

MAKING A FIRST IMPRESSION
THE CHARACTERISATION OF DAVID AND
HIS OPENING WORDS IN 1 SAMUEL 17:25-31

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Summary

David is perhaps the most complex character in all of Scripture. He has been understood in many and various ways, from a backstabbing, ruthless warlord to a pious and poetic shepherd-king. One place we ought to probe when asking the question of David's character is his first speech. It has been noted that in the Hebrew Bible first words are particularly important moments of characterisation. In the case of David, his first words look initially to emphasise his scheming and ambition. However, the present essay will take a closer look at David's first words and argue that they present a more complex character than may first appear.

1. Introduction: Making a First Impression

As the old adage goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. John Wayne's dramatic rifle-slinging entrance in John Ford's 1939 classic film *Stagecoach* is frequently cited as launching his career. Before, he was a B-list Western actor. Afterwards, having been introduced to mainstream audiences, he went on to become one of the most iconic actors in cinema history. In other words, first impressions matter.

With the character of David we have multiple first impressions.¹ We could consider his anointing (1 Sam. 16:1-13); we could consider his

¹ Scholars frequently note the issue of multiple introductions to David. These are handled in different ways. Paul Borgman, for example, attempts to read

arrival in Saul's court (1 Sam. 16:14-23); we could consider his entrance into the public world in his battle with Goliath (1 Sam. 17).² In chapter 16 David says and does nothing. He does not function as a character in his own right. The first time he says or does anything is in the episode with Goliath, the Philistine giant. So, in many ways, this is the place where we truly get a first impression of David as a character.

What we intend to explore in this essay is one specific aspect of the literary characterisation of David in our first impression, namely his first spoken words. David's first words have been understood to characterise him in various ways, as we will see below. Through sustained literary attention to his first words we intend to shed some light on this enigmatic moment of this enigmatic character and see how, just as John Wayne's entrance into film in *Stagecoach* set the stage for him as an actor and icon, David's first words set the stage for him as a character and a king.

1.1 Impressions of David

The study of the character of David is, or at least should be, more than a passing interest for Bible readers. Several factors make understanding David's character of utmost importance. First, the character of David is frequently and popularly misunderstood. On the one hand, there is the popular version of David. This David is the purely pious and poetic shepherd boy who becomes Israel's first king and is the example *par excellence* of dedication to the Lord. Yes, it must be admitted that he sinned with Bathsheba, but he is a great repentor, as is seen in Psalm 51, so he remains a saintly example of faith. On the other hand, there is the reconstructed or 'realistic' David. This David is a ruthless warlord whose path to the throne is paved with the blood of his enemies.³ Which biblical portrait of David (for they are both biblical!) will win the day? Is he to be understood as the pious shepherd or the ruthless warlord?

them together in *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 37-51. John Van Seters, on the other hand, sees them as clear evidence of multiple sources within the David story in *The Biblical Saga of King David* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009): 121-61.

² One could also add the allusions to him in 1 Sam. 13:14 and 15:28.

³ See, for example, Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

Second, according to the history of Israelite kingship, David will be remembered as the benchmark by which all other Israelite and Judahite kings are judged.⁴ The kings of Israel and Judah are measured by whether or not they did like their father David had done. The fact that God takes it upon himself to promise a dynasty to David suggests that God has approved of him somehow (see 2 Sam. 7). If David is a benchmark of proper kingship, then understanding his character is vital.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, according to 1 Samuel 13:14 David is described as 'a man after [the Lord's] own heart' (אִישׁ כְּלִבְבוֹ). Though many argue that this phrase is solely about God's own choice of David and does not say anything about David's character,⁵ a careful reading of the text and attention to the key narrative thread of rightness of heart in 1 Samuel suggests that this phrase does in fact say something positive about David's heart.⁶ If this is the case, we may perhaps take this one step further and even suggest that to say something about David's character is tantamount to saying something about God's character inasmuch as David is the person whom God viewed to be suitable for the role of his anointed. Or, as Paul Borgman says, 'the question about who David *really* is emerges as a corollary to the mystery of who God is'.⁷ How then does one reconcile the statement that David is a man after the Lord's own heart with his murderous and adulterous track record? Again, we are left with something of a conundrum.

All three of these issues attest to the fact that David's character is somewhat enigmatic. He is a character of the utmost importance, but he remains at least partially hidden from us. In fact, in his analysis of David, Robert Alter describes his narrative presentation as 'deliberately

⁴ See 1 Kgs 11:4-6, 33, 38; 14:8; 15:3-5, 11; 2 Kgs 14:3; 16:2; 18:3; 22:2. For a recent study of this feature see Alison L. Joseph, *Portrait of the Kings: The Davidic Prototype in Deuteronomistic Poetics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).

⁵ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr, *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (AB 8; Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1980): 229. For recent studies making this case see George Athas, "'A Man After God's Own Heart": David and the Rhetoric of Election to Kingship', *JESOT* 2.2 (2013): 191-98 and Jason S. DeRouchie, 'The Heart of YHWH and His Chosen One in 1 Samuel 13:14', *BBR* 24.4 (2014): 467-89.

