

**Insiders, Outsiders, Adversaries and Allies: David's Retreat and Return in
2 Samuel 15:1-16:14; 19:9-43**

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In the announcement of the Thirteenth Oxford Institute the call for papers for the Biblical Studies Working Group opens with these lines, "In what ways do the scriptures represent God's people as relating to communities outside of Judaism and Christianity? How do the Old and New Testament scriptures represent Jews and Christians relating to followers of other religious beliefs?"

For the Old Testament scriptures it seems useful to explore these questions in relation to the central character of David. After all, it is David, who more than any other figure becomes the idealized figure of God's anointed one, both remembered as the "man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14)," and projected into the future as the prototype of the messiah who will someday come in the line of David and restore God's kingdom. Since David's story is told in the Books of Samuel with some honesty over David's ambiguities and shortcomings the Chronicler even cleaned up David's story to make him more worthy of his role as Israel's ideal once and future king.

Yet, even in the narratives of the Books of Samuel David remains a figure to be reckoned with. His story has been an object of fascinated reflection from the earliest rabbis down to the latest twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship.¹ David has been both revered and reviled by those who have read his story, but he cannot be ignored. If we are to explore how the community of God's people relate to those outside their own religious community then it would be valuable to explore how David regarded such persons.

David's story is among the most expansive and detailed for any single figure in the biblical story.² It is impossible in one brief paper to explore it all. The narratives often described as the History of the Rise of David (1 Sam 16:1-2 Sam 5:10) offer some suggestive places to consider our larger focal theme. When David had been forced to run from Saul we are told, "Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him, and he became captain over them (1

¹ In a recent monograph that will be of special interest for the focus of this paper, Steven T. Mann, *Run, David, Run: An Investigation of the Theological Speech Acts of David's Departure and Return (2 Samuel 14-20)* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), the author includes seventeen pages of bibliography related to David's story, almost all published within the last thirty years.

² This entire paper assumes as foundational my own work on the Books of Samuel and my own dialogue with a large segment of the available scholarship on David's story, Bruce C. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary and Reflection," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 947-1383.

Sam 22:2).” This suggests a receptivity by David to outsiders just as he himself had become an outsider to Saul, but these are probably not non-Israelites. Twice David spares the life of Saul when he has power over him (1 Sam 24 and 26). He refuses to take the life of God’s anointed and thus shows an extension of respect even to those who have become his enemy. David seeks refuge with and enters the service of Achish, the Philistine king of Gath (1 Sam 27:1-7). He is able to make a practical alliance with a non-Israelite for his own protection, and the relationship is so positive that Achish makes David his personal bodyguard (1 Sam 28:2). The narratives of the rise of David report often that “the Lord was with him” (2 Sam 5:10) and show David frequently resorting to prayer in consultation and openness to God’s will. However, these stories also illustrate David’s shrewd political pragmatism, and there seems little to extrapolate from these narratives for our theme except that David is not narrowly insular in his judgments about allies or enemies.

It has long been recognized that David’s story falls into two dramatically different parts with the dividing point coming in the story of David’s sin against Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam 11-12). For our purposes we can note Carlson’s description of these two parts as David under the blessing prior to the Bathsheba episode, and David under the curse following David’s sin.³ Gunn’s characterization of these two parts of David’s story as “gift and grasp” have also seemed helpful.⁴ If we look at the second half of David’s story in relation to our theme the relationship of David to non-Israelites seems mainly negative in the beginning of this sad chapter of David’s story. In 2 Sam 11 it is Uriah, a Hittite, surely not a believer in Israel’s religion, but serving loyally as a mercenary in David’s army, who is victimized by David, who takes first his wife and then his life. This is hardly a basis for any theology of relationship between God’s people and outsiders. In fact, the David of 2 Sam 11-14 bears little resemblance to the David seen in 1 Samuel 16-2 Samuel 9. David is no longer a man of prayer. He has become a “taker” fulfilling the dire warning of Samuel in 1 Sam 8:10-18. Confronted by the prophet Nathan, David first receives the words of God’s judgment that the very violence he has inflicted on another’s family will now visit his own (2 Sam 1-14) and then begins the tragic lived reality of this judgment. This tragic family history does not seem a promising ground on which to find models for relationship between the community of God’s people and those outside that community.

