

MELODRAMA AS PARABLE: THE STORY OF THE POOR MAN'S EWE-LAMB AND THE UNMASKING OF DAVID'S TOPSY-TURVY EMOTIONS

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In spite of all the scholarly attention given to 2 Samuel 12, there is still no consensus about the most basic aspects of Nathan's story of the poor man's ewe-lamb, and its relationship to David's immediate situation and the Court History¹ as a whole. Is the story a "parable" and the theft of the lamb a "tragedy"? Is the tale "realistic"? Does David believe that Nathan is describing an actual case? Is it significant that the story does not fit David's circumstances in every respect? Does Nathan's use of the story have a lasting effect on the king's emotional life and self-awareness? Does 2 Samuel 12 serve an apologetic or "anti-monarchical" function in the Court History?

In order to answer these questions, one must begin by acknowledging that the story is a melodrama and that David's response is typical of the intense emotional reaction melodrama is designed to provoke. Its unrealistic nature is in stark contrast to the oft-praised realism of the Court History and the "realistic dress" which is said to characterize "judicial parables" (Simon, 1967, p. 221). Nevertheless, we will find that Nathan does use his story "parabolically," to force David into increased self-awareness. He does this by leaving the tale incomplete as melodrama. In fact, the story acquires the characteristic "openness" of parable only through its incompleteness as melodrama. In "closing" the story, David reveals *his* melodramatic expectations and values, by focusing on the element of "pity" and entering the story as righteously indignant judge.

1. The term "Court History" will be used in preference to "Succession Narrative" throughout this paper. As will become apparent, the question of David's successor is not the major "theme" of the narrative. We will also find that the subtle psychological portrait of David presented in the Court History is consistent with passages outside the usual boundaries of the "Succession Narrative" (2 Samuel 9-20; 1 Kings 1-2). See note 35, below.

Although David has been lauded for his "sense of reality," he takes Nathan's mawkish fiction as the report of an actual case. This allows Nathan to take the unrealistically harsh judgment aimed at the fictional villain and turn it back upon the real "villain" who issued it.

By reporting David's exaggerated response to Nathan's story immediately after the account of his callous indifference toward his victim Uriah, 2 Samuel 12 grants the reader invaluable insight into David's topsy-turvy emotions, insight which the king himself does not possess. 2 Samuel 13-19 shows that Nathan's strategy does not truly change the king or increase his self-knowledge, in spite of his repentance. David continues to confuse reality and fiction when his family and his feelings are involved, while his vacillation between paralyzing love and callous indifference turns his kingdom upside down. In the concluding section of the paper, I will show that this analysis of David's emotions can shed some much-needed light on the debate over the purpose and *Tendenz* of the Court History, and clarify the relationship between the David of the Court History and the "perfect" David presented in the books of Kings.

NATHAN'S STORY AS MELODRAMA

The thoroughly melodramatic nature of Nathan's story has not been recognized by scholars. According to Simon (1967, pp. 220-222), the story as a whole is "realistic." Most commentators agree that David hears the story as an account of an actual case.² Fokkelman even assumes that readers of 2 Samuel 12 initially take the story as a report of "an actual event" (1981, p. 76). Only rarely has Nathan's tale been described as "exaggerated" (Ackroyd, 1977, p. 108) or "sentimental" (Gerleman, 1977, p. 132). Although Hagan does detect "melodramatic elements in the narrative," he nevertheless believes that it "contains a real dimension of sorrow and injustice" (1979, p. 306). Indeed, the taking of the lamb has even been called "tragic" by several interpreters.³

The relationship between the poor man and his lamb has been particularly effective in stirring the sentiments of commentators, who describe it as "idyllic," "paradisical," "extremely tender," or "touchingly intimate."⁴

2. E.g., Simon (1967, p. 221), Fokkelman (1981, p. 72), and Caird (1953, pp. 1102-1103). Cf. Whybray (1968, pp. 36-37).

3. E.g., Smith (1899, p. 322) and Coats (1981, p. 372). According to Hagan (1979, pp. 305-306), "the story is not properly a tragedy because of the melodramatic elements. . . ."