⁶ See Benjamin J. M. Johnson, 'The Heart of YHWH's Chosen One in 1 Samuel', *JBL* 131.3 (2012): 455-66.

⁷ Borgman, *David, Saul, and God*, 6.

limited'.⁸ However, if saying something about David is tantamount to saying something about God and David is held up as the good king *par excellence*, then surely attempting to come to grips with how David is characterised in the biblical narrative is crucial.

1.2 First Words as First Impressions in the Hebrew Bible

Robert Alter has made the observation that in biblical narrative a character's first words are often 'a defining moment of characterization'.⁹ A brief survey of some significant characters in the biblical narrative prove this to be true.

Jacob has his first dialogue in Genesis 25, when a famished Esau comes to him and says 'let me devour please from this red stuff for I am famished' (Gen. 25:30).¹⁰ Jacob's response is to say 'sell today your birthright to me' (Gen. 25:31). If we can say anything about the character of Jacob as portrayed in the narratives in Genesis 25–36 it is that he is wily, deceptive, and quick to press his own advantage, or, as one recent study has labeled him, a trickster.¹¹ This is precisely Esau's estimation of him and the meaning of his name: 'Is his name not called Jacob (עֵקֶב)? He has betrayed (עֵקֶב) me these two times!' (Gen. 27:36). Jacob twice swindles Esau out of his birthright. And after being himself swindled by Laban, he returns and swindles Laban out of his sheep (Gen. 30:25-43). Thus his first words, 'sell today your birthright to me' (Gen. 25:31), signal this key characteristic of Jacob, which will define him throughout the narrative.

Another example, closer to our present concern, is Saul. Saul is introduced to the reader as a young man searching for his father's donkeys (1 Sam. 9:1-4). His search is recounted in a brief survey that feels like the opening of a folk tale: 'and they passed through X and they did not find them, and they passed through Y and they were not

⁸ See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (revised and updated ed.; New York: Basic Books, 2011): 143-62 (149).

⁹ Alter, *The David Story*, 105; cf. Keith Bodner, *David Observed: A King in the Eyes of His Court* (HBM 5; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008): 17.

¹⁰ There is more than a hint of narrative irony here, where Esau's first words reveal him to be someone that is ruled by his stomach – this will cost him his birthright, a trait which he apparently gets from his father, whose willingness to let his stomach rule him will cost Esau his blessing (Gen. 27:1-40)!

¹¹ See John E. Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and YHWH's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle* (Siphrut 5; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

there, and they passed through Z and they did not find them'. When they come to the land of Zuph, Saul turns to the young man that is with him and utters his first words: 'Let us turn back, or my father will stop worrying about the donkeys and worry about us' (1 Sam. 9:5). As Alter notes, 'Saul's first utterance reveals him as a young man uncertain about pursuing his way.'¹² Bodner takes this observation one step further when he writes that 'Saul's words "Come, let's go back" are surely ironic in that there is *no returning* from this journey that leads to kingship.'¹³ Saul's uncertainty and in some ways his unwillingness to go on the journey that is before him is in many ways characteristic of his kingship. At his anointing he is found hiding amongst the baggage (1 Sam. 10:22). When the Philistines make a move to Micmash, Saul is sitting under a pomegranate tree, while Jonathan and his armour bearer go and defeat the Philistine garrison (1 Sam. 13:23–14:23). Upon witnessing the turmoil in the Philistine camp, his first instinct is to consult the ephod (LXX) or ark (MT) rather than join in (1 Sam. 14:16–18).¹⁴ Then, when the Philistines move into the Elah valley and the Israelites are confronted by the giant of the Philistines, Saul, the giant of the Israelites, stays back with the troops and leaves room for the young David to be the champion of Israel. Hesitancy and uncertainty, then, seem to be characteristic of Saul and his reign. This theme is first sounded when Saul first opens his mouth.

These two examples, to which others could be added, serve to illustrate the point that in Hebrew narrative a character's first words are in fact an important element in that person's characterisation and often set the tone for the way the character is to be understood.

When it comes to the character of David, the interpretation of his first words is complex. Though recent studies have done a better job of recognising the complexity of characterisation offered by David's first

¹² Alter, *The David Story*, 47.

¹³ Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009): 81.

