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When Fathers Refuse to Eat: The Trope of Rejecting Food and Drink in Biblical Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Aaron is silent following the deaths of his sons Nadab and Abihu during their priestly consecration described in Leviticus 10. In the aftermath of their deaths, Aaron does not eat the cultically prescribed priestly meal, but instead makes a burnt offering out of the priestly offering he and his fellow-priests are meant to eat (Lev 10:16–20). In spite of the silence of both Aaron and the text, his character and state of mind may be illuminated by examining Aaron's actions in the light of other texts in which other similar refusals occur. We find that these intertextual readings resonate in the reader's understanding, adding significant dimensions to the spare characterization of Aaron in this text. David refuses to eat while the child he conceives with Bathsheba lies critically ill. Instead of mourning even more deeply when the child dies, David washes, anoints himself, and eats heartily. David's behavior when he hears of his son's death shocks the servants—and the reader. David's character coalesces in the mind of the reader who understands David's present actions in light of what has gone before, and what is to come. This article examines the premise that the trope of refusing food and drink is a powerful narrative tool in the Hebrew Bible. By means of intertextuality and reader response, two case studies are examined in some detail, yielding insights into this subtle technique of biblical characterization.

Here I address two troubling texts that deal with fathers responding to the deaths of their sons. Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, are snuffed out on the day of their dedication to service in the sanctuary in Leviticus 10; David's child with Bathsheba dies in accord with Nathan's imprecation in 2 Samuel 12. In both of these narratives, the fathers do not demonstrate grief following the deaths of their sons. The absence of overt expressions of grief and mourning in these texts, the apparent ability of both fathers to proceed with business as usual after the loss of a child, is troubling to the modern reader.[1]

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1 A literary reading of these texts yields a richer picture of the characters of Aaron and David as fathers, and also provides insights into the larger biblical function of each of these texts. Recent literary scholars of the Bible have noted that the Bible is a laconic document, sparing in both physical and emotional description. Conroy, Bar-Efrat, and Sternberg, among others, have drawn attention to the spareness of Hebrew narrative, and to the fact that all reported

Small features in these terse narratives may bear a disproportionate burden of meaning. The text relies on the nuance of language, the subtlety of allusion, to convey the broad spectrum of intense human experience that makes up its content. Such features demand to be identified and then read within the wider biblical context. Here I shall examine the element of food, taken or refused, that occurs in each of these texts. How does this apparently minor detail enrich our understanding of character and context? What does it mean when food is rejected or eaten unexpectedly, when cultic meals are refused, when the narrative reverses our expectations of fasting and feasting?

In both Leviticus 10 and 2 Samuel 12, there are expectations by other characters regarding Aaron's and David's participation in meals. In both of these narratives, these expectations are violated. After his sons are killed, Aaron refuses to partake in a consecrated meal, though Moses had earlier commanded him to eat. After his child's death, David approaches his meal with gusto, though his servants expect him to refuse to eat at all. I will look first at Aaron's story, and then at David's.

Leviticus 10:1–20

In Lev 10:1–20, where a ritual meal is not eaten, the scene is the consecration of the priesthood in the newly dedicated tabernacle. Two of Aaron's sons are incinerated by divine fire while offering incense during the ceremony. After the priestly consecration, Aaron and his fellow priests are supposed to share a cultic meal, the *minḥâ* or gift offering, usually consisting of grain in some form. However, in the aftermath of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron makes a burnt offering out of the cultically prescribed priestly offering he and his fellow-priests are meant to eat (10:16–20).

Moses, vigilant against any further irregularities, challenges Aaron about this discrepancy. Aaron's stated reason is that he was wary, in the aftermath of the day's disaster, of making an unintentional error, and so took what he perceived to be the safer course of making a burnt offering to God out of the priestly repast. Moses is satisfied with Aaron's explanation.

Earlier, Moses had commanded Aaron not to grieve or put on the usual signs of mourning for his sons, but to continue the consecration without pause (Lev 10:6–7). Cultic and communal requirements transcend Aaron's personal needs.

Aaron had silently acceded to Moses' command to continue. His only divergence from the prescribed routine is his refusal to eat the *minḥâ* offering, the priestly meal, which he makes instead into a burnt offering. Aaron's only reference to the day's personal disaster is the expression, ותקראנה אתי כאלה,

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events, even the most apparently ordinary, are of literary significance when they occur in the Hebrew Bible.