Yet, even as David is suffering through a rebellion led by his own son, Absalom, a remarkable alteration takes place in the character of David within the story. Absalom has plotted and launched an insurrection against his own father (2 Sam 15:1-12). David has refused to see this developing and is suddenly in danger of being captured in his own city of Jerusalem. What ensues is David’s retreat from Jerusalem and an unusually detailed account of those who met and interacted with him on this desperate journey. In the course of this retreat David has five encounters (2 Sam 15:13-16:19), and following

³ R. A. Carlson, *David, the Chosen King: A Traditio-historical Approach to the Second Book of Samuel* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1964).

⁴ D. M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation*, JSOTSup 6 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978).

the dramatic victory of David's forces and the tragic death of Absalom, David has three more encounters on his return to Jerusalem (2 Sam 19:9-43). In the course of these meetings we see a transformed David. He is no longer the David who simply takes in power what he desires. He is chastened even penitent. He knows himself a sinner yet he becomes once again a man of prayer willing to submit his life and his fate to God. It is this David that in his bruised wisdom deals with a wide variety of people who come out to meet him on his retreat from and his return to Jerusalem. It is this David, these encounters, that will be the focus of this paper.⁵

David's Retreat from Jerusalem (2 Sam 15:13-18)

Four years have passed since Absalom's return to Jerusalem after he was banished for the killing of his brother Amnon (2 Sam 15:7). During this time Absalom has ingratiated himself to people by hearing their grievances and suggesting that if only he were king he would be more responsive to the people's concerns (15:1-6). In so doing we are told that "he stole the hearts of the people of Israel" (v 6b).⁶ Undoubtedly he drew on dissatisfaction of northern Israelites still loyal to the memory of Saul and his family, but the fact that he launches his rebellion in Hebron, the capital of Judah and David's own tribe, suggests southern support as well. Absalom gains David's consent to go to Hebron for an offering to fulfill a vow and shrewdly takes with him two hundred influential men of Jerusalem who know nothing of his intention (v 11). Thus, when Absalom publicly declares his rebellion (v 10) and summons his supporters these men are already implicated in his plan or if opposed are in his power. He also summoned one of David's most influential advisors, Ahithophel, and this counselor presumably joined Absalom willingly (v 12). Ahithophel becomes a crucial part of the turning point in the story of this rebellion.

When news of Absalom's open revolt reaches David it is with the sweeping statement that "The hearts of the Israelites have gone after Absalom" (v 13). Two things

⁵ Since the work of Leonard Rost, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* (BWANT 3; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926) a lively debate has unfolded over the central theme and purpose of 2 Samuel 9-20; 1 Kings 1-2. Rost labeled these chapters a Succession Narrative focused on the succession to David's throne and having a literary unity that suggested an earlier existence as an independent narrative. Almost nothing about this statement would now represent a consensus in Old Testament scholarship. However, no one alternative view of the composition or purpose of these chapters has gathered a significant majority of opinion. An outstanding summary of scholarship on these chapters is included as a full chapter in Mann, *Run, David, Run*, pp. 10-29. It can be said that there is increased attention to the lengthy narrative around Absalom's rebellion that treats this material as significant for its statement about the character of David and his faith rather than the issue of who will succeed to David's throne. This author finds himself persuaded by this view. Absalom is the rebellious son in this story, but almost never is the focus on his loss as an heir to the throne. The focus is on David—his pathos, his faith, his grief, and ultimately his wisdom.

