

# Books of Samuel: Women at the Center of Israel's History

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## The Move to Monarchy

In the Christian canon, “David” is the last word before the beginning of the books of Samuel. The book of Ruth closes with a genealogy that ends with David and so points to the monarchy as the theme of the stories that follow. The end of the book of Ruth announces a profound political shift that will shake Israel's self-concept to its roots.<sup>1</sup> In the Tanakh, in the sequence of the Jewish canon, the books of Samuel are immediately preceded by the book of Judges. Judges 21:25 laments the lack of a king in Israel. Thus the book of Judges ends with an absence, a not-yet, and so also points toward the institution of the monarchy.

The narratives that follow are about the transition from the time of the judges to monarchical government, and about the threats to and the establishment of dynastic rule, the installation of the house of David as the royal house. No longer will charismatic judges be given the task of leading the people; men will be born to this duty through sonship.

The biographies of three men who embody three stages in the transition from the period of the judges to the period of the monarchy shape the books of Samuel: Samuel himself is the last judge in Israel (1 Sam 7:15), and he anoints the first king, Saul (1 Sam 9); Saul is the first king, but his kingship does not endure; ultimately David succeeds in establishing a dynasty and so in handing on the office of leadership as an inheritance.

The books of Samuel can be broadly divided along the lines of the biographies of these three men. A first major section (1 Sam 1–15) tells of the transition from the time of the judges, embodied by Samuel, the last judge, to the time of the

1. On the book of Ruth as a transitional narrative from the time of the judges to the monarchy, and for the links between the ending of the book of Ruth and the beginning of the books of Samuel, see David Jobling, “Ruth Finds a Home: Canon, Politics, Method,” in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series, vol. 143 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 125–39.

kings, embodied in Saul, the first king of Israel. His failure in war against the Amalekites (1 Sam 15) prepares the ground for the rise of his successor, David. The narrative of that process makes up the second major section (1 Sam 16 to 2 Sam 10). David's crime against Bathsheba and Uriah marks a turning point and opens the third major section, in 2 Samuel 11: the "story of the succession" to the throne of David, which ends in 1 Kings 2. This narrative structure, stretching over several books, recalls that, according to the witness of the Hebrew manuscripts, the books of Samuel were counted as a single book, and that the Greek and Latin tradition speaks of the books of Samuel and Kings as "1-4 Kingdoms."

Within the framework of an exegesis oriented toward literary criticism, our interest will be not so much in history as in the linking of past events, but more in the stories that narratively describe, present, and secure Israel's concept of itself. The exegetical position I have chosen concentrates on the biblical text in its final form. We must assume that the books of Samuel, as literary products, went through a process of growth, but that process is not the object of this investigation. Literary-critical work with biblical texts accords a high value to textual pragmatics. Therefore in what follows I will not only describe the content that is communicated, but also what the text does to its hearers and readers. Why and how are the stories in the books of Samuel told this way and not some other way? How are women presented, and how are men? What place does the text assign to women? A feminist interpretation of the books of Samuel is a balancing act between an analysis of the marginalization of women, as attempted by the text, and an appreciation of the female figures there presented. The acknowledgment of the female figures represented in the text will not lead, in the remarks that follow, to the reconstruction of a separate history of women, but will attempt to describe the place(s) of women within the narrated political world of Israel — that is, in a male-dominated system of coordinates.

### **Birth and Death: The Stories of Women Frame the Books of Samuel**

Hannah's quest for a child (1 Sam 1–2) stands at the beginning of the books of Samuel, and Rizpah's action on behalf of her dead sons (2 Sam 21:1–14), almost at the end. Beginning and ending show women fighting for a life fulfilled and for an honorable death. In great detail, 1 Samuel 1–3 describes how the birth of Samuel and his special call to prophecy came about. Comparable to the birth narratives of other important men in Israel's history (Isaac in Gen 17; 18–21; Joseph in Gen 30:22–24; Samson in Judg 13; Jesus in Matt 1; Luke 1–2; and indirectly David also as the descendant of Ruth in Ruth 4:22), the birth of the prophet Samuel is traced to God's special intervention. The books of Samuel begin their treatment with a narrative imbalance. The same man has two wives, but one, Peninnah, has children, and the other, Hannah, has none. Childlessness is presented in the Bible as the

harshest fate a woman can suffer. Peninnah personifies the social scorn that falls upon a childless woman (Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes 1993, 95), and thus stands within a biblical tradition that associates motherhood with rivalry between women (Fuchs 1989, 161-62). Aware of YHWH's influence on barrenness (1 Sam 1:5) and pregnancy (1 Sam 1:19-20), something Hannah shares with the narrative community (cf., e.g., Gen 16:2; 21:1, 2; 29:31; 30:2, 17, 22), she becomes the first biblical female figure to turn, in the misery of her childlessness, to the Living One. She prays in the sanctuary with such intensity that the priest Eli thinks she is drunk and tries to expel her from the house of God.