"Look what happened to me," in explaining to Moses his decision to make a burnt offering out of the *minḥâ*. Aaron's private grief is ignored by the text as secondary to the public consecration of the priesthood. However, dimensions may be added to our understanding of Aaron's character and state of mind by focusing for a moment on Aaron's action, and by reading this abstention from a cultic meal in light of other such abstentions in the Hebrew Bible.

I begin by looking for other occasions of abstention from cultic meals in biblical narrative, in order to derive meaning from linguistic, stylistic, and thematic correspondences among such texts.[2]

Three other instances of cultic meals refused are Hannah's abstention from the family sacrifice during the pilgrimage festivals (1 Sam 1:1–8);[3] David's abstention from Saul's table during the Feast of the New Moon (1 Sam 20:5–7, 24–29); and Jonathan's abstention from eating during the same event (1 Sam 20:34). In each case, the person holding back from participation is doing so in a distressed state of mind: Hannah is brought to tears by Peninnah's nasty teasing about her barrenness (1 Sam 1:6); David feels persecuted by his king (1 Sam 20:1–3); and Jonathan storms away from the feast in a rage after a murderous attack by Saul (1 Sam 20:34).

Aaron is likewise in a distressed state of mind: his sons have just been consumed by the God he serves, and he has been prohibited from expressing his grief (Lev 10:6–7). Aaron's situation is structurally analogous to Hannah's and David's, although the plots of these narratives differ widely. Like Hannah, Aaron is mourning for children God has withheld from him, although Aaron's grown sons are gone forever and Hannah will soon receive the gift of a child that she asks of God. Like David, Aaron is suspicious of a sovereign who has turned against him, although Aaron's sovereign is divine, and David's is all too human. Like Jonathan, Aaron is enraged at betrayal by a revered guardian, although Aaron's guardian is the exacting God whose demanding ritual he administers, and Jonathan's is his father the King.

In Leviticus 10, Aaron is commanded to remain silent.[4] He must sublimate his personal feelings to the welfare of the community so as not to desecrate the seven-day consecration. Nevertheless, Aaron abstains from the

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2 See Fishbane (1979:xii, 12, and *passim*), where he defines this approach to reading texts as "intertextual." Among other modern studies of biblical texts applying an intertextual approach, cf. Exum and Clines; Fewell; Fishbane (1985); Savran. This literary approach is important to our interpretations, and other works on intertextuality will be cited throughout this work.

3 The Hebrew syntax of this section (the use of the *yqtl* verb form in a narrative context) describes an ongoing or repeated event: they would go up to worship, Peninnah would afflict Hannah, Hannah would cry and not eat. The transition to the occasion that is the focus of the story in 1 Sam 1:9 does not state explicitly that Hannah again abstained from this ritual meal. However, the notation in 1:18b that she left (Eli's presence) and ate implies that she had not done so before but, her heart eased by the old priest's blessing, she does so now.

4 This is the traditional interpretation of the verbal root דמם in the Hebrew text. For an alternate suggestion, see Levine.

meal, even the ritually important, divinely commanded cultic meal of priestly consecration. When read in the light of analogous episodes, Aaron's tersely reported gesture bears the germ of his intense distress.

The wider context of biblical literature is the literature of the nations surrounding Israel, especially in the millennia preceding and contemporary with the probable formation of biblical traditions. Examination of these literatures reveals that the trope of eating or not eating is not confined to biblical literature. Refusing to eat as a signal of a troubled spirit also occurs in the wider context of ancient Near Eastern literature. There, as in the Bible, it is sometimes followed by a resumption of eating once the spirit is soothed. Such reassurance following despair occurs in the biblical example from 1 Samuel 1, where Hannah initially refuses to eat during the family ritual meal (1:7–8). Following her prayer and the blessing by Eli the priest, however, she eats and is no longer sad (1:18b).

In the Hittite myth of Ullikumi (Hoffner: 52–61), near the end of Tablet One, the sun god visits Tessub to warn him of the mortal threat represented by Ullikumi, and refuses to eat or drink the banquet offered by his host, who sees the sun god coming and prepares a banquet to greet him. The sun god refuses to sit in the chair, touch the table set for him, or touch his lip to the cup. Tessub asks him why. There is a break in text as Tablet One ends, but the sun god apparently tells him of the potential challenge, because at the beginning of Tablet Two Tessub reassures the sun god that he will take care of the matter. Tessub urges the sun god to eat and drink with enjoyment, which he does, and then he returns to the sky.