4. Hagan (1979, p. 305), White (1900, p. 488), Schulz (1920, p. 128), von Rad (1972, p. 43). Schulz qualifies his judgment somewhat by adding that the relationship is "almost exaggerated."

These scholars do not dwell on the fact that the relationship is “totally unnatural” (Stolz, 1981, p. 240). Far from acknowledging the excessive sentimentality of the story, some interpreters have actually accentuated its mawkish tone and unnatural relationships. The theft of the animal becomes “the stealing of the loved one of another,” and the rich man’s serving of the lamb now has “implications of cannibalism” (Hagan, 1979, p. 305). Descriptions of the man/lamb relationship can become so rhapsodic and abstract that a reader would never guess they had anything to do with a man and his pet lamb, if he were not told: “the twosome of pauper and sheep grows into a unity in an atmosphere of warmth and care. This unity is . . . existential. It emanates the mystical lustre of everyday life, as we often suspect and even come to know in our most open moments” (Fokkelman, 1981, p. 74).⁵

The verse which has invited so much sentimental amplification reads as follows: “the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and kept alive; it grew up with him and with his children together; from his morsel it ate and from his cup it drank and it lay in his bosom and was to him as a daughter” (12:3). How is one to determine whether this situation, and the story as a whole, are truly “melodramatic”? Like all melodrama, Nathan’s story offers one-dimensional, emotionally charged portrayals of helpless innocents exploited by ruthless villains. Scholars who do not see the story as melodramatic, but nevertheless describe it in exaggerated, sentimental terms, are also providing evidence of its melodramatic nature, for one of the hallmarks of melodrama is its tendency to inspire readers to overreact emotionally (Cawelti, 1976, pp. 263–264; Abrams, 1981, pp. 100–101). The most telling evidence, of course, is the reaction of the intended hearer within 2 Samuel 12. Nathan’s tale evokes a vehement emotional response from David, who, like these scholars, does not view it as a melodrama.

Because melodramas are dependent on conventional morality and sensibility, what constitutes “melodrama” will depend on what is conventional at a given time. In the case of a written text which, like the

5. Although Nathan’s narrative does not carry all readers to such emotional heights, the sentimentality of v. 3 does seem to make scholars distort the facts as reported there. For example, it is commonly said that the lamb “is the darling of the *whole* family” (Hertzberg, 1964, p. 312; italics mine) or “an active member of the family” (Coats, 1981, p. 372), that the lamb itself is affectionate (Napier, 1962, Vol. 4, p. 316), and that it is “treated exactly like his children” (Schulz, 1920, p. 128). None of these statements is grounded in the text. Nor is it expressly stated that the poor man buys the lamb “out of his savings” (Mauchline, 1971, p. 253).

Hebrew Bible, contains material from many periods, one must determine what is "conventional," and hence melodramatic, in terms of the way other passages in the same text relate similar events. When Nathan's story is compared with other accounts of analogous events in the Bible, its melodramatic nature is even more apparent. While other reports of the exploitation of the poor by the rich or powerful are often expressed in striking imagery, these passages display none of the indulgent sentimentality and reductiveness of melodrama (e.g., Amos 2:6-7, 5:10-12; Isa 3:13-24; Job 24:2-4, 9). This is even true of Zech 11:5-6, which uses the same vocabulary as Nathan's story to describe the injustice of the rich against the "flock" whose own "shepherds" do not "pity" them.⁶ Moreover, while lambs and sheep can indeed symbolize innocence, gentleness, and vulnerability when used metaphorically by the prophets, actual sheep and lambs are almost always mentioned in terms of their use for sacrifice, clothing, or food. Most significantly, other accounts of theft, injustice and the taking of another man's wife in the Hebrew Bible do not exhibit the indulgent sentimentality of Nathan's story. This includes the account of the stealing of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21), which contains several potentially melodramatic plot-elements, such as the exploitation and murder of an innocent victim and the eventual punishment of the villain, and has several features in common with David's "theft" of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, as well as the crime in Nathan's melodrama (see Ackroyd, 1977, pp. 104, 107, 111). Nor is the report of David's repossession of Michal, for reasons of political expediency, told melodramatically (2 Sam 3:13-16). The picture of the weeping husband Paltiel being ordered back by David's unfeeling agent Abner is genuinely pathetic. But the scene which supplies the most important contrast with Nathan's melodrama is the account of David's real villainy in 2 Samuel 11, the same villainy which prompts Nathan's story. Whether or not one takes chapter 11 as an "objective"⁷ report, its

