or even heroism,⁷⁰¹ none seek to soften the blow

⁷⁰⁰ Gunn, *Fate*, 111; Exum, *Arrows*, 25; Humphreys, *Tragic*, 40.

⁷⁰¹ Humphreys, *Tragic*, 41.

of Saul's ultimate isolation and death. It is this insistence upon the desolation of Saul's ending which gives the tragic approach its existential impetus and surely highlights a feature of Saul's presentation which must be seriously considered in any attempt to grapple with the story in its present form.

A second strength of these tragic readings is the attempt to take seriously Saul's genuine strengths even alongside his weaknesses. The sympathetic elements in the text often seem to provide the impetus for invoking the fate-flaw dynamic. Gunn highlights the ways in which the Christian tradition has vilified Saul and, as such, needs some rethinking.⁷⁰² As a corrective, Humphreys, Gunn and Exum all seek to offer a sympathetic account of Saul, or at least seek to take seriously potentially sympathetic elements in the text. It is Saul's positive characteristics which contribute to his complexity. There may be some disagreement on exactly what Saul's strengths are. However, Saul's complexity, again, needs to be considered in a careful reading, as it has been here.⁷⁰³

The strengths noted here point to the fact that these tragic readings make a serious attempt to grapple with the subject matter of the story of Saul. They seek to uncover what it is in Saul's narrative that presses on the reader and in this sense they are excellent. However, after a careful reading, we may well find ourselves with some questions about the approaches adopted. At the heart of my own reservations is the question: why introduce the category of tragedy into a reading of

⁷⁰² Gunn, *Fate*, 23-26. Notably Saul has received a more sympathetic reading in Jewish tradition. See, for instance, L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. H. Szold, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1937-1966), vol. 4; Hanna Liss, "The Innocent King: Saul in Rabbinic Exegesis," in *Saul in Story and Tradition*, FAT 47, ed. Carl S. Ehrlich (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 245-260; for a more recent perspective, which draws from the Jewish exegetical tradition, see Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 69-95.

⁷⁰³ Humphreys, "Hero to Villain," 99; Gunn, *Fate*, 39; Exum's account offers a nuanced take on the ambiguity inherent in Saul's portrayal, Exum, *Arrows*, 35-36.

Saul at all? Presumably, the answer has to be something to the effect that the tradition of literary and philosophical reflection on tragedy provides the interpreter of 1 Samuel with workable categories and useable concepts which help to shed light on some of the dynamics of a complex narrative.⁷⁰⁴ Yet, when we examine the categories of the tragic tradition, as presented by Humphreys, Gunn and Exum, and the contours of the Saul narrative, we often find that the categories invoked sit awkwardly with the specifics of the text.

One consistent characteristic across these three studies is a pragmatic approach to the category of tragedy. Humphreys and Exum, in particular, appear to be indebted to Sewall's understanding of the tragic vision which is discerned through the seemingly intuitive response of the reader.⁷⁰⁵ As we will see in due course, defining tragedy in broad terms seems eminently sensible.⁷⁰⁶ This pragmatic approach to tragic theory might lead us to anticipate readings which hold lightly to traditional tragic categories.⁷⁰⁷ However, what we find is, in fact, quite the opposite. For a second consistent trait in all three tragic readings is the positioning of the categories of fate and flaw as central to the tragic narrative. Of course, it is widely agreed that the interplay of human freedom and transcendent demand is significant to much tragic literature.⁷⁰⁸ Indeed, Friedrich Schelling made

⁷⁰⁴ See Exum and Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul," 6-7.

⁷⁰⁵ Sewall, *Vision*, 4; cf. Humphreys, *Tragic*, 2; Exum, *Arrows*, 4-5.

⁷⁰⁶ See Arthur Schopenhauer's initial definition of tragedy, "The only thing essential to tragedy is the portrayal of a great misfortune." Although Schopenhauer expands his definition in ways we might question, his basic point seems reasonable enough; Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*, trans. and ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 281 [300].

⁷⁰⁷ Exum, *Arrows*, 2.

⁷⁰⁸ "Tragedy is that peculiar form which presents us neither simply with human affliction nor simply with what transcends it, but with each in terms of the other." Terry Eagleton, *Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 8; see the extended discussion in idem, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 101-152.

the resolving of this relationship the heart of his discussion of tragedy; a discussion which, in many ways, stood at the commencement of the nineteenth century German philosophical discussion of tragedy.⁷⁰⁹ This granted, there may be some difficulty with the ways in which these categories are applied here to the story of Saul.

The concepts of fate and flaw, and their relationship, are construed slightly differently by each commentator. For instance, Gunn is distinct in seeing Saul's narrative as primarily a tragedy of fate in which Saul's flaw(s) plays a muted role.⁷¹⁰ By contrast, for Humphreys and Exum, the point of Saul's tragedy is that fate and flaw are displayed in tension.⁷¹¹ There are, however, two noticeable points of agreement across all three accounts. First, each author associates the category of fate with the dark side of God. In other words, in each case the category of fate is personalised through appeal to YHWH's ambivalence, or opposition, to Saul.⁷¹² Secondly, in each case, the category of flaw is relativised. Whether or not Saul's actions are construed as culpable,⁷¹³ his guilt is not congruous with his punishment.⁷¹⁴

The difficulty comes, therefore, not with seeing this dynamic between fate and flaw as central to many exemplars of tragic literature. Rather, the difficulty is that the categories of fate and flaw, as construed by Humphreys, Gunn and Exum,

⁷⁰⁹ F. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, ed. and trans. D.W. Scott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 250; cf. Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 68-69. Also see Schopenhauer's depiction of the conflict of the will; Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 280 [299].

⁷¹⁰ Gunn, *Fate*, 19, 115-116.

⁷¹¹ Humphreys, *Tragic*, 3-9; Exum, *Arrows*, 10-13, 41-42.

⁷¹² Humphreys, *Tragic*, 41; Gunn, *Fate*, 128-129; Exum, *Arrows*, 40; cf. also, Nicholson, *Faces*, 77-110.

⁷¹³ Cf. Humphreys, *Tragic*, 40.

⁷¹⁴ Exum, *Arrows*, 40; cf. Gunn, *Fate*, 56.

do not seem to do justice to the intricate relational dynamics displayed in 1 Samuel. It is perhaps best that we look to particular examples of this tendency. First, we will consider the role of the tragic flaw in the work of Humphreys and Exum and then the work of fate in the readings of Exum and Gunn.

To begin with, then, we consider the category of flaw. As we have seen, both Humphreys and Exum seek to portray Saul's flaw in ways which go beyond simple wickedness. This kind of approach to a tragic flaw has a lengthy pedigree in the tragic tradition.⁷¹⁵

Still, the pertinent question remains, on what grounds may one speak of the nature of Saul's fault? Within the context of the narrative, Saul's fault appears to be found in his failure to obey the specifics of particular commands and then, perhaps, in his pursuit of David and his murderous violence at Nob (1 Sam. 22).⁷¹⁶ Yet in analysing Saul's flawed character, both Humphreys and Exum appear to abstract the dimensions of Saul's flaw from the specifics of the narrative. In particular, Humphreys gives a good example of this tendency.

Humphreys defines the notion of a tragic flaw as follows: "At its essence stands the recognition that the tragic hero is active, that there is no shrinking back from before the cosmos as designed, from the boundaries as drawn."⁷¹⁷ This then make sense of Humphreys's early claims that tragic figures exist at the boundaries of human potential: "Life's boundary situations are confronted as the hero lives at

⁷¹⁵ The most famous example is found in Aristotle who argues that a tragic figure cannot undergo "a change to misfortune because of vice or wickedness..." *Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. and trans. R. Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 1453a1-17; cf. G.F.W. Hegel for whom the tragic flaw is found in the hero's "one-sidedness"; G.F.W. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, ed. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2:1197-1198.

⁷¹⁶ This much appears to be recognised by Exum; Exum, *Arrows*, 30-31.

⁷¹⁷ Humphreys, *Tragic*, 5.

the very edge of human power and potential, thereby defining these limits with new sharpness...⁷¹⁸ The flaw which defines the tragic hero is their refusal to accept the boundaries marked out for them; they resist such limitations in acts of greatness. The point may be a fair one, in general terms, as far as it goes.⁷¹⁹ Yet it becomes problematic when Humphreys seeks to apply it to Saul. For example, Humphreys defines Saul's death at Gilboa as a confrontation with a "boundary situation."⁷²⁰ It is by no means clear, however, that Saul, in his death, is defining the limits of "human power and potential" with "new sharpness." May it not be rather more plausible to read Saul's death as a fearful act through which he seeks to escape a more humiliating death at the hands of the Philistines? This may be implied in the reasoning Saul offers to his armour bearer in 1 Samuel 31.4, "lest these uncircumcised come and pierce me through and deal wantonly (והתעללוּ בִּי) with me."⁷²¹ The point here is that Humphreys's application of the category of flaw, as he understands it, to the conclusion of Saul's career sits awkwardly with certain key details of the closing scene.⁷²² Humphreys appears to have determined the nature of the tragic flaw before turning to his reading of Saul and then sought to fit Saul to that model; this runs the risk of creating a certain dissonance with the specifics of 1 Samuel.

Exum gives a more measured and attentive account of Saul's failure.

Similarly to Humphreys, she is prepared to construe the tragic figure's flaw in

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷¹⁹ Again, Aristotle notes that the tragic hero must occupy some great status; *Poetics*, 1453a1-17. For Humphreys, Saul's status as king seems to be part of his tragic presentation; Humphreys, *Tragic*, 38, 40. However, see Eagleton, *Violence*, 103-104.

⁷²⁰ Humphreys, *Tragic*, 41.

⁷²¹ Cf. Exod. 10.2; Num. 22.29; 1 Sam. 6.6.

⁷²² This point echoes some of the concerns raised in David M. Gunn, "The Anatomy of Divine Comedy: On Reading the Bible as Comedy and Tragedy," *Semeia* 32 (1984): 115-129 (122-124).

terms a “heroic struggle against fate.”⁷²³ Yet, Exum adds to this notion an element of guilt which seems largely absent from Humphreys’s account.⁷²⁴ That said, Exum’s configuration of the concept of guilt is not altogether clear. In relation to the guilt of the tragic hero she argues in her introduction that this “guilt need not stem from wrongful acts...”⁷²⁵ Exum’s point seems to be that the tragic hero can be considered guilty by the forces which determine his/her fate, even if, on another reckoning, they have done little wrong. Part of the confusion here is that Exum fails to bind her discussion of tragic guilt to the particular ways in which guilt is incurred in the Hebrew Bible more generally and 1 Samuel in particular.⁷²⁶ As with Humphreys, when this broad category of guilt is applied to the story of Saul, certain questions arise.

As Exum begins to draw her discussion of Saul and Samson to a close, she notes, “Saul’s downfall is of his own making; and in more than one instance he has incurred the divine wrath. But whereas Saul is guilty, he is not really wicked.”⁷²⁷ She notes shortly afterwards that the key problem raised by the story of Saul is not the reason for Saul’s rejection but why there is no forgiveness.⁷²⁸ We might ask a number of questions at this point. On what grounds are we to say that Saul is “not really wicked”? His slaughtering of the priests at Nob certainly seems to be an act of wickedness. Is it necessary for Saul to be wicked for his flaw to be the determinative element in his fall or tragedy? On what basis might one expect

⁷²³ Exum, *Arrows*, 11.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷²⁶ Exum argues, “In the Bible, no one is innocent, except perhaps the Job of the folktale...” But then does not elucidate how her understanding of guilt relates to the Bible’s apparent notion that “no one is innocent.” *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

forgiveness for Saul given the shape of the narrative? There seems to be no point in the narrative where the problem of unforgiveness, as such, becomes explicit. If the narrative does give expression to questions of forgiveness, then surely the most suggestive instance would be David's sparing of Saul in 1 Samuel 24 and 26. This would, however, pose an issue for Exum, as the problem would then be construed in terms of how David is able to forgive one who has treated him so appallingly. The problems seem to be analogous to those highlighted for Humphreys. In recognising that personal wickedness need not, perhaps even should not, constitute the essence of the tragic flaw and in framing the central concern of the narrative in terms of forgiveness, Exum abstracts the issues around Saul's flaw from the specifics of the narrative.

The upshot here, then, is that, for Humphreys and Exum, when it comes to summarising and assessing the nature and function of Saul's flaw(s) they move into categories which seem somewhat removed from the narrative itself. Of course, this may, to some degree, be inevitable when handling a narrative as complex and opaque as the story of Saul at times is. If we accept, however, that there is an element of sympathy in Saul's depiction and that this, at least in principle, qualifies him for the role of a tragic hero, then careful consideration needs to be given to where Saul's actual faults lie.

Secondly, we may turn to the example of how these tragic readings handle the category of fate. Some of the issues that we have already noted with regards to the handling of Saul's flaw apply here as well. For example, fate as a category is one which is not typically seen as fitting well with the narrative world of the Hebrew Bible and, consequently, its application would require careful explanation. Unfortunately, this is not the case. What we tend to find is the language of fate

being used as a synonym for the work of YHWH.⁷²⁹ As noted above, here we look particularly at the role of fate in the readings of Exum and Gunn, respectively.

Exum sees YHWH as ambivalent towards kingship and, specifically, the kingship of Saul.⁷³⁰ This ambivalence commences with YHWH's sense of rejection in 1 Samuel 8 and is compounded through the disregard shown by Samuel and YHWH for Saul's "good faith" in 1 Samuel 13 and 15. The crowning moment of this divine hostility is seen in the "evil" spirit sent by YHWH in 1 Samuel 16.⁷³¹ Exum, thus, lays out a case for YHWH's continued hostility towards Saul through a reading which seeks to attend to certain specifics of the 1 Samuel narrative. However, in turning to her concluding remarks, Exum argues, "In no other biblical story is the problem of evil so pressing and so uncompromising as in the story of Saul."⁷³² This claim is then furthered through an appeal to Paul Ricoeur's discussion of "predestination to evil."⁷³³

The issues here are twofold. First, it is not at all clear from the reading which Exum has provided that the problem of evil, as such, is the irreducible issue at the heart of Saul's story. Notably, Exum makes little attempt to explain what is meant by the problem of evil and how it relates to the dynamics of fate which she outlines. Typically, this problem would seem to turn on how devastating disaster can befall the innocent, as exemplified in the case of Job. Exum may wish to counter this classic articulation of the problem, but, if so, she does little to indicate as much. The issue in the story of Saul appears to be how, or on what grounds, an

⁷²⁹ "Fate in the tragedy of King Saul is clearly the work of Yahweh." Humphreys, *Tragic*, 41; cf. Gunn, *Fate*, 123; Exum, *Arrows*, 41.

⁷³⁰ Exum, *Arrows*, 35.

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷³² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷³³ *Ibid.*, 41; Ricoeur, *Symbolism*, 218.

individual can fall from a position of ostensible favour or privilege and what role YHWH has in that. That the story of Saul contains horrific elements does not necessarily make the problem of evil central in the story. As comparable examples, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* both contain unsettling and horrific elements, but it is doubtful that either play would be pointed to as a classic handling of the problem of evil as such.

Secondly, in referencing Ricoeur's discussion of tragedy, Exum fails to give due weight to the fact that Ricoeur's argument revolves around certain particular ancient Greek tragedies, particularly Aeschylus's *The Persians* and *Prometheus Bound*. Ricoeur's discussion goes on, from the opening quotation given by Exum, which references "predestination to evil",⁷³⁴ to discuss the role of Zeus in *Prometheus Bound* specifically:

With the figure of Zeus the movement tending to incorporate the diffused satanism of the δαίμονες into the supreme figure of the 'divine' is brought to completion; and with him, consequently, the problematics of the 'wicked god,' the undivided unity of the divine and the satanic, reaches its highest pitch.⁷³⁵

Is this, the problematics of the wicked god, the undivided unity of the divine and the satanic, what Exum sees taking place in the Saul narrative?⁷³⁶

Whatever force is given to the sending of the evil spirit in 1 Samuel 16, it seems a

⁷³⁴ Exum, *Arrows*, 41; Exum quotes, "The tragic properly so called does not appear until the theme of predestination to evil – to call it by its name – comes up against the theme of heroic greatness..." See Ricoeur, *Symbolism*, 218.

⁷³⁵ Ricoeur, *Symbolism*, 218.

⁷³⁶ It is not clear that Exum goes quite this far. There is a comparable move, however, made by Gunn when he notes that for David YHWH is "providence" and for Saul he is "fate." Gunn, *Fate*, 116, 131.

stretch to impute to it the conceptuality articulated by Ricoeur in relation to a quite different narrative setting. What is more, Exum appears to assume that the spirit sent in 1 Samuel 16 is evil in a sense which corresponds to the categories employed by Ricoeur. If one is to hold such a position, then some defence, explaining why in the case of 1 Samuel 16 “evil” proves a good translation for the semantically flexible term רעה, is surely necessary. As it is then, the category of fate, parsed in terms of the problem of evil and the “predestination to evil”, does not seem a obvious fit for the material of Saul’s narrative.⁷³⁷

Finally, we turn to Gunn’s reading of the fate of Saul. Gunn is distinct among the three scholars we are examining as he resists any clear discussion of tragic theory and seems more content to offer a reading of the story and then see whether there is any fit with tragic categories.⁷³⁸ Gunn is also distinct in seeking to offset any balance that might be found between the dynamics of fate and flaw in the story of Saul and, instead, to depict the story in terms of fate.⁷³⁹

Gunn sees YHWH’s fateful influence at work from the very beginning of Saul’s reign. Gunn suggests that Saul’s rejection in 1 Samuel 15 is latent in the narrative of 1 Samuel 8. As we have seen the link between 1 Samuel 8 and 1 Samuel 15 through the use of the verb סאג is crucial for Gunn. Saul’s role is to be kingship’s “scapegoat”; his function is to effectively demonstrate “the weakness of

⁷³⁷ Gunn also sees Saul’s story as concerned with the problem of evil and makes an explicit analogy with Job; Gunn, *Fate*, 130.

⁷³⁸ Cf. Gunn, “Anatomy,” 125; Gunn does not seem to see the category or definition of tragedy as determinative for his reading; cf. Gunn, *Fate*, 115.

⁷³⁹ Gunn, *Fate*, 116.

human kingship.”⁷⁴⁰ From 1 Samuel 8 onwards, “the future is loaded against him... fate has become his active antagonist...”⁷⁴¹

However, as with Exum, Gunn’s conception of the workings of fate appears to make little sense of the early portion of Saul’s career to which Gunn explicitly applies it. Beyond the זמ word link, there is little, if anything, in 1 Samuel 8 to suggest that the installation of a king is set up for failure. The people’s request is certainly received reluctantly, but that by no means indicates a predisposition for Saul’s particular demise. Indeed, when we arrive at chapter 12, the very real possibility of obedience is set out. Gunn suggests that in 1 Samuel 12 Saul is presented with a tightrope to walk as he obeys YHWH.⁷⁴² Yet, what we have in 1 Samuel 12 is language which is typical of the Deuteronomistic conception of whole-hearted obedience to YHWH; it is hardly exceptional, as far as the Deuteronomistic History, or indeed, the Hebrew Bible, is concerned.⁷⁴³

What we see, therefore, is that Gunn’s claims regarding the workings of fate from the outset of Saul’s career are not congruous with the reading he is able to produce from the narrative as it stands. It is striking, then, that Gunn, like Exum and, in fact Barth for that matter, gives no real account of 1 Samuel 13.13b: “For then YHWH would have established your kingdom over Israel for ever.” At the heart of Gunn’s account is the suggestion that things could never have been otherwise for Saul and that his actions in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 made no substantive difference to his trajectory. Yet 1 Samuel 13.13b seems, initially at least, to speak

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., 125.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 115.

⁷⁴² Ibid., 65.

⁷⁴³ A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 134-135.

directly against this position. A central question in reading 1 Samuel revolves around whether 1 Samuel 13 and 15 alter the direction of Saul's career. Both Gunn and Exum seem to respond in the negative without considering the primary piece of textual data which seems to counter their position. Given the difficulties we have seen with the category of fate, we circle back, in closing, to the wider question of the use of tragedy as an interpretive category for Saul's narrative.

The difficulty with tragedy is that it originated in the particular historical context of ancient Greece and has since flourished across centuries and cultures, such that finding unifying elements which make up a definition is a daunting task.⁷⁴⁴ As such, we may do well to steer clear of definitions which turn on a particular literary form,⁷⁴⁵ and rather follow Julian Young's rather sparse definition: "tragedy is a very sad story."⁷⁴⁶ Young's definition would seem congenial to the tragic vision espoused by Humphreys and Exum. In this sense, there are certainly tragic elements to the story of Saul. However, Young goes on to point out that debate around tragedy has not really been confined to what makes tragedy tragedy, but really turns on what makes tragedy great tragedy.⁷⁴⁷ In other words: what makes a very sad story meaningful and significant in its capacity as a very sad story? In this sense, the category of tragedy seems to have failed, as applied in the examples surveyed here, to illuminate the story of Saul in clearly helpful ways. As we have seen, the categories of fate and flaw, as applied by Humphreys, Exum and Gunn, have sat uncomfortably with what can be reasonably

⁷⁴⁴ On the context of Greek tragedy, see Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

⁷⁴⁵ For instance, Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1968; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 85.

⁷⁴⁶ Young, *Tragedy*, 263; Young qualifies this definition by concurring with Aristotle that the story still needs to be told in such a way as to evoke the audience's fear and pity etc.

⁷⁴⁷ Young, *Tragedy*, 264.

inferred from the contours of the narrative. The narrative of Saul's rise and fall is meaningful and significant. However, this meaning and significance is not to be defined finally in terms of its tragic elements. The narrative conveys particular elements of Israel's first king's interaction and relationship with YHWH; these particular elements cannot simply be abstracted into the categories of fate and flaw but require more careful handling.

Our tour through the accounts of Saul's rejection and fall offered by Karl Barth and the tragic readings have thrown up numerous questions, many of which turn on the account one gives of those central chapters, 1 Samuel 13-15. With these questions in mind, we now turn to a constructive reading of 1 Samuel 13-15 and an account of Saul's rejection.

Chapter 6

SAUL IN 1 SAMUEL

1. Introduction

We have seen how Karl Barth and various tragic readings have handled the narrative of Saul. Now I turn to my own reading of Saul's rejection. As we saw, for both Barth and the tragic readings, albeit in different ways, Saul's rejection in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 does not represent a decisive break with what has come before in the narrative. Rather, Saul's rejection is an outworking of dynamics present in the narrative from 1 Samuel 8 onwards. The story of Saul does, of course, span from 1 Samuel 10 to his death in 1 Samuel 31 and it is surely right, as both Barth and the tragic readings do, to see his story extending beyond these strict limits, with its genesis in the debate of 1 Samuel 8 and its continuation with Saul's progeny into 2 Samuel (2 Sam. 4; 9; 16; 19; 21). However, given our particular concern with Saul's rejection, it is appropriate to maintain a focus on the central chapters which describe its announcement, namely, 1 Samuel 13-15. As with the Jacob-Esau cycle, my approach will not be to offer a comprehensive handling of these chapters. Instead, I seek to elucidate their dynamics with a view to highlighting their theological significance. Of course, I read these chapters within their wider context. Yet the choice of 1 Samuel 13-15 as a focus text for a study of Saul's rejection is surely uncontroversial.⁷⁴⁸

⁷⁴⁸ See comments on the delimitation of this section in David Jobling, "Saul's Fall and Jonathan's Rise: Tradition and Redaction in 1 Sam 14.1-46," *JBL* 95 (1976): 367-376; cf. the focus on 1 Sam. 13-15 in Sykora, *Unfavored*, 119-202; as we have seen, Gunn isolates chapters 13 and 15 in Gunn, *Fate*, 33-56; cf. V. Philips Long, *The Reign and Rejection of King Saul: A Case for Literary and Theological Coherence*, SBLDS 118 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 69-169.