Hannah's activity (see the extensive treatment in Habermann 1989, 97-98) stands in sharp contrast to the passivity of the men in this narrative. It is true that her husband first steps upon the story's stage and dominates the system of relationships, but he has neither direct contact with the divine nor any influence on the naming of Samuel or the plan for his life. Hannah has authority both to decide her child's career and to make and fulfill a vow (cf. Num 30:3-16). She chooses the child's name, decides how she will participate in worship, and presents her son for service in the sanctuary. Hannah's presence dominates that of the other people in the story; she is a partner in every narrated dialogue (Meyers 1994, 99). Hannah's vow can be interpreted against the background of the consecration of the firstborn (cf., e.g., Exod 13:2, 12-15). The associated hope for the gift of continued fertility is expressed in Eli's blessing and in Hannah's other five pregnancies (1 Sam 2:20-21) (Hackett 1992, 89-90).

Hannah's closeness to God is expressed in her threefold prayer, in which the third part has the form of a song of thanksgiving. Her song sets Hannah alongside the psalmist David (2 Sam 22:2-23:7). Hannah's and David's songs of thanksgiving stand at the beginning and end of the books of Samuel and are the only psalms in these narrative books. Hannah's song probably points to a women's tradition of songs of victory and thanksgiving on the occasion of a birth (Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes 1993, 93-97). The text expands the individual experience of rescue and embeds it in the actions of the God who reverses unjust and oppressive social conditions. Hannah's song becomes a model for Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:46-56. Motherhood is not individualized and understood as successful self-realization, but is grasped in its social dimension. The unexpected pregnancy is set alongside experiences of social and political liberation. In this the motif of competition between women, already visible in the story of Hannah and Peninnah, is taken up again. "The barren" is set in contrast to the one "who has many children" (1 Sam 2:5; cf. Isa 54:1); her pregnancy is a contribution to the reversal of the situation. The dualisms of mighty and feeble, full and hungry, barren and having many children, pious and wicked that run through this psalm are ambivalent. On the one hand they reduce enigmatic reality to black-white contrasts; the liberation of the barren woman requires the defeat of the one with many children. On the other hand, the possibility of a reversal of conditions releases a powerful potential for

hope, as the reception accorded Hannah's and Mary's psalms in liberation theology reveals.

The story of Rizpah's vigil in 2 Samuel 21:1-14 shows that a woman's care for her children can extend beyond death. Rizpah, a concubine of Saul, is the mother of men who represent the continuation of the Saulide royal house. Her particular function in the course of the transfer of power from the house of Saul to the house of David is depicted in 2 Samuel 3:6-11 (see below). In 2 Samuel 21 it is her sons whose lives David extinguishes in order to put an end to a famine in Israel. The "blood-guilt" that, according to YHWH's decree, lies upon the house of Saul points back to Joshua 9; 1 Samuel 22:6-23, a covenant Joshua had made with the Gibeonites that was broken by Saul. The execution of seven of Saul's children is supposed to restore the balance. Like Saul and Jonathan (1 Sam 31), these dead are also denied burial. "To desecrate the corpses was to scorn the elementary right of the dead to be buried" (Schmidt and Ellmenreich 1990, 83). Rizpah cannot prevent her sons' murder, but she stands like an "Israelite Antigone"<sup>2</sup> against this disdain for the dead. The length of her vigil signals both the intensity of her protest and a positive link to the God who is so darkly depicted in this story. The beginning of the rains marks the end of Rizpah's vigil and also the beginning of the end of the famine, and it points forward to God's saving intervention (Exum 1992, 116). Rizpah's action is brought into causal relationship with David's (2 Sam 21:11); he causes Saul's and Jonathan's bones to be brought from Jabesh-gilead (1 Sam 31) and buried, together with the corpses of the executed Saulides, in the grave of Saul's father.

Women's concern for life and death brings them into conflict with representatives of the ruling order. Peninnah, Eli, and David personify attitudes of hatred for life and disdain for human beings. The position of women on the threshold between life and death brings dangers with it, dangers these women defy by their resistance to the powers of indifference and death.

### Not Only Victims: Women in War

"Be men! . . . Be men and fight!" (1 Sam 4:9): in face of their own fears in battle against Israel, in whose camp God's power is embodied in the ark of the covenant, the Philistines shout this encouragement to one another. This challenge is probably the clearest indication of how masculinity is constructed in the books of Samuel. They are men who go to battle, and courage and warlike strength are elements of their masculinity. The power of such masculinity counters the power of the ark of the covenant — and wins (cf., in contrast, Jth 9:11). Showing themselves to be

2. Martin Buber, "Weisheit und Tat der Frauen," in Buber, *Kampf um Israel. Reden und Schriften (1921-1932)* (Berlin: Schocken, 1933), 104-14.

men (“Show yourselves to be men!” is another possible translation of the Hebrew text of 1 Sam 4:9) spurs the Philistines against their fear and on to victory. Masculinity is at stake in battle, and victory proves the masculinity of the victors.