¹⁴ Most scholars prefer the LXX's reading of ephod; for example, see A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011): 150–51; McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 237; and Stephen Hre Kio, 'What Did Saul Ask For: Ark or Ephod? (1 Samuel 14.18)', *BT* 47 (1996): 240–46. For a defence of the MT's 'ark', see David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007): 365–66.

words,¹⁵ some still read them simplistically. Some, for example, emphasise their pious aspect.¹⁶ Much more common, however, is to emphasise the negative characterisation of David's self-serving opening words. Garsiel, for example, notes that David twice asks about reward (17:26-27, 30) and comments that 'he is marked by ambition and purposiveness'.¹⁷ In commenting about the narrative insight into David's thoughts in 1 Samuel 18, Marti Steussy notes that 'this privileged insight reinforces the implication of David's opening words: whatever else may or may not be on his mind, David is keenly aware of political position and possibilities for his own advancement'.¹⁸ Elsewhere, she notes that it is true that David 'has one eye on God, but the other watches greedily for reward (17:26)'.¹⁹ We could easily multiply examples of others who note the ambitious tenor to David's first words.²⁰ Though there is clearly a positive statement in the second half of David's opening statement, it seems easier to see David's self-promoting comment as the one that receives the most stress. This

¹⁵ E.g. Paul S. Evans, *1–2 Samuel* (SOGBC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018): 189-90; Robert B. Chisholm, Jr, 'Cracks in the Foundation: Ominous Signs in the David Narrative', *BibSac* 172 (2015): 158-59.

¹⁶ E.g. Abraham Kuruvilla, 'David v. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What is the Author Doing with What He is Saying?', *JETS* 58.3 (2015): 501; Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001): 217.

¹⁷ Moshe Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (Tel Aviv: Revivim Publishing House, 1985): 116.

¹⁸ Marti J. Steussy, *David: Biblical Portraits of Power* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999): 54.

¹⁹ Steussy, *David*, 4.

²⁰ E.g. Uriah Y. Kim, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story: A Postcolonial Reading* (HBM 22; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008): 12, 79: 'Finally, his first reported speech in the narrative ... is indicative: "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine?" (1 Sam. 17.26) ... David was indeed an ambitious man' (p. 12). And later he writes 'To be fair, David is very angry that Goliath has insulted God, even though it is his second sentence. This line may attest to his piety, but his very first sentence reveals his ambition ... In other words, there is a dark side to David's heart of which the reader should be mindful' (p. 79). Cf. also J. Richard Middleton, 'The Battle Belongs to the Word: The Role of Theological Discourse in David's Victory over Saul and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17' in *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith*, ed. James K. A. Smith and Henry Isaac Venema (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004): 128, 'it is possible that David's first speech reveals his baser instincts, which must be taken into account along with his more noble claim to be concerned with the insult to Israel's God ... Perhaps ... Eliab's critique of David is "double-voiced," expressing not just his own sense of outrage at his young, upstart brother, but also the narrator's hint that all is not right in David's "heart."'

emphasis is seen in Alter's own comments: '[t]he inquiry about personal profit is then immediately balanced (or covered up) by the patriotic pronouncement.'²¹

2. David's First Words (1 Sam. 17:25-26)

2.1 Immediate Narrative Context

Having established the principle that a character's first words are frequently a significant moment of characterisation, we turn now to examine David's. Though David has been first introduced to us in chapter 16, and a good deal of information (especially about his physical appearance) has been given, his first words do not come until he arrives at the Israelite camp and just happens to catch the challenge of the Philistine giant.

It is important to set David's first words in their narrative context. He is sent by his father to bring food to his brothers, who are with Saul and the army, and to find out about their welfare. Upon arrival, as he is talking to his brothers, the Philistine giant comes and offers his daily challenge. We are told that all the Israelites are afraid and begin to talk about what will be done for the person who kills the Philistine challenger. This is the scene in which David gives his first utterance.

Three things stand out as potentially significant about this narrative context. First, this scene is reminiscent of the scene in which we meet the character of Saul. Both Saul and David are sent on a mission by their respective fathers (9:3b; 17:17-18), which begin with the words 'take now' (אָנֹכִי).²² The similarities between these two scenes highlight their differences, most notably Saul's failure to complete his mission and David's simple fulfilment of his. This difference offers a subtle characterisation of the two first kings. Saul will continually face failure, while David, at least in the early part of his career, will have nothing but success.

The second thing that stands out about the narrative context of David's first words is the element of happenstance. The narrative of David's mission to his brothers starts out very pedestrian. David arrives

²¹ Alter, *The David Story*, 105.

²² A. Graeme Auld and Craig Y. S. Ho. 'The Making of David and Goliath', *JSOT* 56 (1992): 26 note the similarities between these two scenes.

at the camp, leaves his bags with the keeper, and goes to find his brothers. While he is speaking to them, the narrative says, ‘and behold! (והנה), the champion, Goliath the Philistine was his name, from Gath, was coming up from the ranks of the Philistines’ (17:23). The use of the phrase ‘and behold’ (והנה) is particularly important as a focaliser and potentially does several things. First, it functions to focus our attention on this new scene. Second, dramatically, it implies that this new action is happening *at that very moment!* Finally, it also potentially signals to us that this is David’s perspective and emphasises that we are seeing what David is seeing.²³ This phraseology serves to highlight the fact that David just happened to be in the right place at the right time. The theme of coincidence has been noted elsewhere in the stories of Samuel as a way of saying that the action is actually divinely ordained.²⁴ So the narrative is told in such a way that David is the actor in a series of *fortunate* events and we are meant to read between the lines to see God at work here.