6. Thus, the rich (*šr*, 11:5; cf. 2 Sam 12:1-2, 4) sells the flock whose shepherds do not pity (*hml*, 11:5; cf. 2 Sam 12:4, 6). Now Yahweh will no longer pity (*hml*) the inhabitants of the land (11:6). However one interprets the "shepherd allegory" as a whole (11:4-17), the absence of melodrama is evident.

7. According to Perry and Sternberg (1968, p. 451), the narrator of 2 Samuel 11 assumes a pose of "pseudo-objectivity," which creates an "ironic tension between the understated manner in which the story is communicated and the events themselves as reconstructed by the reader." This tension is said to "force" the reader to evaluate or judge the events. In terms of our analysis, one could say that 2 Samuel 11 condemns David "obliquely" through understatement, while 2 Sam 12:1-6 criticizes the king obliquely through his exaggerated response to Nathan's overblown narrative.

“unsentimental” tone is in sharp contrast to Nathan’s tale, as rightly noted by Gerleman (1977, p. 132).

Coats points out that Nathan’s tale “piles up” descriptions of the lamb in human terms (1981, p. 371). While this is indeed the case, it does not support his contention that the story is a “fable” which sounds a “tragic note” because of its human-like animal victim. On the contrary, it contributes to the unrealistic sentimentality of the story. However, the descriptions of the lamb in human terms *do* bear a resemblance to the “animal-in-human-activity” branch of the world upside down *topos*,⁸ in which human/animal roles of dominance and subservience are reversed. Such reversals show that “the real world ‘order’ . . . is really the disorder of injustice” (Kunzle, 1978, p. 89; cf. pp. 58–59). Nathan’s story also describes unjust reversals of the normal world order. The rich man takes from the poor man, instead of giving to him, even though it is usually the poor who are driven to steal from the rich. While such reversals might seem best suited for a story designed to inflame the emotions of an audience of poor people against the villainy of the rich, Nathan’s audience consists of one rich man, whose actions show that he no longer remembers that he once called himself poor (1 Sam 18:23; cf. Carlson, 1964, p. 160). Although melodrama, like the inverted world *topos*, displays inversions of moral order, it does not refer to the injustice in the real world in order to prompt real change. Rather, it provides an imaginary escape from the real world.

The Court History in 2 Samuel and 1 Kings has often been praised for its “realism” (Rost, 1965, p. 232; von Rad, 1962, p. 313). In spite of differing opinions about the value of the narrative as history, there is almost universal agreement that its “realism” involves profound insight into human psychology and an appreciation of the complexities and “cross-purposes” of real events (Auerbach, 1953, p. 20). Nathan’s story, on the other hand, is totally unrealistic by these same standards. In fact, its position in the realistic Court History makes its artificiality even more apparent. Because the tale is blatantly unrealistic, it is inappropriate to use either the story or David’s response as evidence of royal judicial procedure during David’s reign, as some scholars have done (Phillips, 1966; Macholz, 1972; pp. 165–166),⁹ or to use 2 Sam 12:3 as evidence of

8. On the *topos* as a whole, see Curtius (1963, pp. 94–98). Although the style, theme and characters of the story also have an affinity with wisdom literature (Carlson, 1964, p. 252; Mauchline, 1971, p. 253), it is the melodramatic use of these elements which characterizes the story.

9. Also see note 10, below. Although Whitelam (1979, pp. 123–129) does point to the difficulties which arise when the story and David’s judgment are taken as evidence of

ancient Israelite attitudes toward pets. Because melodrama is fundamentally opposed to mimetic art, the story is even less likely to reflect social customs and legal procedures accurately than most fiction.