Another Near Eastern example, this one from late Egyptian literature, is the Tale of Setne-Khamwas II (Lichtheim: 90–94). In this narrative, the refusal to eat or drink signals to the wise man and his son that the Pharaoh is troubled. Following reassurance, the three men banquet merrily.

In both the Hittite and the Egyptian examples, eating and not eating are used to express the mental and emotional states of the characters, as they are in the biblical examples. In the Hittite and Egyptian tales, as in Hannah's story in 1 Samuel 1, the healing of the troubled spirit results in the return of appetite. In Leviticus 10, however, Aaron is not so comforted. The absence of this concluding amelioration may be another clue that, finally, Aaron is not reconciled to the deaths of his sons.

In Leviticus 10, Aaron's gesture is twofold. First, he chooses not to eat. Second, the meal he refuses is cultic; thus, in rejecting this meal, Aaron is also refusing to share a meal with the God whose fire has consumed his sons.[5] The ancient Near Eastern idea that sacrifice is a meal for the

[5] For the ancient idea underlying sacrifice in the Near East that the offering is a meal for the divinity, see, for example, Oppenheim, esp. the section entitled "Care and Feeding of the Gods," 183–98; van Driel, esp. 159–62; Hallo, 1987:3–14; 1983:1–18.

deity resonates throughout the Bible, most explicitly in Numbers 28:2: צו את־בני ישראל ואמרת אלהם את־קרבני לחמי לאשי ריח ניחחי תשמרו להקריב לי במועדו, "Command the Sons of Israel and say to them, 'My offerings, the food (לחם) for my fire-offerings, my pleasing aromas, take care to offer to me in the appointed time.'" A sacrifice such as the חטאת or sin offering, prescribed in Leviticus 10, in which part of a sacrifice is eaten by the priest and part is reserved for the deity, may thus be said in some sense to be a meal "shared" by the priest with the deity. This is the offering Aaron does not make. Instead, Aaron offers an עולה, or burnt offering, that is completely consumed by fire. It is devoted entirely to God and not shared at all by the human participant(s).

Like Aaron in Leviticus 10, Hannah, David, and Jonathan in the other biblical examples also refuse to eat at the table with their tormentors. Both in his refusal to eat and in his metaphorical refusal to share a meal with the God who took the lives of his sons, Aaron is expressing his grief and rage in the only way that is left to him—in the silent eloquence of symbolic gesture. Aaron's emotions legitimately may be imagined to reflect those of Hannah, David, and Jonathan in their analogous refusals: bereavement over missing progeny; wariness in the face of subversion by a trusted sovereign; rage at the treachery of a beloved guardian. Reading Aaron's refusal to eat the cultic meal in light of its resonance with other similar refusals thus adds poignant dimensions to the spare characterization of Aaron in this text.

2 Samuel 12:1–23

David's character and its subsequent development within the David narrative are elucidated, as was Aaron's in Leviticus 10, by means of the seemingly minor feature of David's eating behavior in episodes surrounding the birth and death of his first child with Bathsheba. An analysis of this episode in light of other analogous texts will prove fruitful.

One outcome of David's adulterous coupling with Bathsheba is her pregnancy (2 Sam 11:5). This pregnancy is the trigger for David's downfall on several levels, leading David from adultery to murder. Even for kings, adultery is a capital crime, and David attempts to cover up the evidence of that adultery, Bathsheba's pregnancy during the prolonged absence of her husband. David Marcus has suggested that David's concern to provide legitimacy for this child's paternity is one reason for the king's recall of Bathsheba's husband Uriah from the battlefront, and his several attempts to trick Uriah into sleeping under his own marital roof in 2 Sam 11:6–13 (see esp. 166; for other readings see Sternberg: 188–222; Bal: 10–33). Marcus suggests that Uriah's insistent refusal may be a clue that he suspects what David is up to and refuses to cooperate with the king.

When David fails to persuade Uriah to cooperate in giving even the appearance of cohabiting with his wife, the king effectively signs Uriah's death

warrant in 2 Sam 11:14–25 by ordering him into the thickest fighting at the front. By eliminating Bathsheba's husband, David opens a way that he himself can espouse Bathsheba and claim the child. After her husband's death and a suitable period of mourning, Bathsheba marries David and bears the child (2 Sam 11:26–27).