Women do not participate in the wars as fighters. Fighting is men’s business, and the perspective on the conquest is entirely male. In 1 Samuel 30, David and his men come into their city of exile, Ziklag, which has been captured by the Amalekites. “The women and all who were in it” or “wives and sons and daughters” (1 Sam 30:2, 3) have been taken captive. The mobility and activity of the fighting men contrast with the passivity of the women and other groups in the population who are incapable of fighting: “small and great” (NRSV) or “young and old” (vv. 2, 19), “sons and daughters” (vv. 3, 6, 19). Women are part of the spoils of war. A different perspective on war is presented when the destruction of Amalek is the subject. Here it is exactly the point that nothing that belongs to the Amalekites or constitutes them is to be left alive; the aim, in the destruction of the Amalekites, is comprehensiveness. Not by way of special mention, but in the same breath with men, children, and animals, women are spoken of as victims in the destruction of Amalek (1 Sam 15:3, 33; 22:19; 27:9). Saul and his troops cannot resist the temptation to take booty, a crime that causes the end of Saul’s kingship. But women are also victims in war because they lose their husbands, fathers, and sons in battle. “As your sword has made women childless, so your mother shall be childless among women.” So Samuel motivates the murder of the Amalekite king Agag in 1 Samuel 15:33. And the nameless daughter-in-law of Eli dies during the birth of her child when she hears of the loss of the ark of the covenant to the Philistines and the death of her husband and father-in-law (1 Sam 4:19-22). In the name given to her son (Ichabod, explained as the departure of glory — *kābôd* — from Israel) she holds this loss in memory.

Women participate actively in military operations, though differently from men. The wise woman of Abel of Beth-maacah negotiates with the commander Joab (see below). As singers of victory songs, women are not mere decorative elements; they influence the alteration of political situations (Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes 1993, 32). It is their task to greet and celebrate the warriors on their return home. This is depicted as the custom not only in Israel, but also among the neighboring peoples (2 Sam 1:20). The women use this forum to make public their view of the political situation. “Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands!” That is the song the women sing, accompanied by instruments and dancing, when David returns from a victory over the Philistines (1 Sam 18:6-7). Current translations relate the preposition *liqra’t* (“against” or “toward”) in verse 6 to the verb “come out.” Thus, for example, NRSV: “the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments.” But the Hebrew text applies “against” to the verb “sing”: “and the women came out of all the towns of Israel in order to sing in round dances against Saul.” The first type of translation insinuates

that this is a triumphal entry for Saul. In the Hebrew text, however, Saul is not among those who enter, returning from the victory. David's entry into the city is celebrated, and the women sing against Saul. Thus it is clearer in Hebrew than in the usual English translations that the women take David's part against Saul. The song has a high degree of resonance for both internal and external politics. Saul understands it as an attack on his kingship, a reaction that emphasizes the power of these women (Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes 1993, 36). For the Philistines, this song defines David (1 Sam 21:12[Eng. 11]; 29:5); they cite it in giving expression to their fear of David.

### *Tu Felix David Nube!*<sup>3</sup> Wives and Daughters of Kings

The song of the women in 1 Samuel 18:7 is in the context of a whole series of demonstrations of love offered to David. Saul loves David (1 Sam 16:21; cf. 18:22). Jonathan loves David (1 Sam 18:1, 3; 20:17; 2 Sam 1:26; cf. 1 Sam 19:1). All of Saul's servants love David (1 Sam 18:22); all Israel and Judah love David (18:16); Saul's daughter Michal loves David (18:20, 28). Only David doesn't love anybody.<sup>4</sup> The love given to him from all sides is part of his political success. God's election of David (1 Sam 16) has its human echo in 1 Samuel 18 when Saul's children, his servants, and even the nation turn to David in love.

Saul attempts to channel this universal love for David in the form of a strategically beneficial marriage. Immediately after the assertion that "all Israel and Judah loved David" (1 Sam 18:16) follows Saul's offer to give David the oldest royal daughter, Merab, as his wife (18:17). This lays the foundation for a marriage policy that is intimately allied to David's governing policy. Saul's offer is no surprise to the readers of the books of Samuel; already in 1 Samuel 17:25 the Israelites had predicted that the king would give his daughter as wife to the man who would slay Goliath. Nevertheless, David reacts with surprise and, in his astonishment, puts the marriage offer in the correct light: "Who am I . . . that I should be son-in-law to the king?" (1 Sam 18:18). This is not about marriage to Merab, but about the status of the king's son-in-law. However, it is not Merab who will be David's first wife, but Michal.

Michal's story is so broadly distributed across the books of Samuel that, textu-

3. "You, fortunate David, marry!" — an allusion to the often-cited exclamation of Matthias Corvinus: "Bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube!" ("Let other countries wage war, you, fortunate Austria, marry!"). This is how at the end of the fifteenth century the Hungarian king portrayed the Hapsburgs' politics of marriage, in particular that of Frederick III. David's politics of governance does not rely on this alternative. His power is founded on sexual *and* military conquests.

4. 2 Sam 1:23, where David calls Saul and Jonathan "beloved," could indicate David's love, but he is not explicitly made the subject. In 2 Sam 19:7(6) Joab speaks of David's love, but does not say who the object of David's love is.

ally, she becomes one of the Bible's fragmented women (Exum 1993). Her history begins with an activity that is unusual for a woman. "Saul's daughter Michal loved David" (1 Sam 18:20). This makes her the only woman in the Hebrew Bible — with the exception of the female voice in the Song of Songs — who loves a man.<sup>5</sup> Her bride-price (so also the title of Grete Weil's novel about Michal)<sup>6</sup> is unusual. Saul asks for a hundred Philistine foreskins, in the hope that David will not survive the battle. But David murders not just 100, but 200 Philistines and becomes the king's son-in-law. In 1 Samuel 19:8-24, Michal helps David escape from Saul. In the conflict between her father, Saul, and her husband, David, she chooses David's side. She deceives Saul's messengers by putting an idol *tērāpîm* in the bed in David's place. (In Genesis 31, too, a woman, Rachel, chooses her husband, and here again the deception of the father in relation to an idol plays a role.) In 1 Samuel 25:44 a retrospective note mentions that Saul had given Michal to another man, Palti, as his wife. But he, weeping, loses her again to David, who, already by this time the king and the husband of six other wives, demands Michal back again (2 Sam 3:13-16). In 2 Samuel 6:16 Michal enters the stage of the narrative world for the last time. David roughly rejects her criticism of his dancing before the ark, and the narrator comments succinctly: "And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death" (2 Sam 6:23).