DAVID'S MELODRAMATIC RESPONSE TO NATHAN'S STORY

According to Rost (1965, p. 231), David is distinguished by his "sense of reality" and "calculating acuteness." Nevertheless, in 2 Samuel 12–19, the king's sense of reality shows itself to be deficient at certain crucial points. The fact that he takes Nathan's melodrama as the report of a real case is the first sign of the faulty reality-sense which has such unfortunate repercussions later. However, not all scholars agree that David takes the story as the account of an actual case. For example, Ackroyd (1977, p. 109) insists that "it is not to be supposed that David for one moment thinks that he is dealing with actuality" when he hears this "fictional case." This disagreement can only be settled by referring to David's response in vv. 5–6. The reader is first told that the king's "anger was greatly kindled." David then declares that the man deserves to die, and that he must restore the lamb four-fold because of his deeds and his lack of pity.¹⁰ The fact that David is enraged is not, in itself, sufficient to prove that he thinks he is hearing an actual case. Fiction, particularly sensationalistic forms like melodrama, can inspire emotions which are more intense than those experienced in real life.¹¹ However, David's

actual judicial practice, he does not recognize the melodramatic nature of the story. He therefore misconstrues the "purpose" of 2 Samuel 12 in the Court History (see p. 118, below).

10. David's declaration that "the man is a son of death" (*ben-māwet hā'îš*) is not to be taken as a legal death sentence (with Simon, 1967, p. 230). According to Phillips (1966, p. 243), David is indicating that he thinks "such a heinous offense" deserves capital punishment, but, "because he has in fact committed no *crime*, the state cannot intervene, and so the injured party is left to sue for full compensation under the civil law." This attempt to explain both the death threat and the call for fourfold restitution in legalistic terms totally ignores the mood and situation of the speaker. David is far too upset emotionally to be instantly aware of such hypothetical legal nuances. This crucial fact is also missed by Coats, (1981, p. 372), who sees the "monetary penalty" as a "softening" of the death sentence. This also assumes that David's violent emotions subside immediately, in mid-sentence, so to speak. In reality, the ambiguous death threat, and the additional call for restitution, should be viewed only as an expression of the king's intense and, therefore, unrealistic rage. Any attempt to find a rational legal basis for his impulsive words misses the point. Gerleman (1977, p. 133) is therefore close to the mark when he describes David's reference to the man's death as a wholly emotional use of strong language, "through which the king gives vent to his moral indignation."

11. See Cawelti (1976, p. 23). Plato describes and condemns this tendency in many of his dialogues. More recently, Le Bon (1960) has emphasized the violence of feeling of

announcement that the man must pay fourfold, and his rationale for this punishment, *are* most appropriate as a response to an actual case, particularly because he says nothing which indicates that he is aware that it is a mere fiction which has called forth his heartfelt indignation and harsh verdict. Thus, the available evidence does indicate that David assumes he is “dealing with actuality” when he makes his response.

It is significant that Nathan presents his story without any preamble or explanation which would help David determine how he is to take the narrative. This is in striking contrast to the other situations in the Hebrew Bible to which 2 Samuel 12 is so often compared,¹² namely the fabricated stories of the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:1–20) and the anonymous bandaged prophet (1 Kgs 20:35–43). In these cases, the speakers disguise their appearance and identity and make themselves part of the “fictional” world of their stories (cf. Coats, 1981, p. 378 on 2 Sam 14:5). Specifically, they play the part which belongs to the king in reality, at least in some respects.¹³ Unlike these “dramatized narrators,” Nathan neither makes a request of the king nor reports on his own supposed malfeasance. It is therefore incorrect to say that Nathan “asks David as leader of the judiciary to give his official ruling on the case” (Caird, 1980, p. 105). Because David is given no clue as to the purpose or context of the story, his response is a function of his own assumptions and expectations. As it turns out, his words say much more about himself than they do about the story. The fact that David reacts to the mawkish story as though it were “realistic” reveals the extent of his detachment from the real world in which he had acted so unjustly.

