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CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERIZATION IN THE BOOK OF SAMUEL

Edited by

Keith Bodner and Benjamin J. M. Johnson

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PREFACE

From Samuel to Saul, from Michal to Jonathan, from Abner to Joab, from Abigail to Bathsheba, from Absalom to David himself, the book of Samuel contains some of the most interesting and iconic characters in literature. David, for example, has been described as “the first human being in world literature.”¹ However, even the most minor or most seemingly one-dimensional characters in the book of Samuel are often capable of surprising complexity. This volume is intended to recognize the significance of character and characterization in the book of Samuel by giving a range of scholars the space to reflect in depth on a number of key characters in this masterful narrative.

Recent studies in New Testament literature have begun to re-appreciate the role that characters play in that literature.² Given the rich presentation of characters in the book of Samuel we are hopeful that this volume will similarly highlight the importance of characters and characterization in Hebrew narrative.

Character and characterization have always been an important part of appreciating Hebrew narrative. Since Erich Auerbach argued that biblical narrative was “fraught with background” and that biblical characters were marked by “multilayeredness,”³ most scholars offering literary analyses of biblical text have seen the importance and complexity of biblical characters. Robert Alter, for example highlighted the way that biblical narrative was artfully reticent in its characterization and suggested a “scale of means” with which the biblical authors offered their characterizations

1. Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 6.

2. See Christopher W. Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, LNTS 461 (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013); Christopher W. Skinner and Matthew Ryan Hauge, eds, *Character Studies and the Gospel of Mark*, LNTS 483 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014); and Frank Dicken and Julia Snyder, *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts*, LNTS 548 (New York: T&T Clark, 2016).

3. Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 12–13.

from direct to indirect.⁴ Adele Berlin highlighted the different character types that can be found in biblical narrative, from type to agent to full-fledged character.⁵ Meir Sternberg offered an even more complex picture as he highlighted the surface-level characterization of a character that may be given in something like a characterizing epithet and the in-depth characterization that is only possible by appreciating the whole narrative.⁶

While there have been some advances and a considerable number of studies on the poetics of characterization in the literary guild, there has been a comparatively smaller body of research in biblical studies. Nonetheless, the volume of books and essays devoted to individual characters in biblical literature has been steadily on the rise, and this present project aims both to collate such recent studies and suggest other ways that the study of character might move forward.

One interesting factor in the study of characters in the book of Samuel is that whether one considers this book as part of the Deuteronomistic History, part of the Former Prophets, or part of some sort of Primary History, it is a narrative unit that is inherently connected to other literary units. For example, is it adequate to study the character of Joab without referencing his death which doesn't occur until 1 Kings 2? Or should Bathsheba's story be told without reference to her role in getting her son Solomon on the throne in 1 Kings?⁷ Thus this volume had to make decisions about whether characters should be considered in the book of Samuel or the book of Kings. Crossover characters such as Nathan, Bathsheba, Joab, and David, could be legitimately considered as part of Samuel and Kings. Luckily, this volume has a companion volume that is focused on characters and characterization in the book of Kings,⁸ and studies on characters such as Bathsheba can be found there.

4. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 114–30. The pagination for the Revised and Updated version is, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 143–62.

5. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), Chapter 2.

6. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), esp. Chapters 9–10.

7. For helpful discussion of the “fuzzy edges” in biblical narrative, see Barbara Green, *David's Capacity for Compassion: A Literary-Hermeneutical Study of 1–2 Samuel*, LHBOTS 641 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), esp. 33–8.

8. Keith Bodner and Benjamin J. M. Johnson, eds., *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Kings*, LHBOTS 670 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020).

The present volume, then, offers two general studies related to character in the book of Samuel and fourteen case studies on specific characters. Some studies are intentionally reading with the grain of the text, such as Stephen Chapman's study of the character of God. Others offer a reading that is attentive to the biblical narrative's presentation of character but also correct perceived misconceptions of standard views of some of these characters, such as Yairah Amit's attempt to soften the negative portrait of Absalom. Some studies are complete studies that look at the entirety of the presentation of a character such as Barbara Green's study of Joab or Paul Evans' study of Saul. Other studies are snapshots of the characterization of a given character in a particular pericope, such as J. Richard Middleton's study of Samuel in his speech in 1 Samuel 12. Other approaches are arguments are on offer. For example, Jenni Williams attempts to give Hannah more attention as a character in her own right rather than as the type she is frequently considered to be. And David Gunn offers reflections on trends in study of the character of David over forty years after the publication of his monumental *Story of King David*.⁹ In short, this volume offers a kaleidoscope of studies of characters within the book of Samuel from different perspectives and different agendas. It is our hope that through this study, something of the significance, variety, and sheer enjoyment of these characters would come across to the reader and initiate more readings of these and other characters within the book of Samuel.

Keith Bodner
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Date?

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