"Depriving her of children is a symbolic way of killing Michal. Denying her a reply to David kills her off as a narrative presence. By representing her as challenging the king from a position of weakness, the narrator has Michal essentially commit verbal suicide" (Exum 1993, 29).

The comment on Michal's childlessness writes this woman out of the story. As with the other female figures in the books of Samuel, and in sharp contrast to the important men in the story, there is no account of Michal's death. Her departure from the stage of the narrative world does not happen suddenly; she fades away. In a gruesome way, the Masoretic Text resurrects Michal in 2 Samuel 21:8, when Michal's sons are to be murdered by David as recompense to the Gibeonites. The text had denied her children; here it gives them to her only to take them away again (Exum 1993, 38). What is so horrible about this passage is that many textual variants read "Merab" instead of "Michal." The two sisters who were already interchangeable in Saulide marriage politics (1 Sam 18) are confused again here. Michal is in a position of danger, between the two houses of Saul and David, between her father and her husband. This corresponds to the deliberately varied designations of Michal as "daughter of Saul" or "David's wife." While, for example, in 1 Samuel 19:11 "David's wife Michal" acts against her father, in 2 Samuel 6 it is "Michal the daughter of Saul" who enters into conflict with David and ultimately remains

5. In Gen 25:28 Rebekah loves her son Jacob. Ezek 16:37 speaks of the love of the city, metaphorized as a woman. And finally it is Ruth (4:15) who loves Naomi.

6. *The Bride Price: A Novel*, trans. John Barrett (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1991).

childless. Thus in 2 Samuel 6:23 the continuation of the house of Saul through Michal is explicitly made impossible.

Chronologically, Ahinoam of Jezreel is the second wife David marries (1 Sam 25:43), but textually David's encounter with Abigail precedes the notice about this marriage. In 1 Samuel 25 this woman proves herself David's strategic equal. Her husband Nabal (his name means "idiot" or "criminal" and indicates that his behavior sets him outside Israel's ethics) takes David's measure quite incorrectly. He refuses to give material support to David, who, with his followers, is in flight from Saul. Abigail averts the impending catastrophe by addressing David in a "speech that can be regarded as a rhetorical masterpiece" (Schroer 1996, 90), pleading that he excuse her husband's action and giving him material support. When Nabal hears of it, he suffers a heart attack and dies within ten days. In the same verse in which David expresses his joy at Nabal's death, he sends messengers to Abigail to take her as his wife (1 Sam 25:39). Abigail's cleverness is in sharp contrast to the stupidity of her husband. The narrative shows this woman acting independently in the economic sphere and presents her as diplomatically skillful and politically astute. The style of her speech corresponds to the rhetorical conventions of biblical Hebrew. The frequent address "my lord," and formulations in which the conversation partner is spoken of in the third person, are not submissive gestures, but are elements of politeness. Abigail, through her intervention, averts the murderous rage of David and his troops on her household. She presents herself in verse 26 as a messenger of the Living One: "God sends this woman to make his will known, and in this moment Abigail is God's prophet. . . . God is against senseless shedding of blood, and it is altogether remarkable that here, in the tradition of the great prophets of Israel, a woman proclaims this message and successfully carries out God's mission" (Schroer 1996, 93).

After a summary note about other concubines, including some from Jerusalem, which David had captured, and who had borne him other sons and daughters (2 Sam 5:13-15), Bathsheba is cited as the next woman David takes to wife. At 2 Samuel 11-12, David is at the climax of his sexual and political-governing power. Bathsheba is the last woman he conquers sexually, and Rabbah is the last city he conquers militarily. From his rooftop, David sees Bathsheba bathing. He beholds, desires, and takes her. Nothing is said about Bathsheba's feelings and desires. The king wants her, and in view of the structural power relationships, it makes no sense to ask about Bathsheba's possible participation, much less strategic considerations, as has repeatedly been the case in traditional exegesis. While some women exegetes have described the sexual act described here as rape (e.g., Bal 1987, 11), Cheryl Exum above all has emphasized the textual side of this act of violence. This narrative, by offering no possible access to Bathsheba's feelings or her perspective, presenting her instead through the sexualized lenses of David, denies Bathsheba her subjectivity, an act of textual violence: "rape by the pen" (Exum 1993). "The narrator who disrobes Bathseba and depicts her as the object of Da-



vid's lust is the real perpetrator of the crime against Bathseba, and commentators . . . , who imply that Bathseba may have desired the king's attentions, perpetuate the crime" (Exum 1993, 174).

Bathsheba becomes pregnant. A note that her bathing was connected to her monthly indisposition makes it clear that the child she is expecting is David's, not her husband Uriah's; he was at the battle for Rabbah. David, in his interaction with Uriah, does everything possible to get around this textual clarity. He attempts to get Uriah to go to his house and sleep with his wife, so that Uriah could be fooled into thinking he was the child's father. But Uriah refuses, out of solidarity with the men who are camping on the field of battle.