It is often noted that the relationships and situations in Nathan’s story do not fit David’s own circumstances. This “ill-fit” provides another way for Nathan to insure that David’s response will expose the king’s basic attitudes and expectations. Because the story seems so remote from his own experience, he can adopt the stance of a detached listener. The way he finally “attaches” himself to the story shows what interests him when

crowds responding to fictions and images. At one point, he describes how theatrical villains had to be defended against the violence of spectators “indignant at the crimes, imaginary though they were, which the traitor had committed” (p. 68). He goes on to draw conclusions about the tendency of crowds not to distinguish between the real and the unreal (p. 69). Although this may be typical of a crowd’s reaction to fictional villains, it is also very similar to David’s reaction to the villain in Nathan’s story.

12. See, e.g., Simon (1967), Hoftijzer (1970), and Gunn (1978, pp. 40–42).

13. The wise woman’s role, in particular, differs from David’s situation in some ways. Thus, her fictional family wants to kill the remaining son, eliminating her last heir (2 Sam 14:7). This has no parallel in David’s situation.

he assumes he is “outside the frame.” David’s reaction informs the reader that the exaggerated sentimentality of the story actually “fits” the emotionalism of the hearer.

Readers who note the radical inconsistency between David’s reaction to fictional injustice and his unjust deeds are led to ask: “If David responds with such pity and anger at a trivial, unreal abuse of power, how can he remain unmoved by his own terrible abuse of power and lack of pity?” Yahweh Himself asks a similar question of Jonah, contrasting the triviality of Jonah’s “pity”¹⁴ for the shade-giving plant with the prophet’s lack of pity for the great city of Nineveh (Jonah 4:10–11). While the book of Jonah satirizes an anti-prophet in an unrealistic context, in 2 Samuel 11–12 there is no room for humor,¹⁵ for David, the historical figure and chosen king, has been acting like an anti-king. The very juxtaposition of 2 Samuel 11 and 12 suggests that it may be David’s tendency to be attracted by sentimental situations which allows him to remain blissfully unaware of his cold, criminal actions in reality. As long as melodramatic emotion can continue to reinforce his “idealized self-image” as avenger of injustice, he will not see that he has acted like a “rich oppressor” or “oriental potentate” who displays “unthinking callousness for human life.”¹⁶

As long as the theft and slaughter of the lamb in Nathan’s story are assumed to be “tragic,” David’s emotional response might be viewed as “tragic pity.” Although melodrama is fundamentally distinct from tragedy (Cawelti, 1976, p. 315), and the demise of the lamb is more trivial than tragic, Plato would consider David’s response a typical reaction to “tragedy” and other fictions. Plato contends that fictional imitations of exaggerated emotions infect the listener with similarly exaggerated emotions, gradually causing his view of himself and his world to become as unstable and unreal as the fictions which absorb his attention. This is

14. Here the term for “pity” is *hūs*, which appears together with the parallel term *hāmal*, for example, in Ezek 16:5 (where *hāmal* is in the nominal form *hūmlāh*). This passage invites comparison to Nathan’s story. For the similar vocabulary of Ezek 16:6–7 and 2 Sam 12:3, see Coats (1981, p. 371).

15. Coats (1981, p. 376) asserts that Nathan’s story “ridicules” the rich man, while the application shows that the rich man and David “are both ridiculous in the eyes of the audience” (p. 382). Although it is unclear whether by “audience” Coats means David’s court, the people as a whole, or the readers of 2 Samuel, the basic problem with this argument is that the story and its application have nothing to do with the “ridiculous.” Interestingly, one of the defining features of melodrama is its humorlessness. See Frye (1957, pp. 40, 47, 167) and Cawelti (1976, pp. 262–263).

16. Roth (1977, p. 8), Mauchline (1971, p. 252), Simon (1967, pp. 230–231); cf. Seebass (1974, pp. 205–206).

especially true of pity. If we “feed fat” the pitying part of ourselves when witnessing the sufferings of fictional characters, we will have a hard time restraining excessive pity and grief for our own suffering (*Republic*, 606b). David illustrates Plato’s point perfectly. He “fosters” his pity for the fictional victim here, and when Absalom dies, he indulges in extravagant grief which threatens to destroy his kingdom.