The third element that stands out is David’s leaving. In verse 20 David leaves (ויטש) his sheep to a keeper (שמר) and in verse 22 he leaves (ויטש) the bags (כלים) to a keeper (שומר). There is a symbolic element to each of these actions. On the one hand, David has left the sheep, foreshadowing that he will not return to his father’s flock but has more royal shepherding in his future. On the other hand, David’s act of leaving the bags (כלים) at this initial moment in his story recalls Saul’s hiding among the bags (כלים) at an initial moment in his story (10:22).²⁵ This contrasting picture of the first two kings is very telling. Where Saul is found hiding among the bags in an attempt to avoid his kingship, David is happy to leave his bags with someone more suited to the task and *run* (וירץ) to the action.

Thus, by attending to the initial narrative context of David’s first words, we see that he is already being compared and contrasted to Saul. While both of their initial stories are about sons who go on a mission from their father and have adventures orchestrated by ‘coincidental’ divine intervention, there is little else that is similar between their

²³ For discussion of the Hebrew והנה, especially the way it represents perspective or consciousness, see Robert S. Kawashima, *Biblical Narrative and the Death of the Rhapsode* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Narrative; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004): 77-123.

²⁴ See Ferdinand Deist, ‘Coincidence as a Motif of Divine Intervention in 1 Samuel 9’, *Old Testament Essays* 6.1 (1993): 7-18.

²⁵ Cf. Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 180-81.

respective reactions to that intervention. David is characterised as one who easily succeeds in fulfilling his mission while Saul fails. David is one who leaves the baggage with the attendant and runs to the action while Saul hides amongst the baggage. Already a pattern is emerging.

2.2 *David's First Words*

We come now to David's first words. The general principle of Hebrew narrative, that a character's first words offer 'a defining moment of characterisation',²⁶ has clued us in to pay close attention to them. The narrative context has suggested that we keep an eye on the potential contrasts between David and Saul. Having been thus prepared, we are ready to examine David's first words (1 Sam. 17:26).

מה־יעשה לאיש אשר יכה את־הפלשתי הלז והסיר חרפה מעל ישראל כי
מי הפלשתי הערל הזה כי חרף מערכות אלהים חיים

What will be done for the man that kills this Philistine and turns aside the reproach from upon Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine who reproaches the ranks of the living God?

If we are convinced of the importance of a character's first words, then it is easy to see how David's could be understood to suggest that a defining aspect of his character is his ambition or self-interest. This is, in fact, what we saw above in our brief survey of some of the scholarly interpretations of David's first words.

The reality is that David says two things, one that appears to be quite self-serving and another that appears to be pious and proper. Both of these things must be taken into account in order to understand how David's first utterance gives insight into his character. However, more than this, we must consider the seriousness and purposefulness of a character's first words, especially a character as important, prominent, and enigmatic as David. As Bodner has shown in the way that Saul's first words on one level say something about him as a character and yet on another level have even more to say about Saul's mission and destiny, we must be sensitive to the possibility that David's first words have more to say than may be immediately apparent. We must, therefore, attend to them with a little more concentrated scrutiny.

David's first words are in fact two questions. The first question, 'What will be done for the man who strikes down this Philistine?',

²⁶ Alter, *The David Story*, 105.

seems very self-serving. However, several factors suggest that it may not be as self-serving as it looks at first glance. First of all, the very structure of the question highlights the fact that David is not instigating it. Instead, his question is a responsive one to the talk of the camp. The responsive nature of the question is seen by the structural relationship between David's question and the question of the men of the camp.

- Men of Israel (v. 25) A) הראיתם האיש העלה הזה כי לחרף את־ישראל
 Have you seen the man who has come up in order to reproach Israel
- B) והיה האיש אשר־יכנו
 ... And it will be that the man who strikes him ...
- David (v. 26) B') מה־יעשה לאיש אשר יכה את־הפלשתי הלז
 What will be done for the man who strikes this Philistine
- A') והסיר חרפה מעל ישראל
 And turns aside the reproach from upon Israel

It is also evident that the question of the men of the camp is not directed toward David, but is instead a report of the talk of the camp. The phrase 'a man of Israel said' (ויואמר איש ישראל) is a way of stating that 'the men of Israel were saying' (cf. NRSV; JPS).²⁷ Furthermore, the address of this initiating question is the whole camp, as indicated by the second person plural form of the verb (הראיתם).²⁸

Thus, it seems that David's initial question is in response to an overheard discussion: 'What did you say will be done for the man who kills this Philistine?'²⁹ In other words, David is not initiating a discussion about rewards but responding to a conversation that is about rewards. He may certainly be seen as being *opportunistic* in seizing this

²⁷ For other instances of איש ישראל functioning as collective subject of אמר, sometimes with a singular verb, sometimes with a plural, see, e.g., Josh. 9:7; Judg. 8:22; 21:1; 2 Sam. 19:44 [19:43 ET]. Ronald J. Williams discusses this phenomenon under the heading of 'Impersonal third person as passive' in *Williams Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd ed., revised and expanded by John C. Beckman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007): §160.