⁶ Biblical quotations in this paper are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

become immediately apparent in the story. The first is the decisive response of David. Without hesitation he makes the judgment that Jerusalem must be abandoned (v 14). He believes that to stay there will be to become trapped. This is the kind of decisiveness in command that was apparent in the stories of David's early life as a military commander and in the eluding of Saul in the wilderness. It is something of a surprise because David appears weak and indecisive as tragic events unfold in his own family since the confrontation by Nathan (ch. 12). He fails to deal with Amnon for the rape of his half sister Tamar. He allows the circumstance that leads to Absalom's revenge on Amnon. He allows only banishment for the slaughter unleashed by Absalom, yet will not allow restored relationship even after Absalom returns from exile. It is hard to believe that the behavior of Absalom to gain favor at David's expense was unknown to him, and yet he took no action. Now, faced with entrapment in Jerusalem and the threatened end of his kingship David orders an immediate strategic retreat from Jerusalem.

As the retreat begins a second reality becomes apparent. David stands on the outskirts of the city to review his entourage as it passes (vv 16-18). "These verses speak of David's household, his officials, his servants, and the mercenary troops that are in his personal service. The implication is clear: the people are with Absalom. The odds do not look good for David."⁷ In this episode of David's retreat he is now the outsider, the pursued. He no longer represents established power. Perhaps this stirs something in him that recalls an earlier time in his life when without the trappings of power he was forced to rely on God and to find God working in unlikely ways, people and places. A detailed accounting of this retreat now unfolds in the form of five encounters and David's response to them.

Ittai, the Gittite (2 Sam 15:19-23)

David has long used mercenaries, especially in the contingent of troops that served as his personal bodyguard. No regular army troops are mentioned in those who pass by David in review, only Cherethites, Pelethites, and Gittites (v 18). But David singles out Ittai, the commander of the Gittites, for a special encounter. The Gittites are said to number six hundred and are perhaps come to serve David as an extension of his relationship to Gath when he held Ziklag in behalf of Achish of Gath. In any case, David seems surprised to see Ittai marching into exile with him, and ironically tells him to "Go back" (2x, vv 19, 20) since Ittai's name means "with me." David indicates that Ittai and his contingent are recent additions to David's entourage and shouldn't be expected to wander the wilderness with him in exile ("You came only yesterday," v 20). There seems to be some emphasis on the fact that Ittai brings not only his fighting men but all of the families, women and children, with them. Many commentators suggest this is not the ordinary case for mercenaries so Ittai may be somewhat unusual in bringing to David not only fighting men but families intending to settle with David. David addresses him as "a foreigner and also an exile from your home" (v 19) and tries to release Ittai from any sense of obligation. David's speech is personal and not a royal command. Indeed, David urges Ittai to stay and serve "the king" seeming to acknowledge Absalom as the holder of

⁷ Birch, *NIB*, 1324.

the throne and himself as deposed monarch (v 19). To underline the tone of graciousness as opposed to command, David pronounces a blessing on Ittai and his household, “May the LORD show steadfast love and faithfulness to you.” Covenant blessings, shown by God to Israel, are extended by David to this faithful friend labeled “foreigner.”

Ittai’s response is equally gracious and generous. To the reader’s surprise this foreign mercenary swears an oath in the name of David’s God, Yahweh, “As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be” (v 21).⁸ In this oath Ittai rejects the contention that Absalom is already king and swears allegiance to David as king, in life or in death. It is a moving show of loyalty first shown to David in exile by an alien who could have left honorably and in safety. And it is this foreigner, Ittai, who reinforces David’s own invoking of God’s name as this penitential journey begins. David seems humbled and simply accepts Ittai’s gift of service by saying “Go then, march on” (v 22), which Ittai and his entire household proceed to do.

This sad entourage proceeds through the Kidron Valley with the wilderness as destination, and the penitential character of the journey is underlined by their weeping (v 23).

Abiathar and Zadok (2 Samuel 15:24-30)

David is next met by the priests, Abiathar and Zadok, with “all the Levites” bearing the “ark of the covenant of God” (v 24). Both of these men have a long history with David extending back into his time in the wilderness eluding the pursuit of Saul. From the reader’s point of view Ittai seemed an unlikely companion on David’s retreat but the priests and the sacred ark seem like powerful religious symbols that David would want to claim for his side in this conflict. But David rejects this support in a characteristic blend of piety and pragmatism.