The focus on 1 Samuel 13-15, then, is a relatively straightforward one. However, approaching the text of 1-2 Samuel presents more overarching difficulties. On the text-critical level, Samuel poses a number of challenges.⁷⁴⁹ Its relationship with 4QSam^a and the Septuagint may suggest that these witnesses point to a distinctive Hebrew source (or sources) other than that contained in MT.⁷⁵⁰ Still, quite what one is to make of this relationship remains unclear. For my purposes here I take a pragmatic approach, working with the MT and commenting on textual issues as they arise.

In addition to its text-critical difficulties, 1-2 Samuel has typically had a disharmonious relationship with various aspiring theories for the compositional development of the Deuteronomistic History.⁷⁵¹ The difficulty with fitting the books of Samuel into any clearly defined theory of the Deuteronomistic History is largely due to the sparsity of language with a clear Deuteronomistic inflection.⁷⁵² Moreover, what seemingly Deuteronomistic language there is fails to give the book

⁷⁴⁹ For an introduction to the contemporary state of text-critical research on Samuel, see Philippe Hugo, "Text History of the Books of Samuel: An Assessment of the Recent Research," in *Archaeology of the Books of Samuel: The Entangling of the Textual and Literary History*, ed. Philippe Hugo and Adrian Schenker, VTSup 132 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1-19.

⁷⁵⁰ See the preliminary publication in Frank Moore Cross, "A New Qumran Biblical Fragment Related to the Original Hebrew Underlying the Septuagint," *BASOR* 132 (1953): 15-26; more developed analysis is found in Frank Moore Cross and Richard J. Saley, "A Statistical Analysis of the Textual Character of 4QSamuel(a) (4Q51)," *DSD* 13 (2006): 46-54; cf. Eugene Charles Ulrich, Jr., *The Qumran Text of Samuel and Josephus*, HSM 19 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978); cf. the assessment of Ulrich's work in E. Tov, "The Textual Affinities of 4QSam^a," *JSOT* 14 (1979): 37-53; for an in depth study of 4QSam^a's relationship with MT, see Jason K. Driesbach, *4QSamuel^a and the Text of Samuel*, VTSup 171 (Leiden: Brill, 2016); on the LXX more generally, see Anneli Aejmelaeus, "The Septuagint of 1 Samuel," in *VIII Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies, Paris 1992*, ed. Leonard Greenspoon and Olivier Munnich (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 109-129.

⁷⁵¹ As already recognised in Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 54-55.

⁷⁵² Jürg Hutzil, "The Distinctiveness of the Samuel Narrative Traditions," in *Is Samuel Among the Deuteronomists? Current Views on the Place of Samuel in a Deuteronomistic History*, ed. Cynthia Edenburg and Juha Pakkala, AIL 16 (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 171-205.

a clear Deuteronomistic framework when compared, for example, with 1-2 Kings. At present, any real consensus on the relationship of Samuel to the Deuteronomistic History, as traditionally understood, seems unlikely.⁷⁵³ There are certainly points in 1 Samuel 13-15 where the language seems strikingly Deuteronomistic,⁷⁵⁴ but, again, the aim here is not to provide an account of how these texts might fit into a wider theory of supposed Deuteronomistic composition/redaction. Instead, I seek to handle the text in its received form in a way which is sensitive to, and informed by, its potentially complex pre-history.

My purpose, then, is to give a reading of 1 Samuel 13-15 which is attentive to the theologically charged issue of Saul's rejection. I include a reading of 1 Samuel 14 as it seems that Jonathan's role in this part of Saul's narrative serves as a contrast to his increasingly failing father and, as such, the chapter offers insight into Saul's presentation. We turn first, however, to chapter 13 and Saul's prospective battle against the Philistines at Michmash.

2. 1 Samuel 13

i. *1 Sam. 13.1-7a*

1 Samuel 13 arrives after a series of narratives in which Saul is introduced in impressive terms (9.2), he is announced as king (10.1, 24; 11.15), he wins a great victory over the Ammonites (11.1-11) and Samuel warns the people and the king to remain faithful to the command of YHWH (12.1-25).⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁵³ See particularly the positions represented in, *Is Samuel Among the Deuteronomists?* ed. Cynthia Edenburg and Juha Pakkala.

⁷⁵⁴ On Deuteronomistic language see Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), esp. 320-365.

⁷⁵⁵ On the complex interplay of perspectives in 1 Samuel 8-12, see Johannes Klein, "Für und wider das Königtum (1 Sam 8-15): Figurenperspektiven und Erzählsystem," in Auld and Eynikel, *For and Against David*, 91-113.

The material in 1 Samuel 9-12 seems to function as something of an introduction to the kingship of Saul, with chapter 12 serving as a transition between the leadership of Samuel and Saul.⁷⁵⁶ This may explain why it is only at 13.1 that we find a regnal formula outlining the details of Saul's reign.

When we turn to 13.1, we are immediately faced with textual difficulties. As it stands the verse could be rendered, "Saul was a year old at the beginning of his reign and he reigned two years over Israel."⁷⁵⁷ Of course, this presents a number of problems, none of which are easily resolved. While some try to explain at least part of the verse in its context,⁷⁵⁸ the reality of some corruption in the text relating to one or both of the numbers tends to be taken as given.⁷⁵⁹ Some suggest that the verse, perhaps coming from the hand of a Deuteronomistic redactor, simply omitted information about Saul's age and reign which was not available.⁷⁶⁰ The difficulty is compounded by a certain obscurity in the extant textual witnesses. Most manuscripts of the LXX simply omit the verse, though whether this is due to

⁷⁵⁶ Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos, *The Road to Kingship: 1-2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 95.

⁷⁵⁷ וְשָׁתַי שְׁנַיִם, The figure presented in 13.1, is unconventional. We might expect שְׁנַיִם שְׁנַיִם (e.g. 2 Kings 21.19) or שְׁנַיִם (e.g. 2 Sam. 13.23; 14.28). For an overview of various translations, ancient and modern, see Hendrick J. Koorevaar, "He Was A Year Son: The Times of King Saul in 1 Sam 13,1," in *The Books of Samuel: Story – History – Reception History*, ed. Walter Dietrich (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 355-369.

⁷⁵⁸ Siegfried Kreuzer suggests that the figure of two years points to Saul's forthcoming period of conflict with the Philistines; Siegfried Kreuzer, "»Saul war noch zwei Jahre König...« Textgeschichtliche, literarische und historische Beobachtungen zu 1 Sam 13,1," *BZ* 40 (1996): 263-270; cf. idem, "»War Saul auch unter den Philistern?« Die Anfänge des Königtums in Israel," *ZAW* 113 (2001): 56-73 (64-66).

⁷⁵⁹ See S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1890), 74-75; Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, trans. J.S. Bowden, OTL (London: SCM, 1964), 103; P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel*, AB 8 (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 222-223; Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC 10 (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 122; Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 82.

⁷⁶⁰ Henry Preserved Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899), 92; Hans Joachim Stoebe, *Das erste Buch Samuelis*, KAT VIII/1 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1973), 242; Anthony F. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, FOTL 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 137; cf. David Jobling, *1 Samuel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 79-80.

its difficulty or simple unawareness is unclear. Some manuscripts of LXX^L list Saul's age as thirty.⁷⁶¹ Josephus and the Book of Acts both suggest that Saul's reign lasted forty years.⁷⁶² Again, it is unclear how these figures relate to the wider tradition. All that can reasonably be said is that it is unlikely that the length of forty years stands behind the original wording of 13.1 and, as such, Josephus and Acts shed little light on the problem.⁷⁶³

It is obvious, then, that some obscurity pervades the actual content of 13.1. Still, it may be that, even as we acknowledge the probability of textual corruption or confusion, we might attempt a partial reading 13.1 as it stands and in its wider context. While the Targum reads Saul's age in 13.1 as symbolically indicative of his innocence,⁷⁶⁴ contemporary readers sometimes see Saul's limited reign as foreshadowing his impending failures. Throughout the narratives of 1-2 Kings there is often a correlation between the length of a king's reign and his righteousness before YHWH. Within this framework the limiting of Saul's reign to two years could point to Saul's failure as YHWH's king. On this reading 13.1 functions to summarise Saul's struggles in a formulaic, symbolic, sense.⁷⁶⁵ This kind of approach, however, is not without difficulty. There seems to be no evidence of a regnal formula being used symbolically in the Old Testament, and, while this

⁷⁶¹ See McCarter, *Samuel*, 222; Driver, *Notes*, 74-75.

⁷⁶² Josephus, *Ant.* 6.378; Acts 13.21.

⁷⁶³ See Kreuzer, "»Saul war noch zwei Jahre König...«" 265. R. Althann denies that 13.1 is a regnal formula at all, he translates, "More than a year had Saul been reigning, even two years had he been reigning over Israel." Althann fails to account for the verse's resemblance to other formulas in 1-2 Kings and depends on somewhat speculative analogies in Northwest Semitic usage; R. Althann, "1 Sam 13,1: A Poetic Couplet," *Biblica* 62 (1981): 241-246.

⁷⁶⁴ Eveline von Staaldvine-Sulman, *The Targum of Samuel*, SAIS 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 299.

⁷⁶⁵ Rachele Gilmour and Ian Young, "Saul's Two Year Reign in 1 Samuel 13:1," *VT* 63 (2013): 150-154; cf. Long, *Reign*, 74-75; Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary*, HBM 19 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 119.

reading offers some explanation for the truncated nature of Saul's reign, it offers little insight into what one is to do with the note on Saul's age. It might be that the regnal formula is used deliberately in an unconventional way to point to Saul's demise;⁷⁶⁶ but we have no way to be sure.⁷⁶⁷ We move from verse 1 with a certain sense of frustration; the text has not yielded its meaning in any clear way.

In 1 Samuel 13.2-7a we receive an account of the military situation between Saul and the Philistines. Initially Saul appears with three thousand men divided between himself at Michmash and Jonathan at Gibeah.⁷⁶⁸ At this point, Jonathan is not identified as Saul's son; this association is not made until 13.16. This silence in the text is not as extraordinary as some claim; others are introduced by their name alone in the Old Testament.⁷⁶⁹ Still, we may see here a slight move to open up some critical distance between the father and his son, perhaps introducing a central theme of 1 Samuel 13-14.

If 13.2 serves primarily to set some of the scene,⁷⁷⁰ then in 13.3 the action begins with earnest. Jonathan strikes down the *נציב פלישתים*, apparently stationed at Geba. The term *נציב*, used both in 13.3 and 4, may refer to a military commander

⁷⁶⁶ Stephen B. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 123, n.9.

⁷⁶⁷ See the summary comments in Walter Dietrich, *Samuel VIII/21*, BKAT (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2011), 3.

⁷⁶⁸ There is some debate over the relationship of Gibeah (v.2) and Geba (v.3); some suggest they are synonymous; e.g. J. Maxwell Miller, "Saul's Rise to Power: Some Observations Concerning 1 Sam 9:1-10:16; 10:26-11:15; 13:2-14:46," *CBQ* 36 (1974): 157-174 (163); idem, "Geba/Gibeah of Benjamin," *VT* 25 (1975): 145-166. However, most seem content to recognise their distinction; see McCarter, *Samuel*, 225; Stoebe, *Buch Samuelis*, 240; on Gibeah more generally, see Patrick M. Arnold, S.J., *Gibeah: The Search for a Biblical City*, JSOTSup 79 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), esp. 87-106.

⁷⁶⁹ Cf. Joshua (Exod. 17.9) and Eli (1 Sam. 1.3); Long, *Reign*, 76.

⁷⁷⁰ The geographical and chronological difficulties in the following verses are complex. However, there seems to be little reason to read 13.2 as a summary of, rather than a prelude to, Saul's battle with the Philistines. Cf. Miller, "Saul's Rise," 161; Stoebe, *Buch Samuelis*, 246-247.

whom Jonathan has struck down.⁷⁷¹ The scene seems curiously reminiscent of Jonathan's later exploits in chapter 14, where he attacks the מצב פלשתים. The micro-scene of 13.2-4 may then reflect the wider dynamics which play out in chapter 14.⁷⁷²

The second half of v.3 has tended to puzzle interpreters.⁷⁷³ Yet, while the implications of the verse might be obscure, the actual text can be rendered fairly straightforwardly, "And the Philistines heard, and Saul blew the trumpet in all the land, saying, 'Let the Hebrews hear.'" ⁷⁷⁴ In v.4 the Israelites hear of the events of v.3, but they hear that it is Saul who has struck down the נציב פלשתים.⁷⁷⁵ The confusion here could be due to one of three things: (a) Saul has taken the credit for Jonathan's victory; (b) the victory that Jonathan has won is attributed to Saul as any victory achieved by one of Saul's commanders would be; (c) there has been some miscommunication which has resulted in the people's confusion.⁷⁷⁶ Whatever the reasoning behind Saul's accreditation, the striking down of the נציב פלשתים provokes the Philistines to action against the rebellious Hebrews. The Hebrews are

⁷⁷¹ This reading is preferred by Driver, *Notes*, 61; Karl Budde, *Die Bücher Samuel*, KHCAT 8 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1902), 67, 84; on נציב more generally, see Erfurt J. Reindl, "יצב/נציב," in *TDOT*, 519-529 (526-527).

⁷⁷² Moshe Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (Ramat-Gan: Revivim, 1985), 85; Jobling, *Samuel*, 94; Sykora, *Unfavored*, 128.

⁷⁷³ E.g. McCarter, *Samuel*, 225-226.

⁷⁷⁴ McCarter alters v.3 on the basis of Saul's use of העברים (McCarter, *Samuel*, 225). Israelites do not tend to use עברים. Rather this is a designation used by non-Israelites. There are numerous proposals to resolve this difficulty. It might be noted, however, that the term עברים is sometimes used by Israelites when in the presence of non-Israelites, e.g. Gen. 40.15; Exod. 1.19; 5.3; 7.16 etc. cf. Deut. 15.12. The immediate threat of the Philistines may explain the usage here. Alternatively, Saul may be summoning a group akin to the Israelites who are currently serving the Philistines; cf. David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 337-338.

⁷⁷⁵ Those summoned in v.4b may be those dismissed in v.2b.

⁷⁷⁶ Robert Lawton teases out the possible implications of these options; see Robert B. Lawton, "Saul, Jonathan and the 'Son of Jesse'," *JSOT* 58 (1993): 35-46 (37).

summoned by Saul to Gilgal, presumably in preparation for battle with the Philistines.

The Philistine reaction to Jonathan's provocation is extreme. They gather together thirty thousand chariots, six thousand horsemen and innumerable foot soldiers.⁷⁷⁷ Unsurprisingly, this extraordinary force causes the "men of Israel" (presumably a reference to those summoned in v.4) to react in fear and they hide themselves as best they can (13.6b). What is more, others, that is the עבריים, whose relationship to the "men of Israel" is not altogether clear,⁷⁷⁸ flee across the Jordan to the east. Saul is left with a depleted force, who tremble even as they follow him. The introduction of chapter 13 ends with the desperation of Saul's position forcefully highlighted.

ii. *1 Sam. 13.7b-15a*

Saul waits for seven days at Gilgal. This waiting period is said to be "for the time which Samuel" set (13.8).⁷⁷⁹ This reference presents a number of challenges. The only obvious reference, within the overall narrative context, to a seven-day period set by Samuel appears in 10.8. There, from v.7 onwards, Samuel instructs Saul:

⁷ And it will be, when these signs come to you, do whatever your hand finds, for God is with you. ⁸ You shall go down before me to Gilgal, see, I am coming to you, to make burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings.

⁷⁷⁷ The LXX^L and Syriac read "three" as opposed to "thirty" (LXX and MT). This reading seems more viable. However, the general tenor of hyperbole which runs through the verse may favour the more extraordinary figure. Cf. Klein, *Samuel*, 122.

⁷⁷⁸ They are perhaps the same group as that addressed in v.3. But how this group relates to the wider group of Israelites is unclear. One classic, socio-political explanation is supplied by Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 BCE* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 423.

⁷⁷⁹ The MT simply reads: למועד אשר שמואל. Some MSS read שם, others אמר with the LXX and Targum.

You shall wait seven days until I come to you (שבעת ימים תוחל עד־בוֹאִי אֵלַיךְ)
and I will make known to you what you will do.

This instruction appears in the context of Saul’s anointing as “leader” (נגיד) over Israel.⁷⁸⁰ Samuel grants Saul three signs which seem to function as a kind of confirmation of God’s choice (10.7).⁷⁸¹ Having described these signs, Samuel gives Saul permission to do whatever his hand finds once they are fulfilled. We are told simply in 10.9, “and all these signs came that day.” The logic at this point, presumably, is that now that the signs have been completed Saul is to “do whatever [his] hand finds to do.” Seemingly part of this entails going down before Samuel to Gilgal to then receive further instructions.

However, the narrative then has something of an interlude; Saul returns to his father and gives a partial explanation to his uncle of his adventures following the asses (10.14-15). Samuel then addresses the people again on the matter of kingship and Saul is publicly elected (10.16-24). Thus, we get to the end of chapter 10 with the signs fulfilled, but still wondering when Saul will go to Gilgal to wait for Samuel. In chapter 11 Saul rescues the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead from the Ammonites and although a journey is made to Gilgal and sacrifices are offered, the situation does not seem to fit Samuel’s earlier instruction. Chapter 12 is made up of a speech given by Samuel at the Gilgal assembly but sheds no further light on Saul’s seven day wait.⁷⁸²

⁷⁸⁰ On the elusive term נגיד, see Tomoo Ishida, *History and Historical Writing in Ancient Israel: Studies in Biblical Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 57-67; cf. Baruch Halpern, *The Constitution of the Monarchy in Israel*, HSM 25 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 1-11.

⁷⁸¹ This is made explicit in the LXX at 10.1: καὶ τοῦτό σοι τὸ σημεῖον ὅτι ἔχρισέν σε κύριος ἐπὶ κληρονομίαν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἄρχοντα·

⁷⁸² The confusion here means that many see 10.8 as an addition to anticipate and harmonise with chapter 13; see, for instance, Campbell, *Samuel*, 109; McCarter, *Samuel*, 26, 182-183;

As it is then, we arrive at chapter 13 puzzled. Samuel's predictions in chapter 10 seem to have come to pass with relative ease; but the proposed seven-day wait and joint sacrifice is yet to appear. As such, when we meet the reference to a seven-day period set by Samuel in 13.8, it seems natural to suppose that we have here the completion of Samuel's final instruction from 10.8.⁷⁸³ However, this conclusion has to bear the weight of certain difficulties.

The primary challenge is a chronological one. There is no clear indication of how long the period between 10.8 and 13.8 might be. There are clues, however, which suggest that it could be some considerable time – certainly much longer than seven days.

In chapters 9-10 Saul appears as a relatively young man. He is introduced with reference to his father (9.1-2) and is given instructions by his father to hunt for family property (9.3). Of course, this information is sparse, and is sometimes overplayed,⁷⁸⁴ we are not told that Saul is living in his father's house nor are we told whether Saul has any kind of family.⁷⁸⁵ Still, whatever Saul's age and position in chapters 9 and 10, the situation has clearly moved on substantially by the time we reach chapter 13. Here Saul is not only king of Israel, but he also has a son capable of leading an Israelite force in battle.

Walter Dietrich, *David, Saul und die Propheten: Das Verhältnis von Religion und Politik nach den prophetischen Überlieferungen vom frühesten Königtum in Israel*, BWANT 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987), 97.

⁷⁸³ This connection is widely made, see Long, *Reign*, 51; Klein, *Samuel*, 123; Diana Vikander Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah*, JSOTSup 121 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 77; Miscall, *Samuel*, 86; Sykora, *Unfavored*, 188; D. Janzen, "The Sacrifices of Saul Thoroughly Examined," *PSB* 26 (2005):136-143 (137); Dietrich, *Samuel VIII/21*, 8.

⁷⁸⁴ E.g. McCarter, *Samuel*, 228.

⁷⁸⁵ See the cautionary comments in Long, *Reign*, 204-205; cf. Ralph K. Hawkins, "The First Glimpse of Saul and His Subsequent Transformation," *BBR* 22 (2012): 353-362 (355).

So, then, what kind of chronological connection between 10.8 and 13.8 does the text imply? Some suggest that the reference to a seven-day period in 13.8 implies that only seven days have passed between chapters 10 and 13.⁷⁸⁶ This clearly would present intractable difficulties but may over-read the text somewhat. The chronological difficulties seem to be of a different, more basic, order. No time frame between chapters 10 and 13 is, in fact, given or implied. Instead, we are simply told in 13.8 that Saul waited seven days, in accordance with Samuel's instruction. How this seven-day period relates chronologically to chapter 10 is not commented on. Within its immediate context, it seems most natural to take Saul's period of waiting as beginning, not with 10.8, but with the gathering of forces to Gilgal in 13.4. This would potentially fit with Saul's explanation offered to Samuel in v.11. Under this reading, it is while Saul waits at Gilgal that he observes those who had mustered to him deserting rapidly (v.11a).

Placing the commencement of Saul's seven-day wait earlier in chapter 13 also has the advantage of binding the events of vv.7b-15a closely with the rest of chapter 13 in a way which mirrors the linguistic similarities between the two sections. For example, Saul's explanation to Samuel in v.11 picks up directly on the scenario and language of v.5:

13.5: וּפְלִשְׁתִּים נֹאסְפוּ לְהִלָּחֵם עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף רֶכֶב וְשֵׁשֶׁת אֲלָפִים פָּרָשִׁים וְעַם

כָּחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל־שַׁפְּתֵיהֶם לָרֶב וַיַּעֲלוּ וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמַכְמֵשׁ קִדְמַת בַּיִת אֹנָן

13.11: וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂאוּל כִּי־רָאִיתִי כִּי־נִפְץ הָעָם מֵעָלַי וְאַתָּה לֹא־בָאתָ לְמוֹעֵד הַיָּמִים וּפְלִשְׁתִּים

נֹאסְפִים מִכְּמֵשׁ

⁷⁸⁶ E.g. Chapman, *Samuel*, 123, n.11; cf. McCarter, *Samuel*, 228; Janzen, "Sacrifices of Saul," 137-138.

Saul's removal, then, to Gilgal mentioned in v.4b seems to be the circumstantial prerequisite for Saul's explanation in v.11. Moreover, outside the text unit of vv.7b-15a, the flight of some of Saul's force across the Jordan towards Gad and Gilead (v.7a) perhaps makes more sense if Saul has already removed to Gilgal. Of course, to advocate a quite close interplay between 13.7b-15a and its immediate surroundings does not necessarily require us to question the widely held view that these verses are a later insertion.⁷⁸⁷ The point is rather to suggest that these verses draw on the immediate context of chapter 13 for their logic.

However, even if the seven-day wait begins in chapter 13, the instruction still comes much earlier in chapter 10. What then are we to make of the lacunae between the mentioning of the seven-day period in 10.8 and its recurrence in 13.8 as it now stands?⁷⁸⁸ For all the confusion readers experience in 1 Samuel 13, perhaps the most striking element of the text is the unanimity when it comes to the interpretation of 10.8 by Saul and Samuel. While we may wonder how Saul can know that this is the time to wait seven days in keeping with Samuel's words from 10.8, Saul himself actually seems to have relatively little difficulty in applying Samuel's instructions to his present situation. Saul seems to understand that once the Philistines are engaged in war, he is to meet Samuel at Gilgal.⁷⁸⁹ Ultimately the

⁷⁸⁷ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885), 258; Budde, *Samuel*, 86-87; Smith, *Samuel*, 93-95; Hertzberg, *Samuel*, 105; Bruce C. Birch, *The Rise of the Israelite Monarchy: The Growth and Development of 1 Samuel 7-15*, SBLDS 27 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 75; Klein, *Samuel*, 123; McCarter, *Samuel*, 228; John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 257.

⁷⁸⁸ David Toshio Tsumura suggests that the link between 10.8 and 13.8 has been overplayed, but his is a minority position; Tsumura, *Samuel*, 340-341; Chapman offers a thoughtful account of the function that the relationship between 10.8 and 13.8 has in the interplay between the world of the text and the world in front of the text; Chapman, *Samuel*, 122.