²⁸ Tsumura, *Samuel*, 453.

²⁹ Cf. J. P. Fokkeman, *The Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel Vol. 2: The Crossing Fates* (Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands; Dover, NH: Van Gorcum, 1986): 160, who also notes the responsive nature of David's first words. Tsumura, *Samuel*, 453 suggests that 'David was not informed of what was said in v. 25', but the close relationship between the verses seems to suggest otherwise.

chance, but he is not, in this instance at least, *initiating* an enquiry about reward. Though understanding the responsive nature of David's opening words is helpful for contextualising his characterisation, it is also important to note the differences between David's speech and the speech of the men of the camp.

The first potential difference between the talk of the camp and David's speech is the language used to refer to the Philistine champion. In the talk of the camp, reference is made to 'the man' (הַאִישׁ). David, on the other hand, refers to him as 'this Philistine' (הַפְּלִשְׁתִּי הַלֵּז). There may not be much difference between these two referents. However, David's language may be subtly demeaning of the Philistine champion. It is often noted that David's second reference to Goliath as 'this (זֶה) uncircumcised Philistine' (1 Sam. 17:26b) is a pejorative one.³⁰ However, it may be that already with the use of the demonstrative 'this' (הַלֵּז) some level of demeaning reference is intended in David's first reference to the Philistine champion. In his study of demonstratives Scott Noegel notes that the demonstrative הַלֵּז is used predominantly in pejorative contexts. For example, when Joseph's brothers see him coming towards them, they say to each other 'behold, this (הַלֵּז) master of dreams is coming' (Gen. 37:19). This, of course, is right before they plot to kill him, so the pejorative context is easy to see. In another instance, it is used by Jonathan to refer to 'that (הַלֵּז) side' of the valley where the Philistine garrison is (1 Sam. 14:1), which is referenced, as here in 17:26, in parallel with another pejorative reference, 'those (אֵלֶּה) uncircumcised ones' (1 Sam. 14:6).³¹

The second difference is that while both the men of the camp speak of the Philistine champion as reproaching (חַרְפָּה/חַרְרָה) Israel, only David sees this reproach as something that needs to be removed.³² The word 'remove' (סוּר) is repeated throughout this chapter in a significant way. First, David sees the need of removing (סוּר) the reproach from Israel brought on by the Philistine champion (v. 26). Second, David removes (סוּר) Saul's armour (v. 39). As others have noted, it is hard

³⁰ E.g. Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 160; Mark K. George, 'Constructing Identity in 1 Samuel 17', *BibInt* (1999): 402.

³¹ Scott B. Noegel, 'The "Other" Demonstrative Pronouns: Pejorative Colloquialisms in Biblical Hebrew', *JBQ* 33/1 (2005): 23-30 (here 24-25).

³² Cf. David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel* (AOTC; Nottingham: Apollos, 2009): 198.

not to see symbolic significance in David's act of removing Saul's armour.³³ David is rejecting both conventional warfare and Saul's way of being king. Third, David tells the Philistine giant that he will strike him down and 'remove' (סור) his head (17:46).³⁴ By repeating the keyword of 'removing' (סור) the narrator develops a key theme that attaches itself to David. David arrives on the scene as someone who removes things. He removes the reproach from Israel, he removes Saul's way of being king, and he removes the head of Israel's enemy. David, in other words, marks something of a turning point; he marks a change of direction. The old is gone; the new has come. This theme will play itself out throughout this opening narrative, but it is first sounded in David's opening speech.

Noting the similarity between David's initial question and the talk of the camp does two things. First, it highlights that David's first words are responsive, not initiative. He does not initiate the talk of rewards. Instead, he is seeking to clarify the talk that he has heard. Second, it highlights that David is not merely repeating the talk of the camp but that he is adding some things to the discussion. These pieces of additional information are interesting contributions to this 'defining moment' of David's characterisation.³⁵ While it is understandable to view the self-serving aspect of David's initial speech as the primary characterising element, this analysis suggests that this is not quite accurate. The statement about rewards is a repetition of the talk of the camp. The actual contributions that David himself makes in this initial part of his speech are the additional disdain for *this* Philistine, the need for action, the concern for the reproach that this Philistine has brought, and the theme of David as a remover. Saul, on the other hand, is simply

³³ E.g. Ora Horn Prouser, 'Suited to the Throne: The Symbolic Use of Clothing in the David and Saul Narratives', *JSOT* 21.3 (1996): 30-31.

³⁴ Note that LXX 1 Sam. 17:36 has an additional reference to David 'removing' the reproach from Israel and LXX 1 Sam. 17:51 speaks of David 'removing' Goliath's head, both using the term ἀφαιρέω. On this wordplay in the Greek see Benjamin J. M. Johnson, *Reading David and Goliath in Greek and Hebrew: A Literary Approach* (FAT/II 82; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015): 103-104, 126-27.