In the same decisive manner with which David announced the retreat from Jerusalem he simply commands Zadok to “Carry the ark of God back into the city” (v 25a). There is no debate about its strategic importance or its power as the symbol of God’s presence. David’s immediate reason for this command is theological. His statement to Zadok suggests that at this point in his life David is once again willing to place his trust in Yahweh as the one who alone can restore fallen ones. Previous events have shown that David is well aware of his status as a sinner before the LORD beginning with his confessional response to Nathan’s confrontation (2 Sam 12:13). But it is only at this point in David’s story that we see him once again willing to trust his future to God

⁸ Katherine D. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, HSM 17 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 1-8 has called attention to the parallel of Ittai’s vow of loyalty to that of Ruth who responds to Naomi’s effort to give her leave to go with a pledge of loyalty even to Naomi’s God.

and to accept the restoration from this banishment only as God wills it.⁹ He declares to Zadok that the ark cannot save him, but only as he once again finds favor in the eyes of God will David return to see the ark in its holy place in Jerusalem (v 25). Further, if the LORD still finds David unworthy, he is willing to accept whatever fate God has decreed for him (v 26). This is no longer the David who acts as though he can secure his own future. It is a David, who even given the opportunity to claim the most powerful religious symbol of the ark, along with all who serve it, chooses to go into exile as the outsider trusting in the LORD rather than his own ability to claim the trappings of power.

Lest we forget what a shrewd strategist David is, he also manages to turn this theologically altruistic act to his own advantage. He urges Zadok and Abiathar to return to Jerusalem and become spies for David in Absalom's Jerusalem. The sons of Zadok and Abiathar, Ahimaaz and Jonathan, are to serve as messengers to bring strategic information to David at a prearranged place (vv 27-29).

The retreat procession into the wilderness proceeds with additional signs of this as a penitential journey. David proceeds up the Mount of Olives weeping, head covered, and barefoot, and all the people followed him weeping with heads covered (v 30).

Hushai, the Archite (2 Samuel 15:31-37)

As David's procession progresses word reaches him that one of his most trusted advisors, Ahithophel, has cast his lot with Absalom (v 31). We are told later that his advice was considered "as if one consulted the oracle of God" (16:23). This is a seriously worrisome development. David's response is immediate, and it takes us back to an earlier David. He prays. It is a direct petition to God. "O LORD, I pray you, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness" (v 31). We have not seen David pray since the death of his first child with Bathsheba (12:16).

Almost immediately David reaches the summit of the Mount of Olives and is met there by another trusted advisor, Hushai, the Archite who, with torn cloak and earth on his head, proposes to go into exile with David (v 32). Archi, Hushai's town is near Bethel on the border of Benjamin and Ephraim. Thus, Hushai is from the northern tribes but clearly a David loyalist.

It is apparent that David takes Hushai's appearance as an answer to prayer, and we the readers are intended to understand that as well. But David is capable of implementing the answered prayers that Yahweh sends his way. He informs Hushai that if he accompanies David into exile he will only be a burden (v 33) but if Hushai returns to Jerusalem and, like Ahithophel, pledges his service to Absalom then he can become the instrument through which Yahweh will "defeat the counsel of Ahithophel" (v 34).

⁹ Steven T. Mann, *Run, David, Run*, pp.88-99, makes a compelling case for David's speeches in relation to Zadok and Hushai as revealing of a central theological theme in this narrative, namely that David believes that God can be on the side of even a banished sinner, and David is willing to trust his fate to God.

Hushai can send information to David through the sons of Abiathar and Zadok. Hushai accepts the challenge and returns to Jerusalem just as Absalom enters the city. An unlikely northern Israelite from near Saul's old capital has become God's secret weapon in behalf of David.