⁷⁸⁹ Perhaps because of the significance of the Philistines and the נצבי פלישתים in chapters 9-10; cf. Long, *Reign*, 51-65.

narrative does not make explicit how it is that chapter 13 provides the context for the seven-day wait and joint sacrifice. A reading which seeks to run with the grain of the text should probably accept a reasonable amount of uncertainty when it comes to identifying exactly how Saul knew to wait when he did.⁷⁹⁰ Still the connections between chapters 10 and 13 seem to suggest that on any reckoning Saul's war with the Philistines has a privileged place within his role as king.

Perhaps more pressing than the chronological difficulty, for our purposes, is the confusion that arises from Samuel's arrival at Gilgal. In 13.8 we are told that Samuel does not come to Gilgal and the people scatter from Saul. Following directly from this note we hear Saul's response to this situation: "'Bring to me burnt offerings and peace offerings.' And Saul burnt burned offerings." (13.9). But, directly after Saul has sacrificed,⁷⁹¹ Samuel appears, and Saul goes out to greet him only to be met by a stinging rebuke (13.11, 13).

It seems strange that Samuel would be late for the appointment that he had fixed; what is more, it seems strange that Samuel would arrive directly after Saul had offered his sacrifice. There are a couple of points which are unclear. To begin with, it is not quite apparent how Samuel's arrival relates to the seven-day period. The implication in Saul's behaviour seems to be that the seven-day period had

⁷⁹⁰ This seems to be an instance where the putative processes behind the text's formation provide relatively little insight into the actual assumptions operating within the world of the text itself. For reflections along these lines, see Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Old Testament Narrative as Christian Scripture*, JTISup 17 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017), esp., 103-147, 148-181.

⁷⁹¹ The near simultaneity of Samuel's arrival and the end of Saul's sacrifice is indicated through the infinitive construct with inseparable preposition, ככלתו.

come and gone, and Samuel still had not arrived (so Samuel perhaps arrived on the eighth day).⁷⁹²

If we accept that the time scheduled has elapsed, then we might reasonably ask what Saul has done wrong. Some are inclined to exonerate Saul and see Samuel's tardiness as an indictment of his character. In this view, Samuel's failure to arrive on time is part of a wider plot, rooted in resentment, to see Saul's kingdom wither. This view is expressed forcefully by Robert Polzin:

Verses 1-15 of chapter 13 are thus about Samuel's present failure as prophet as well as Saul's future failures as king. The 'missed appointment,' after all, is as much Samuel's as Saul's. This basic fact allows us to see how once again the author can turn the condemnatory words of Samuel against the prophet himself...⁷⁹³

Polzin's reading is suggestive and makes up part of a wider depiction of Samuel that he works out across 1-2 Samuel but seems to lack clear purchase in 1 Samuel 13.

⁷⁹² So, J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 2: *The Crossing of Fates (I Sam 13-31 and II Sam 1)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 35-36; Hertzberg, *Samuel*, 105-106; Sykora, *Unfavored*, 187. As an alternative, some speculate that Samuel arrived at some stage on the seventh day, see Long, *Reign*, 88-89; David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, AOTC 8 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 154.

⁷⁹³ Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: 1 Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 131; cf. Thomas R. Preston, "The Heroism of Saul: Patterns of Meaning in the Narrative of the Early Kingship," *JSOT* 7 (1982): 27-46 (31); Klein, "Für und wider," 101-102. David Jobling suggests that Saul's error is acting without Samuel present; Jobling, *Samuel*, 87. See, in contrast, Claire Mathews McGinnis's case for Samuel's trustworthiness throughout 1 Samuel; Claire Mathews McGinnis, "Swimming with the Divine Tide: An Ignatian Reading of 1 Samuel," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 240-270 (250-251).

It may be more satisfactory to read Samuel's initial instruction as extending beyond the seven-day wait. We are familiar with this kind of approach from David Gunn,⁷⁹⁴ V. Philips Long puts it in clear terms:

in proceeding with the sacrifices, Saul adopted an inappropriately narrow interpretation of the command of 10.8. For the command in 10.8 was not only that Saul should wait seven days, but that he should wait *until Samuel arrived*.⁷⁹⁵

Perhaps, then, Saul waits patiently for seven days and still fails to fulfil the original instruction of 10.8. In 10.8 Samuel's instruction does seem to have a two-part structure: (a) "seven days you shall wait, (b) until I come to you and I will make known to you what you shall do." Thus, under this reading, when Samuel accuses Saul of breaking the commandment of YHWH (13.13), he has the wording of 10.8 in view.⁷⁹⁶ The seven-day wait is not the only part of the command.⁷⁹⁷

As we read through the verses which follow Saul's sacrifice, the sense that Saul has acted in a pre-emptive way, such that he has not fulfilled Samuel's

⁷⁹⁴ Gunn, *Fate*, 39-40.

⁷⁹⁵ Long, *Reign*, 88-89 (emphasis original); cf. Auld, *Samuel*, 141.

⁷⁹⁶ The seven-day period is rarely interrogated; it could, however, have a less specific and more symbolic (cf. the cultic significance of the seven-day period in Exod. 29.30; 34.18; Lev. 8.33; 12.2; 13.4; 14.7; Num. 12.14; 19.11) or general intention; cf. Gunn, *Fate*, 39. Samuel's note that he will "make known to you what you shall do" perhaps envisages an early period in Saul's kingship, but provides a rationale for waiting until Samuel's arrival.

⁷⁹⁷ This reading certainly does not resolve every complexity. However, it does seem preferable to others which see Saul's disobedience as a technical mistake, for instance, McCarter, *Samuel*, 228; Campbell, *Samuel*, 138; Klein *Samuel*, 126; Edelman, *Saul*, 79; or others which see Saul's error as simply acting in Samuel's absence, for instance, Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 100; Jobling, *Samuel*, 86; interestingly Peter Miscall moves in the opposite direction and suggests that Saul is rejected because he failed to act without Samuel and engage the Philistines in battle, see Miscall, *Samuel*, 87. Perhaps understandably, Smith despairs of finding a source for Saul's disobedience and puts his rejection down to "the sovereign will of Yahweh who rejects and chooses according to his own good pleasure." Smith, *Samuel*, 98.

instruction, grows. Were Saul to have attended to Samuel’s instruction in an uncompromised fashion, we might expect his explanation later in the chapter to present Samuel’s delay as the exclusive reason behind his decision to sacrifice. However, as we read through the interaction in 13.8-14, we can discern a system of dual reasoning on Saul’s part. Samuel’s delay in coming certainly plays a role in Saul’s sacrifice, but this delay is always paired with Saul’s concern for other external circumstances. This becomes clear when we compare the narrator’s account in v.8 with Saul’s in v.11:

	Samuel’s Delay	External Circumstances
13.8	And he waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel, and Samuel did not come to Gilgal	and the people scattered (יָפִיץ).
13.11	and you did not come at the appointed time	When I saw that the people scattered (נִפְּצוּ) away from me and the Philistines were gathering at Michmash... ⁷⁹⁸

⁷⁹⁸ Cf. 13.5; see Dietrich, *Samuel VIII/2*, 30-31; McGinnis notes that in Saul’s explanation the ordering is reversed so that the people’s scattering is mentioned first, perhaps giving it interpretive priority; McGinnis, “Divine Tide,” 257; cf. Paul S. Evans, “From a Head Above the Rest to No Head at All: Transformations in the Life of Saul,” in *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*, ed. Keith Bodner and Benjamin J.M. Johnson, LHBOTS 669 (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 101-120 (110-11).

What we see here is that those readers who wish to accuse Samuel of deliberately ensnaring Saul at most only get half the picture. In both the narrator's account and Saul's own testimony a key factor which appears to shape Saul's decision to act is the fragile military situation and the pressure caused by the people's desertion.⁷⁹⁹

At this point we should hold off overloading our interpretation. It does seem that Saul demonstrates a disordered understanding of the situation in his failure to trust the arrival and instruction of YHWH's prophet.⁸⁰⁰ However, a real examination of Saul's failure has to wait until the portraits of Saul and Jonathan are laid side-by-side in 1 Samuel 14 and the contrast constructed there plays itself out.⁸⁰¹

Still, at this point it seems reasonable to give Saul's fragile military position interpretive prominence in his interaction with Samuel. Under this reading strategy, Saul's anxiety around his military position takes precedence over his concern with right religious practice.⁸⁰² But if we are to make this judgement, we need to take seriously Saul's own account of his religious reasoning in 13.12. Saul explains to Samuel, "I said 'Now the Philistines will come down to me at Gilgal and I have not entreated YHWH (וּפְנֵי יְהוָה לֹא חִלִּיתִי), so I restrained myself (וַאֲתַפְקֶה) and burned up burnt offerings.'" The key phrases in v.12 are in themselves fairly

⁷⁹⁹ Rachele Gilmour nicely highlights the significance of the people's opinion in Saul's election (8.7) and contrasts this with their role in his ultimate failure; Rachele Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel*, VTSup 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 125.

⁸⁰⁰ Cf. similar suggestions in Chapman, *Samuel*, 127; Hertzberg, *Samuel*, 106; Ming Him Ko, "Fusion-Point Hermeneutics: A Theological Interpretation of Saul's Rejection in Light of the Shema as the Rule of Faith," *JTI* 7 (2013): 57-78.

⁸⁰¹ For Shimon Bar-Efrat, Saul's concerns with numbers provides a central contrast with the opening narrative of 1 Sam. 14 and Jonathan's disregard for numbers; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel: Ein narratologisch-philologischer Kommentar*, trans. Johannes Klein, BWANT 16 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 189.

⁸⁰² Cf. Johannes Klein, *David versus Saul: Ein Beitrag zum Erzählsystem der Samuelbücher*, BWANT 18 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 74-75.

neutral. The verb הלה generally means “to entreat” or “to seek favour.” It is used in a variety of settings.⁸⁰³ Quite how to translate אפק here is somewhat more complicated. Elsewhere in the Old Testament the verb in the Hithpael is always translated as “to control, constrain or restrain oneself.”⁸⁰⁴ Some, in this instance, have advocated a translation like “I forced myself.”⁸⁰⁵ However, it seems reasonable to keep with typical Old Testament usage. If we do so, then the use of אפק could add to the picture of Saul’s military anxiety sketched above. Seeing that the people were scattering from him, instead of holding out for Samuel’s arrival, Saul steadied himself and proceeded with what he saw as the correct religious preparations for war.⁸⁰⁶

It seems, therefore, from the context of chapter 13, the wording of Samuel’s instruction in 10.8 and Saul’s own account of his behaviour that Saul has acted pre-emptively in offering the sacrifice at Gilgal. What is more, he may be influenced by the military situation to forego Samuel’s further instructions and, perhaps, betray his inclination to favour concrete action rather than open-ended trust in YHWH’s representative. Whether readers view this disposition negatively or not will largely depend on their own preconceptions; that Samuel views it negatively is undeniable.

Samuel interprets Saul’s disobedience in 13.13 in language which lays the blame for disobedience firmly on Saul’s shoulders. Samuel states bluntly, “You have done foolishly (נסכלת), you have not kept the command (מצות) of YHWH your

⁸⁰³ For deliverance in difficulty, see 2 Kings 13.4; for entreating God’s favour more generally, see Ps. 119.58; Mal. 1.9.

⁸⁰⁴ E.g. Gen. 43.31; 45.1; Isa. 42.14; 63.15; 64.11; Esth. 5.10; see Firth, *Samuel*, 151.

⁸⁰⁵ Sykora, *Unfavored*, 190; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 99.

⁸⁰⁶ See Chapman, *Samuel*, 125; Graeme Auld seems to capture the sense with “I collected myself”; Auld, *Samuel*, 139.

God, which he commanded you (צוֹרֵךְ)...⁸⁰⁷ Yet Samuel's response to Saul consists in more than a denunciation of his behaviour. Samuel goes on to lay out the consequences of Saul's actions in vv.13b-14,

... for then YHWH would have established (הִכִּינְךָ) your kingdom over Israel forever (עַד־עוֹלָם). But now your kingdom will not stand (לֹא־תִקּוּם). YHWH has sought for himself a man after his own heart (בִּקֵּשׁ יְהוָה לּוֹ אִישׁ כְּלִבְבוֹ), and YHWH has appointed him leader (נִגִּיד) over his people because you did not keep that which YHWH commanded you.

In Samuel's pronouncement there are two points worth highlighting. First, Saul hears of what could have been his future, but is now denied him; namely, a kingdom established forever. Secondly, Saul hears about another whom YHWH has chosen as a replacement to rule over his people. That this anonymous figure is a replacement for Saul is clear, quite when he will replace Saul is undefined. These two points require comment in turn.

First, then, here, for the first time in the narrative, we hear of YHWH's intention, now negated, to establish Saul's dynasty over Israel forever.⁸⁰⁸ It is unclear why this possibility has only been raised now that it has been forfeited. It may be that Saul's war with the Philistines constitutes something of an initiation for Saul's kingship; an initiation which he has failed.⁸⁰⁹ If this is so, then it is only implied through the sense of a possibility lost. There is some debate over how exactly to translate the phrase כִּי עַתָּה הִכִּינְךָ יְהוָה אֶת־מַמְלַכְתְּךָ אֶל־יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד־עוֹלָם. I am

⁸⁰⁷ The use of סָכַל in the Niphal in 2 Sam. 24.10 highlights the severity of Samuel's charge here; Auld, *Samuel*, 142.

⁸⁰⁸ In light of 13.13b I take it that in 1 Samuel 13 Saul's dynasty is primarily the object of rejection and only in 1 Samuel 15 is Saul himself rejected. This point is widely suggested; see Klein, *Samuel*, 127; Birch, *Monarchy*, 85.

⁸⁰⁹ Sykora, *Unfavored*, 191.

inclined to insert a modal verb into the clause and take the phrase *כי עתה הכין יהוה* as indicating what YHWH would have done.⁸¹⁰ This is certainly a common use of the combination *כי עתה*, although when it indicates a possibility that is unrealised it is usually accompanied by a particle like *אולי* or *לולא*.⁸¹¹ This approach is not uncontested. David Jobling, for instance, argues that it is just as valid to translate the clause, “Just now YHWH established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom will not continue.”⁸¹² I am not convinced that Jobling’s translation bears the same warrant as the more traditional rendering. Even so, were we to follow Jobling’s rendering the sense of a possibility lost could be retained, albeit in a slightly different sense.

Difficulties of translation to one side, the central point here is that a genuine alternative or possibility has been lost through Saul’s disobedience. Another future was open to Saul and now this future has been jettisoned.

So, Saul has lost something which was, at one time, a genuine possibility. But what is it that he has lost? As many have pointed out, the phrasing of v.13b seems to have resonances with the promises made to David in 2 Samuel 7.⁸¹³ In 2 Samuel 7.12-13, YHWH promises David, through Nathan:

When your days are filled, and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise
(והקימת) up your seed after you who will go out from you and I will

⁸¹⁰ Following GKC, §106*p*.

⁸¹¹ E.g. Gen. 31.42; 43.10; Num. 22.29, 33. Smith proposes repointing *לא* at the beginning of the verse to *לָא* or *לֹאִא* (Smith, *Samuel*, 99; cf. *DCH*, 4:387) to bring *כי עתה* in line with more conventional usage. The use of *כי עתה* in Exod. 9.15 (*כי עתה שלחתי את־ידי ואך אותך ואת־*) (עמך) suggests that this adjustment is not necessary to inject the modal sense; cf. Stoebe, *Buch Samuelis*, 245.

⁸¹² Jobling, *Samuel*, 80.

⁸¹³ Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 100; Auld, *Samuel*, 142; Tsumura, *Samuel*, 348; Dietrich, *Samuel VIII/2*₁, 47.

establish (וְהִכִּינֹחִי) his kingdom. He will build a house for my name, and I will establish (וְכִנְנֹתִי) the throne of his kingdom for ever (עַד-עוֹלָם).

The implication surely seems to be that the kind of dynasty which is promised to David in 2 Samuel 7 was also a possibility for Saul. On one level, then, the elected and rejected kings find their point of contact in the possibility of their future.

This leads us to the second point. At this stage Saul is also informed of a successor who will replace him (13.14) and the nature of this successor helps to elucidate what is at stake in Saul's loss. Knowing the wider narrative as we do, we recognise that Saul's neighbour is to be David, who, as we have just seen, will go on to realise the inheritance of the kingdom denied to Saul.

This neighbour is described in 13.14 in peculiar terms: "YHWH has sought for himself a man after his own heart..."⁸¹⁴ The point here, at least in part, seems to be that there is something about David that is qualitatively different to Saul. Here I take it that the phrase אִישׁ כְּלִבּוֹ refers, at least primarily, to the quality of David's heart rather than the nature of YHWH's decision. Of course, this view has been widely contested. Most influentially, P. Kyle McCarter suggested that the construction כְּלִבּוֹ "has nothing to do with any great fondness of Yahweh's for David or any special quality of David."⁸¹⁵ Instead, McCarter argued, the construction refers to "the free divine selection of the heir to the throne."⁸¹⁶ However, in recent years McCarter's argument has gradually lost support in favour

⁸¹⁴ It is not clear how David's portrayal in 1-2 Samuel relates to his wider endorsement in 1-2 Kings, but it is telling that David's "heart" is invoked in both; cf. 1 Kings 11.4; 14.8; 15.3.

⁸¹⁵ McCarter, *Samuel*, 229; McCarter's suggestion has had widespread influence on subsequent scholarship.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

of a more traditional reading which emphasises David's quality.⁸¹⁷ Perhaps most notable is Benjamin Johnson's article directly addressing McCarter's case.⁸¹⁸ Johnson places YHWH's concern in 1 Samuel 13.14 in the wider context of 1 Samuel and highlights the significance of the heart in assessing the credentials of YHWH's servants. He points to the examples of Eli in 1 Samuel 2, Saul in 1 Samuel 10 and Eliab in 1 Samuel 16 as examples of figures whose hearts play a prominent role in relation to their service of YHWH.⁸¹⁹

However, if we grant that David's heart is qualitatively different to Saul's, quite why this might be so is never fully explained nor are we told what it is about David's heart which distinguishes him. Thus, a reading which privileges David's quality does not exclude elements of mystery and inexplicability. However, it seems that whatever the precise content of the distinction, it is a distinction which relates as much to the distinctive characters of Saul and David as it does to the distinctive disposition of YHWH to each.

We have seen, therefore, that Saul, in his rejection, loses the possibility of an enduring kingdom. In this sense the horizon open to Saul at the beginning of the narrative is symmetrical with the horizon open to David. In terms of the narrative's primary presentation, the distinction lies in Saul's disobedience as contrasted with the quality of David's heart which, in some undefined sense, reflects something of YHWH's heart. To take the central verses of 1 Samuel 13 in this way has

⁸¹⁷ E.g. Chapman, *Samuel*, 128.

⁸¹⁸ Benjamin J.M. Johnson, "The Heart of YHWH's Chosen One in 1 Samuel," *JBL* 131 (2012): 455-467.

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 460-463; the comparison between the election of Samuel and that of David is elaborated on in Gilmour, *Representing*, 117-123. Further, the juxtaposition of כלבבו with בקש perhaps makes it more likely that איש is to be qualified rather than בקש.

momentous implications for the way we read 1-2 Samuel. Consider, as an alternative, Jobling's assessment:

It is not possible to make a sensible comparison between the monarchies of Saul and David, for different rules apply to them from the outset. Davidic monarchy represents a *new* divine dispensation in Israel, not a continuation of the dispensation under which Saul reigned.⁸²⁰

The contrast, for Jobling, lies in the fact that there is nothing that David or his descendants can do to forgo God's covenant promises to them. By contrast, Saul's rejection highlights how small an infraction is required for his rejection to be justified.⁸²¹ Jobling has a point. There does seem to be a distinction between YHWH's interaction with David and with Saul. The question, however, is to what extent that nullifies the suggestion that at the outset there is a symmetrical relationship between the prospects of Saul and of David.

As we read through 2 Samuel 7, there is clearly some distinction between YHWH's relationship with Saul and with David. YHWH says to David, concerning his son, "But my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I caused it to turn aside from Saul..." In some sense, then, David's relationship with YHWH is quite distinct from Saul's. Still, the point here turns on where this distinction lies. For Jobling the distinction is essentially inexplicable; it lies in YHWH's contradictory attitude to Saul and David.⁸²² Part of the task here, though, is to

⁸²⁰ Jobling, *Samuel*, 84 (emphasis original); cf. Dietrich, *Samuel VIII/2*, 47; Klein, *David*, 72-75.

⁸²¹ Jobling, *Samuel*, 84.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, 85.

attempt to tease out whether there is any discernible logic to YHWH's preference for David over Saul which endures even through David's sin.

Within 2 Samuel 7 little explanation is given for David's preferential treatment. However, what we do see is that once David's dynasty is established, his distinct relationship with YHWH becomes the grounds for YHWH's ongoing steadfast love.⁸²³ In other words, while there may be something inscrutably distinct about YHWH's disposition towards David, even if the text never puts it as such, there is also something qualitatively different about David's disposition towards YHWH which forms the bedrock of his enduring dynasty. There is little that could be pointed to as the content of this distinct disposition other than Samuel's comment in 13.14 that בקש יהוה לו איש כלבבו. Jon Levenson expresses the logic at work here well, writing of David's wayward descendants:

...it is [David] who is the human partner to the covenant. His descendants are an afterthought. They are mentioned only as a token of God's enduring fidelity to David. He is God's ally; their moral record is in no way essential to the validity of the covenant.⁸²⁴

Levenson goes on to point out that the root of David's covenant with YHWH lies in the fact that David has "already satisfied what claims YHWH might wish to make upon his line."⁸²⁵ Thus, YHWH swears to reward David with the gift of a

⁸²³ Cf. 1 Kings 3.3, 6, 14; 9.4; 11.4, 12-13, 32-34, 38-39; 14.8; 15.3; 2 Kings 8.19; 14.3; 16.2 etc. Among these examples are occasions where David's behaviour becomes the condition for ongoing faithfulness to the covenant; cf. Jon D. Levenson, "The Davidic Covenant and Its Modern Interpreters," *CBQ* 41 (1979): 205-219 (218-219).

⁸²⁴ Levenson, *Sinai*, 99-100.

⁸²⁵ *Ibid.*, 100; Levenson here follows the distinction found in Moshe Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90 (1970): 184-203.

continuing dynasty.⁸²⁶ David is granted an enduring kingdom as a covenant reward for un-covenanted behaviour.⁸²⁷ This does not mean that YHWH's treatment of David is proportional to David's distinct faithfulness to YHWH. However, if we follow Levenson's logic, there is a line of congruity between the distinctive way YHWH treats David's line and the distinctive way David responds to YHWH. It is not clear at this point in the narrative what it is about David that characterises him as an אִישׁ כְּלִבְבוֹ, but it is clear, as we follow David's narrative on, that David's distinctiveness plays a central role in his treatment and the treatment of his descendants.⁸²⁸

Circling back round then to Saul's rejection and the loss of the kingdom, the point in the comparison with the Davidic dynasty is not merely that Saul failed a test which David passed. The point is that Saul's failure to keep the command that Samuel has given him may be indicative of a wider disposition which has allowed external fears to cloud his judgement and hinder his obedience. This has led to an unfavourable comparison with David who will interact with YHWH on different terms. The unfavourable comparison with one who displays a different attitude towards YHWH will continue into 1 Samuel 14 as Saul is set alongside his son Jonathan. For now, however, a central point to observe in 1 Samuel 13 is that a genuine possibility has been lost. Saul has had some agency in directing the course of his future. Our reading of 1 Samuel 13.7b-15a certainly suggests that Saul has

⁸²⁶ Levenson notes the similar covenantal-dynamic in the case of Noah, Abraham, Caleb, Phinehas; Levenson, *Sinai*, 100.

⁸²⁷ See Mark K. George, "Yhwh's Own Heart," *CBQ* 64 (2002): 442-459 (455).

⁸²⁸ Of course, speaking of David's distinctiveness is not without its problems; but space precludes a lengthier discussion of how David is (and is not) distinct. For an account of some of the issues with a traditional Christian account, see Chapman, *Samuel*, 245-251.

not been set on a path to rejection from the moment the Israelites requested a king in 1 Samuel 8. He has had a hand in his own future.