David's court prophet Nathan delivers an oracle of condemnation (2 Sam 12:1–14): the sword shall not depart from David's house, his concubines will be taken carnally by another in broad daylight, and the child that is born to him will die. Before the end of David's story, every one of these predictions comes to pass.

When the baby falls critically ill, David fasts and sleeps upon the bare ground, apparently in supplication for the child's recovery (see 2 Sam 12:22). David's refusal of food as he prays for the life of the smitten child is one of several occurrences in Hebrew Bible narrative in which fasting is an act of supplication. Fasting is associated with supplication in Nineveh's appeal for a divine reprieve in Jonah 3; in Esther's preparation to appear unsummoned before Ahasuerus in Esther 4; in the Babylonian king's appeal for Daniel's well-being in the lion's den in Daniel 6; and in Ezra's petition for divine protection on his pilgrimage of return to Jerusalem in Ezra 8, his plea for divine forgiveness when he finds out about the foreign wives in Israel's midst, and his determination to correct this transgression in Ezra 9–10.

There are also many examples of supplication without fasting. David's prayer for mercy after his transgression in ordering a census in 2 Samuel 24 is almost exactly paralleled by the account in 1 Chronicles 21, and fasting is not mentioned in either. During the dedication of the Temple in parallel accounts in 1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 5–6, Solomon's appeal to God for future mercy when the people are in need is framed in a prayer, and the means for communicating the people's distress to God is also by means of prayer. Fasting is not mentioned in these supplications.

Hezekiah successfully petitions for divine aid twice, and fasting is not mentioned in either case. First, in 2 Kgs 19:1–4 and the parallel account in Isaiah 36–37, Hezekiah is dismayed by the coercive rhetoric of the Rabshakeh. Hezekiah and his chief scribes and priests rend their clothes and don sackcloth. The king also offers an effective letter-prayer (2 Kgs 19:14–20), and the danger is averted.[6] Prayer, in combination with weeping, is also effective in securing an extension on his life, when Hezekiah falls ill as reported in 2 Kgs 20:1–6. Clearly, although it occurs several times, fasting is not required in the Hebrew Bible in order to make divine supplication. Therefore, when fasting does occur, it invites further analysis.

A final example of fasting is an ambiguous melding of the imagery of supplication and grief. Nehemiah fasts, weeps, prays, and sits in mourning

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6 For possible ancient Near Eastern parallels to this incident, see Hallo 1976:209–24.

for days when he hears about conditions in Jerusalem (Neh 1:4). Is his reaction one of grief or supplication? Here, there is a blurring of the lines between mourning and petition, as there is in the imagery of prophetic poetry.[7] The traditional gestures of grief precede a long prayer which ends Nehemiah 1 with a plea for divine support for "your servant's success" (והצליחה נא לעבדך היום ותנהו לרחמים לפני האיש הזה, 1:11), most likely in making his petition to the Persian potentate for a leave from the king's service that is the subject of the following chapter, Nehemiah 2. Like Ezra's plea for a safe pilgrimage to Jerusalem noted earlier, Nehemiah's request is favorably received (see Greenstein).

Since supplication does not require the element of fasting, and since it occurs both with and without fasting on many different occasions in biblical narrative, David's refusal to eat as part of his vigil of supplication for the child's life may have a literary function beyond its association with the cluster of gestures signaling supplication. I believe that David's refusal to eat functions here to draw the reader's attention to significance dwelling in the stark contrast between David's fasting and his behavior after the death of the child.

When the child dies after seven days (2 Sam 12:18), the servants fear to inform David, concerned that he will react even more drastically to the baby's passing than he did to the child's illness. But instead of mourning even more deeply upon the death of the child, David astonishes his servants by washing and anointing himself and eating. He replies matter-of-factly to their exclamations of surprise that while the child was sick, it was worth appealing to God in the hope of changing the divine mind, but now that the child is irreversibly dead, fasting is of no use since nothing can bring the child back to life (2 Sam 12:21–23).

David's behavior foreshadows that of Jehu in 2 Kings 9, who sits down to a meal after Jezebel is pushed to her death, and only when he is finished inquires about her burial arrangements. Just as Jezebel's death and the ignominious disposition of her remains fulfill an oracle and signal payment of the price God exacts for her transgressions, so the death of this child signals for David the fulfillment of an oracle and payment of the price of his sins.