In his retreat encounters thus far David reminds us of the opportunistic yet piously trustful David in the years before he became king. Ittai is most useful to him as a commander in the field, and indeed, will be placed in command of one third of David's army when the time for battle comes (18:2). But Hushai, like Abiathar and Zadok, are more useful to David back in Jerusalem. David seems to think of Hushai primarily as a spy, a man able to get close enough to gain important information to send out with Ahimaaz and Jonathan. Little did David know that his trust in Hushai as the answer to his prayer would actually lead to direct advice to counter Ahithophel's plan offered to Absalom.

Although it lies beyond the scope of this paper there is a dramatic narrative detailing the competing advice of Ahithophel and Hushai to Absalom. When Absalom takes Hushai's advice it ensures that Absalom's forces will be led into ambush and David's forces under Joab will win a victory against the odds (16:15-18:18).¹⁰

Ziba (2 Samuel 16:1-4)

David is now met by Ziba, the servant of Mephibosheth (16:1). In 2 Sam 9 David had extended hospitality to Mephibosheth, a surviving son of his friend Jonathan who had been left handicapped by an injury to his feet as a child. David learns of this survivor of Saul's household through Ziba, a servant of Saul. David grants Mephibosheth the possession of all the lands of his grandfather, Saul, out of loyalty (*hesed*) to Jonathan. He places Ziba and all of his "fifteen sons and twenty servants" (9:10) in charge of the management of these lands in behalf of Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth himself is invited to eat at the king's table for the remainder of his life.

We receive no explanation for the fact that Mephibosheth is not with David's household from the beginning of the retreat. Now, only Ziba approaches and brings with him two donkeys laden with provisions, undoubtedly a gift of great value to the hastily retreating David. David asks him "Why have you brought these?" presumably to be clear that these are provisions intended for his entourage. But perhaps David is also questioning why Ziba arrives with provisions alone and not also Mephibosheth. David's next question is "Where is your master's son?" (v 3a). It is interesting that David

¹⁰ Since we are in Oxford I cannot resist calling to our attention that the Ahithophel/Hushai encounter became a fascination for sixteenth and seventeenth century English writers. From Chaucer to Shakespeare to Dryden they saw in these two characters metaphors of the treacherous turncoat and the unheralded loyalist in English politics. A verb for disloyal treachery was even coined, "to Ahithophel." See Larry Carver, "Ahithophel," *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. by David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1992), 27-28.

considers Ziba's master to be Saul and not Mephibosheth himself, even though Saul is long dead.

Ziba now tells David that Mephibosheth remained in Jerusalem in the hope that the rebellion of Absalom would result in the restoration to him of Saul's kingdom (v 3b). Ziba reports his words as "Today the house of Israel will give me back my grandfather's kingdom." Scholars are completely divided on whether Mephibosheth actually spoke these words or Ziba is lying.¹¹ Mephibosheth will later appear before David to dispute Ziba's claim (19:24-30). The text clearly does not help us to know the truth of the matter. It serves to underline the situation of David who also does not know the truth here.

It would seem that there are problems of credibility to Ziba's report. Why would even Mephibosheth think that Absalom has any interest in restoring Saulide heirs? Unless, as Goldingay suggests, Mephibosheth has something wrong with his head as well as his legs.¹²

David, as he has been from the start of the retreat, is decisive in his response. He has no evidence to dispute Ziba's claim. He has the generous gift of provisions brought by Ziba. He knows Ziba has cast his lot with the clear underdog in this unfolding drama. He therefore assumes that Ziba is loyal and Mephibosheth has betrayed him. Thus, he decrees "All that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours" (v 4). Ziba bows and expresses his hope for David's favor, which, of course, he is now receiving.

David has acted appropriately on the basis of the information he has, and he counts Ziba among his friends and supporters. But this story is not yet completed. On his return to Jerusalem, weary and grief stricken but victorious, David will meet Mephibosheth with a different story. We will have to wait to see how David deals with that situation.