In reading 1 Samuel 13 thus, I have attempted to make sense of what is a highly confusing chapter and I do not pretend to have resolved every difficulty, ambiguity and confusion and my reading certainly pushes below the surface of the text. However, my hope is that one of the strengths of my reading is its congruity with what follows in 1 Samuel 14. These chapters are clearly to be read together. Indeed, in their current form, they envisage one event: the conflict at Michmash. It may be that one of the best ways to make sense of 1 Samuel 13 is by reading it with one eye on 1 Samuel 14.⁸²⁹

iii. *1 Sam. 13.15b-23*

When the action returns to the battle with the Philistines, Saul's force has been greatly depleted (13.15b). What is more, the pressure from the Philistines begins to increase. Whatever we might think of Saul's behaviour at Gilgal, there is no denying that his position at Geba is mortally precarious.

Samuel 13 closes with a peculiar, and obscure, note on the armaments of the Israelites. It is occasionally suggested that vv.19-22 constitute an insertion,⁸³⁰ but even so these verses nicely set the scene for the events that follow in chapter 14. Moreover, the mention of Saul and Jonathan in v.22 as the only Israelites in possession of recognisable weapons goes some way to setting up the contrast

⁸²⁹ It is widely accepted that 1 Samuel 13-14 make up one continuous narrative. See, for example, Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 77.

⁸³⁰ Smith, *Samuel*, 101.

which will be so central to chapter 14.⁸³¹ The details of vv.20-21 are somewhat obscure but need not detain us here.⁸³²

3. 1 Samuel 14

i. 1 Sam. 14.1-23

In 1 Samuel 14 we find a range of complexities.⁸³³ Some of these are textual, others relate to the chapter's purpose in the account of Saul's reign. Whatever our response to individual points of complexity, Jobling's suggestion that this chapter's position between the two accounts of Saul's rejection gives it a special significance is surely correct.⁸³⁴ In light of this, I handle Jonathan's exploits in chapter 14 with a particular view to grasping the way in which Jonathan's presentation serves to offer a contrast with Saul.⁸³⁵

As we move into chapter 14, the basic scene is swiftly set in 14.1, "That day Jonathan son of Saul said to the lad who carried his armour, 'Come and let us go to the camp of the Philistines which is across on the other side.' But he did not tell his father."⁸³⁶ The narrative returns to Jonathan and his armour bearer in v.6, but for now a couple of basic features are set in place. Jonathan attempts a daring mission with no one but his armour bearer for company. He seems to deliberately

⁸³¹ Klein, *Samuel*, 128.

⁸³² See Stephen L. Cook, "The Text and Philology of 1 Samuel XIII 20-1," *VT* 44 (1994): 250-254; older comments include, Julius A. Bewer, "Notes on 1 Sam 13.21; 2 Sam 23.1; Psalm 48.8," *JBL* 61 (1942): 45-49; Robert Gordis, "A Note on 1 Sam 13.21," *JBL* 61 (1942): 209-211; William R. Lane, "Newly Recognized Occurrences of the Weight-Name *PYM*," *BASOR* 164 (1961): 21-23.

⁸³³ See Campbell, *Samuel*, 144.

⁸³⁴ Jobling, *Samuel*, 88; cf. the comments on the received form of the text in Marsha C. White, "Saul and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 1 and 14," in *Saul in Story*, 119-138 (129).

⁸³⁵ The analogy drawn by Keith Bodner between 1 Sam. 13 and 14 is helpful; Bodner, *Samuel*, 130.

⁸³⁶ The translation of וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם as "that day" is significant as it points to the dramatic framing of the events of chapter 14 all in a single day (cf. 14.23, 24, 31, 37); see Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Jonathan's Sacrilege: 1 SM 14,1-46: A Study in Literary History," *CBQ* 26 (1964): 423-449 (426).

withhold his plans from his father,⁸³⁷ perhaps for fear of being prevented from such a daring move.⁸³⁸ We might see here another instance of the critical distance that was first opened up in 13.3.⁸³⁹ This contrast is certainly played out more fully in the remainder of chapter 14; the opening verse simply offers us a slight hint of its significance.⁸⁴⁰

With Jonathan's venture introduced, the scene swiftly shifts to Saul and his camp. Saul's introduction in 14.2-3 lays particular weight on the figure of Ahijah. Ahijah is given a comprehensive introduction; his grandfather is Eli's wayward son Phinehas and his uncle is Ichabod.⁸⁴¹ The specific mention of Ichabod points back to 1 Samuel 4.12-22 which offers something of a climactic account of the failures of the Elides. Eli dies, the death of Hophni and Phinehas is reported and Ichabod's birth pronounces that "the glory has departed from Israel."⁸⁴² It is perhaps telling here that Saul is found with an Elide priest, when he has just been rejected by the "faithful priest" who replaced Eli's sons.⁸⁴³ Not only is the company which Saul

⁸³⁷ The position of זח is emphatic in this final clause, perhaps for emphasis. Long, drawing on the comparison between Saul and Nabal, highlights how Saul's ignorance may be indicative of a wider moral state; see Long, *Reign*, 101; on Saul and Nabal more generally see Robert P. Gordon, "David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24-26," *TynBul* 31 (1980): 37-64.

⁸³⁸ Smith, *Samuel*, 104.

⁸³⁹ Contra Edelman, *Saul*, 83; see Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 103.

⁸⁴⁰ Chapman, *Samuel*, 129; see the contrasts laid out in Auld, *Samuel*, 147; Bodner outlines a convincing parallel between Saul's statement in 9.5 and Jonathan's words in 14.1; Bodner, *Samuel*, 131; for a critical account of this comparison, see E.H. Scheffler, "Saving Saul from the Deuteronomist," in *Past, Present, Future: The Deuteronomistic History and the Prophets*, ed. Johannes C. de Moor and Harry F. van Rooy, OTS 44 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 263-271 (269).

⁸⁴¹ On Ahijah's Elide genealogy, see Matitiah Tsevat, "Studies in the Book of Samuel I: Interpretation of 1 Sam. 2.27-3.6: The Narrative of *Kareth*," *HUCA* 32 (1961): 191-216 (209-214).

⁸⁴² While Ahijah has a less prominent role in the remainder of the chapter his presence here does provoke resonances with the wider text of 1 Samuel and is, therefore, literarily suggestive; contra Franz Schicklberger, "Jonatans Heldentat: Textlinguistische Beobachtungen zu 1 Sam XIV 1-23a," *VT* 24 (1974): 324-33 (327).

⁸⁴³ Ichabod only appears here and in 4.21, perhaps bolstering the suggestion that his mention may implicate Saul; cf. Hertzberg, *Samuel*, 112; Miscall, *Samuel*, 90; Jobling, "Saul's Fall," 368; Bodner, *Samuel*, 132; on the similarities between the rejection of Saul

keeps slightly suspect, but the introduction of the “ephod” in v.3 perhaps also builds a contrast between Saul’s religious caution and Jonathan’s boldness.⁸⁴⁴

Saul’s introduction functions as an aside before the narrative returns to Jonathan. Jonathan’s boldness is further highlighted in v.6 where he addresses his armour bearer in a speech which will be programmatic for the narrative that follows:⁸⁴⁵ “Come, let us cross over to the camp of these uncircumcised, perhaps (אולי) God will act for us, for nothing hinders YHWH from saving with many (ברב) or with few (במעט).”⁸⁴⁶ Jonathan’s confidence in YHWH’s saving potential does seem to stand in some contrast to the outlook of Saul evidenced in 1 Samuel 13.⁸⁴⁷ We note, to begin with, that for Jonathan his immediate fate is not his primary concern.⁸⁴⁸ Rather, YHWH’s power to potentially intervene on his behalf is reason enough to act and act boldly. Further to this we may also see some implicit contrast with Saul’s situation in 1 Samuel 13. As Saul explains to Samuel in 13.11, he is concerned about the dual factor of diminishing forces and amassing opponents.⁸⁴⁹

and Eli, see Ulrich Berges, *Die Verwerfung Sauls: Eine thematische Untersuchung* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1989), 27-30.

⁸⁴⁴ The ephod’s role in this chapter is complex, I comment on it further at 14.18; on the ephod in the Old Testament, see Klein, *Samuel*, 135; on the contrast between Ahijah and Jonathan’s armour bearer, see Sykora, *Unfavored*, 135.

⁸⁴⁵ The rocky outposts described in v.5 may establish the difficulty of Jonathan’s crossing; cf. McCarter, *Samuel*, 239.

⁸⁴⁶ In vv.6-12 (with the exception of v.12b), the name Jonathan is spelt יהונתן, rather than יונתן (the same spelling is used widely elsewhere in 1-2 Samuel, e.g. 1 Sam. 18.3; 19.1; 20.3-5; 23.16, 18; 2 Sam. 1.4; 4.4). The variation is minor, but hard to explain; some see here the signs of redactional activity, e.g. Smith, *Samuel*, 107; Edelman suggests that the variation is used to highlight Jonathan’s complete subservience to God; Edelman, *Saul*, 84.

⁸⁴⁷ Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 136.

⁸⁴⁸ The language of trust in YHWH’s potential intervention on one’s behalf is elsewhere expressed through the particle אולי and is indicative of exemplary faithfulness. For instance, Caleb in Josh. 14.6-12, “Perhaps (אולי) YHWH is with me and will dispossess them as YHWH promised.” (Josh. 14.12). This would suggest that we should not take Jonathan’s words here as a “pious platitude” (Miscall, *Samuel*, 90-91); see, helpfully, David J. Reimer, “An Overlooked Term in Old Testament Theology – Perhaps,” in *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E.W. Nicholson*, ed. A.D.H. Mayes and R.B. Salters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 325-346, esp. 339.

⁸⁴⁹ Bar-Efrat, *Samuel*, 189,

We know from 13.5 that the Philistines have amassed a “multitude” (רבו) and that this powerful force seems to have contributed to Saul’s disobedience. In Jonathan’s case the numerical situation is explicitly dismissed as a consideration. Whether one has many or few makes no difference in relation to YHWH’s ability to save. The contrast here between Jonathan and Saul may not be a direct one, although I am inclined to think it is; but even if the contrast is implicit, Jonathan’s actions serve to illuminate Saul’s failings in a fresh way.⁸⁵⁰ Indeed, Jonathan’s boldness is affirmed in the response of his armour bearer, “Do all that is in your heart, turn to yourself, see, I am with you, even as your own heart.”⁸⁵¹ The encouragement to “Do all that is in your heart” highlights the armour bearer’s complete trust in Jonathan’s leadership and instinct; similarly, Jonathan trusts YHWH’s saving providence. For both Saul and Jonathan religious concerns lie at the heart of their military exploits, as we would expect,⁸⁵² the distinction lies in their religious attitude.

Once Jonathan has the consent of his armour bearer, he lays a hasty plan which involves making a risky approach to the Philistine camp (מצב). Jonathan’s test to discern whether YHWH will fight for him puts into practice his bold declaration from v.6.⁸⁵³ Jonathan does not enter the fray under the assumption that simply because he has put his trust in YHWH, YHWH will deliver him. On the

⁸⁵⁰ For a similar account, see Peter J. Williams, “Is God Moral? On the Saul Narrative as Tragedy,” in *The God of Israel*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 175-189 (181).

⁸⁵¹ The phrase לַעֲשׂוֹת is awkward; the LXX reads the verse, $\text{ποιεῖ πᾶν, ὃ ἐὰν ἢ καρδία σου ἐκκλίνῃ· ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μετὰ σοῦ, ὡς ἡ καρδία σου καρδία μου}$. Here I have tried to keep with MT, although the omission of לַעֲשׂוֹת at the end of the verse through haplography seems plausible. I have taken לַעֲשׂוֹת as reinforcing the armour bearer’s encouragement that Jonathan act on his initial inclination. On the difficulties see Driver, *Notes*, 81; McCarter, *Samuel*, 235-236.

⁸⁵² Karel van der Toorn, “Saul and the Rise of Israelite State Religion,” *VT* 43 (1993): 519-542 (528).

⁸⁵³ Garsiel sees here another contrast between Saul and Jonathan; Garsiel, *Samuel*, 86.

contrary, at each step he is consistent in his understanding of YHWH's potential, but by no means guaranteed, deliverance.

Jonathan and his armour bearer approach the Philistine outpost and the Philistines, in what is surely an ironic, mocking tone,⁸⁵⁴ call on Jonathan and his armour bearer to come up to them so that they might “make known something” to them. Jonathan takes this as all the confirmation necessary that “YHWH has given them into the hand of Israel” (14.13). It is unclear exactly what the significance of ויפל is in v.13. The context suggests that Jonathan and his companion bear down upon the Philistines and kill those whom they meet. But it is not apparent whether their falling (ויפל) precedes their defeat or is a consequence of it.⁸⁵⁵ The plain reading surely suggests the latter. The Philistines fall under the sword of Jonathan and his armour bearer comes after, killing those who survive Jonathan's initial attack.⁸⁵⁶ However, given the way the attack has been introduced with Jonathan's various speeches, we might be well advised to see more in Jonathan's success than mere martial craft. In the following verses YHWH's direct intervention seems to become more explicit.

After a note on the impact of Jonathan's initial attack we are told of its wider effects (v.15).⁸⁵⁷ In v.15 we seem to have an account of the extent of the panic into which Jonathan's attack has plunged the Philistines. This verse ends with the curious note that “the earth quaked, and a trembling of God came about (ותהי להרדת אלהים).” The natural terrors which accompany Jonathan's attack seem,

⁸⁵⁴ Hertzberg, *Samuel*, 112.

⁸⁵⁵ See Fokkelman, *Samuel*, 51-52.

⁸⁵⁶ Smith, *Samuel*, 108; Smith follows the LXX which reads, καὶ ἐπέβλεψαν κατὰ πρόσωπον Ἰωναθαν, καὶ ἐπάταξεν αὐτούς.

⁸⁵⁷ The final phrase of v.14 is obscure (see McCarter, *Samuel*, 236); for attempts to work with the verse, see Driver, *Notes*, 82; Tsumura, *Samuel*, 363.

surely, to point to YHWH's work on Jonathan's behalf. Indeed, the phrase וַתְּהִי אֱלֹהִים לְהַרְדֹּת אֱלֹהִים probably points to God's direct intervention; in this sense אֱלֹהִים should be taken to indicate YHWH's agency, rather than as an adjectival intensifier.⁸⁵⁸ There seems to be little doubt that Jonathan's trust has been vindicated and that his effort has been enabled by YHWH.

With the vindication of Jonathan's boldness in 14.15 we return to Saul in Gibeah. Saul assumes that the commotion in the Philistine camp has been caused by some party unknown to him. It soon becomes clear that it is only Jonathan and his armour bearer who are missing and, as such, could be the cause of the commotion (14.16-17).⁸⁵⁹ The Philistines are clearly in disarray (14.15), but before joining the battle Saul calls for Ahijah to bring the ark of God.⁸⁶⁰ Saul's reasoning for having the ark present is not stated, but presumably he intends to seek or consult YHWH before entering battle. However, no sooner has Saul summoned the ark, than the disruption and commotion of the Philistines increases to such a degree that Saul orders the priest to cease and he leads his people into battle (14.19-20).

⁸⁵⁸ So, Klein, *Samuel*, 137; Sykora, *Unfavored*, 138. This reading accords well with the note on YHWH's involvement in 14.23.

⁸⁵⁹ It is perhaps striking that Saul shows little concern for Jonathan's welfare at this point; cf. Lawton, "Saul, Jonathan," 38.

⁸⁶⁰ This whole verse causes some considerable confusion as, earlier in the narrative, Ahijah has carried the ephod. As such, the presence of the ark seems surprising. What is more, in narrative terms, it is unclear that the ark is available to the Israelites given its predicament at the end of 1 Sam. 6. As a consequence of these difficulties many follow the LXX which has "ephod" (τὸ εφֹοδ) in place of "ark" (אַרְוֹן); cf. Smith, *Samuel*, 112; McCarter, *Samuel*, 237; Klein, *Samuel*, 132; Philip Davies proposes that the term "ephod" has systematically replaced "ark" in the 1 Samuel narratives, with 14.18 being the sole exception, in order to accommodate the account of the ark's capture in 1 Sam. 4-6; see Philip R. Davies, "Ark or Ephod in 1 Sam. XIV.18?" *JTS* 26 (1975): 82-87; see also Karel van der Toorn and Cornelius Houtman, "David and the Ark," *JBL* 113 (1994): 209-231. Whether one reads "ark" or "ephod" at this point makes little difference to the overall sense of Saul's attempt to discern YHWH's will.

Once more we may see a contrast between Saul's military outlook and that of Jonathan. Jonathan's military action is preceded by a statement of YHWH's sovereign ability to intervene on his behalf and an awareness of that ability is built into his exploit. For Saul, the commencement of battle short-circuits an attempt to discern YHWH's will. Chapman summarises this contrast nicely:

At this point the contrast between Saul and Jonathan could not be sharper. Jonathan enters into battle prematurely in a worshipful spirit; Saul prematurely concludes worship in order to enter battle.⁸⁶¹

As Saul enters the battlefield, the victory seems to bear all the marks of divine victory. In the confusion Israel's enemies seem to be doing their work for them.⁸⁶² The Philistines are swept away as Saul's force is swelled by returning Israelites and defecting Hebrews. This portion of the narrative closes with the simple statement, "YHWH delivered Israel that day." Jonathan's confidence has been rewarded.

ii. *1 Sam. 14.24-46*

While the basic scene of the routing of the Philistines remains, 14.24 clearly introduces a new subject. As v.23 closes with a bald statement of YHWH's salvific work, the opening words of v.24 are all the more arresting. It seems most probable that the pressure (שגג) exerted upon the Israelites is caused by the oath of Saul.⁸⁶³ In

⁸⁶¹ Chapman, *Samuel*, 133; cf. Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 133-135.

⁸⁶² The MT of 14.20 simply reads, "See, the sword of a man was against his fellow..." but it seems to be implied in v.23 that the disaster falls upon the Philistines, not the Israelites; indeed, the וּנְהָה particle perhaps highlights that the scene is being portrayed from Saul's perspective; see Bodner, *Samuel*, 137.

⁸⁶³ Sykora, *Unfavored*, 140-141; Marsha White sees the present text portraying Saul here negatively, even though, in White's view, an earlier form of 1 Sam. 14 gave a positive account of Saul's campaign; White, "Saul and Jonathan," 129; idem, "The History of Saul's Rise: Saulide State Propaganda in 1 Samuel 1-14," in *A Wise and Discerning Mind: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*, ed. Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley, BJS 325 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 271-292; contrast the alternative view

this sense the expansion found in the LXX tradition (“[Saul] committed an ignorant act on that day”; ἠγνόησεν ἄγνοιαν μεγάλην ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ), captures the force of the MT.⁸⁶⁴ The MT’s censuring of Saul is perhaps more subtle. Saul lays an oath (לֹאֲנִי) upon the people, but the use of לֹאֲנִי may suggest a slight word play. If the root underlying לֹאֲנִי is הִלֵּא (“to swear”), as it is often taken to be, then we have a straightforward account of the oath Saul sets upon the people. However, if we accept the הִלֵּא root in a Hiphil imperfect form,⁸⁶⁵ then the pointing is anomalous. For a Hiphil imperfect with *waw*-consecutive we might expect לֹאֲנִי, this obviously poses a problem with regards to the form’s current pointing. The current pointing opens the possibility that the form derives from the root לֹאֲנִי which could mean “to play the fool.”⁸⁶⁶ The wider story seems to require the הִלֵּא root.⁸⁶⁷ However, the potential for a *double entendre* in 14.23 adds colour to the picture of Saul’s floundering attempt to crush his opponents.⁸⁶⁸ The little phrase captures something which seems to be a consistent feature of Saul’s portrayal since chapter 13: whatever his intentions, his actions take a different shape to that which he intends. Of course, the content of Saul’s oath will become significant throughout the remainder of the chapter. For now, however, it is not quite clear what motivates Saul’s imposed fast. Perhaps he intends to remove the distractions and delays of food; perhaps he seeks a grand gesture of devotion to YHWH. Whatever the case, as we will see, his oath is painfully ill-advised.⁸⁶⁹

in Nadav Na’aman, “The Pre-Deuteronomistic Story of King Saul and its Historical Significance,” *CBQ* (1992): 638-658 (646-647).

⁸⁶⁴ See McCarter, *Samuel*, 248, who follows the LXX.

⁸⁶⁵ BDB, 46.

⁸⁶⁶ Smith, *Samuel*, 118.

⁸⁶⁷ See the infinitive construct of שָׁבַע in 14.27.

⁸⁶⁸ See Long, *Reign*, 117; Klein, *Samuel*, 138; Jobling, “Saul’s Fall,” 374.

⁸⁶⁹ Brueggemann notes that Jonathan seems to transcend the ill-fated decision-making which dogs Saul; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 106.

The consequences of Saul's oath emerge almost immediately. As soon as Saul places a fast upon the people, they come across honeycomb falling to the ground. It is not explained how or why, but Jonathan has not heard Saul's oath and tastes the honey in passing. We have spoken already of the critical distance between Jonathan and Saul. Here that distance becomes explicit for the first time. On being informed of his father's oath, Jonathan declares:

My father troubles (עָכַר) the land, see now that my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if the people had eaten freely today from the spoil of their enemies which they found, for now the defeat among the Philistines is not great.

Jonathan's heroic exploits earlier in the chapter possibly grant him licence to speak out against his father. Jonathan has qualified himself as one capable of discerning how best to seek YHWH's victory. Therefore, his criticism stings all the more as he denounces his father's actions. His introduction of the verb עָכַר lends a particularly bitter edge to his criticism. The verb appears notably in relation to the story of the destruction of Ai and the sin of Achan in Joshua 6-7.⁸⁷⁰ As we will see more fully in due course, there are certain parallels between Saul and Achan, but at this point they are both those who cause "trouble" for the people of God (cf. Josh. 7.25).⁸⁷¹ What is more, Jonathan's critique of his father highlights the counterproductive nature of Saul's move. The defeat of the Philistines has not been great.

⁸⁷⁰ See Driver, *Notes*, 87; Josh. 6.18; 7.25.

⁸⁷¹ Gordon, *Samuel*, 139; Klein, *Samuel*, 138; the analogy between Josh. 7 and 1 Sam. 14 is also drawn by White, but she is inclined to see the analogy as, originally at least, reflecting positively on Saul; White, "Saul and Jonathan," 132.

From this point on the narrative flow becomes slightly more confusing. Jonathan initially states in 14.30 that the defeat of the Philistines has not been great, but then in 14.31 we are told of their striking down the Philistines from Michmash to Aijalon, a great distance with the Philistines driven west. At the end of v.31, we find another note on the people's exhaustion, presumably brought about by Saul's oath. However, circumstances seem to change again in vv.32-35 where the people fall upon the Philistine plunder.⁸⁷² Yet the crisis here is not that the people are breaking Saul's fast, but that they are eating food with its blood. This is resolved, not with the execution of the offenders, but with the building of an altar.

These points of dissonance are relatively minor and, for our purposes at least, can be resolved in various ways. It could be that while the battle passes the twenty miles to Aijalon, the actual damage inflicted on the Philistines was insignificant or that total victory was forfeited due to the troops' exhaustion; this would be suggested by the note at the end of v.31. Likewise, it may be that the troops only fell upon the spoil after the battle and, therefore, after the curse had been lifted.⁸⁷³ Under this logic, Jonathan would be the only party guilty of breaking the oath because he ate while the pursuit was still in progress. Whatever the case may be, Saul's oath appears to be the cause of the people's desperation to satisfy their hunger with untreated meat (cf. Gen. 9.4; Lev. 17.11; Deut. 12.23).⁸⁷⁴

⁸⁷² Thus, some see 14.31-35 as an interpolation; McCarter, *Samuel*, 249; Campbell, *Samuel*, 147.

⁸⁷³ Cf. 14.34; Edelman, *Saul*, 92.

⁸⁷⁴ The preposition על in the phrase העל-ההם should be taken as "with" rather than "upon" or "over"; thus, McCarter, *Samuel*, 249; Klein, *Samuel*, 139; contra Hertzberg, *Samuel*, 115-116; Stoebe, *Buch Samuelis*, 268.