From Aristotle’s point of view, however, David’s response has little in common with tragic pity. Aristotle believes that we feel pity for men who are like ourselves, whose undeserved suffering could also possibly happen to us (*Rhetoric*, 1385b–86a). Tragedy, although it involves fictions, communicates the universal through description of particular actions (*Poetics*, 1451a–b) so that we can recognize our possible fate. Therefore, “tragedy, which involves pity, leads us to face the hard truths about ourselves,” and the painful emotions evoked by tragedy “are justified by the learning they accompany” (Redfield, 1975, pp. 87–88). In contrast, David’s angry condemnation of the rich man for lack of pity is not evoked by any insight into his true place within the frame of the story. He does not “face the hard truths” about himself until he is forced to do so by Nathan. He neither identifies with the unjust rich man nor sees his own possible fate in that of the poor man. Rather, he sees himself as a righteous judge and helper who enters the story from outside.

David’s response is an appropriate reaction to melodrama, not tragedy. The purpose of melodrama is “not to make me confront motives and experiences in myself that I might prefer to ignore but to take me out of myself by confirming an idealized self-image” (Cawelti, 1976, p. 18). In King David’s case, ideal behavior includes the execution of justice and righteousness to all his people (2 Sam 8:15). According to McCarthy (1982, p. 87), although “David was to be the ideal king, the model of justice and mercy,” by “oppressing the weaker, he went directly against the key points in the ideal.” Whitelam (1979) also stresses the vast difference between the “ideal” of the just king in Israel and the practice of royal judicial authority “in reality.” David’s response to Nathan’s story shows that he managed to maintain an “idealized self-image” as righteous king and judge at the same time that he was going directly against that ideal in reality!

NATHAN’S “PARABOLIC” USE OF HIS STORY AND DAVID’S INITIAL RESPONSE

The “escapist thrust” of melodrama might seem to preclude its being used as a tool to make a callous, complacent listener acknowledge his guilt. Yet, by telling David this sentimental story, Nathan evokes a melodramatic response which not only unmask the king’s emotional

imbalance but also allows the prophet to use that response to force David into becoming aware of his own lack of pity and his sin against Yahweh. At this point, the story can be said to function as a parable, in the sense that parables “jolt” the hearer into increased self-awareness by requiring him to complete and “close” surprising or ambiguous stories by involving his own values.¹⁷

Simon calls Nathan’s story a “juridical parable.” The “realistic dress” of such parables is said to conceal their parabolic nature, so that “the unsuspecting hearer” will pass judgment on himself (1967, p. 221). Yet we have found that it is the extremely unrealistic nature of the tale which obscures any connection between the fictional events and David’s actual crimes, so that he can hear the story in a detached manner and respond without defensiveness, thereby revealing his basic expectations and values. The fact that Nathan, unlike the wise woman and anonymous prophet, does not make himself an active participant in a plausible fiction renders the story even less realistic. While their stories purport to deal with the king’s own surroundings, Nathan refers only to a certain unnamed city.¹⁸ If “juridical parables” are realistic, and parables in general use “the familiar experience of every day to . . . direct the hearer to his present existence” (Beardslee, 1970, p. 69), Nathan’s story, *in itself*, is anything but a parable. Rather than directing David to his “present experience,” it invites him to fall right into the melodrama, so that he forgets himself and any possible relationship which may exist between the story and his situation in the present.

Both biblical scholars and reader-response critics have recently argued that reversal of reader expectation in parables, proverbs, synoptic sayings and, perhaps, all narrative art, can “shock” the reader or hearer into

17. See, e.g., Beardslee (1970, p. 69) and Kermode (1979, p. 24). However, it is doubtful that such optimism about the power of parables (and other fictional forms) is justified. We will find Nathan’s “jolting” of David does not succeed in increasing the king’s awareness for very long. Tolbert’s warning (1979, pp. 41–43) against “making exaggerated claims of power for the [NT] parable stories qua stories” should also be heeded by interpreters of Nathan’s “parable.”