David's whole sequence of actions — beginning with the fact that he has stayed in Jerusalem while "all Israel" (2 Sam 11:1) has gone to war, through adultery, to his dealing with Uriah and finally Uriah's murder — positions him as Israel's opposite, outside the ethics of the people whose king he is. 2 Samuel 11 is the turning point and crux of David's story. To this point David has built up his house; from now on his house is in danger: "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house" (2 Sam 12:10). This narrative is the beginning of a sequence of tragic events in which David's sons repeat his crime (Exum 1992, 129). In 2 Samuel 11 itself, David's dealings with Uriah already signal a crack in his power. Uriah is subordinate to David and nevertheless does not follow his commands. Uriah is not an Israelite, but a Hittite, and yet he shows himself, in contrast to Israel's king, to be solidly with "Israel and Judah" (2 Sam 11:11).

David has built up his house through his marriage policies (see below), and so has secured his dominance over all Israel by forging ties, by means of women as "representatives of the social environments connected with them" (Willi-Plein 1995, 355), with different social and geographical areas. Through Michal, David preserves continuity with the royal house that preceded him, in order at the same time to deny the house of Saul its continuance. Ahinoam and Abigail secure for David "good relationships with the highly regarded families of the southern highlands of Judea" (Schroer 1996, 92). Bathsheba and some nameless concubines anchor David's rule in Jerusalem. David's marriages are not primarily for the purpose of joining women to him emotionally, but rather to link areas of land and social classes to him politically.

## **Power and Sexuality in the House of David**

David's house enjoys no period of stability or even of standing still. The phase of construction and expansion of power is followed, in the "narrative of the succession" (2 Sam 11 to 1 Kings 2), by a phase of conflicts over royal power. The protagonists in these confrontations are David's sons, especially Absalom and, in 2 Samuel 13, Amnon. Attacks also come from outside David's family (2 Sam 20), but the pri-

mary conflict over royal power takes place within the house of David. In these struggles, women are used and functionalized by the men in the narrative.

The story of David's adultery with Bathsheba, the murder of Uriah, and the consequences of those deeds (2 Sam 11–12) is followed immediately by the narrative of Tamar and Amnon. In 2 Samuel 13:1–22, Amnon rapes his sister Tamar. The first verses of the narrative spread the net of family relationships within which the deed of violence will be carried out. The frequency of terms referring to family relationships here and in the rest of the narrative indicates that the system of family connections is of the highest importance for understanding the narrative. With the exception of Tamar, all those concerned are described in terms of their family relationships to David. Tamar is introduced by way of her brother Absalom. Here it is already evident that her relationship with King David is not direct and does not have the same value as the sons' relationships with David. The king is at the center of the net of relationships; his lack of competence in the course of the narrative stands in sharp contrast to his narrative position at the central point and to his social position as king.

Amnon's lust initiates the action. He sees an obstacle to the fulfillment of his desire, namely, Tamar's status as a virgin. As such, she is part of the sphere that belongs to her father. There is some ambivalence in the Hebrew formulation of the obstacle. The verb *pl'* means both "impossible" and "wonderful." Tamar's belonging to David's sphere thus makes it both difficult and at the same time desirable to do something to Tamar (2 Sam 13:2).

Amnon's friend Jonadab functions, in correspondence to his designation as a "crafty man," as an adviser. Amnon is supposed to pretend to be sick, and the king is to come and, at Amnon's request, persuade Tamar to prepare some tasty food to strengthen him. Jonadab's plan works. The term "heart cakes" or "dear little cakes" for the sickbed food is from Amnon's perspective. It describes the form of the baked goods and also evokes the concept of the "heart." The latter, of course, does not represent romantic feeling in contrast to reason — that kind of thinking in contrasts is foreign to Hebrew. Rather, the heart is the seat of will and passion, and the place of decision. The concept makes it clear that more is at stake for Amnon than just being fed by Tamar. Amnon's desire is not merely a superficial wish for food. Amnon's point of view dominates the narrative. His eyes behold the preparation of the food (13:5–6). But in verse 5 the object of the verb "see" is missing, so that it remains open whether Amnon's interest is in the food or in Tamar herself. The voyeurism thus indicated (Schroer 1992, 171–72), and Amnon's wish to eat from Tamar's hand, make it clear that Amnon's desire is to be interpreted as sexual: "In this narrative, Amnon's eyes are an instrument of rule. Not only the sexual intercourse performed against Tamar's will, but already Amnon's look is an act of sexual violence" (Müllner 1997, 168).

Tamar resists Amnon (13:12–13). The rhetoric of her speech is brilliant. While Amnon had demanded that she sleep with him, thus making *Tamar* the subject of

the sexual act (13:11), Tamar shows that *Amnon* would be the subject of a sexual act that would have different, but catastrophic, consequences for both participants. That act would be an act of violence. This is not just about physical superiority or the use of force. The emphasis lies on the social consequences. The community's opprobrium (that is the semantics of *ḥerpâ* in 13:13) would fall on the innocent Tamar. Amnon would become one of a series of criminals (*nēbālim*) in Israel (cf. the name of Abigail's first husband, Nabal, in 1 Sam 25). Tamar's speech shows clearly that the narrative community is on her side, for she is the one who formulates the common ethics of Israel in words that none of the hearers or readers can escape. Only Amnon, with his refusal to listen to Tamar (2 Sam 13:14: "But he would not listen *to her [voice]*"; 13:16: "But he would not listen *to her*"), dismisses her whole person.