Saul clearly places the blame for the sin on the people (14.33; “You deal treacherously...”), and his response seems to constitute one of his more positive moments. He takes the initiative and resolves the issues produced by the people’s frailty.⁸⁷⁵ However, if Saul’s reaction to the crisis is commendable, then the people’s rashness still may serve to highlight the extent of Saul’s own foolishness. If in Jonathan Saul’s rash oath strikes close to home, then in the people’s rash hunger the sheer extent of the damage done by Saul is also evidenced.⁸⁷⁶ Again, as is typical, the narrative provides little by way of explicit evaluation, but the allusion to the weariness of the people in 14.31 may well serve as a link between Jonathan’s conversation in vv.28-29 and the events of vv.32-34.⁸⁷⁷

The key narrative surrounding Saul’s oath and Jonathan’s infraction has been stalled somewhat by the incident of the people’s sin. In the meantime, tension has built as we have waited to see what the result of Jonathan’s mistake might be. Saul clearly does not linger once the altar has been built. He appears to suggest an immediate course of action in which, with his troops refreshed, the Philistines will be slaughtered during the night (14.36). The troops give their wholehearted consent, although we might note in passing that they call on Saul to “do all that is good in [his] eyes.” It is not Saul’s heart that is appealed to, as it was for Jonathan in 14.7; perhaps we see a slight allusion to the successor of Saul whose heart will be more trustworthy.⁸⁷⁸ The general enthusiasm, however, is dampened at this

⁸⁷⁵ See the positive account of vv.31-35 in L. Daniel Hawk, “Saul’s Altar,” *CBQ* 72 (2010): 678-687.

⁸⁷⁶ The people’s desperation may be captured by the use of the root טרף in the *Qere*; see Andrea Weiss’s discussion of the metaphorical significance of this root; Andrea L. Weiss, *Figurative Language in Biblical Prose Narrative: Metaphor in the Book of Samuel*, VTSup 107 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 54-56, 94.

⁸⁷⁷ McGinnis, “Divine Tide,” 258.

⁸⁷⁸ Edelman, *Saul*, 93; cf. Klein, *David*, 68; Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 134-135.

point as an unnamed priest advises the king to seek YHWH, presumably to discern his will. This is the first time in the narrative that Saul has inquired of YHWH, and it is done at the priest's bidding.⁸⁷⁹ Earlier in the chapter Jonathan seemed to instinctively place his military affairs before YHWH, opening himself and his armour bearer to approbation or disapproval. Here, by contrast, Saul seems to approach YHWH and his concerns as an afterthought.

Saul's first attempt to inquire of God meets with no answer. Indeed, Saul is the first person in the Samuel narrative to fail to receive an answer from God and God's silence bookends his career as a rejected king (14.37; 28.6, 15).⁸⁸⁰ YHWH's silence may have ominous implications, but initially, and perhaps rightly, Saul puts the silence down to some other sin which he now seeks to discern.⁸⁸¹ At this point, Jonathan's honey tasting has still not been revisited, but there is surely also a sense of the lurching futility of Saul's predicament as since 14.23 the narrative has moved from one failure to another.

Saul is determined to root out the sin which has arisen (14.38) and apparently emphasises his commitment by announcing that even if it is found in his own son, Jonathan will be put to death. Something of Saul's sincerity may well be seen here, yet it is telling that the most emphatic example that Saul offers is that of his son not himself. Perhaps it does not occur to Saul that he might be the cause of the problem. For the reader, and perhaps also for the people, the mention of Jonathan has a chilling effect as we recall 14.27. The people, like YHWH, are

⁸⁷⁹ Chapman, *Samuel*, 134.

⁸⁸⁰ See Auld, *Samuel*, 164; Kenneth Craig suggests that these two passages form an inclusio around Saul's narrative, see Kenneth M. Craig, Jr., "Rhetorical Aspects of Questions Answered with Silence in 1 Samuel 14.37 and 28.6," *CBQ* 56 (1994): 221-239.

⁸⁸¹ Commentators often take it as given that Saul's instincts are right here, e.g. Hertzberg, *Samuel*, 117; McCarter, *Samuel*, 249; Klein, *Samuel*, 139; cf. the cautionary comment in Auld, *Samuel*, 163.

silent before Saul's proclamation and in siding with YHWH in this sense they also seem to align themselves implicitly with Jonathan, as they will later do explicitly.⁸⁸² As it is then, at this point the distance between the father and the son becomes more emphatic. Saul and Jonathan stand together in the lot casting, but it is Saul's oath which prizes them apart.

The lot-casting ceremony is one of a number of features in the narrative which recall the account of Achan's sin in Joshua 7.⁸⁸³ Among others, Ralph Klein points out how something of the form and, indeed, much of the vocabulary mirrors that found in Joshua 7.⁸⁸⁴ The allusions to the Achan incident are subtle and flash across this chapter and into the next.⁸⁸⁵ Marsha White suggests that, at least in 1 Samuel 14, the parallels with Joshua 7 reflect positively on Saul as he takes on the Joshua role and Jonathan fills the Achan role.⁸⁸⁶ However, there are a couple of difficulties with such a straightforward account. First, Saul's raiding of the Philistines cannot simply be equated with Joshua's conquest of Canaan or, more narrowly, Ai.⁸⁸⁷ In Joshua 7-8, the Israelites ultimately gain victory over Ai following their false start. No such victory emerges in 1 Samuel 14. Instead, we read: "the Philistines went to their place" (14.46); they have certainly been driven back, but the vengeance envisaged by Saul (14.36) does not materialise. Secondly, in seeking out Achan, Joshua acts on direct instructions from YHWH (Josh. 7.10-13); Saul receives no such guidance but initiates the lot-casting ceremony himself.

⁸⁸² Auld, *Samuel*, 164; Firth, *Samuel*, 166.

⁸⁸³ Joseph Blenkinsopp also points out various ways in which Jonathan's experience in 1 Sam. 14 mirrors Gen. 3; Blenkinsopp, "Jonathan's Sacrilege," 447.

⁸⁸⁴ Klein, *Samuel*, 140; cf. White, "Saul and Jonathan," 132; the key lexical parallel is the Niphal form of לָכַד (1 Sam. 14.41; Josh. 7.16, 17, 18); cf. also the questions in 1 Sam. 14.43 (הַגִּדָה לִי מִה עָשִׂיתָה) and Josh. 7.19 (הַגִּדְנָא לִי מִה עָשִׂיתָה).

⁸⁸⁵ See Williams, "Is God Moral?" 186-187; Sternberg, *Poetics*, 497-499.

⁸⁸⁶ White, "Saul and Jonathan," 132-133.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

Thirdly, Joshua is faithful in the face of the consequences of the outcome of the lot-casting ceremony. By contrast, Saul ultimately bows to the people's will; however much sympathy we may have with the people's viewpoint, Saul's willingness to go back on his oath does not instil confidence.⁸⁸⁸ The upshot of these observations is that the allusions to the Achan account may, in fact, serve to contrast Saul and Joshua rather than compare them. This kind of reading would also prove more congruous with the allusions to the Achan narrative in 1 Samuel 15, where Saul, like Achan, breaks YHWH's חרם legislation.⁸⁸⁹

As we approach the crux and climax of the whole chapter the MT offers a terse account of the climactic moments:

⁴¹And Saul said to YHWH, 'O God of Israel, give truth (הבה תמים)⁸⁹⁰ and Jonathan and Saul were taken, and the people went out.⁸⁹¹ ⁴²Then Saul said, 'Cast between me and my son Jonathan.' And Jonathan was taken.⁸⁹²

⁸⁸⁸ Williams, "Is God Moral?" 187.

⁸⁸⁹ And of course, as we have noted, with the way the root עכר is applied to both.

⁸⁹⁰ This translation of הבה תמים follows Cornelius Van Dam, see his discussion in Cornelius Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 198, 200; cf. Tsumura, *Samuel*, 378.

⁸⁹¹ Or "escaped"; see Johannes Lindblom, "Lot-Casting in the Old Testament," *VT* 12 (1962): 164-178 (167).

⁸⁹² There is a major expansion to vv.41-42 in the LXX which many scholars follow; see Smith, *Samuel*, 121-122; Driver, *Notes*, 89; McCarter, *Samuel*, 247; Klein, *Samuel*, 132; Firth, *Samuel*, 161; A. Toeg, "Textual Note on 1 Samuel 14.41," *VT* 19 (1969): 493-498; for a response to Toeg, see Edward Noort, "Eine weitere Kurzbemerkung zu 1 Samuel 14.41," *VT* 21 (1971): 112-116. However, I am inclined to follow those who see the LXX as an explanatory expansion on the terse MT; see Van Dam, *Urim*, 197-203; Tsumura suggests that the MT's abbreviated account assumes that the audience would be familiar with the lot-casting practice (Tsumura, *Samuel*, 379); see the extensive discussion of these verses in Stephen Pisano, S.J., *Additions or Omissions in the Books of Samuel: The Significant Pluses and Minuses in the Massoretic, LXX and Qumran Texts* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1984), 183-204; Pisano is hesitant in offering a verdict on the question of 14.41, although he seems to marginally favour the MT; he clearly endorses the MT in 14.42.

As soon as Jonathan is identified as the culprit, Saul demands answers. Remarkably, there seems to be little evident sympathy or feeling from Saul following the discovery.⁸⁹³ It is now, in 14.43-45, that the distinction between Saul and Jonathan which we have traced from 13.3-4 comes to a head. Jonathan declares his fault clearly and opens himself to his fate.⁸⁹⁴ Saul repeats his conviction from 14.39 that whoever is at fault, even Jonathan, will die. The stage seems set for a tragic end to a victorious chapter; but the people, so conspicuously silent in the face of Saul's first statement of intent, now intervene.

There are two striking features of the people's response in 14.45. First, they echo 14.23, which attributed Israel's victory to YHWH (ויישע יהוה), by claiming that it is Jonathan who brought about deliverance for Israel (עֲשֶׂר הַיְשׁוּעָה (הַגְּדוּלָה הַזֹּאת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל)). The two statements are not necessarily in tension with one another. Of course, Jonathan has wrought a great victory through his daring venture in the Michmash Pass. Nonetheless, it is still equally true that YHWH was the one who brought this victory about, as Jonathan himself readily recognises (14.6). The people's point seems to be that it is Jonathan, rather than Saul, who is the instrument of YHWH's purposes in 1 Samuel 14. Indeed, Jonathan "has worked with God" (14.45). The people's statement corroborates well with the narrator's account of 14.1-23.

Secondly, the people use an oath formula to demonstrate their conviction which possibly evokes Saul's own oath at the beginning of the section. They cry, "As YHWH lives (חַי־יְהוָה), not a hair of his head shall fall to the ground..." (14.45;

⁸⁹³ Compare, for example, Jephthah's reaction to the fate of his daughter (Judg. 11.35) or David's reaction to the death of Absalom (2 Sam. 18.33).

⁸⁹⁴ Perhaps there is a further contrast here between Jonathan's open admission of fault and Saul's confusion in 13.13.

cf. 14.39). Saul's oath is countered by the people and it is their conviction which wins the day.⁸⁹⁵ Saul has already set too much store by the people in 1 Samuel 13 and he will do so again in 1 Samuel 15. Whatever we may think of the situation as a whole, Saul's foolishness has only served to highlight his malleability.⁸⁹⁶

Following 14.46 the contrast between Jonathan and Saul is submerged beneath the contrast between Saul and David which will take centre stage in 1 Samuel 16. For now, it seems apparent that Saul's failings have only been highlighted through the role of his son.⁸⁹⁷ As we read through chapter 14 the rejection of Saul in 13.7b-15a seems a stark, but very immediate, reality.⁸⁹⁸ Saul's behaviour in chapter 14 seems a world away from his daring victory in 1 Samuel 11 and surely acts as a prelude to his steady demise throughout the remainder of 1 Samuel.⁸⁹⁹

iii. *1 Sam. 14.47-52*

The close of 1 Samuel 14 is taken up with a summary of Saul's military victories and an account of his immediate family. The military details offered in 14.47-48 are surprisingly positive, given the somewhat unimpressive close to 14.46.⁹⁰⁰ Saul

⁸⁹⁵ It is not quite clear what situation is envisaged by the phrase, "And the people redeemed (יָדָפוּ) Jonathan." Perhaps they offered some sort of payment or substitute for Jonathan: Klein, *Samuel*, 141.

⁸⁹⁶ Gunn, *Fate*, 69.

⁸⁹⁷ Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 106.

⁸⁹⁸ If Saul's dynasty is rejected in 1 Sam. 13, then it is perhaps telling that he seeks in 1 Sam. 14 to kill his son, and apparent heir, Jonathan; cf. Tsumura, *Samuel*, 368.

⁸⁹⁹ "So stand, der biblischen Darstellung zufolge, Sauls Herrschaft von vornherein unter einem negativen Vorzeichen." Dietrich, *Samuel VIII/2*, 19.

⁹⁰⁰ Birch classifies 1 Sam. 13-14 as a partial fulfilment of Saul's commission in 9.16. This seems likely, but we still need to recognise the differing evaluations of this fulfilment in 14.1-46 and 14.47-48; Birch, *Monarchy*, 92.

here is praised in the most emphatic terms and, so, whatever his failings in chapter 14, we are not allowed to forget the Saul of 1 Samuel 11.⁹⁰¹

4. 1 Samuel 15

i. *1 Sam. 15.1-9*

There is no clear sense of transition from the end of 1 Samuel 14 to the beginning of 1 Samuel 15. It is unclear at what distance the events in chapter 15 stand from those at the end of chapter 14.⁹⁰² Rather, the narrative begins abruptly with Samuel's speech of instruction to Saul. In chapter 15 we enter the closing stages of Saul's legitimate and uncontested rule; here we will hear of Saul's final rejection and Samuel's opening words contain crucial elements which determine the dynamics of what follows.

Samuel begins by announcing his initial relationship with Saul: "Me, YHWH sent to anoint you king over his people, over Israel..." The pronoun *אני* is in an emphatic position at the beginning of Samuel's announcement. The whole construction seems designed to highlight Samuel's authority with regards to Saul's rule and presumably to prepare the ground for his instruction. Samuel highlights his role in anointing Saul (9.1-10.16); presumably the authority expressed in that office is being invoked to buttress Samuel's claim to speak for God.⁹⁰³

⁹⁰¹ In particular, cf. *ויעש חיל ויך את־עמלק*; the juxtaposition of the note on Amalek with *ויצל את־ישראל מיד שסרו*, perhaps suggests that a different encounter to 1 Sam. 15 is envisaged.

⁹⁰² There is little in the chapter that suggests an awareness of 1 Sam. 13-14. On the similarities between 1 Sam. 13 and 15, see Smith, *Samuel*, 129. The relationship of the two chapters has long been contested (Birch, *Monarchy*, 94-96). Still, I find Birch's suggestion compelling that they have developed into "answers to two related but separate questions: Why was Saul rejected as king and David chosen before the death of Saul, and why was Saul's dynasty not established forever while David's was?" Birch, *Monarchy*, 105-106.

⁹⁰³ Birch, *Monarchy*, 96; cf. McCarter, *Samuel*, 265.

The significance of Samuel's appeal to his initial role as the one to anoint Saul is found in his current role as a YHWH's messenger. The phrase, "listen to the voice of the words of YHWH" is anomalous.⁹⁰⁴ It may provide emphasis as it introduces Samuel's order which has been prepared for through an appeal to his previous role in Saul's appointment.⁹⁰⁵ Samuel's authority precedes his instruction.

After the introduction of Samuel's message, we might expect a command to follow immediately. Instead, however, through Samuel, YHWH recounts his remembrance of Amalek's treatment of Israel following their flight from Egypt.⁹⁰⁶ It would seem that this is a reference to an event recounted in both Exodus (Exod. 17.8-13) and Deuteronomy (Deut. 25.17-19) where the Amalekites opposed the Israelites.⁹⁰⁷ In Exodus, Amalek comes out to fight Israel at Rephidim and is ultimately defeated through Moses's intercession and God's intervention. Once Amalek has been defeated, YHWH tells Moses, in Exodus 17.14, that he will "utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven (מחה אמהה את-זכר) (עמלק מתחת השמים)." In Deuteronomy we have a slightly different account. The assessment of Amalek comes at the end of a list of various commands. Here, YHWH emphasises the way in which Amalek attacked the Israelites, particularly attacking those who were weary and lagged behind. Apparently, this was done because "he did not fear God," and presumably, then, showed no regard for

⁹⁰⁴ Ulrich Berges explains the peculiar phrase as the result of a combining of the elements דבר/יְהוָה (15.19, 20, 22) and קול יהוה (15.11, 13) from elsewhere in 1 Sam. 15; Berges, *Verwerfung*, 176; Tsumura retains MT given the analogous constructions elsewhere (e.g. Job 34.16); Tsumura, *Samuel*, 389. See the analogous phrase in Deut. 5.238.

⁹⁰⁵ The term שמע is a key one in 1 Sam. 15; indeed, it appears as many times in the chapter as another key term, חרם, highlighting the intimate relationship between the two; see Caroline Nolan, "The Rejection of Israel's First King," *ITQ* 73 (2008): 355-368 (362).

⁹⁰⁶ פקדתי could be taken with the force of "punish" or "mark/remember." I favour the latter, given the context; contra Driver, *Notes*, 92-93.

⁹⁰⁷ For a comprehensive account of the Amalekite texts in the Old Testament, see Hans Andreas Tanner, *Amalek: Der Feind Israels und der Feind Jahwes: Eine Studie zu den Amalektexten im Alten Testament* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005).

common humane concerns.⁹⁰⁸ Consequently, once Israel has rest in the land and has no further concerns with its inhabitants, then they “shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven (תמחה את־זכר עמלק מתחת השמים)” (Deut. 25.19).

While it seems clear that there is some genuine connection between the passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and as such it would be unwise to seek to divorce the two accounts too forcefully, the language in 1 Samuel 15.2 seems quite clearly to echo that found in Deuteronomy 25.⁹⁰⁹ For example, when we compare Deuteronomy 25.17 and the words of YHWH in 1 Samuel 15.2, the parallel seems quite apparent:

זכור את אשר־עשה לך עמלק בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים (Deut. 25.17).

פקדתי את אשר־עשה עמלק לישראל אשר־שם לו בדרך בעלתו ממצרים 15.2).⁹¹⁰

The assumption, in Deuteronomic terms, is that a time will come when vengeance will be meted out on Amalek. Presumably, for reasons unstated, Saul’s reign constitutes a suitable time for this retribution. However, as we see quite clearly in both the text from Exodus and that from Deuteronomy, the Amalekites are to be “blotted out” (מחה). The verb מחה (“to wipe out, blot out”) is used in a variety of contexts and is used indiscriminately of both Israelites and non-Israelites.⁹¹¹ However, it is surprising, given its repeated occurrence in Exodus 17 and

⁹⁰⁸ R.W.L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 93.

⁹⁰⁹ McCarter, *Samuel*, 265.

⁹¹⁰ See the parallelism between פקד (“to mark”) and זכר (“to remember”) in Ps. 8.4; Tsumura, *Samuel*, 389.

⁹¹¹ E.g. Gen. 6.7; Exod. 32.32; Deut. 25.6; 29.20; Judg. 21.17; 2 Kings 14.27; *HALOT*, 2:567-568.

Deuteronomy 25, that it does not appear in 1 Samuel 15. Rather a more specific, and for that matter notorious, term is used: **הָרֵם**.⁹¹²

Now Samuel turns to his key instruction for Saul (v.3), “Now, go and strike Amalek and you shall put to the ban (**וְהָרַמְתָּם**) all that is theirs and you shall not have pity upon them.” The **הָרֵם** legislation has been a classic interpretive and ethical crux for readers of the Old Testament.⁹¹³ The primary texts relating to its institution are found in Deuteronomy (Deut. 7.1-5; 20.16-18; cf. Exod. 22.20) and these appear to be most apposite here.⁹¹⁴ The practice of **הָרֵם** constituted the devoting, through destruction, to YHWH of an entire populace, as outlined in 1 Samuel 15. In this sense, it was a “religious” practice, in so far as that is a helpful category in the context of ancient Israel.⁹¹⁵ There is much debate over to what extent and in what fashion the **הָרֵם** imperatives were followed in ancient Israel.⁹¹⁶ However, what is clear, is that, in Deuteronomy at least, the command to commit a nation or people to the “ban” is enforced out of a particular concern to preserve the

⁹¹² For introductory remarks on the moral questions raised by 1 Sam. 15, see Stephen B. Chapman, “Worthy to Be Praised: God as a Character in 1 Samuel,” in Bodner and Johnson, *Characters*, 25-41 (34-40).

⁹¹³ The most extensive treatment of the term to date is found in Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical Ĥerem: A Window on Israel’s Religious Experience*, BJS 211 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991); for a recent overview of research on **הָרֵם**, see K. Lawson Younger, “Some Recent Discussion on the ĤĒREM,” in *Far From Minimal: Celebrating the Work and Influence of Philip R. Davies*, ed. Duncan Burns and J.W. Rogerson (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 505-522.

⁹¹⁴ The language of **הָרֵם** also appears in Leviticus (Lev. 27.28-29); the use of the term in Leviticus is sometimes distinguished between that of Deuteronomy in terms of war-**הָרֵם** (Deut.) and priestly-**הָרֵם** (Lev.). Priestly-**הָרֵם** seems to refer to something set apart as holy or as YHWH’s particular possession. On this distinction, see Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, JTISup 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 96-104.

⁹¹⁵ See Sykora, *Unfavored*, 154; cf. Richard D. Nelson, “Ĥĕrem and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience,” in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature*, ed. M. Vervenne and J. Lust, BETL 133 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 36-54.

⁹¹⁶ See the discussion in R.W.L. Moberly, “Election and the Transformation of Ĥĕrem,” in *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 67-89 (71-73).

covenantal identity of the people of Israel.⁹¹⁷ We see this, for example, in the way חרם is particularly invoked against the seven, or six, nations of the land in both Deuteronomy 7.1 and 20.17. In this sense, Douglas S. Earl's summary of חרם violation is helpful:

Thus covenant violation is really the issue, which the חרם violation symbolises. The presence of חרם objects is not a problem because they contaminate the Israelite camp with a property of 'חרם-ness', but because their presence is symbolic of covenant violation. Covenant violation cannot exist in Israel, since obedience to the covenant is what constitutes Israel's identity as a community in response to YHWH.⁹¹⁸

What, then, are we to make of the appearance of חרם language in 1 Samuel 15? Amalek, while having a most notorious reputation in the Pentateuchal traditions, never appears as an object of the חרם legislation until this point. Indeed, while there are surely conceptual similarities, it is by no means clear that the notion of חרם portrayed in 1 Samuel 15 derives directly from Deuteronomy 7 or 20.⁹¹⁹ Amalek seems to be marked as a particular case for חרם application perhaps because of their portrayal as the first threat to the covenant people following their liberation from Egypt. Still, as in Deuteronomy, Saul's instructions for implementing the חרם are all-encompassing in their scope; Saul is to spare none.

⁹¹⁷ Moberly helpfully advocates the term "ban" as a translation for חרם "as it has the merit of being somewhat opaque in the kind of way that prevents the contemporary reader from too readily assuming that the meaning of the word is understood." Moberly, "Election," 75.

⁹¹⁸ Earl, *Joshua*, 103.

⁹¹⁹ See Stern, *Biblical Herem*, 165-167; contra Diana Edelman, "Saul's Battle Against Amaleq (1 Sam. 15)," *JOT* 35 (1986): 71-84 (75).