Shimei (2 Samuel 16:5-15)

The next encounter with David is of an entirely different character. Ironically, just after receiving the support of an old Saulide retainer, a man from the house of Saul named Shimei of Gera comes out to meet David. He curses him, throws stones at him, and accuses him of murder and treachery. He claims that David's low estate is the result of the LORD's vengeance for the blood of Saul, and implies that David is a usurper on the throne. He pronounces that Absalom is the judgment on David who is a man of blood (vv 5b-8). Surely Shimei is the epitome of someone with the courage only to attack a man who is already down. It is unlikely he expressed himself so vehemently when David

¹¹ Among those who believe Ziba is lying are Ridout, Hertzberg, Whybray and Alter. Those who believe Ziba accurately reports Mephibosheth's words include Rost, Anderson, Goldingay, and Halpern. Conroy and Brueggemann believe both Ziba and Mephibosheth are trying to take advantage.

¹² John Goldingay, *Men Behaving Badly* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 290.

was at the height of his power. He clearly believes that the moment for Saulide vengeance has now come as he views a barefoot, head covered, weeping David making his hasty retreat from Jerusalem.

Shimei almost miscalculates for Abishai, one of David's most trusted warriors, begs leave of David to take off Shimei's head (v 0). But David has had to deal with the hot-tempered sons of Zeruah before (Abishai and Joab, 1 Sam 26:8-9; 2 Sam 3:30, 39), and he quickly restrains Abishai. This is significant because David, in his recent life, has kept silent while violence unfolded in his own family with eventual repercussions for his kingdom. He could have kept silent and let Abishai take care of this irritant. However, David not only restrains Abishai, he responds theologically to this adversary thrown in his path.

David's response to Shimei is not simply pragmatic. Shimei's removal might have been quicker and more practical. "David takes this moment of cursing to reflect on his position before God and his trust that it is God's grace and not Abishai's sword that can counter Shimei's cursing. David reflects that Shimei's cursing may be a part of what God has done in this moment (v 10b), and he chooses to endure the curses as a part of what God's providence has brought to him. After all, David muses, his own son Absalom is in open revolt against him (v 11). What are curses and stones compared to the threat from which they are in retreat? David recognizes that it is not the goodwill of Shimei that he needs, but the grace and mercy of God in his time of distress (v 12a). He expresses a hope, almost a prayer, that Shimei's curses may be countered and replaced by God's goodness (v 12b). In this moment we again see David as we have seen him before at his best. He trusts God and recognizes his reliance on God's providence, while moving forward himself with the most effective action he can take on his own behalf. It is a juxtaposition of political realism and trusting faith that is part of what so fascinates us about David."¹³ David does not know the outcome of the events now unfolding, but he is willing to trust his fate to the LORD. He journeys as a sinner in the grip of the consequences of his own sin. He does not hope for the "good" that he deserves but the "good" he can only receive through the grace of God.

This causes David to look, even at an enemy, with new eyes. Perhaps even in those most adamantly opposed to us, we, like David, are called to consider whether trustful responses are more in line with God's grace than responses of anger or retaliation. So David travels with his procession down to the Jordan accompanied the entire way by the curses and flung stones of Shimei.

David's Return to Jerusalem (2 Sam 19:9-15)

At this point in the narrative the rebellion of Absalom is over. But its ending was far from simple. David the king is victorious, but David the father is grief stricken and bereft. He treats his own supporters as if they had committed an act of treachery rather

¹³ Birch, *NIB*, 1326.

than won for him an improbable victory. It takes a straight talking Joab to convince him to take up his royal responsibilities in spite of his loss as a parent (19:1-8).

David can now return to Jerusalem but this turns out to have political difficulties. Most of the tribal populace had supported Absalom. But they now remember David as the king who saved them from the Philistines and other enemies, and Absalom, who looked so promising is dead (vv 9-10). No one wants to step forward at first to bring David home. The text speaks of anointing Absalom (v 10a). Perhaps David has been formally deposed and must be anointed again. The situation is awkward to say the least. David must himself appeal to his own tribe of Judah to take the lead in bringing him back. He further, shrewdly elevates Amasa, a distant kinsman, who led the army of Absalom, to the position of commander of David's own army in place of Joab (vv 13-14).. Joab probably kept command of David's personal military force, but this gesture to Amasa suggests amnesty to those who had opposed David. Initially this strategy seems to work and representatives of Judah meet at Gilgal to bring David over the Jordan. This later leads to harsh words from the elders of the northern tribes of Israel, and it is clear that the unity between Judah and the northern tribes is a shaky one (19:41-43).