Tamar's prophecies are fulfilled. Amnon rapes her. Tamar does turn to the public to accuse him of his crime and receive justice. But her brother Absalom orders her to keep quiet. This second act of violence (against Tribble 1987, who interprets Absalom's role very positively) also takes Tamar's words away and sentences her to silent desolation. For Tamar, Absalom's house is not a place of security and restoration, but the place where she silently collapses. This story is told to counter Absalom's command to silence. That makes 2 Samuel 13 a contrast story to 2 Samuel 11. In 2 Samuel 11 the narrated sex act remains ambivalent as far as its violence is concerned, though the text acts violently. In 2 Samuel 13 the men within the narrative world are united in doing violence to Tamar. But the text breaks with the command to silence and reveals itself to be on the woman's side. As a consequence of Amnon's violent act against Tamar, Absalom murders his brother (2 Sam 13:23-37) and so eliminates a competitor for the succession to the throne. The resulting banishment of Absalom is ended through the intervention of a wise woman (see below). But Absalom's hunger for power is very great. In the course of his rebellion against his father David, Absalom amasses so much military and political strength that David has to flee Jerusalem. In his hasty flight, David leaves seven concubines in Jerusalem "to look after the house" (2 Sam 16:21). Absalom and his troops take Jerusalem. In Absalom's uncertainty about what he should do now, Ahithophel makes a suggestion about how Absalom could document his rule: "Go in to your father's concubines, the ones he has left to look after the house; and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened" (16:21).

Absalom follows this advice and sleeps with his father's concubines before the eyes of all Israel. The reference to 2 Samuel 11-12 is all too clear, since it suggests that one should interpret Nathan's prophecy in 2 Samuel 12:7-14 in terms of these events. The roof of the palace from which David had seen and desired Bathsheba is the place where Absalom "takes" his father's concubines. The direction of the look David had cast upon Bathsheba is reversed when now Absalom, "in the sight of all Israel," goes in to David's concubines (2 Sam 16:22). The roof that in 2 Samuel 11

marked the elevated and thus powerful position of the one looking is now the exposed location of an event at which the whole public looks. By his public sexual act with his father's concubines, Absalom demonstrates a claim to rule. The consequence of Absalom's deed is as gruesome for the women as was the consequence for Tamar of Amnon's violent act. David comes back to Jerusalem and provides for the women, but imprisons them; until they die they are "living as if in widowhood" (20:3).

These passages about David's ten concubines, so difficult to understand by themselves, must be read in the context of the whole corpus of the books of Samuel and the passage in 1 Kings 1–2 that is part of the "succession narrative." We may here say only this about the narrative in 1 Kings 1–2, in which Abishag the Shunammite plays a role: Abishag is supposed to care for the aged David, whose sexual impotence ("the king did not know her," 1 Kings 1:4) is a sign of his political powerlessness. Abishag is functionalized by David's sons when Solomon — who in the meantime has become king — interprets the desire of his brother Adonijah to marry Abishag as a claim to David's throne, and has Adonijah killed (1 Kings 2:13–25).

The thread that runs through all the sexual connections in the context of royal dynasties is the linking of sexual and political power. David's marriage policy falls within this context, as does a brief episode (2 Sam 3:6–11) in which Saul's son Ishbaal challenges the general, Abner, who had taken Rizpah, Saul's concubine, after the death of Saul. Ishbaal understands this sexual act by Abner with Rizpah as a claim to rule. David's sexual "conquest" of Bathsheba should be seen against that background, as also Amnon's violent act against Tamar and Absalom's sexual manifestation, on the palace roof, of his claim to rule.

The description of the task David assigns to his concubines during his flight from Jerusalem may furnish us with a key to understanding the relationship between sexuality and the politics of power. They are to "look after the house." This task is so important that it is repeated every time the women are mentioned (2 Sam 15:16; 16:21; 20:3). The concept of the house shifts back and forth, within the books of Samuel, among its quite concrete spatial, its familial, its dynastic, and its national meanings. Thus the "house" is both the specific place as well as the family, which in the narrated political situation is becoming a dynasty, and also the nation as the house of Israel and Judah. David's house especially is no "private" space, but represents public reality. When in 2 Samuel 15:16–17 David's "house" is paralleled with the "people" or "nation," it is clear that the Davidic house has national-political significance. David's concubines are not left behind in Jerusalem to watch over the palace (the "king's house"); rather, these women represent in this moment the (in)stability of the Davidic dynasty. Leaving them behind also means positioning them as a point of attack. That is precisely what the counselor Ahithophel recognizes, as does the rebellious Absalom, following his advice. These women embody the Davidic dynasty. If Absalom can take possession of them he will force his way, over the bodies of the women, into his father's sphere of power.