From the point of view of Saul's obedience, the account of his action begins positively; Saul summons the people to Telaim (v.4).⁹²⁰ Saul promptly approaches the Amalekites and prepares an ambush.⁹²¹ However, before the attack begins in earnest Saul offers a reprieve to a certain group, presumably living among the Amalekites. He instructs the Kenites to leave Amalek lest they receive the same treatment. In the same way that YHWH offers Saul a justification for his attack on Amalek, so Saul here offers the Kenites an explanation for their deliverance. Both explanations relate to the peoples' treatment of Israel in their coming up from Egypt. Yet, while the justification pertaining to Amalek is reasonably straightforward in terms of its reference, there is no obvious point in Israel's extant literature at which the Kenites, as a definite group, show "loving kindness" to Israel.⁹²²

In offering an opportunity for escape to the Kenites, Saul does not follow Samuel's command explicitly. Yet perhaps here he shows a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of the *הרם* legislation. Meir Sternberg notes, "It is precisely what looks like a divergence from the letter of the divine command that proves so encouraging, since it manifests a remarkable grasp of the spirit informing that command."⁹²³

⁹²⁰ טלאים is often seen as identical with טלם in Josh. 15.24; cf. McCarter, *Samuel*, 266; Auld, *Samuel*, 168; the numbers in Saul's army, in contrast to 1 Sam. 13, are astonishingly large; perhaps indicating the chapter's paradigmatic nature (cf. 1 Sam. 11); Miscall, *Samuel*, 100.

⁹²¹ The reference to the city of Amalek (or cities; LXX τῶν πόλεων Αμαληκ) in v.5 is peculiar given that the Amalekites are typically thought of as nomadic; the location of this city is unknown. See Auld, *Samuel*, 163.

⁹²² Some point to the tradition that Moses's father-in-law was a Kenite (Judg. 1.16; 4.11); see Driver, *Notes*, 93; John Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 124; for alternative explanations, see McCarter, *Samuel*, 266; Tsumura, *Samuel*, 394.

⁹²³ Meir Sternberg, "The Bible's Art of Persuasion: Ideology, Rhetoric, and Poetics in Saul's Fall," *HUCA* 54 (1983): 45-83 (52). Saul's actions here seem to be in line with Joshua's. The sparing of the Kenites parallels the sparing of Rahab in Josh. 2. 1 Sam. 15.6

Saul meets with extraordinary success in his defeat of Amalek. Yet, in vv.8-9 two notes of foreboding are sounded. First, in v.8, Saul takes King Agag alive. Here Saul's disobedience to Samuel's command is somewhat implicit. However, secondly, in v.9, his disobedience is made explicit as the very language of v.3 is taken up again. Saul was told not to show pity (חמל) to the people of Amalek, but in v.9 he does exactly that showing pity, or perhaps sparing (חמל), Agag and "all that was good." In case the reader was any doubt v.9 notes, "he was not willing to put them to the ban (החרימם)."

ii. *1 Sam. 15.10-35*

In v.11 we are immediately informed of YHWH's displeasure over Saul's failure, "I repent (בהמת') of having made Saul king, for he has turned back from after me..."⁹²⁴ Saul's failure with regard to the הרם is of such a magnitude that it provokes YHWH to regret his very election; the reason given is that Saul has "turned back from me and has not established my words." Put differently, Saul's disobedience, expressed through an abandonment of YHWH and his words, has led to YHWH's abandonment of Saul. This theme is picked up again more explicitly in Samuel's rebuke of Saul in 15.23. As such, divine repentance constitutes a central concern for the chapter.⁹²⁵

"you showed loving kindness (עשיתם חסד)"; Josh. 2.12, "for I have shown you loving kindness (כִּי־עָשִׂיתִי עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד)"; cf. Miscall, *Samuel*, 100-101.

⁹²⁴ This verse introduces one of the key themes of the narrative, namely, God's so-called "repentance/נהם." There is not an immediately obvious way to translate נהם; I will discuss the term more fully later once the narrative has developed. For now, I translate נהם with the traditional term "repent," while being aware of its limitations. On the difficulties of translating נהם, see R.W.L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 108-111; cf. Terence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *HBT* 10 (1988): 47-70.

⁹²⁵ Cf. Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 140.

At the end of v.11 we receive the curious note that “Samuel was angry and cried out to YHWH all night.” It is not clear what caused Samuel’s anger nor what he cried to YHWH about. Was Samuel angry with Saul or with God? Was he pleading and interceding for Saul? Or does he perhaps fear the task ahead, as he seems to in 1 Samuel 16.2? The text gives us no real indication and if Samuel does initially feel some sympathy for Saul it appears to quickly evaporate come the morning. Still, given his later mourning for Saul (15.35; 16.1) and potential pity in 15.31, it is quite possible that Samuel is pained by the news of Saul’s failure and the prospect of his rejection.⁹²⁶

Samuel pursues Saul and is told (anonymously) that Saul has travelled to Carmel and built (מציב)⁹²⁷ for himself a monument (יד).⁹²⁸ Given the brevity of the reference, it is difficult to know what to make of Saul’s monument. Long points to the narrative analogy with Absalom’s monument (יד/מצבת) in 2 Samuel 18.18, where Absalom seeks to preserve his name.⁹²⁹ If this analogy holds, then it seems quite possible that Saul sets up this monument for the preservation of his own fame; perhaps in light of the rejection of his line. The reference to Saul’s monument may be unnerving, but it is too brief to give us much of an indication as to what will follow.

⁹²⁶ Hertzberg goes too far in suggesting that Samuel’s crying out “can only mean that he is attempting to make him change his mind.” Hertzberg, *Samuel*, 126; for a more balanced approach see Long, *Reign*, 141; Chapman, *Samuel*, 138.

⁹²⁷ The translation of the present participle is difficult; although see McCarter, *Samuel*, 262; McCarter suggests that the participle forms a parenthetical clause.

⁹²⁸ The LXX has the addition at this point, καὶ ἐπέστρεψεν τὸ ἄρμα. καὶ κατέβη εἰς Γαλαλα πρὸς Σαουλ, καὶ ἰδοὺ αὐτὸς ἀνέφερεν ὀλοκαύτωσιν τῷ κυρίῳ τὰ πρῶτα τῶν σκύλων, ὧν ἤνεγκεν ἐξ Αμαληκ. The reference to Saul’s burnt offerings seems somewhat redundant given the following narrative and even if we follow the LXX here it is by no means clear that the note on Saul’s offerings is to be taken favourably given the subsequent narrative. Contra Gunn, *Fate*, 50.

⁹²⁹ Long, *Reign*, 143; Auld, *Samuel*, 174.

In a manner strangely analogous to their previous meeting at Gilgal, Saul greets Samuel with an apparently “clear conscience.”⁹³⁰ Through linguistic resonances the narrative carefully depicts Saul’s misguided understanding of the situation. Saul declares to Samuel, in words drawn directly from YHWH’s previous pronouncement, “I have established the word of YHWH (הקימתי את־דבר) יהוה; cf. 15.11 (ואת־דברי לא הקים).” As we read Saul’s dialogue with Samuel it is not always clear whether Saul’s sincerity should be taken at face value. There seem to be moments of subtle shifting of emphasis which indicate a potential nervous guilt on Saul’s part; but these will need to be teased out as we progress.⁹³¹

Again, mirroring their encounter in 1 Samuel 13, Samuel responds to Saul’s greeting with a question (15.14). However, here the question is less direct and more subtle. Samuel asks, “But what is this sound of sheep in my ears and the sound of cattle which I am hearing?” Presumably, given YHWH’s words in 15.11, Samuel has a reasonable idea of the situation, but here he uses his question as a means of accusing Saul.⁹³² In Saul’s response we see four indicators of his unease, “And Saul said, ‘From the Amalekites *they* took them, for *the people* spared the best of the sheep and cattle in order to sacrifice to YHWH *your* God and the rest *we* have put to the ban.’” (15.15; emphasis added) There are two main points to highlight here.

First, three of the indicators I have highlighted relate to the role of the people. Saul credits the people with taking the sheep and cattle and apparently with the intention to sacrifice them. In doing so, Saul subtly distances himself from the

⁹³⁰ Chapman, *Samuel*, 138.

⁹³¹ For a masterful analysis of this dialogue, see Sternberg, “Art of Persuasion.”

⁹³² Cf. Long, *Reign*, 145.

decision to spare the sheep and cattle and even from the decision to sacrifice them to YHWH. We as readers suspect that Saul is being “invited to make a moral response”⁹³³ to Samuel’s question, perhaps in the form of repentance. As Sternberg points out, Saul, instead, offers a dubious factual account which leaves out one of the most significant factors, namely, the sparing of Agag.⁹³⁴ While in 1 Samuel 13, Saul’s account to Samuel appeared to hold fairly firmly to the narrator’s, here in chapter 15, Saul seems to subtly depart from the report of vv.8-9. In v.8 we are told that “Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep...” while in v.15, Saul announces, “the people spared the best of the sheep...” The omission is clear. What is more, Saul reverts, for the most part, to the narrator’s account at the end of the verse when talking of his part in the enactment of *הָרַם*. In v.9 we are told “and all that was despised and worthless (*נִמְבֹזָה וְנִמָּס*) they put to the ban,” Saul’s account more or less follows this, although without the language of *נִמְבֹזָה* and *נִמָּס*. This speech appears to highlight Saul’s participation in the enactment of *הָרַם*, but downplays his role in the sparing of the spoil.⁹³⁵

Secondly, in his address to Samuel, Saul speaks of “your God.” At this point it is perhaps telling that in a context where sacrifice to YHWH is so prominent, Saul distances himself from God by distinguishing Samuel’s allegiance to God from his own. As we have seen already in chapters 13 and 14, Saul’s direct

⁹³³ Sternberg, “Art of Persuasion,” 73.

⁹³⁴ Ibid., 73; cf. Berges, *Verwerfung*, 185-186.

⁹³⁵ Gunn attempts to read Saul’s explanation, particularly in vv.20-21, in line with v.9 (Gunn, *Fate*, 51-52). Gunn admits that his reading may be “over-subtle” and he largely overlooks Saul’s initial explanation in v.15 where the language (*הַמֶּלֶךְ*) more clearly resonates with v.9.

engagement with YHWH appears minimal,⁹³⁶ but here we seem to have another indicator that Saul is reluctant to identify himself too closely with YHWH.⁹³⁷

Samuel's response almost appears as an interruption of Saul's explanation: "Desist!" Samuel then goes on to point out the apparent disparity between Saul's behaviour and his status. Perhaps picking up on Saul's attempt to elide his role in sparing the spoil, Samuel contrasts Saul's littleness in his own eyes with his status as God's anointed king. Some see Samuel's allusion to Saul's littleness as a reference to Saul's diminutive air in 9.21 where he hides amongst the baggage.⁹³⁸ Samuel's attack may have this wider dynamic in view, although in its immediate context it most probably points to Saul's deference to the people. Saul is king; his is the responsibility for carrying out YHWH's command. Saul's responsibility is emphasised in vv.18-19 by the build-up of second person singular forms:

¹⁸But God sent you on the way and said "Go and you shall put the Amalekites, the sinners, to the ban and you shall fight against them until they are consumed. ¹⁹Why did you not listen to the voice of YHWH? And why did you dart upon the spoil? And you have done evil in the eyes of YHWH.

The point here is not that the Hebrew text gives some special emphasis to the second person singular forms through the use of additional pronouns. What could be given special emphasis is expressed in conventional terms. Rather, the point is that there is an unstinting singularity to the direction of Samuel's accusation. Samuel's accusation is directed against Saul and Saul alone. Saul was

⁹³⁶ Cf. the analysis in Klein, *David*, 70-71.

⁹³⁷ So, Klein, *Samuel*, 152.

⁹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 152; McCarter, *Samuel*, 267; cf. Evans, "Head Above," 114.

the one commanded by YHWH; the outcome is Saul's responsibility. Yet Saul's perplexity remains. Apparently at this point he is either still under the impression that he has acted properly, or he is holding out hope for being able to bring Samuel round. In v.20, for the first time Saul alludes to the sparing of Agag. Peculiarly, however, he includes this under how he "listened to the voice of YHWH" (v.20). The distinction between Saul and the people is then emphasised once again; it was the people who took from the spoil to sacrifice to YHWH "your God."

In v.21 Saul again emphasises the quality of what was spared such that it might be offered to YHWH. If in v.15 the people spared the "best" (מיטב) of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice, then in v.21 the claim is that the people took the "choicest of that put to the ban" (ראשית ההרם). The term is unique. As Smith points out, elsewhere ראשית is used of the "firstfruits of vegetable products."⁹³⁹ Yet its employment in relation to הרם is quite distinct.⁹⁴⁰ What we may see here, in the present shape of the text, is Saul's fundamental misunderstanding of the dynamics of הרם. In designating something הרם, one devotes it to the deity; to then seek to sacrifice to the deity "the choicest" of what is already devoted to them, seems at best confused and at worst disingenuous.

In Samuel's response in vv.22-23 we move to the poetic climax of the encounter:

²²And Samuel said, 'Does YHWH delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in listening to the voice of YHWH? See, to listen is better than sacrifice, to attend than the fat of rams. ²³For like the sin of divination is rebellion

⁹³⁹ E.g. Exod. 23.19; 34.26; Num. 15.20; Deut. 18.4; Smith, *Samuel*, 138.

⁹⁴⁰ Stern makes this point as he distinguishes הרם in 1 Sam. 15 from that found elsewhere in Deuteronomistic/Deuteronomic texts; Stern, *Biblical Herem*, 168.

and like iniquity and idols is presumption (ואון ותרפים הפצר).⁹⁴¹ Because you have rejected the word of YHWH, he has rejected you from being king.’

Samuel’s rebuke launches with the significant terms קול and שמע.⁹⁴² These have been found at key points already in the narrative (15.1, 14, 19, 20, 24).⁹⁴³ Whatever the remaining concerns which the chapter provokes, and, as we will see, these are significant, the crucial thrust of 1 Samuel 15 is found here.⁹⁴⁴ In many ways the concern is the same as that found in 1 Samuel 13; Saul has disobeyed a commandment of God. The substantive difference is that here the commandment broken is quite clear.

Samuel’s assessment of the situation highlights something which seems to be indicative of Saul’s spiritual state. Saul’s value system has been inverted. Samuel’s rhetorical questions in v.23 diagnose Saul’s failings. Saul, according to Samuel’s assessment, values external ritual practices over obedience: sacrifices are prized more highly than listening.⁹⁴⁵ Yet, this outlook is a direct inversion of YHWH’s priorities. Ritual observance should be indicative of a wider devotion, not constitutive of it. However we evaluate Saul’s rejection, if we intend to read

⁹⁴¹ The phrase in v.23aβ is complex. The LXX has καὶ πόνους θεραφιῶν ἐπάγουσιν (cf. Symmachus, ἡ δὲ ἀνομία τῶν εἰδώλων). It is quite possible that the LXX has followed a moderately different *Vorlage*. The root פצר is relatively rare in the Old Testament, but for a justification of taking it with a substantival force here, see Driver, *Notes*, 98. און is associated with idolatry in Isa. 66.3. Cf. McCarter, *Samuel*, 263.

⁹⁴² In chapter 15 I translate שמע consistently as “hear/listen,” rather than the perhaps more straightforward, “obey,” to highlight its pairing with קול.

⁹⁴³ See Jamie H. Ferguson, “The Epic and the Prophetic: A Reading of the Primeval History against 1 Samuel 15-16 and 2 Samuel 7,” *JSOT* 36 (2012): 297-320 (315). Ferguson highlights some probing analogies between Gen. 4 and 1 Sam. 15; cf. Alter, *Narrative*, 93.

⁹⁴⁴ Indeed, Chapman points to the way in which these verses capture the thrust of the whole of 1 Samuel and its concern for “true worship.” Chapman, *Samuel*, 140.

⁹⁴⁵ McCarter suggests that 1 Sam. 15.22-23 belongs “to the long tradition of prophetic attack on hollow cultic practice.” He draws analogies with Isa. 66.2b-4; Hos. 6.6; Amos 5.21-24. McCarter, *Samuel*, 267.

with the grain of the text in its present form, disobedience, that is, a refusal to listen to YHWH's words, has to be at the heart of our explanation.⁹⁴⁶

In v.24, for the first time, Saul offers some recognition of his failing. It is unclear whether this is an immediate realisation in which Saul suddenly comes to see his disobedience for the first time, or an admission of disobedience which Saul was already aware of but had previously sought to cloak. The text gives us no clear indication either way, although it may be telling that the people re-emerge as actors in Saul's narrative. Previously it has been their decision to preserve some of the livestock (15.15); now Saul listens (שמע) to them and so sins. Perhaps Saul's consistent appeal to the role of the people throughout the chapter is suggestive of a residual uneasiness or even guilt associated with their role (cf. 13.11).

Alternatively, Saul may still be seeking to displace the blame. As in 15.9 Saul and the people both spare the livestock, but by attributing his disobedience to the influence of the people's voice Saul still departs from the narrator's account.

While vv.22-23 may be the crux of the chapter, their significance is not immediately felt by Saul. Once he has admitted his sin, he asks Samuel for forgiveness and asks him to return with him, presumably to the site of the sacrifice in Gilgal, where he will worship YHWH.⁹⁴⁷ Yet, at this point Samuel remains unmoved. Saul has rejected (סאמ) the words of YHWH and, consequently, YHWH has rejected (סאמ) Saul as king (15.26).⁹⁴⁸ In the wider context of the text of 1

⁹⁴⁶ This would seem to draw into question Walter Brueggemann's attempt to disentangle loyalty to YHWH, loyalty to Samuel and the destruction of Amalek from under what he calls Samuel's "one-issue political ideology." These distinctions might (or might not) be those we wish to make in response to the text, but they seem misplaced when construed as constitutive of the text's own presentation. See Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 110.

⁹⁴⁷ Cf. Hertzberg, *Samuel*, 128.

⁹⁴⁸ The verb סאמ tends to imply the formal ending of a covenant or relationship; cf. 2 Kings 17.20; Isa. 33.8; Jer. 2.37; 6.30; Hos. 4.6. We may see here how "the narrative portrays

Samuel, we surely hear resonances here of Samuel's discussion with YHWH in 1 Samuel 8.7 and his warning to the people in 10.19.⁹⁴⁹ In both instances **בָּחַר** is used to characterise the people's decision for a king; in choosing a king the people reject YHWH. Here, however, the chosen king rejects God's words by listening to the people.⁹⁵⁰ The finality of Samuel's words makes clear that in this instance, perhaps in contrast to 1 Samuel 13, Saul himself is the object of rejection. Seemingly, there is nothing to be done to make recompense for this misdeed.

Samuel's announcement of Saul's rejection serves as the opening for one final scene between the two men. The tearing of Samuel's robe, as Saul reaches out in supplication, is seen as a symbol by Samuel of the finality of Saul's rejection.⁹⁵¹ Samuel adds a further statement of the finality of Saul's rejection:

²⁸YHWH has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and given it to your neighbour, who is better than you; ²⁹and also the Everlasting One of

Samuel as the uncompromising voice of the old covenantal tradition." Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 108; cf. McCarter, *Samuel*, 268.

⁹⁴⁹ On wider similarities between 1 Sam. 8 and 15 in particular, see Smith, *Samuel*, 129.

⁹⁵⁰ These resonances with 1 Sam. 8 and 10 may well be congruent with the reference to 10.1 in 15.1; this negative appraisal of Saul's listening to the people runs counter to Dawn Maria Sellars, "An Obedient Servant? The Reign of King Saul (1 Sam. 13-15) Reassessed," *JSOT* 35 (2011): 317-338.

⁹⁵¹ See Paul A. Kruger, "The Symbolic Significance of the Hem (*kānāf*) in 1 Samuel 15.27," in *Text and Context: Old Testament and Semitic Studies for F.C. Fensham*, ed. W. Classen, *JSOTSup* 48 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 105-116. In theory either Saul or Samuel could be the subject of **קָרַח**; given the context, I am content to assume it is Saul.

Israel⁹⁵² will not deceive (ישקר)⁹⁵³ and he will not repent (ינהם) for he is not a human that he should repent (להנהם).

As in 1 Samuel 13, here we have a reference to Saul's replacement. We will comment on this reference in due course; but first, Samuel's pronouncement presents a difficulty for those wishing to read with the grain of the text's received form as it appears to directly contradict YHWH's earlier statement in 15.11.⁹⁵⁴ In 15.11 we read of YHWH's words, "I repent (נחמתי) that I made Saul king..."; in 15.29, by contrast, we read, "the Eternal One of Israel will not deceive and will not repent (ינהם)..." This tension is often pointed to as an instance of problematic contradiction. Robert P. Carroll puts it quite starkly, writing of the difficulties the Bible presents for the construction of theological dogma, he notes:

Either Yahweh repents (as humans do) or Yahweh does not repent (unlike humans). Both cannot be true. That, in Western logic, is the law of the excluded middle. It is also a violation of the rules about contradiction. So if theological systems are to be founded on the Bible they are going to run into serious problems in 1 Samuel 15.⁹⁵⁵

⁹⁵² The phrase נצח ישראל is unique in the Old Testament and nowhere else is the term נצח used in the deity's title. The term is used as an attribute of the ideal king (1 Chron. 29.11). Its basic sense suggests "eminence," "splendour" or "perpetuity." It is almost impossible to determine what the right nuance is here. The LXX offers very little in terms of assistance as it reads καὶ διαίρεθήσεται Ἰσραὴλ εἰς δύο, perhaps translating a different *Vorlage*, perhaps reading נצח in the Niphal.

⁹⁵³ The NRSV reads, "the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind;" this reading follows the LXX (ἀποστρέφω) and Qumran (ישוב). Retaining the more forceful verb שקר fits better with the parallel text in Num. 23.19.

⁹⁵⁴ As throughout 1 Samuel, it seems best, unless clearly guided otherwise, to read Samuel's words as genuinely reflective of YHWH's viewpoint; Polzin's contention that Samuel is painted in "unflattering" ways by the Deuteronomist is largely overstated; Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 145; cf. Klein, "Für und wider," 104; Yairah Amit, "The Glory of Israel Does Not Deceive or Change His Mind': On the Reliability of the Narrator and Speakers in Biblical Narrative," *Prooftexts* 12 (1992): 201-212.

⁹⁵⁵ Robert P. Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheep Fold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1991), 42.

Carroll goes on to argue that a “critical” reading of the text (by which he means a reading freed from the “straightjacket of dogmatic control”) could take v.29 as an ironic gloss.⁹⁵⁶ While Carroll’s own explanation might be unsatisfactory, he sets up the issues sharply and draws our attention to the wider theme of God’s repentance in the Old Testament which this verse purportedly contradicts (cf. Jer. 18.7-10 Jonah 3.10).⁹⁵⁷

How then might we approach this extraordinary statement? To begin with it is worth noting the similarities between 1 Samuel 15.29 and Numbers 23.19, which reads, “God is not a man that he should lie (ויִכֹּזֵב), or a human being (וּבִנְיָ אָדָם) that he should repent (וַיִּתְנַחֵם).”⁹⁵⁸ Both 1 Samuel 15.29 and Numbers 23.19 appear to illuminate the sense of the term נָחַם through the use auxiliary verbs appearing in parallelism. In 1 Samuel 15.29 the verb is שָׁקַר (“do/deal falsely”); the noun שִׁקָּר (“deception, disappointment”) is widely attested in the Old Testament. In Numbers 23.19, the verb is כֹּזֵב (“to lie”).⁹⁵⁹ The assumption, then, must be that the kind of “repentance” denied here in 1 Samuel 15 and Numbers 23, is a kind which would be congruent with deceit and lies. In other words, it is perhaps not denied that YHWH will never turn back from a course once set upon (as he does in 15.11), rather it seems to be denied that he will ever act capriciously or unfaithfully. YHWH will act in ways which are responsive, while also being reliable and trustworthy.⁹⁶⁰ He does not change in the manner of a human being.

⁹⁵⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁹⁵⁷ See the engagement with Carroll in Moberly, *Old Testament*, 112-116.

⁹⁵⁸ There is perhaps a wider link between 1 Sam. 15 and Num. 23 as key terms in 1 Sam. 15.23, אָוֶן and קָסָם, only appear together in the same context elsewhere in the Old Testament in Num. 23.21, 23; see, Auld, *Samuel*, 176. Again, there may be connections with the Balaam narrative which go beyond Num. 23, see the oracles concerning Amalek and the Kenite in Num. 24.20-21 and the reference to an Agag in Num. 24.7.

⁹⁵⁹ Cf. Moberly, *Old Testament*, 131.