Although sitting down to a meal immediately following the news of a death appears callous, in David's defense it is fair to note that fasting is not a

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7 My discussion here necessarily excludes prophetic poetry, where fasting is so well known in its association with supplication that mention of the one evokes the other, as in Joel 1:14 and 2:15–17. It is interesting that most examples of supplication that include the element of fasting come from later biblical literature, and that the element of fasting is absent in supplication accounts earlier in the biblical texts. It is tempting to speculate that the convention in literary prophecy associating fasting and supplication might account for this phenomenon—confirmation must await future work.

normative expression of grief in the Bible.[8] The first mention of fasting in connection with a death in the Hebrew Bible is the seven-day fast observed by the men of Jabesh-Gilead after their daring rescue, cremation, and burial of the remains of Saul and Jonathan (1 Sam 31:13). No other mourning practice by them is mentioned.

Following this precedent, David makes a practice of fasting in public mourning for the deaths of his political enemies, a gesture that on occasion appears to win him the approbation of the people. When David hears of Saul's death (2 Sam 1:11–12) he and his men rend their clothes, lament and weep, and fast until evening for Saul and Jonathan and all the fallen warriors. David then slays the messenger who claims to have killed Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:15–16), and intones his famous lament as reproduced in 2 Sam 1:19–27.

David also fasts following the murder of Abner, commander of the troops of Saul's house, in 2 Sam 3:28–39. David declares his innocence in the shedding of Abner's blood by David's commander Joab, and utters an imprecation upon Joab and his house as a consequence. David orders all the troops to rend their clothing, don sackcloth, and make public lament. David himself walks behind the bier and intones a lament for Abner, reproduced in 2 Sam 3:33–34. In spite of the urging of his men to eat after the funeral, David vows to fast until sundown in honor of the fallen Abner. In this case, at least, David receives the approval of the troops for this mourning practice, which also appears to be taken as evidence of David's innocence of the deaths (2 Sam 3: 36–37).

However, David does not fast for his many private griefs. When David's son Amnon is slain in vengeance by his half-brother Absalom (2 Sam 13: 36–39), the priests, the court, and David weep bitterly, and the text reports that David recovers from his grief. No fasting is mentioned. When David's son Absalom is slain, so ending his rebellion, David is inconsolable. The text repeatedly reports in 2 Sam 19:1–5 that David wails, laments, covers his face, and cries out loud. No fasting is mentioned here, either. Thus, when David eats following the death of his and Bathsheba's child in 2 Samuel 12, he is not violating accepted mourning practices. However, the absence of any other signs of grief may lead some readers, including David's incredulous servants, to wonder.

Feasting and fasting are important elements throughout the stories of David, and examining some of these shed valuable light on David's character and relationships. For example, there are several episodes in which accepting or rejecting food functions symbolically as the acceptance or rejection of love

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8 See the expanded discussion of this phenomenon in the revised and expanded book based upon the author's dissertation (Sharon: forthcoming).

and loyalty. Several of these episodes occur during David's retreat from Jerusalem, and involve the love and loyalty of fathers and sons, and the reverse, in 2 Samuel 16–19.

Questionable loyalty, and even betrayal, are evident in two incidents involving David's relationship with the rival house of Saul. Ziba, servant of Mephibosheth the lame son of Jonathan, greets David with supplies to be eaten and drunk by David's retinue (2 Sam 16:1–4). David questions Ziba about his master's whereabouts, Ziba denounces Mephibosheth, and David accepts his accusation at face value, without investigation or verification: Ziba is granted all his master's property, and Mephibosheth is effectively dispossessed. Second, David encounters Shimei ben Gera, whose offering is a negative one of hurled stones, dirt, insult, and execration (2 Sam 16:5–13). Calling David a man of bloodshed and a wicked man (איש הדמים ואיש הבליעל), his accusation concerns David's usurpation of the throne of Saul. Abishai ben Zeruiah offers to slay Shimei but David restrains him with the first of a two-part refrain connecting this text with 2 Sam 19:16–40, David's return to Jerusalem: "What has my [business] to do with you, sons of Zeruiah?" (מה־לי ולכם בני צריה, 2 Sam 16:10a, and compare 19:23a). David does not feel in a position to take action against a partisan of his rival's house when the king is fleeing from a mortal threat by his own son (2 Sam 16:11).