The women are a means by which to demonstrate a political claim to rule. The enormity of the functionalization of women, as presented in the stories of Rizpah, Bathsheba, Tamar, David's concubines, and finally Abishag, is related to the specific sexualization of the politics of power, as it takes place in the establishment of the dynastic kingship. Inasmuch as the family is made into an institution for the support of the state, the sexual relationships regulated by the family likewise acquire significance for the maintenance of the state. The "succession narrative" shows that the dynastic form of rule is vulnerable to the misuse of power within the family. These narratives are not simply ambivalent as regards David, or generally critical of royalty; they criticize the dynastic form of rule. In the context of the depiction of dynastic politics, then, women come particularly into focus as the objects of sexuality understood in terms of the dynamics of power.

### Wise Women in Israel

The first woman from the "group of wise women counselors in Israel" (Schroer 1992, 119) who treads the stage of the narrative world of the books of Samuel is a nameless woman from Endor (1 Sam 28). It is true that this woman is not called "wise," but in view of her narrative function she can be counted as part of that group. After Samuel's death, King Saul is in terrible trouble. Samuel had been the prophet who anointed Saul as king and during his reign stood at his side as his adviser, albeit a critical one. Samuel dies, and so does Saul's access to God: "When Saul inquired of YHWH, YHWH did not answer him, not by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets" (1 Sam 28:6).

Saul then bids his servants to look for a woman who is a medium, in command of a dead spirit. His servants react promptly by telling him there is such a woman at Endor (28:7). This brief dialogue shows not only that this one woman "was widely known for her services as a medium" (Schroer 1992, 119), but also that the narrative community was more inclined to associate the practice of invoking the dead with women than with men, since Saul asks specifically for a woman with this ability.

Saul brings himself, and the woman he then visits, into conflict with a law against mediums that he himself had promulgated (1 Sam 28:9; cf. Lev 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deut 18:11; Isa 8:19; 19:3; 29:4). The guest, who at this point in the story is not yet identified to the medium as Saul, allays her fear of punishment by promising that nothing will happen to her. And so the medium enables a last, weird encounter between Samuel and Saul. The narrative gives this meeting a character of "*fascinosum et tremendum* . . . that quakes throughout" (Dietrich and Naumann 1995, 108). Samuel confirms for Saul only what had already become clear during the prophet's lifetime: "YHWH has turned from you and become your enemy" (1 Sam 28:16). In the dialogue with the desperate king that follows, the medium

shows herself to be the sovereign host and a self-possessed woman. She is on the same level as Saul when she says: "Your servant has listened to you; I have taken my life in my hand, and have listened to what you have said to me. Now therefore, you also listen to your servant!" (28:21-22).

The medium turns "listening to Saul's voice" around, and in so doing makes it clear that she is not acting in obedience to a command but has offered Saul her services. Her concern as a host shows that "here mercy [belongs] to the image of the wise woman" (Schroer 1992, 121).

Two other women are introduced into the narrative with the explicit title of "wise woman": the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14) and the wise woman of Abel of Beth-maacah (2 Sam 20). The fact that both women are known only by this designation and their belonging to their respective cities indicates that the narrative community must have had a picture of these women prior to the actual narrative (Camp 1981, 17). Both women exercise a normative influence on political events through their intervention.

The wise woman of Tekoa is summoned by Joab through a messenger, a sign of how well she was known. She is to induce King David to bring his son Absalom back from exile, after the latter's murder of Amnon. Similarly to the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:1-7 and a nameless prophet in 1 Kings 20:38-43, the woman of Tekoa also tells the king a story that turns out to be a parable. The rhetorical strategy is to induce the king to issue judgment in a case that purportedly has nothing to do with him, in order then to apply the judgment to the king's own situation. In 2 Samuel 14 the woman pretends to be the mother of two sons, one of whom has murdered the other. While her other relatives demand blood vengeance, the woman is concerned for the continuance of her family. David twice attempts to console the woman without making any promises. Only after her second response does the king issue the judgment that nothing should happen to the son who had struck down the other (2 Sam 14:11). Now the woman applies her own familial situation to David, although not by referring to his own family, but by asking him: "Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God?" (14:13). The close connection, to the point of identity, between the house of David and the house of Israel enables this kind of transfer. David has decided in a fashion that he must now apply to his own son by bringing him back from exile.

The wise woman of Abel of Beth-maacah (2 Sam 20) intervenes in a siege situation. She seeks a parlay with David's general, Joab, and succeeds in saving her city, in which a man named Sheba, who has revolted against David, has hidden. At the request of the woman, Joab approaches the city wall. The very fact that Joab lets himself get so close to the wall points to the authority of this woman. Approaching a city wall has to be regarded as a dangerous business, since Joab himself, in 2 Samuel 11:20-21, had recalled that Abimelech, in Judges 9:50-54, had been killed by a millstone thrown by a woman from the city wall. Although he is the general, Joab at this point finds himself in the inferior and endangered situation, a danger that

threatens not only his life but also his honor. For to be killed by a woman was a shameful end for a warrior (Judg 9:54). Against this background, Joab enters into negotiations with the woman. After a request to be heard and the assurance that her dialogue partner is really Joab the general, she begins her speech with a proverb that distinguishes her city as a counselor from of old. She also calls the city a “mother in Israel,” a formulation that refers back to the characterization of Deborah in Judges 5:7. By emphasizing the city’s function as a counselor and personifying it as a mother, the wise woman embeds herself in the context of a city personified as a wise mother. She thus evokes the tradition of the mother as wise teacher (Prov 1:8) whose authority is here expanded from the immediate family to a broader political context (Camp 1981, 24-26). The wise woman must also be assured of having the same authority toward her fellow citizens, since even before she has spoken with the people of the city, she assures Joab that they will meet his condition, namely, the killing and handing over of the rebel. Her going “to the people of the city with her wise plan” (2 Sam 20:22) can be compared, as to its influence, with the kind of counsel a court adviser would give to his king (Camp 1981, 18).