⁹⁶⁰ Ibid., 121.

This reading seems to be upheld when we look again at 1 Samuel 15.28. Here we see the context which provides the impetus for the sweeping statement in 15.29.⁹⁶¹ The reference to the “neighbour” in v.28 refers to David, who will be anointed in the following chapter. It also suggests that YHWH’s promise of permanence in 15.29 applies particularly to David and his progeny.⁹⁶² As we have seen in 1 Samuel 13, because of the nature of David’s commitment to YHWH and, perhaps, because of some intrinsic, if elusive, quality which David possesses, the terms on which he engages with YHWH differ to those of Saul. Terence Fretheim puts it like this:

Verse 28 states that God has taken the kingdom from Saul and given it to David; v. 29 then proceeds to speak to this particular action of God: With regard to the giving of the kingdom to David, this is a matter concerning which God will not repent, come what may.⁹⁶³

The tension between 1 Samuel 15.11 and 15.29 perhaps, more than anything, points to the discrepancy between the terms of Saul’s engagement with YHWH and the terms which will determine David’s relationship with YHWH.⁹⁶⁴ To be sure, David is, in a certain sense “better” (הטוב) than Saul; but YHWH responds to David in such a way that the terms of YHWH’s responsiveness are radically reformulated. Divine repentance is no longer a prospect in the same way.

⁹⁶¹ Polzin points out the ways in which the antecedent context determines the meaning of נָהַם across a range of Old Testament texts; Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 140-141.

⁹⁶² So, Berges, *Verwerfung*, 190-191.

⁹⁶³ Terence E. Fretheim, “Divine Foreknowledge, Divine Constancy, and the Rejection of Saul’s Kingship,” *CBQ* 47 (1985): 595-602 (597).

⁹⁶⁴ For a more explicitly dialogical reading, see Benjamin J.M. Johnson, “Characterizing Chiastic Contradiction: Literary Structure, Divine Repentance, and Dialogical Biblical Theology in 1 Samuel 15.10-35,” in *Theology of the Hebrew Bible: Volume 1 Methodological Studies*, ed. Marvin A. Sweeney, RBS 92 (Atlanta: SBL, 2019), 185-212.

In 15.30 Saul repeats his confession and again entreats Samuel to accompany him to worship; this time Samuel agrees.⁹⁶⁵ Saul asks Samuel to honour him before the elders of Israel. Perhaps this plea highlights some of Saul's overarching concern. It may be that he has recognised that reconciliation with God is an impossibility and, as such, now turns to maintaining his position of authority and honour before the people. More likely, to my mind, is that Saul's concern with his honour before the elders is congruent with his consistent concern with the people throughout 1 Samuel 13-15. Even at his lowest point, the draw of popular approval shapes his perspective. It is somewhat surprising, then, that Samuel acquiesces to his request. This may reflect the tacit sympathy which Samuel seems to display towards Saul throughout the narrative (cf. 15.11, 35; 16.1).

Samuel finally chooses to complete what Saul has neglected. He calls Agag to him and Agag comes. The translation of v.32 is a major difficulty, and it largely turns on how one is to construe Agag's state of mind as he approaches Samuel.⁹⁶⁶ We might do well at this point to seek help beyond the text of MT. While the ancient versions seem to have had difficulty here as well, the Septuagint tradition may offer some insight with its rendering, τρέμων, "trembling." This would seem to make sense of Agag's position as one facing death; of course, we do not know whether the Septuagint's translators were working from knowledge

⁹⁶⁵ Given Samuel's change of heart from 15.26 some see here a double ending to the account; cf. McCarter, *Samuel*, 268; Paul Kruger sees Samuel's response to Saul's second confession as shaped by Saul's act of supplication in 15.27; Kruger, "Symbolic Significance," 111.

⁹⁶⁶ The word מְעַדְנֹת proves to be the interpretive crux. Some link it with מְעַדְנֹת found in Job 38.31, which seems to refer to "bonds" or "fetters" and thus be linked, via metathesis, with the verb עָנָה (Prov. 6.21; Job 31.36). This suggestion appears to date back to David Kimḥi and finds a recent advocate in McCarter, *Samuel*, 264. Others look to the Hithpael form of the root עָנָה which appears in Neh. 9.25 and seems to refer to some overindulgence or might mean "to luxuriate." Consequently, the adverbial sense here would be something akin to "daintily," which seems unlikely; see the explanation of this view, and the objections to it, in Smith, *Samuel*, 142.

which is now no longer available or whether they were working with their best guess.⁹⁶⁷

The whole difficulty in establishing Agag's frame of mind is compounded by the difficulty of his thought in v.32b, "Surely the bitterness of death turns aside (סר)."⁹⁶⁸ The MT's text may introduce a note of hope into Agag's mind, even as he approaches Samuel in fear. If this is the case, such hope is short lived. Samuel's pronouncement on Agag makes it clear that his death amounts to the just reward of his dealings with countless others (15.33). Samuel's slaughter of Agag could be taken as the fulfilment of his initial command to Saul. If this is so, however, it is perhaps notable that the language of חרם is not reintroduced at this point. Moreover, if Samuel were to complete the command given to Saul, then we should expect him to deal with the livestock retained by the people, but no mention is made of them. It is perhaps more likely, then, that the reason for Agag's death is in fact given in v.33. As Agag's sword has rendered women childless, so his own mother would be rendered childless. It is possible, therefore, that with Saul's disobedience the חרם mandate falls from view. Saul has disobeyed YHWH's command and thus rendered the חרם mandate redundant; no fulfilment of YHWH's command, by Saul, Samuel or anyone else, can now redeem the situation.

The chapter closes with a note on Saul and Samuel's separation (15.34) and a statement on its permanence (15.35).⁹⁶⁹ We are told that Samuel "grieved"

⁹⁶⁷ See the helpful note marshalling the various witnesses, S. Talmon, "1 Sam 15:32b – A Case of Conflated Readings," *VT* 11 (1961): 456-457.

⁹⁶⁸ סר is omitted in many ancient witnesses. Quite what to make of this omission is unclear; but it may point us towards the potential originality of the LXX's reading: Εἰ οὕτως πικρὸς ὁ θάνατος; McCarter puts the presence of סר down to dittography; McCarter, *Samuel*, 265.

⁹⁶⁹ The suggestion that Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death is complicated somewhat by 1 Sam. 19.23-24, which depicts Saul coming before Samuel and prophesying.

for Saul. Whatever the harshness of Samuel's demeanour towards Saul or the necessity of Saul's rejection, the pain of such an event is still borne by the prophet. However, this grief does not serve to nullify the statement which summarises the central significance of 1 Samuel 15, "And YHWH repented that he had made Saul king over Israel."

The significance of Saul's rejection will need to be worked out more fully in the following, and final, chapter. However, at this point it will be helpful to briefly summarise what we have seen of Saul. A central contention in my reading is that Saul's disobedience in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 makes a substantial difference in the outworking of his own fate. Another world was open to Saul which he foregoes through his actions at Gilgal. Thus, YHWH's rejection of Saul is not depicted as an immovable inevitability, but in rejecting Saul YHWH responds to Saul's own actions. What is more, Saul's disobedience hinges on more than cultic infractions but is probably indicative of a wider disposition. Saul refuses to wait for Samuel's arrival and instruction in 1 Samuel 13 due to the pressure of his military position. In 1 Samuel 15 he explicitly appeals to the people as those who have swayed him in his decision making. In both instances YHWH and YHWH's purposes are not foremost in his considerations. This account of the two chapters is strengthened by the comparison with Jonathan which makes up 1 Samuel 14. Where Jonathan displays an open and confident attitude, Saul is somehow both rash and cautious. In this sense, Saul's kingdom cannot be established in the way that it will be for his successor whose distinct, if elusive, quality means that he will relate to YHWH on different terms.

Having now considered the rejections of Esau and Saul from various perspectives, in some depth, it is now time to try and draw together these observations into some constructive conclusions.

CONCLUSION

How, then, are we to make sense of all that we have said on this controversial topic of divine rejection? For better or worse, I have reserved sustained reflection on the implications of my readings of Esau and Saul to this point that they might be considered alongside one another. First, I offer some more sustained reflections on Esau and Saul separately before moving to a brief account of their significance when read alongside one another in the context of a wider Christian theological context.

1. Esau

In approaching the rejection of Esau, we spent time engaging two master exegetes in the form of John Calvin and Jon D. Levenson. The purpose of this engagement was, of course, to see how Calvin and Levenson attended to the specifics of the text, but also, more broadly, to see how they went about situating their readings of Esau within larger theological and existential frameworks. Taking the insights of Calvin and Levenson as my starting point, I have sought to offer a close reading of Genesis 25-36 as these chapters relate to Esau. Calvin and Levenson provided useful conversation partners as their readings, and wider conceptual frameworks, push in differing directions.

For Calvin, the centre of the Jacob-Esau narrative is the decision to distinguish between the two brothers without reference to any merit, or potential merit, that either possesses. Indeed, the inversion of primogeniture exemplified in the narrative serves to highlight the startling fact that YHWH takes no account of human merit. Rather, YHWH's favour is founded solely on His grace. It is this discriminative grace which forms the foundation of YHWH's election. We noted

Calvin's particularly careful move to distinguish the "common adoption" (*communis adoptio*) of Genesis 25 from the "secret election" (*arcana electio*) which is Paul's primary concern in Romans 9. The reason that Paul can cite Genesis 25.23 in Romans 9 to such good effect, according to Calvin, is that the elective logic on display is the same in both instances. There is, therefore, a spiral of election within which the principle of election remains the same while the number of those elected is refined.

However, as we have seen, a key weakness in Calvin's overall handling of the Jacob-Esau relationship, when placed in the context of his wider theological account, is the judgement he makes regarding Esau's individual treatment. The election of Jacob's seed in Genesis 25.23 is not coterminous with the "secret election." We might wonder then whether Esau's rejection in the Genesis narrative can easily be read as synonymous with reprobation as classically understood. Calvin argues at some length in the *Institutes* that Jacob's election should be read as election to eternal life; but we are left wondering how this relates to the careful distinction in his commentary between the "common adoption" of Genesis 25.23 and the "secret election" of Romans 9. It seems that in order to discuss Esau's place in YHWH's purposes with due care, we require a more diligent account of how the decision making of Genesis 25.23 might, or might not, fit into more overarching Christian concerns.

It is with this in mind that we turn to Levenson. Levenson does not offer the kind of sustained commentary on the Jacob-Esau narrative that we find with Calvin. However, his brief account of the story, when set within the wider framework of his reflection on election, proves provocative in significant ways. To begin with, we should offer some thoughts on what I suggested was the central

weakness of Levenson's wider thinking on election with reference to the Jacob-Esau narrative. There seems little indication in the Jacob-Esau story that God's election of Jacob is vindicated at any point in such a way that would distinguish him from his brother. The closest the narrative seems to come to vindicating Jacob in any significant sense appears to be through the blessing Jacob receives at the Jabbok in Genesis 32. It is perhaps telling though that Jacob's encounter at the Jabbok appears directly before his meeting with Esau in which Esau displays such extraordinary magnanimity. Is Jacob distinguished in Genesis 33 in any way that would vindicate his election? Not really. Elsewhere in his account of the patriarchal narratives Levenson is nervous about the apparently "arbitrary" nature of the divine decision when read through the polarising lens of a grace-works paradigm. Yet, when he comes to read the Jacob-Esau narrative, he seems to fail to give due weight to what appears to be an inexplicable distinction between the two brothers. From an ethical standpoint, contrived as this might seem, there appears little to separate the two brothers either at the beginning or the end of the narrative. In other words, if YHWH's decision to favour Jacob is something other than arbitrary, we are left wondering under what terms YHWH's decision might be justified. In this sense, Calvin's insistence on what we might call the scandal of the disparity seems closer to the dynamics of the Genesis text.

However, when it comes to Levenson's other major emphasis, that of complicating the relationship between particularity and universalism, we find a helpful corrective. Levenson's reading of the enduring particularity of Israel, within the biblical narrative, sees it as bracketed with a divine concern for the whole of humanity. There is an antediluvian concern for an undifferentiated humanity which is echoed, although not exactly mirrored, in the eschatological

vision which seems to emerge at various points in the Hebrew Bible. Levenson does not bring these reflections into play in any substantive way in his reading of Jacob and Esau,⁹⁷⁰ nor for that matter does this concern register at all prominently in his work on the patriarchal narratives. Still, Levenson's reflections on the Hebrew Bible's potentially more open-ended approach to the significance of divine election may give us a partial framework within which to consider Esau's rejection. Levenson's work on particularity and universalism provides the impetus for a return to the discrete witness of the Old Testament, before offering wider theological conclusions as to the nature of Esau's rejection.

Turning, then, to our reading of Esau's narrative, what might we say about this depiction of a rejected figure? From the outset Calvin's account of the inexplicable nature of the distinction between Jacob and Esau, raised in Genesis 25.23, holds good. That the oracle is offered before the birth of either son, that both sons are of the same mother, indeed twins, all suggests that there can be little to distinguish between them. Indeed, in my own reading I suggested that, if any distinction is to be made, it should note that Esau emerges from the womb as the victor in the prenatal struggle. Thus, YHWH's decision has an element of what Levenson might term the arbitrary. Yet, as we have seen, there is a degree of complexity in the initial oracle which gives the reader pause for thought. While it seems quite right to suggest that the oracle drives, shapes or even determines the subsequent narrative, the terms on which it does this are not entirely straightforward. From a purely grammatical point of view the oracle is ambiguous. It is unclear, at least initially, who is to serve whom. I have sought to argue that this

⁹⁷⁰ Although Levenson does reference Esau's acceptance of Jacob's election in sympathetic terms; Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, 68.

ambiguity does not render the oracle entirely opaque. There remain good reasons for taking the **ב** as the probable subject of **יעבד**. In this sense, therefore, the oracle does not leave entirely open the question of who will triumph over whom. However, if we try and take seriously what significance there might be in the oracle's inherent ambiguity, we could suggest that it serves to complicate the divine decision and the outworking of human action within the narrative.

The ambiguity of the oracle's form creates a dialectic between the action of the characters and the shape given to their futures by the divine decision. This is an asymmetrical relationship;⁹⁷¹ the narrative has been given a definite shape by YHWH's words in Genesis 25.23. However, this dialectic means that Esau's behaviour, in Genesis 25 and 26 especially, serves to fill out and not simply fulfil the oracle. The steady ascendancy of Jacob in the early chapters of the narrative has an interpretive significance when it comes to the oracle. It is part of the Hebrew narrative art to set up this situation with such care.

I take it, then, that Esau is rejected from holding priority over his brother. That is to say that before the birth of either, YHWH elects Jacob as the bearer of the promise and as the father of his people. However, from the narrative's point of view, all questions are not resolved by the oracle of Genesis 25.23. The narrative explains the oracle, as the oracle explains the narrative.

To speak of explanation, however, is not quite the same as to speak of justification or vindication. As we have seen, YHWH's election of Jacob is not vindicated in any straightforward way by his behaviour. Indeed, it appears as though Jacob and Esau go toe-to-toe throughout the narrative in terms of their

⁹⁷¹ For the language of asymmetry, see David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 32-36.

general characterization. Early on, neither is depicted in flattering terms. Esau shows disregard for his status as the first-born and wounds his parents through his marriages. Jacob, on the other hand, appears ruthless and deceptive and as Genesis 27 closes we may find our sympathies lying more with his cheated brother than with him. This situation is not entirely resolved by the close of the narrative either. Jacob re-emerges from Paddan-aram and confronts Esau in a way, I suggest, which appears distinctly humble. Yet even Jacob's apparent deference is outdone by Esau's exuberant welcome. The brothers meet and find some form of reconciliation.

One of the most intriguing elements of Jacob's meeting with Esau in Genesis 32-33 is the way in which God and Esau are spoken of in comparable terms. This is most striking in Jacob's description of seeing Esau again as like "seeing the face of God" (33.10). Moreover, as Jacob approaches Esau the language of "favour" (חן) takes on an unprecedented prominence in the narrative. As suggested already, central to this climactic scene is Jacob's realisation that his ascendancy, indeed his safety, is dependent on divine favour. This realisation is brought about through his palpable vulnerability before Esau and Esau's bestowing of favour on Jacob. In other words, the inscrutable decision in Jacob's favour in Genesis 25.23 is animated and, from Jacob's point of view, realised through his dependence on the rejected figure of Esau. Perhaps we see something of Esau's role explained in the comments of Rowan Williams on the experience of the eponymous character of Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Lila*:

What Lila sees at the end of the novel that bears her name is the way in which a whole series of profoundly flawed, guilty, damaged persons have mysteriously helped to create in her a responsiveness to grace.⁹⁷²

This surprising twist sends us back once again to reconsider the implications of Genesis 25.23. Thus, the dialectic between oracle and narrative is maintained.

This is all well and good, but what more are we to say of Esau? Esau is rejected as the recipient of YHWH's blessing and as the ancestor of YHWH's people, but the significance of this rejection is hard to gauge. Esau appears as an agent of mercy in Genesis 32-33 and this, combined with the obscure promise of 27.40b, may incline us to limit the dimensions of Esau's rejection. Here we might return to Levenson's account of the horizons of the Hebrew Bible's particular concern for Israel. Might it not be that the rejection of Esau's line is taken up in a more hopeful account of a shared human future in which Israel maintains a particular significance? Of course, this is a question which threatens to run on beyond the scope of our conclusions here.⁹⁷³ Still, one word of caution may be in order. There is surely some suggestion that the scenes of reconciliation between Esau and Jacob in Genesis 33 are not the end of Esau's depiction. We have seen how in Genesis 36 a disquieting connection is made between Esau and Amalek, ancestor of Israel's most potently depicted enemies.⁹⁷⁴ It is unclear what weight to give to this brief allusion. Surely it is not to overwhelm the depiction of Esau in Genesis 32-33. Yet it may warn us away from too sanguine an assessment of Jacob

⁹⁷² Rowan Williams, "Beyond Goodness: Gilead and the Discovery of the Connections of Grace," in *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Keith L. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 157-167 (163).

⁹⁷³ On the wider depiction of Esau/Edom, see Anderson, *Brotherhood*; and beyond, Malachi Heim Hacothen, *Jacob & Esau: Jewish European History Between Nation and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁹⁷⁴ Kaminsky, *Jacob*, 115-116.

and Esau's relationship following their respective election and rejection. It is, therefore, difficult for one reflecting on the rejection of Esau within a Christian theological frame of reference not to suffer from the nagging suspicion that trying to classify the nature of Esau's rejection constitutes an enterprise without a satisfying solution. Esau is both the careless hunter who despises his birthright and the cheated mourner who is robbed of his blessing. He is both the magnanimous brother, extending favour to the one who cheated him, and the ancestor of Israel's most notorious enemy. It may be that we can say little more than what we have already said; Esau is rejected as the recipient of YHWH's blessing and as the ancestor of YHWH's people. As Levenson shows, broadly speaking, to be rejected under these terms does not necessarily shut down Esau's horizon, but little more can be said beyond this provisional assessment.⁹⁷⁵

The danger here, of course, is that speculation about the terms of Esau's rejection obscures something more fundamental. In part, this study has sought engage the narratives surrounding Esau and Saul with a sensitivity to how they might function within a wider theological context. The doctrine of election, properly construed, has always been about God.⁹⁷⁶ In Christian terms, it is a doctrine which bears witness to the utter contingency of human life, faith and hope. Karl Barth seems to be circling this point when he notes:

⁹⁷⁵ Cf. Anderson, *Brotherhood*, 234-235.

⁹⁷⁶ Katherine Sonderegger, "Election," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 106-120 (106).

In His grace God is the One who unconditionally precedes (*unbedingt Vorangehende*) the creature. Man with his decision can only follow. He cannot forestall God with any claim, or condition, or ground of action...⁹⁷⁷

By re-emphasising the role of the doctrine of divine election in witnessing to divine pre-eminence and human contingency both triumphalism and despair can be offset. The narrative of Jacob and Esau may bear witness to human contingency in the face of the ways of God in a striking and artistically distinct way.

One perennial problem in thinking through the seemingly intractable difficulties surrounding divine rejection is the tension between transcendent decision making and the limited interpretive capacity of human agents.⁹⁷⁸ Can human beings know what God decides? The tension, in other words, is one of perspective. God's eternal will manifests itself in God's plan which is worked out through the particular events of human history.⁹⁷⁹ How, then, do these temporally conditioned events relate to God's eternal will? The questions surrounding election and rejection which have dogged Christian theologians are, in part at least, a soteriological way into this question.

To speak of "tensions" in theological discourse can often be a way of foreclosing discussion of difficulty. However, there may be ways of giving expression to difficult theological concepts which go beyond the realms of analytical explanation. The classic creeds, for instance, might stand as examples of

⁹⁷⁷ *CD* II/2, 27-28; *KD* II/2, 28.

⁹⁷⁸ This was, of course, a major concern in the sixteenth century and formative in aspects of Calvin's thought; see William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 153-154; cf. Barth's concerns, leading to his attempt at reformulation; *CD* II/2, 48-55; *KD* II/2, 53-60.

⁹⁷⁹ Cf. John C. Cavadini, "God's eternal knowledge according to Augustine," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 37-59 (44).

this. The mystery of the Trinitarian reality of God or the two natures of Christ cannot be explained, but they can perhaps be “stated” in ways which, Christians believe, give real expression to their transcendent substance. In an analogous way the tension between divine decision making and the perspective of the human agent, which finds expression in various ways, probably most famously in the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, cannot be explained in analytical terms but may be “shown.”⁹⁸⁰

It is here that the theological significance of narrative can be introduced. One striking element of the distinction made between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25-36 is the way in which it gives expression to the tension described in the previous paragraph. The ambiguity inherent in Genesis 25.23, while not decisive, prevents the reader, and Rebekah for that matter, from gaining unmitigated access to the realm of transcendent decision making. It injects a degree of provisionality into the subsequent narrative. The oracle receives its full explanation from the events which follow it. However, this does not mean that the element of inexplicable divine favour is done away with. The context of Jacob’s election and Esau’s rejection is taken up again in Genesis 32-33 and it is here that the language of favour is introduced most explicitly into the narrative. At the climax of the narrative the inexplicable distinction between the brothers is maintained and, as such, a more concrete reading of Genesis 25.23 is suggested. Still, even then, the ambiguity cannot be done away with. Part of the subtlety of the Jacob-Esau

⁹⁸⁰ Paul Ricoeur argues, perhaps analogously, that narrative is a response to “inconclusive rumination” on time. However, this response is not a straight substitute for the kind of theoretical speculation to which it responds. “Not that [narrative activity] solves the aporias through substitution. If it does resolve them, it is in a poetical and not a theoretical sense of the word.” Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1:6.

narrative is that it refuses to allow the reader to transcend the provisional nature of the human knowledge of God's ways in the world. Perhaps this is the best reason for holding to a more cautious account of Esau's rejection than Calvin's reading would permit.

In other words, expressing reticence as to the nature of Esau's rejection and its place within a wider theological framework is not to throw up one's hands in acceptance of a trivial account of "mystery." It is, instead, to hold to a legitimate way of reading the Genesis text which bears witness to the provisional nature of human understanding. Perhaps this is, in fact, a concrete example of the *docta ignorantia*, that "learned ignorance," which Calvin himself gives as a guiding principle of his own discussion of predestination.⁹⁸¹ Perhaps such a reading of Genesis 25-36 finds a congruence with the conclusion of the most famous Christian meditation on the mysteries of divine election and divine hardening:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unfathomable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!

'For who has known the mind of the

Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?'

'Or who has given a gift to him,

to receive a gift in return?'

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11.33-36)

⁹⁸¹ *Inst.* 2:923; *CO* 2:680.

2. Saul

As we consider the character of Saul, the issues shift. A particular strength of considering the stories of Esau and Saul alongside one another from a theological point of view is that they present such differing pictures. While Esau is, seemingly, rejected before his birth, before he has “done anything good or bad” (Rom. 9.11), Saul is rejected apparently in response to his actions in 1 Samuel 13 and 15. Whereas, classically understood, all in Esau’s narrative appears contingent on God’s initial decision, for Saul, God’s decision is presented as responsive. There is then a tension between transcendent and immanent modes of decision making.