³⁵ See Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 161 for a similar view of the differences between the parallel speeches of the men of Israel (v. 25) and David (v. 26).

included with the people as responding in silence and fear (17:11, 24).³⁶

The second question in David's first speech is 'for who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should reproach the ranks of the living God?' (1 Sam. 17:26b). This is the part that is sometimes thought of as a cover-up or perhaps we might say that David could be accused of a little theological backtracking. As noted above, Robert Alter suggests that the initial part of David's speech is then 'balanced (or covered up)³⁷ by the present pronouncement. While this is a possible reading, the reality is that David has *added* God's reputation to the scenario, highlighting that he sees a theological aspect to this confrontation.³⁸ Furthermore, by including God in the issue of 'reproach', he has, in essence, drawn God's reputation into this honour/shame confrontation.³⁹ There is also the possibility that his reference to God as 'the living God' (אלהים חיים) shows this is meant as a theological insult, referencing the God of Israel as the living God in contrast to the 'dead' or 'non-living' gods of the Philistines.⁴⁰ In other words, David has shown that he understands this confrontation as being a theological confrontation as much as a political one. Thus, as in the first part of his speech, David makes a contribution to the talk of the camp. In this case it is to ramp up the theological aspect of the confrontation. Thus, David is characterised as one who recognises the theological significance of this situation.

David's first words in 1 Samuel 17:26 are about rewards, yes, but they are also about *action* and *theological significance*. So far, we can say that this critical moment of characterisation of David has portrayed

³⁶ Cf. Barbara Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel* (JSOTSupp 365; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003): 288; Auld and Ho, 'The Making of David and Goliath', 28-29.

³⁷ Alter, *The David Story*, 105.

³⁸ H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1964): 151; George, 'Constructing Identity': 402; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel: Ein narratologisch-philologischer Kommentar* (BWANT; Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1996): 243-44; Firth, *Samuel*, 198.

³⁹ George, 'Constructing Identity', 402.

⁴⁰ Cf. McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 293; Robert P. Gordon, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986): 156; Tsumura, *Samuel*, 455 on the use of the phrase 'living God' (אלהים חיים). Cf. the discussion in Jer. 10:6-11.

him as ambitious and opportunistic.⁴¹ However, it has also characterised him as theologically insightful and action-oriented. This is a far cry from a purely negative portrayal of the future king and presents a much more complex character. However, if we are to further understand how this initial utterance of David is being used to characterise him, it is helpful to understand the response that it elicits.

3. Words, Words, Words: A Response to David (1 Sam. 17:27-31)

We know that David is responding differently to the threat of Goliath from Saul and the people. That contrast has already been highlighted. David's opening question is 'What will be done (עשה) ...?' It is perhaps an interesting moment of characterisation that the response to David's question about what will be done (עשה) is a barrage of 'words' (דבר). In the short section following David's first words we see eight references to 'words' (דבר) previously spoken.⁴² As Robert Polzin has noted, this density of repetition marks this out as stylised narration.⁴³

And the people spoke to him according to this word (דבר), saying 'thus will he do to the man who strikes him.' And Eliab his eldest brother heard his speaking (דבר) to the men and Eliab's anger burned against David and he said, 'Why have you come down, and upon whom have you forsaken those few sheep in the wilderness, I myself know your pride and the evil of your heart, for you have come down in order to see the battle.' And David said, 'What have I done (עשה) now? Was this not a word (דבר)?' And he turned from beside him to others. And he spoke according to this word (דבר) and the people returned a word (דבר) according to the first word (דבר). And they heard the words (דברים)

⁴¹ In a fascinating article, David T. Lamb has suggested that 'trash talking' is an additional key part of David's characterisation in his first words because of their polemical aspect of them and how they fit with his dialogue in the rest of 1 Samuel 17: "I Will Strike You Down and Cut Off Your Head" (1 Samuel 17:46): Trash Talking, Derogatory Rhetoric, and Psychological Warfare in Ancient Israel' in *Warfare, Ritual, and Symbol in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Frank Ames et al. (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2014): 111-30, esp. 121-26. His study adds credence to our contention that there is more going on in David's first words than is sometimes recognised.

⁴² Cf. Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 164-65, who also notes this significant repetition.

⁴³ Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History 2: 1 Samuel* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993): 167-69.

which David spoke (דבר), and they declared them before Saul. And he took him. (1 Sam. 17:27-31)

In this section, speech is obviously a key theme. Furthermore, a significant amount of the speech referenced is indirect speech or reference to previous speech that is not repeated. Thus, we may perhaps be justified in paying extra special attention to the speech that is recorded.

The first significant direct speech recorded is that of Eliab, who casts serious suspicions on David's motivations. Are we simply dealing with the anger of a jealous older brother? Perhaps.⁴⁴ However, there are a number of reasons to take Eliab's speech seriously. First, as Bodner has noted, if David's first words are a significant moment of characterisation, then might not the response that those words engender be significant as well?⁴⁵ Second, as we just noted, in a section where words are a key theme, paying close attention to the words that are spoken is clearly justified. Third, as Miscall has noted, Eliab's speech is focused on the key themes of knowledge (ידע) and heart (לבב), themes which will be significant throughout the David story,⁴⁶ but also significant in this chapter.