These wise women show that both counseling as a function and wisdom language were not restricted to men or to the court context. Both women include proverbs in their speeches (2 Sam 14:14; 20:18). The wise woman of Abel appeals to the value of traditional knowledge (2 Sam 20:18). Both women show their rhetorical skill in dealing with a social superior; both have “the ability to speak the right word at the right time” (Camp 1981, 21, referring to the wise woman of Tekoa).

The counseling function of wise women is so firmly anchored in Israel’s tradition that wise women became models for personified Wisdom (Schroer 1996, 66, 72-73). The term “model” (German *Vorbild*) is used “in the sense of a shaping, effectual model” (Schroer 1996, 72).

## Constructions of the Feminine and of Masculinity

The books of Samuel show women in the greatest variety of roles and functions. They do not present gender-neutral people, but women and men. They construct gender-specific images of how people are supposed to behave. In part, these images deviate from the ideas that are normative in the Western world at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, but in part we can see some overlapping.

For example, when Tamar is depicted in 2 Samuel 13:1 as “beautiful” and Jonadab in verse 3 as “wise,” we are inclined to interpret these two attributes as gender-specific clichés. But a search of the books of Samuel for these two attributes shows that such an interpretation is a projection. The depictions of wise women in the books of Samuel make it clear that wisdom is not a phenomenon re-

stricted to men. And beauty is a quality belonging to men as well as women, though in different ways. Whereas women's beauty in the Hebrew Bible almost always arouses male desire, and often endangers the woman as well, male beauty is the attribute of the politically powerful and successful. Saul is a handsome man (1 Sam 10:23), and so are David (1 Sam 16:12, 18) and Absalom (2 Sam 14:25-26). Male beauty comes to the fore when the men in question begin their political ascent. And male beauty is always made concrete in comparative terms, being attributed to someone who is distinguished from others by some external characteristic. Saul is taller than others, while the color of David's hair and his eyes are emphasized, and Absalom's abundant hair is measured by its weight. Besides beauty and readiness for battle, rhetorical abilities, entering into close relationships with other men, emotional detachment toward women, and musical talent make up a construction of manliness that is developed in the books of Samuel above all in the example of King David (Clines 1995, 216-28).

Likewise, the contrast that is common in our society between public and private space, with the public space belonging to men and the private space to women, cannot be verified in the books of Samuel. In the "house" itself, with its varied connotations, the distinctions between "public" and "private" fall apart. Some narratives center on a woman. In other places women are mentioned only in passing. These seemingly offhand remarks about women that are tossed in are revealing in their very purposelessness (Hackett 1992, 85). They show that women have public duties. At the royal court, for example, we know of the professions of cook, baker, and perfumer (1 Sam 8:13; cf. Schottroff 1989). Women serve at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (1 Sam 2:22), though it is not clear what the specific service was. The text reproaches Eli's sons for having had sexual intercourse with these women. We cannot conclude from this that the passage refers to a sexual service by the women in the sense of cultic prostitution. We should rather think of a cultic service different from that of the priests (Hackett 1992, 87). It is possible that these women were even bound by a vow of chastity. Eli's sons would then be accused "of having seduced the women into failing to keep separate their cult-related service and the exercise of sexuality" (Wacker 1995, 151). In 2 Samuel 4:6 a woman appears as a doorkeeper. Abigail has maidservants (1 Sam 25:42); young women draw water (1 Sam 9:11). In the context of the birth and upbringing of children, it is not only their own mothers who are present. Women are present when a child is born (1 Sam 4:19-22), and 2 Samuel 4:4 speaks of the function of the nurse.

The realms within which women and men are active are not strictly separated in the books of Samuel. With the exception of the battlefield, all spaces are accessible to women. The multiplicity of roles in which women act makes it impossible to sketch a single, unified picture of femininity.



## Biographies of Men and Portraits of Women

Women are the victims of men's striving after power and of male violence; they take charge of their own history and exercise great influence on the political history of Israel; they are mothers, daughters, and wise women; they stand at the center and on the margins of the story that is told. A great deal that might have been told about the lives of women remains unsaid. Very seldom does the text permit access to women's perspective, their thoughts, their feelings, and the context of their daily lives. The androcentric perspective of the depiction presents men as the dominant subjects of the narrated events, and shows both men and women from men's point of view. This bars access to women's understanding of themselves. Their presence at the center of Israel's political history, however, remains not merely a challenge to methodology; it is already realized in the books of Samuel.

Of course, the depiction of women's presence is fundamentally different from the presentation of the men who became central to Israel's political history. The depiction of these men follows biographical lines, while the depiction of women is sporadic. Women enter the game when their actions or their status as objects are important for advancing "his-story." By the same criterion they disappear again from the stage of the narrative world. The fragmentariness of the female figures makes a reading whose interest centers on women awkward, jerky, and often unsatisfying. Such a reading brings together pieces of a puzzle entitled "her-story," in the knowledge that only the imagination can fill in the many empty spaces.

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