One might expect David's return to be a celebratory victory march in contrast to his penitential procession of retreat, but it is not so. The world weary but often wise David we saw during the retreat is the same one we see in three encounters on his return. Although these encounter narratives contain no overt theological statements it is in the spirit of David's early expression in 15:25 that the return unfolds: "If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back and let me see both it [the ark] and the place where it stays." David seems aware that as a sinner he returns only through the grace of God. His decisions in these three encounters seem to express this perspective.

Shimei (2 Sam 19:16-23)

Among those who, with the representatives of Judah, rushed down to the Jordan to escort David home were two related to the house of Saul: Shimei, the Benjaminite along with a thousand people from Benjamin, and Ziba, the servant of the house of Saul, with his fifteen sons and twenty servants (19:16-17).

Shimei has a lot at stake. He miscalculated and has ended up on the losing side of this civil war. He appears with an immediate confession on his lips. In his short appeal to David he acknowledges that he is "guilty," that he has "done wrong," and that "I have sinned" (vv 19-20). He refers to David as "my lord, the king" three times, and to himself as David's "servant" twice. Shimei's hopeful strategy seems to be that he is the "first of all the house of Joseph" to come down to welcome and escort David to Jerusalem along with David's own kinsmen from Judah. In other words, Shimei stresses that he is the first from the northern tribes of Israel to receive David back.

Naturally, Abishai still wants to kill him, but he justifies it with a charge of slander against the LORD's anointed (v 21). At this point in the story we might wonder

if this wouldn't simply be justice. Surely enemies deserve their fate for the slander and violence they have caused.

But David and by implication the biblical witness in this story will not visit violence in the name of justice even on those who have clearly declared themselves an enemy. David declares that none shall “be put to death in Israel this day” (v 22). He knows that he is king, and he acknowledged in the first encounter with Shimei that this could only come as God’s “good” to him in spite of his own sin. Should he then judge even an enemy by visiting violence upon him? David gives Shimei an oath, “You shall not die!” (v 23). David keeps this oath during his lifetime, but he does instruct his son Solomon to deal with Shimei, and Solomon finds a pretext to have him put to death (1 Kings 2:8-9).

Mephibosheth (2 Sam 19:24-30)

Ziba is reported to meet David at Gilgal with his sons and servants to welcome him back as king (19:17), but David has no further interaction with Ziba. It is Mephibosheth who meets David and has quite a different story to tell from that told to David on his retreat from Jerusalem. He is unkempt and dirty claiming that he has not cared for himself at all since the day David left Jerusalem (v 24).

David wastes no time getting to the point, “Why did you not go with me, Mephibosheth?”(v 25). In response Mephibosheth tells a very different story from that related to David by Ziba. Mephibosheth also goes right to the point, “my servant deceived me...”(v 26). He claims that he told Ziba to saddle for him a donkey so that he could ride out with David. Since he is lame he requires a donkey and could not come afoot. Mephibosheth does not give further details, but merely asserts that Ziba has slandered him (v 27). The implication is that he was intentionally left behind. He seems to have some idea that Ziba has made claims against him and labels these slander. It is clear that his case is that he intended to go with David and was abandoned without recourse by Ziba.

What is true? The text does not give any help in adjudicating these competing claims. The implication is also that David has no clear evidence for deciding between these conflicting testimonies. Some commentators believe that Mephibosheth helps his case by immediately appealing to the king’s judgment and compares him to an “angel of God” therefore “do what seems good to you” (v 27). He further acknowledges that he has no claim on David’s graciousness since David has already rescued his house from death and granted him a place at the king’s own table. Therefore, he claims “What further right have I, then, to appeal to the king?”(v 28). This is either genuine humility or good strategy, but neither David nor the reader have any real basis for discerning the truth of the matter.