The theme of knowledge can be found in the climax of the David and Goliath confrontation. According to David, the propagation of certain knowledge is the divine reason for the confrontation. David says that God will grant him victory 'so that all the earth will know (ידע) that there is a God in Israel and so that all this assembly will know (ידע) that YHWH does not save by sword or spear' (1 Sam. 17:46-47).⁴⁷ The heart has been a key theme up to this moment and the

⁴⁴ See Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (WBC 10; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982): 178; Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 161-64; Gordon, *Samuel*, 156; and Tsumura, *Samuel*, 455.

⁴⁵ Bodner, *David Observed*, 19.

⁴⁶ For the significance of the theme of the heart in the David story see Benjamin J. M. Johnson, *David: A Man after God's Own Heart* (Cascade Companions; Eugene, OR: Cascade, forthcoming).

⁴⁷ The phrases 'the earth may know that there is a God in Israel' and 'all this congregation will know that YHWH does not save by sword or by spear' are not syntactically marked purposes clauses, being simply *wayyiqtol* clauses. Nevertheless, the context demands that they be interpreted as marking the purpose of David's victory. See, for example, McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 297; Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC 7; Nashville, TN: B&H, 1996): 196; Tsumura, *Samuel*, 463; David G. Firth, "That the World May Know": Narrative Poetics in 1 Samuel 16-17' in *Text and Task: Scripture and Mission*, ed. Michael Parsons (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2005): 20-32 (esp. 30-31).

reader is expecting a leader with a right heart.⁴⁸ Immediately after David's first words, his brother causes the reader to question David's heart. In short order, David will address Saul to offer to face the Philistine giant. In his first words to Saul, David will say 'let no one's heart (לֵב) fall because of him' (1 Sam. 17:32).⁴⁹ By implication, we are meant to read David's heart as being positively compared to Saul and the people of Israel, whose hearts have failed because of the challenge of the Philistine giant. Thus, Eliab's accusations about David address two key themes.

In assessing the interpretive significance of Eliab's accusations, two things are clear. On the one hand, it is thus clear that Eliab's accusations against David are narratively important and address themes that will be central to this episode. On the other hand, given that the reader has seen God's perspective on David's heart (esp. 16:7,12), the reader is in a position to know that Eliab is misguided in his accusation.⁵⁰ However, it is worth asking about the purpose of this episode. Why include Eliab's negative assessment of David's character at this important moment of David's characterisation? Bodner has argued that Eliab's speech is likely double-voiced and in it we may hear the voice of the Deuteronomist as a 'voice of conscience' or a voice of correction for David.⁵¹ Bodner has certainly correctly highlighted the significance of Eliab's speech in response to David. Perhaps it is better to conceive of this voice more as warning to the reader than as correction for David. Eliab's speech causes the reader to question David's character, even while exonerating him. The question, however, lingers. Surely we know the character of David's heart. Don't we?⁵² The characterisation of David throughout 1–2 Samuel is complex

⁴⁸ This is a key argument of Johnson, 'The Heart', 460-67.

⁴⁹ Interestingly, the LXX reads 'let not *my lord's* heart fall' (μὴ δὴ συμπεσέτω ἡ καρδία τοῦ κυρίου μου). It is difficult to know which reading might be original as the MT's לֵב-אֲדָמִי is graphically very close to the presumed *Vorlage* of the LXX, לֵב-אֲדָנִי. For some discussion of this textual issue see Johnson, *Reading David and Goliath*, 90-91.

⁵⁰ It is sometimes noted that the *character zones* of Eliab and Saul overlap in many ways. One could further explore the way Eliab's misjudgement of David here matches up with Saul's misjudgement of David in later chapters.

⁵¹ Bodner, *David Observed*, 16-22.

⁵² This is not dissimilar from the narrative technique of gap-filling. A gap in a narrative causes the reader to consider multiple interpretive options. Even when the gap is filled, the process of thinking through the alternative possibilities lingers with the reader. See Jerome T. Walsh, *Old Testament*

and at times opaque.⁵³ The reader will be forced to ask time and time again who David is and what he is all about. From Saul's question about whose son he is (1 Sam. 17:55-58) to Nabal's 'Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse?' (1 Sam. 25:10), the reader is confronted with the question of David's identity. Thus, Eliab's statement, while it may not be accurate at this stage in the narrative, foreshadows a question that will crop up again and again for the reader of David's story.⁵⁴

If Eliab's initial questions to David have multiple layers to them, then so does David's response. It is notable that David does not actually respond to Eliab's questions with answers. He certainly could have. He had valid answers to Eliab's two questions. In response to the question of why he has come down, David could have responded that he came because his father Jesse sent him (17:17-18). In response to the question about with whom he has left the sheep in the wilderness, David could have responded that he left them with a keeper (17:20).⁵⁵ Instead of giving valid responses to Eliab's accusations, David opts to ask two rhetorical questions of his own. 'What have I done (עשה) now?'⁵⁶ Was this not a word (דבר)?' (17:29). The second question is a little ambiguous and has been variously understood. Some have noted that the Hebrew דבר can be variously interpreted as 'word', 'thing', or 'matter'.⁵⁷ The NIV translates it as 'Can't I even speak?'.⁵⁸ The NRSV and NJPS similarly interpret it as 'It was only a question' and 'I was only asking' respectively. Or, to put it in a little more modern parlance, it could be compared to the phrase 'We're just talking here!' Some have suggested that David could be defending himself and we could interpret his words as something along the lines of 'Isn't this the essential matter?'⁵⁹ All of these are potentially on the table, given the

Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009): 76.