Our reading of Saul’s fate has been accompanied by discussions of Karl Barth and various tragic readings. As we saw, Barth reads the narratives of 1 Samuel within the framework of his wider account of Jesus Christ as the elected and rejected man. As such, both David and Saul function as witnesses to Christ: Saul to Christ as the rejected and David to Christ as the elect. Further, both Saul and David contain something of the other in their own characterisation; Saul has a *Davidseite* and, likewise, David a *Saulseite*. Thus, as a pairing they witness to Christ as well as each, albeit in a more oblique manner, witnessing to Christ’s dual role as the elect and rejected One.

Barth’s reading strategy injects a degree of sympathy into his depiction of Saul which has often been absent from classic Christian construals; what is more, Barth grapples with Saul’s election with full seriousness. However, as we have seen, Barth’s reading features two particular weaknesses. First, because of his argument that Saul displays two pictures (*die Bilder*), at times his reading fails to take seriously the narrative arc which shapes Saul’s career. The transformation from Saul’s discovery in 1 Samuel 9-10 to his ultimate humiliation in 1 Samuel 31

is obscured. Consequently, what I have described as the responsive element of YHWH's rejection is not taken as seriously as it might be. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the fact that Saul functions for Barth as a witness to God's judgement against sin; but this sin is identified primarily with the great wrong committed at Ramah in 1 Samuel 8. Yet situating Saul's rejection primarily in reference to Ramah means that the actual sins of Saul are downplayed (*mikroskopische Sünden*) and, likewise, YHWH's actual interaction with Saul and the way in which this shapes the narrative is overlooked.

Secondly, because Barth reads both David and Saul as witnesses to Christ, his whole reading pressures towards his own particular reading of Christ's rejection and election. In a well-known reading of Barth's theology, indeed one warmly commended by Barth himself,⁹⁸² G.C. Berkouwer assesses the significance of Barth's christologically intensive account of election in these terms:

It must be evident that in setting forth his conception of election Barth is centrally concerned about the *light* and the *certainty* and the *triumph* of grace. The darkness and the rejection have a distinct place in his treatment of election, but as darkness and rejection whose removal was negotiated for us at Golgotha, that is to say, they are treated as borne by Jesus Christ. To put it differently, the rejection of man has a place in Barth's doctrine of predestination only in the sense that it is carried, put away and destroyed, by Christ.⁹⁸³

⁹⁸² *CD IV/2*, xii; *KD IV/2*, 4-5.

⁹⁸³ Berkouwer, *Triumph*, 107 (emphasis original).

We have, of course, seen something similar to this come through in our reading of Barth's handling of Saul and David.⁹⁸⁴ If there is *one* rejection, that is, the rejection of the Son of God, then, surely, beneath the rejection of Saul lies the gracious victory of election. The rejection of Saul, seemingly, "is carried, put away and destroyed, by Christ." We might wonder, however, whether such an account of the overarching theological direction of Saul's narrative gives due weight to the very real despair with which it concludes. Saul's descent into disaster, seen so clearly at Mount Gilboa, has a pathos which we should surely be hesitant to foreclose. Berkouwer's concern seems to drive towards a suspicion of a certain kind of latent universalism in Barth. My concern is somewhat different. It is, namely, that in Barth's reading the disastrous consequences of Saul's disobedience as well as the faint murmur that things might have been otherwise are both obscured. Put differently, Saul's concrete actions are side-lined in Barth's account and surely require further examination.⁹⁸⁵ Still, Barth has laid down the gauntlet by providing the most rigorous Christian reading of Saul's narrative, indeed of 1 Samuel, in the twentieth century. He doggedly poses us the question: what is to be made of Saul in light of Christ?

If Barth's conclusion seems to blunt the disaster at the climax of 1 Samuel, then the tragic readings of W. Lee Humphreys, David M. Gunn and J. Cheryl Exum can be accused of no such thing. As we have seen, one of the great strengths of these readings is that they place Saul's suicide on Mount Gilboa at the heart of their accounts. These tragic readings prove apt companions for Barth's theological

⁹⁸⁴ *CD* II/2, 390; *KD* II/2, 431.

⁹⁸⁵ Cf. the astute critique of Barth made by W.H. Auden outlined in Alan Jacobs, "Auden's Theology," in *W.H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 170-180, esp. 177.

account as they refuse to allow the existential implications of Saul's rejection to pass by. This is perhaps seen most forcefully in their consistent recourse to the language of "the wicked god", "the dark side of god" or, simply, "fate".

As we have seen, for these tragic readings two of the central concepts are "fate" and "flaw" and the interrelation of the two. However, while Humphreys and Exum seek to identify a tension between these two categories, often the application of the notions of fate and flaw to the 1 Samuel narrative seems somewhat strained. Most particularly there is a failure to examine and give due weight to the terms of Saul's rejection in 1 Samuel 13 and 15. Indeed, this seems to be a shared weakness both in Barth's account and the tragic readings. Both, albeit in different ways, identify one continuous trajectory from 1 Samuel 8 to 1 Samuel 31 and fail to give due consideration to the impact 1 Samuel 13-15 may have in changing Saul's trajectory. This needs to be borne in mind as we turn to our own attempt to give theological expression to the significance of Saul's rejection.

In my own account of Saul's rejection, I have sought to read with the grain of the received text. There are, of course, numerous points of disagreement between my own reading and those of Barth, Humphreys, Gunn and Exum. Perhaps foremost amongst these is the way I have attempted to handle Saul's disobedience in relation to his rejection. The text does certainly display some real sympathy for Saul, although I suspect that this is sometimes exaggerated. Still, the narrative seems insistent that Saul's rejection is due to his disobedience. In my own reading I have attempted to follow this theme and explore ways in which this insistence can be taken seriously in a narrative riddled with complexities. My suggestion has been that Saul's failures in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 reflect a basic inability to grasp the dynamics of life under God; this inability is highlighted for

the reader through the insertion of 1 Samuel 14 between the two accounts of Saul's rejection. Jonathan appears as Saul's antithesis. Jonathan's more open-ended trust in YHWH's potential to intervene on his behalf contrasts with Saul's use of the cultic apparatus which appears reactive and misguided.

All of which is not to say that there is not some intrinsic and indefinable element in the narrative which frustrates Saul's progress. It is, however, to say that this element is not given equal prominence alongside Saul's own actions. In this sense, I suggest that the emphasis on fate which dominates Gunn's reading of the story and emerges so strongly at times in the accounts of Exum and Humphreys is misplaced.

What, then, does this mean for a reading of the story of Saul in relation to wider Christian concerns with God's decision making? What depiction are we given of the concept of rejection in Saul's narrative and how might this fit into wider theological discussions?

There are two elements of this question that are worth considering: the story of Saul in relation to traditional conceptualities of rejection and the rejection of Saul in typological connection to the rejection of Christ.

First, how might the rejection of Saul be related to wider Christian notions of rejection? In traditional discussions of predestination the attempt has typically been made to distinguish between its two forms and, as such, to set up an asymmetrical relationship between election and rejection. The most common way in which this has been done is by seeing election as an expression of God's grace and rejection as an expression of God's judgement. In this sense, God's judgement is a response to human sin, but God is not the author of sin (*auctor peccati*). We

might take two representative examples of how this asymmetry is expressed. In the sixteenth century the authors of the Belgic Confession stated in Article 16:

God showed himself to be as He is: merciful and just. He is merciful in withdrawing and saving from this perdition those whom He, in His eternal and unchangeable counsel, has elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by His pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. He is just in leaving the others in their ruin and fall into which they plunged themselves

*(juste, en laissant les autres en leur ruine et trébuchement où ils se sont précipités).*⁹⁸⁶

Of course, following the Reformation, concerns around the doctrines of election and rejection rumbled on, coming to a head most famously at the Synod of Dort in 1618-19. Here, again, a concerted effort was made to distinguish between God's rejection and His election. In the conclusion to the Canons of Dort, we read a defence of their doctrine of predestination; the Canons deny:

that this teaching means that God predestined and created, by the bare and unqualified choice of His will, without the least regard or consideration of any sin, the greatest part of the world to eternal condemnation; that in the same manner (*eodem modo*) in which election is the source and cause (*est fons et caussa*) of faith and good works, reprobation is the cause (*esse caussam*) of unbelief and ungodliness.⁹⁸⁷

⁹⁸⁶ "The Belgic Confession, 1561," in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valeri Hotchkiss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:413. The French text can be found in *CC* 3:383-436.

⁹⁸⁷ "The Canons of the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619," in Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, 2:598; again, see the Latin text in *CC* 3:550-580.

The simple point here is that, within the mainstream of the Christian tradition, at least in its Western form, there has been a consistent effort to distinguish between the manner of God's election and the manner of His rejection; the attempt has been to prize apart predestination *ad vitam* and predestination *ad mortem*.⁹⁸⁸ God's rejection functions on different terms to His election; the two share an asymmetrical relationship.

It is with this in mind that we turn to our own reading of the story of Saul. In both the reading of Barth and those of Humphreys, Gunn and Exum there has perhaps been a tendency to underplay the relational and responsive elements between Saul and YHWH which appear throughout the narrative. But, as I have suggested, central to those crucial chapters, 1 Samuel 13-15, is, surely, YHWH's response to Saul's behaviour. As we have seen, Saul's disobedience is at no point portrayed as inevitable; the prospect of a possible, alternative future seems to have been available (1 Sam. 13.13) and the language of נָחַם in 1 Samuel 15 suggests that something has genuinely changed.⁹⁸⁹ What is more, a striking alternative to Saul is presented in these chapters through the figure of Jonathan which seems to function to load Saul's responsibility for his own actions. Finally, the reasoning behind Saul's rejection is only ever put down to Saul's disobedience. I have attempted to outline something of the nature of Saul's disobedience and some of the problems with Saul's religious outlook which may be pointed to in the narrative. In such a complex series of chapters, no doubt such claims will be disputed. Still, I have sought to take more seriously the nature of the responsive relationship which exists

⁹⁸⁸ For a Thomistic take on these questions, see Taylor Patrick O'Neill, *Grace, Predestination, and the Permission of Sin: A Thomistic Analysis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 58-67.

⁹⁸⁹ Moberly glosses the theological significance of נָחַם as "The theological principle of divine responsiveness..." Moberly, *Old Testament*, 116-127 (121).

between Saul and YHWH, than do Barth, Humphreys, Gunn or Exum, in spite of their many strengths.

Nevertheless, and this is perhaps where the concerns in the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort become pertinent, despite the clear element of relational interaction, there remains a mysterious dimension to the Saul story. It is this element which seems to, legitimately, provide the stimulus for the role of fate in the readings of Humphreys, Gunn and Exum and for Barth's wrestling with the distinction between Saul and David. While we may, I think quite rightly, dispute Barth's contrast of Saul's "microscopic sins" with David's "crimson sins", there does seem to be something about David's relationship with YHWH which is lacking from Saul's. David is the king "after his own heart" both in the sense of being one chosen by YHWH, but also in the sense of being one who follows after God. David seems to be attuned to YHWH in a way which Saul never is. The source of this distinctiveness is never fully explained in the text; but it does lead to a distinctive treatment of David. To be sure, as we have seen, David's distinctive behaviour goes some significant way to establishing the grounds for his house's covenant with YHWH, but we still have the sense that there is something more to the narrative than that. In 2 Samuel 7, as YHWH promises David an enduring dynasty, there is no suggestion that the iniquity of his son will not be of the calibre of Saul's; what is suggested, indeed promised, is that he will not be treated for his iniquity in the way Saul was. Thus, part of the challenge of the Saul and David narratives is that, looking forward from 1 Samuel 13, their prospects appear symmetrical. Saul had the option of an eternal kingdom open to him. However, looking back from 2 Samuel 7, their prospects seem asymmetrical, YHWH will not treat David's descendants as He has treated Saul.

While David's own election is complex and far from simply gratuitous, there is perhaps some reflection here of the kind of dynamic we saw in the conclusion to the Canons of Dort which denies that rejection and election are caused "in the same manner." Most notably we see how, in the case of Saul, rejection is bound very intimately to disobedience. Thus, following the language of the Belgic Confession, Saul's rejection may display YHWH's justice as He responds to Saul's own action.

Thus, when read within a broad Christian theological framework, the story of Saul provides a profound meditation on the dynamics of disobedience. Disobedience is rarely, if ever, as straightforward as the simple decision of a recalcitrant individual to knowingly turn from God's will.⁹⁹⁰ Saul's own disobedience is so often bound up with his attempts to act with reference to God, which in turn reflects elements of his own incomprehension of God's ways. This, in part, is what is emphasised so well in the tragic readings we have considered. However, the narrative of 1 Samuel never jettisons the place of responsive relationship in YHWH's dealings with Saul. Saul's rejection is pronounced by YHWH in response to his action. This bestows a certain dignity on Saul as one who acts in genuine relationship with YHWH. It also, when read in a wider Christian context, lends credence to the persistent Christian attempt to articulate God's relationship with sin in terms of response and judgement, rather than authorship.

But if this describes something of the terms of Saul's rejection, what are we to say of its significance within a Christian theological frame of reference? Is

⁹⁹⁰ It is here that I would identify the tragic element in Saul's story. Cf. Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 30-36.

Saul simply a warning, a cautionary tale, against the perils of disobedience? Is he the villain whose just end is death at Gilboa? Here we come to the second element in our discussion of Saul. Can we follow Barth and read Saul's rejection as a witness to the rejection of Christ and thereby see it somehow as taken up into the redemption of Christ's work? Or do we accept the finality and desolation of the tragic readings' account of Saul's end?

One recent attempt to arbitrate between these competing questions comes from Stephen B. Chapman's reading of 1 Samuel. Chapman displays a concern for many of the same questions that I have engaged throughout my discussion of Saul. Indeed, he concludes his reading of 1 Samuel with an account of Saul in relation to tragedy and a Barthian typological reading.

Chapman's reflections on tragedy and typology gain much of their purchase from his appropriation of a particular contribution to tragic theory by Emily Wilson. Wilson argues that there is "a central thread in the tragic tradition that is concerned not with dying too early but living too long."⁹⁹¹ Chapman reflects on the narrative of Saul in light of Wilson's argument for tragic "overliving" and finds a striking correlation between Wilson's category and Saul's experience.⁹⁹² As such, "Saul's life becomes an account of death within life or, in Christian terms, of crucifixion."⁹⁹³ It is through this tragic element that Chapman then can read Saul "as a type of Christ."⁹⁹⁴ Saul is a type of the Christ of Gethsemane, "the Christ of divine forsakenness."⁹⁹⁵ To this end, Chapman pushes back against those elements

⁹⁹¹ Emily R. Wilson, *Mocked with Death: Tragic Overliving from Sophocles to Milton* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 1; quoted in Chapman, *Samuel*, 240.

⁹⁹² Chapman, *Samuel*, 243.

⁹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

of the Christian tradition which have viewed David as a type of Christ in such a way that David simply becomes the hero and Saul the villain.⁹⁹⁶ Chapman invokes Barth's reading as a precursor to his own "Saul typology," albeit in a qualified way. Chapman appears more concerned than Barth in providing specific, textual support for his reading of Saul as a type of Christ. Notably, Saul is the anointed of God (1 Sam. 10.1) and, according to Chapman, Pilates's words in John 19.5, "Behold the man," as a partial quotation of 1 Samuel 9.17, point towards an explicit "Saul typology" in John's Gospel.⁹⁹⁷

Chapman has provided us with one of the most stimulating recent readings of 1 Samuel and of the figure of Saul in particular. Chapman's reading attends carefully to the shape of the 1 Samuel text and his use of tragic theory and Barthian dogmatics to illuminate Saul's theological significance is creative and provocative. However, to my mind, the christological reading of Saul, even in Chapman's revised form, still leaves something to be desired. Part of the difficulty comes with Chapman's characterisation of Christ as he seeks to highlight the ways in which the Saul typology works:

My argument is that a close reading of the biblical text compels a Christian reader to see adumbrations and types of Christ not only in David but also in Saul. Jesus is indeed the Son of David, but he is also the One who is

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid., 246-251.

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid., 254; Chapman invokes the observations of Michael G. Azar, "The Scriptural King," *SVTQ* 50 (2006): 255-275. Most of the links drawn by Azar between Saul's life and John's Gospel seem somewhat tenuous; the one concrete link is the quotation in Jn. 19.5, although on balance I think it remains more likely that, if this is an allusion, it refers to Zech. 6.11-13. At any rate, it seems telling that Azar ultimately describes Jesus as an "anti-Saul."

rejected by God despite his best efforts, who does not always know the will of his Father, and who is strung up in shame outside the walls of the city.⁹⁹⁸

It is not quite clear what Chapman is referring to when he describes Jesus's rejection as occurring "despite his best efforts." Is there a point in the Gospel narratives where Jesus's performance is found wanting? Is there a point at which Jesus's crucifixion might have been averted had he acted differently? Again, it is not quite clear what is meant in the claim that Jesus "does not always know the will of his Father." The only time when Jesus explicitly acknowledges ignorance over the Father's will is in relation to "that hour" (Matt. 24.36; Mark 13.32), typically taken to refer to his eschatological return, but presumably this is not the intended reference. A reference to Jesus's struggle in Gethsemane seems to be most probable; but if so, the issue there, complicated as it no doubt is, seems to relate less to ignorance of the Father's will and rather to a struggle to come to terms with what the Father's will requires.

Chapman emphasises that his purpose is not to rehabilitate Saul, but to accredit him with his proper theological significance.⁹⁹⁹ This offsets some of the potential triumphalism in Barth's reading of Saul, even if Chapman's interpretation still seems rooted in a Barthian account of Christ as the Rejected and Elect One.¹⁰⁰⁰ Indeed, it is difficult to see how one would read Saul as a type of Christ without importing at least part of Barth's understanding of election. If, however, as I have suggested, the relational dynamics of disobedience and response lie at the heart of Saul's story, even as sympathy for Saul and YHWH's mysterious sovereignty also

⁹⁹⁸ Chapman, *Samuel*, 254.

⁹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁰⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

shape the narrative, then any account of Saul's theological significance needs to give proportional weight to this dynamic. Under these terms, at present, I am not convinced that a typological account is the best way to situate Saul within a Christian theological framework.

This, however, leads us back to the question with which we began this portion of the discussion: what are we to say of the significance of Saul's rejection within a Christian theological frame of reference? Is Saul merely a villain, a cautionary tale whose example is to be avoided? I noted in the concluding remarks on Esau that Christian reflection on election is always, primarily, reflection on God. We have seen that at the heart of Saul's rejection is a principle of divine responsiveness to Saul's action. That God responds to human sin has been an important, if at times convoluted, principle in Christian reflection on election and reprobation. Yet there is, perhaps, one final point to be made here.

Saul's rejection is announced by Samuel, the figure in the narrative who is most closely identified with YHWH's voice, viewpoint and purposes. Following Saul's rejection, Samuel largely fades from the narrative; another character takes his place as the one most readily identified with YHWH's viewpoint, albeit in a different capacity. That figure is David.¹⁰⁰¹ It is perhaps telling that, throughout the remainder of Saul's career, the primary attitude of David to Saul is one of repaying good for evil (כי אתה גמלתני הטובה ואני גמלתיך הרעה; 1 Sam. 24.18). David's refusal to "stretch out his hand against YHWH's anointed" perhaps reflects a muted opportunity for Saul to respond to YHWH's purposes as they are now expressed in

¹⁰⁰¹ This seems to change again in 2 Samuel where David's relationship with YHWH becomes significantly more complex and he is challenged by Nathan; cf. Barbara Green, *David's Capacity for Compassion: A Literary-Hermeneutical Study of 1-2 Samuel*, LHBOTS 641 (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 183-216.

the life of David. Saul is rejected in the context of a responsive relationship with YHWH; that David opens the possibility of reconciliation with Saul perhaps suggests that this context is still operative to some degree. There is the possibility at least that, for Saul, grace, in some form, remains an option on the other side of rejection.

The primary way in which my account of Saul's rejection differs from both that of Barth and the tragic readings is the emphasis I give to Saul's disobedience in 1 Samuel 13-15 as a reality which changes the course of the narrative. There is much of value in both Barth and the tragic accounts; a sympathy for Saul, a sensitivity to the complexities of the narrative, an awareness of God's sovereignty subtly expressed, a sober acknowledgement of the stark despair of Saul's end. However, at the heart of Saul's narrative seems to be a relationship with YHWH which contains an element of genuine action and response. It is this element of YHWH's responsiveness to Saul's action that seems to me to reflect a wider concern in Christian theological reflection with God's responsiveness to human sin and how this responsiveness might shape the ways in which Christians distinguish between God's election and rejection. But in the context of the life of Saul, this element of response also allows for the possibility of relationship on the other side of rejection. It seems as though, for reasons perhaps beyond his control, Saul refuses this possibility. Yet the fact that it is there continues to witness to the dignity that Saul possesses as one whose decisions continue to shape his future.

3. Closing Reflections

The Old Testament tends to resist straightforward systematisation. Its capacity to do so is all the more remarkable given the persistent attempts made over the years to arrange its ideas, emphases and concepts into systematic categories. Some are

inclined to see this as fatal to the Christian project of reading the Old Testament within a wider systematic framework.¹⁰⁰² However, the Christian tradition has always taken a certain peculiar delight in the framing of its faith in terms of tensions and paradoxes.¹⁰⁰³ Some will find this scintillating, others more or less bizarre. Nevertheless, the point here is that the differing emphases, outlooks and accounts of the Old Testament may just as well be viewed as a resource, rather than a stumbling block, for a faith whose central formularies are framed through such bold paradoxes. Recognising and embracing this possibility opens up ways of reading the Old Testament within a Christian frame of reference which focus intensely on the particularity of any text or portion of text before stepping back to bring it into creative tension with the other parts of the Old Testament and wider Christian canon.¹⁰⁰⁴

It is something along these lines that I have sought to do here. As I noted in the introduction, in one sense, the narratives of Esau and Saul make up a creative partnership when read in the context of Christian theological concerns around rejection. Classically understood, and as we saw clearly expressed in our engagement with Calvin, Esau provides the example, *par excellence*, of one who is rejected before birth for reasons which are entirely unknown. On the other hand, Saul seems to provide quite a different challenge. Saul's rejection comes, ostensibly at least, in response to his own action. There are significant ways in which this responsive element can be complicated, as we have seen in the accounts

¹⁰⁰² Recall the concerns of Robert Carroll quoted in Chapter 6; Carroll, *Wolf*, 42

¹⁰⁰³ Moberly uses the apt example of the Athanasian Creed; Moberly, *Old Testament*, 114.

¹⁰⁰⁴ I take it that this, at least in part, is what Moberly seeks to do in R.W.L. Moberly, *The God of the Old Testament: Encountering the Divine in Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020); cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 85-88.

given by both Barth and the tragic readings. Still, it is difficult to do away with the centrality of the responsive element in Saul's rejection. It is a rejection that is carried out in time.

In my own accounts of these two rejection narratives, this essential dynamic of transcendent decision making contrasted with immanent decision making has been maintained. We have seen in our reading of Esau's depiction that there is always an element of impenetrability about God's decision making even as it shapes and is understood through the distinct events of human existence. Thus, the realm of God's rejection is rightly cloaked, in Christian theological discourse, in mystery. Yet we have also seen in our account of Saul's rejection that God's decision making is responsive to the terms of His relationship with human beings. God's decision to reject Saul as king constitutes a genuine response to Saul's own action. God's transcendence does not erase His immanence; God's immanence does not undercut His transcendence. Our understanding of God's decision to reject is always provisional; God's decision to reject interacts in recognisable ways with the contingencies of human behaviour.

Here we have two poles which need to be held in proper tension in any Christian account of God's decision making. Attempts to reconcile these poles in logically satisfactory ways have often led to what Christians have tended to recognise as inappropriate doctrinal accounts, such as Pelagianism or determinism. The fact that such a tension is found in the Old Testament itself provides constant stimulus for Christian readers of the Old Testament to frame this tension in imaginative and constructive ways.

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