Even in his weariness and grief David retains the decisiveness that he seems to have recovered from the start of his retreat from Jerusalem. He cannot know the truth of these competing claims. So he makes a judgment that avoids harm to whoever might be

the innocent party in these dueling tales. He divides the Saulide lands between Mephibosheth and Ziba, and he declares the matter ended (v 29). In a final word, Mephibosheth declares that Ziba can take it all “since my lord the king has arrived home safely” (v 30). Rhetoric or genuine renouncement of benefits? We cannot know. Some declare that this proves Mephibosheth’s innocence since he refuses to gain benefit. There is still no evidence either way in the text or presumably for David. David’s decision is a wise one and the ongoing outcome remains hidden to the reader.

Barzillai, the Gileadite (2 Sam 19:31-40)

There is one final encounter for David on his return to Jerusalem, and it is with a trusted ally who had given him provision in the wilderness at Mahanaim (17:27-28; 19:32). Barzillai was eighty years old, but he came personally from Rogelim to escort David over the Jordan (vv 31-32).

David seeks to reward this strategic friend by inviting him to come to Jerusalem and live out his years at the king’s side as a reward for his loyalty (v 33). What follows from Barzillai is an eloquent refusal of such generosity (vv 34-37). He appeals to his eighty years, and he says he is long past the ability to enjoy the pleasures of Jerusalem, the food, the drink, the songs. He desires only to escort David a little way in honor and then be allowed to return home and meet death in his own hometown near the graves of his ancestors. But Barzillai does take the opportunity to ask of David one favor. He asks that Chimham (presumably his son) be allowed to come to Jerusalem with David in his place (v 38). David graciously agrees, and even on his deathbed instructs Solomon to deal generously with the sons of Barzillai (1 Kings 2:7).

Barzillai accompanies David a short way over the Jordan, like a good host bidding farewell to his guest, and the two friends part company with a blessing and a kiss (v 39). Chimham travels on with David. Significantly, on the return journey the men of Judah have now been joined by “half the people of Israel” (v 40).

There are now disputes between the men of Judah and the men of Israel over claims to David’s favor (vv 41-43), but we will not explore those further here. These do seem to lay the groundwork for a further rebellion against David led by a man named Sheba (ch 20), and some would see this episode as completing the return of David to full authority as king once again. But, for our purposes David is not directly involved in these events except to send commanders and men to deal with the rebellion, and he is already in Jerusalem by then (20:3-4).

The Bruised Wisdom of David

The David we see in the retreat from and return to Jerusalem is in many ways a return to the qualities seen in David earlier in his story. But this is not the same David. He is chastened by knowledge and acceptance of his own sinfulness. He is bruised by the events that have wreaked violence and death in his own family. Yet, there emerges in the

encounters during his retreat and return a kind of bruised wisdom that rests not in the trust in human abilities but in the grace of God. David prays once again. He acknowledges God's providence as beyond his own control, but he decisively makes realistic decisions while trusting the ultimate outcome to God.

It is best to resist trying to abstract general principles or moral-to-the-story outcomes from the reading of narratives such as these. Yet, surely there are insights into the leadership of God's community here when we rest that leadership in trustful hope in God's future while making wise decisions in situations given to us in the present. We would do well

- to receive the offer of common cause given in loyalty to shared goals even when offered by those from communities and religious perspectives other than our own (Ittai, the Gittite);
- to resist drawing the trappings of power and religiosity to ourselves when we can relate to political and faith communities without controlling them (Abiathar and Zadok)
- to trust that God can use gifts of others in unexpected ways (Hushai);
- to show compassion even to those who have wronged us or become our enemy believing that God's providence is working even there (Shimei);
- to wisely mediate complex situations where truth cannot be fully known but harm should be avoided (Ziba and Mephibosheth);
- and to affirm those who have shown us loyalty and courage in the recognition that we can never save ourselves (Barzillai).