Unconditional love and loyalty mark David's relationship with his own supporters expressed in the medium of food and provisions. This is evident in a single encounter related in 2 Sam 17:27–29. As he reaches Mahanaim, David is greeted by a coalition headed by Barzillai the Gileadite. Beyond the minimum provision required for a fleeing troop, his loyal subjects present to the king foods and furnishings fit for a royal feast in a royal abode, thereby affirming their loyalty to David's kingship even in retreat.[9] Barzillai's name is noted last of the three listed benefactors in this citation, but in 2 Sam 19:32–40 he is the only one of the three mentioned, and the text is careful to note there that it is for his loyal generosity here at Mahanaim that he is offered a reward.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate the importance of food refused or accepted, and with the final resolution make a pattern of contrasts: betrayal (of Mephibosheth by Ziba) and loyalty (to David by Barzillai and his co-benefactors), conditional and unconditional generosity, David's family relationships (symbolized by his son's rebellion) and David's political heritage (exemplified by the two encounters with partisans of the house of Saul). The text in 2 Sam 19:16–40 directs the reader to read the encounters of David with Ziba, Shimei, and Barzillai in terms of one another by bringing all three

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[9] On banquet language in the Bible and in ancient Near Eastern literature, see Lichtenstein 1968; 1979, esp. 145–56.

together to form a literary inclusio with the narrative beginning in 2 Samuel 16. First, Shimei pleads for forgiveness, Abishai makes his offer and David his formulaic restraining response—David's retribution upon Shimei is pressed upon Solomon upon the son's accession (1 Kgs 2:8–9). The reading of Shimei and Ziba as public threats to David's house by partisans of the house of Saul is affirmed in 1 Kgs 2:36–46. Shimei's ultimate elimination is taken by the narrative as the final end to any threat to Solomon's security upon the throne (1 Kgs 2:45–46).

Next, the lame Mephibosheth counters Ziba's accusation, pleading incapacity to come out and greet David upon his earlier retreat. Forbearing to decide which of the two is faithful and which disloyal, David splits Mephibosheth's holdings between master and servant. Is David remiss in not investigating further? Is he wise in recognizing a no-win situation? David's ambivalent relationship to the house of Saul and to the house of Jonathan is epitomized by this episode (Marcus, 1986:163–71).

An intertextual reading of this narrative evokes two other biblical occasions when a king is asked to judge between disputants: Solomon, in a case involving two women and a child to be nurtured in 1 Kings 3; and an unnamed Northern king, in a dispute involving two women and a child to be eaten in 2 Kings 6 (Lasine, 1991:27–53). In each of these three judgment narratives a king is asked to resolve a dispute between two rivals. At one end of the spectrum is Solomon's wise judgment in the case of the two women claiming the same child (1 Kgs 3:16–28), in which Solomon's decision to split the child reveals the true mother. At the other end broods the horror of the unresolved Northern parody of the king's judgment, the case of the cannibal women (2 Kgs 6:26–30), in which the king makes no judgment at all. Instead, he walks away from the bizarre case in disgust, vowing angrily to get even with Elisha, whom he holds responsible for the drought that has brought the women to the point of cannibalism. Where on the spectrum defined by these extremes does David's judgment fall? Is he as wise as Solomon to effect this distribution of property, or is he as helpless as the hapless Northern king, who walks away from judgment cursing the prophet whose pronouncements he blames for this unspeakable turn of events?

Barzillai's unadulterated loyalty is recognized next. Returning measure for measure, the king rewards Barzillai's gift of royal provisions with an offer of perpetual attendance at the king's table in Jerusalem. Barzillai declines this reward in favor of his son, thereby anticipating the closing of the circle of fathers and sons implicit in the entire David narrative. These relationships are highlighted in the account of David's son's rebellion first with reference to David and Absalom in the need for flight at all, and then with reference to Saul and Jonathan as is implicit in the Ziba/Mephibosheth encounter which is finally resolved in 1 Kgs 2:36–46 by David's son Solomon's elimination of Shimei and the security of his rule over a united kingdom.

The themes of loyalty and betrayal and the relationships between fathers and sons are also entwined with fasting and feasting in the story of David and Bathsheba's child. A clue to the literary significance of the eating events in the text of 2 Samuel 12 is the language surrounding David's preparations for his meal.[10] The series of words for washing, anointing, and eating is used together elsewhere in accounts of banquets throughout the biblical text. Seeing that series of banquet expressions in this context where mourning is expected draws the reader's attention to the eating act, associating it linguistically with feasting and festivities. This linguistic association heightens the contextual dissonance inherent in the reversal of conventional expectation expressed explicitly in this text by the servants in reaction to David's shocking behavior.