⁵³ For an attempt to sketch the difficulty in assessing David as a character see Keith Bodner and Benjamin J. M. Johnson, 'David: Kaleidoscope of a King' in *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel* (LHBOTS; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020):122-39.

⁵⁴ Cf. Bodner, *David Observed*, 18-22.

⁵⁵ Cf. Miscall, *Workings of Old Testament Narrative*, 63.

⁵⁶ Auld, *Samuel*, 209 notes that this is a question David asks with some regularity (1 Sam. 17:29; 20:1; 26:18; 29:8).

⁵⁷ Alter, *David Story*, 106.

⁵⁸ See HALOT; Gordon, *Samuel*, 156; Tsumura, *Samuel*, 455.

⁵⁹ See H. J. Stoebe, *Das erste Buch Samuelis* (KAT; Stuttgart: Gütersloher Verlagsgesellschaft Gerd Mohn, 1973): 322-24; Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 164-65; Firth, *Samuel*, 191, 193.

opacity of the two questions. However, if we interpret these questions in the context of the immediate response to David's opening questions, then we can perhaps see their significance a little better.

David's two questions here address the same themes that were present in his speech and the immediate response to that speech. We noted above that David asked the question 'What will be done (עשה) ...?' The response to that question was a series of references to 'words' (דבר). Now David is asking about what he has done (עשה) and what he has said (דבר). These two key themes are brought together in David's two questions here. If we read David's questions in light of the themes of deed and word that we noted above, they bring out a potentially different significance for David's questions. If David's question about what he has done is read in light of his initial word about what will be done for the man who kills the Philistine champion, it compounds the emphasis on the need for action from David's perspective. What has David done? Nothing ... yet. However, we are about to see David's first real action in the narrative and his actions will be significant. If David's question about his first speech being only a word is read in light of the talk of the camp in response to his question, then it can possibly be read as a criticism of the talk of the camp. Wasn't David's speech just a word? Yes, and that is part of the problem. There have been entirely too many words exchanged and nothing has been done to address the threat. Nothing has been done to remove the reproach from Israel. However, now that David is on the scene, his words (דבר) will be brought to Saul and those words (דבר) will initiate action (עשה).

4. Conclusion: Making a Lasting Impression

What, then, can we say about the 'defining moment of characterisation' we see in David's first words? First, we noted that the immediate narrative context of David's words puts his opening story in dialogue with the opening story of Saul in such a way that Saul came across as the hesitant, unsuccessful, and uncertain man hiding amongst the baggage. David, on the other hand, came across as the successful and action-oriented man who abandons his sheep and his baggage and runs to the action. Second, we noted that David's first words were in fact a response to the talk of the camp. His question about reward was

initiated by the conversation about reward going on in the camp. His questions, however, highlighted his disdain for Goliath, his understanding that something needed to be done about this challenger to right the reputation of the God of Israel, and his identification as a 'remover' who is moving Israel in a new direction. Third, David's first words about action set off a barrage of words in such a way that David appeared to be characterised as a man of action amongst a people of words. Finally, Eliab's critical questioning of David about knowing (יָדַע) the intent of his heart (לֵב) forced the reader to question the motivations of David's heart and foreshadowed the importance of those questions for the rest of David's story. Thus, in David's opening speech we are confronted with a complex character, one who is vindicated as theologically insightful, action-oriented, and critical of the current ineffectual leadership, but also one who raises questions, especially about his motivations.

David is perhaps one of the most complex characters in Scripture. Just as he frequently escapes Saul's grasp, he frequently escapes our easy characterisation. Yet he is of utmost importance in the biblical narrative, so it is important to give his characterisation due consideration. In our examination of David's opening words we have attempted to consider this key moment of characterisation for this central figure. While some have suggested that David's opening words provide a generally negative assessment of his character as one defined by ambition and calculation, the reading offered here suggests that this is only one part of David's characterisation in his opening speech. Additionally, David is being characterised as a theologically astute man of action amongst a people of words. With divine approval (1 Sam. 16:6-13), a reluctant and fearful king (1 Sam. 17:11), and the Philistines knocking at the door (1 Sam. 17:1-11), perhaps being characterised as a man of ambition and action is not a purely negative thing after all.

David's first words may not be a zooming close-up of a cowboy slinging a rifle, but they nevertheless paint a significant picture of a complex and enigmatic character who will stay with us for some time. In other words, our first impression of David makes an important and lasting impression.