One possible result of the reversal of conventional expectation of the king's eating or not eating as expressions of grieving or not grieving is to mirror the reversal of other conventional expectations in these chapters. Many conventions have been flouted by this king: the sacrality of marriage, respect for human life, the expected sequence of marriage/conception/childbirth. The reversals surrounding eating or not eating serve as a literary device linking these ideas rhetorically, inviting the reader to look at other reversals suggested by the text, and allowing a deeper comprehension of the significance of what has ocurred in terms of what is to come.

From a literary point of view, the dead child is the product of the forbidden adulterous union, and thus its symbol. With the death of the child, David puts behind him any guilt or shame for what he has done. He picks himself up off the ground and washes his hands of the grime and the crime simultaneously. That done, he can ask after his dinner (2 Sam 12:20). David's ability to cease grieving the instant he hears his son has died shocks the servants—and, perhaps, the reader.

In my opinion, David's lack of emotion upon the loss of his child is extraordinary; even in tragic circumstances where one is helpless at the loss of a child, one experiences grief, rage, loss, guilt. Although other readings are certainly possible, from at least my own reader response perspective David's pragmatism and rationality under these circumstances are deeply revealing of the flaws in his private character. David has demonstrated before that he is capable of cold-blooded acceptance of death. His pragmatic acceptance of the death of this child resonates with his pragmatic condemnation to death of Uriah. Has David learned nothing from Nathan's parable?

We, who know what is to come, hear in David's laconic acceptance of this child's death a raw contrast with the inconsolable cry of the grieving father, בני אבשלום בני בני, "O my son Absalom, Absalom my son, my

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10 On sequence of actions and language relating to banquet, see Lichtenstein, 1979:136–60.

son!" in 2 Sam 19:1, 5. David laments, "If only I could have died תחתיך, in your stead" (2 Sam 19:1). In these wrenching cries of a bereft father, we hear the intertextual connection between Absalom's death and the death of the unnamed child of adultery. When the child's death is predicted in 2 Sam 12:14b, the baby's demise appears to be a mitigation of the prescribed punishment: David himself deserves death on account of his sins of adultery and murder. Instead, in recognition of David's remorse, his son is doomed to die in David's place.

The reader—and David—believe that the son referred to is the child of adultery, the trigger for Uriah's murder. Indeed, that baby is born and does die, as we have seen. But this child's death is not the end of it. Reading intertextually, we understand the ambiguity—and the irony—in Nathan's curse. We hear in David's restrained acceptance of the nameless child's death a heart-wrenching contrast with his grief for Absalom. We see that David, God's chosen anointed, is not to escape his punishment, but is to bear the full weight of his transgression. The appropriate punishment for David's offense is his own death. Instead, his son's life is forfeited—not the baby whose death David brushes off once hope for recovery is gone, but the agonizing death years later of David's beloved son Absalom. The punishment is finally fulfilled in the father's cry (2 Sam 19:1): מי־יתן מותי אני תחתיך אבשלום בני בני, "I would gladly have died in your stead, Absalom, my son, my son!"

Summary and Conclusion

As noted at the start of this analysis, neither Aaron nor David exhibits either grief or lament following the deaths of their sons in the two texts under examination. However, as intertextual analysis has shown, this apparent similarity masks the completely different underlying emotional states of the two fathers. Read in light of analogous texts, Aaron's is a state of unexpressed misery and rage at the death of his sons. David, on the other hand, appears initially to be in a state of naive indifference to the death of his infant, a state that will turn into painful anguish in the aftermath of tragedy to come.

Refusal to eat, or a reversal of the expected elements of fasting or feasting, are employed as sensitive and nuanced literary signposts in several episodes of Hebrew Bible narrative. My discussion represents but a small sampling of how intertextual readings, and reader response approaches, may be applied alone or together to elements of everyday life embedded in biblical narrative. This analysis suggests ways that such apparently marginal details as eating or fasting can point to richer interpretations of tersely reported biblical episodes. In themselves and in resonance with analogous texts, these tropes work subtly to color the interpretation of events of which they are a part, and to enhance character development. Rather than taking these mundane details for granted, sensitive readers can use them as clues

suggesting subtle counterpoints to the surface message, or reinforcement and enrichment of the meaning of the biblical text.

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