18. Tolbert (1979, p. 17) notes that many NT parables “employ the indefinite article (‘a certain man,’ ‘a certain city’), which gives them a marked generality in tone.” She argues that this is one way in which the apparent realism of the parables is “exploded.” This is equally true in 2 Sam 12:1; the unnamed men and city are one way Nathan’s story advertises its unrealistic nature. For scholars who attempt to analyze the story as potential evidence of actual judicial practice, the fact that the “parties involved” are not named and “the site is undisclosed” means only that Nathan reports the “case” in “vague terms” (Whitelam, 1979, pp. 125, 128).

increased self-awareness.¹⁹ Although several interpreters have attempted to describe the effect of Nathan's story in terms of reversed expectation, they have failed to distinguish between David's expectations within the world of the text, and the expectations of the reader of 2 Samuel 12. They assume that no one expects the poor man's sheep to be given to the guest, for "normally" the rich man would use one of his own animals (Roth, 1977, p. 6; Coats, 1981, pp. 372, 376). When this expectation is reversed, there is "the shock of thwarted expectation that makes and marks the parable— . . ." (Roth, 1977, p. 6). These scholars imply that readers regularly expect the most obvious and "normal" things to happen in stories and that they are "shocked" when this does not occur, even when the event being described is a relatively trivial action in a story within a story. From this perspective, reading appears to be a nerve-racking experience. In actuality, a story would not be worth telling if everything occurred just as it normally does. Rather, readers "expect" something told us to be "newsworthy," that is, somehow different from normal. *This* kind of expectation is all the more appropriate when the story is part of a canonized sacred text. In the case of Nathan's tale, the reader of 2 Samuel 12 is "overhearing" a story directed to the "historical" hearer David by a particular historical speaker, on a particular occasion.²⁰ Moreover, the reader of the chapter is more aware of the true nature of the king's situation than the king himself, for the time being. The mention of Yahweh's displeasure in 11:27 makes it clear to the reader that what follows, namely Nathan's story, will express that displeasure, even if Nathan does not begin by invoking the Lord's name. All of these factors make it impossible for the reader of 2 Samuel 12 to have the same expectations as David, even if reading did involve a continual process of shocking reversals of expectation. The fact that David himself *is* shocked by the story reveals only his individual expectations as a listener.

Nathan employs his melodramatic tale parabolically by leaving it incomplete and open *as melodrama*. It is crucial to melodrama that "the

19. Among biblical scholars, see especially Crossan (1975). His ideas on reversed expectation have been applied to Nathan's parable by Roth (1977). If "parable subverts world," as Crossan maintains (1975, p. 59), it is the opposite of melodrama, which reinforces conventional notions of world order.

20. Although Gunn (1978, p. 41) also emphasizes the "particularity" of "parables" such as Nathan's story, it is incorrect to say that this particular story was designed for David to "draw a particular lesson." It was designed to evoke a response which exposes David's obliviousness to reality. Nathan only drives home the intended "lesson" *after* the king's response.

right things will ultimately happen,” no matter how much the helpless victim must suffer first. The villain must ultimately be punished, so that the story can “show forth the essential ‘rightness’ of the world order” (Cawelti, 1976, p. 45). Yet in Nathan’s story nothing is said about the punishment of the rich man. In fact, Nathan gives no information about what happens to any of the parties involved, once the lamb is served to the traveller.²¹ If completed melodramas call upon hearers to overreact emotionally, how much more will this be the case when a melodramatic plot leaves the usual “world order” upside down! Such a situation is geared to inspire a melodramatically inclined hearer to jump from his place in the audience and demand that the perversion of moral order be corrected. If Nathan’s story is indeed a “trap” (Simon, 1967, p. 221) for David, it springs shut when he takes the bait and exposes his own melodramatic emotions and his preference for the unreal.²² Although *Nathan* does not play a role in his fiction, *David* chooses to play the role of righteous judge.

David condemns the rich man “because he had no pity” (*lō²-ḥāmāl*; 12:6). Several scholars have recognized that *ḥāmāl* is a key-word here, although there is no consensus about the exact relationship between David’s use of the word and Nathan’s use of the same term to describe how the rich man “spared” (*wayyaḥmōl*) to take one of his own animals to dress for his visitor (12:4).²³ In actuality, it is David himself who makes *ḥāmāl* into a key word. The prophet only says that the rich man spared (“had pity on”) his own animals. He leaves it to the hearer to notice a connection between the villain’s “pitying” of his own flocks and his lack of pity for the poor man’s ewe.²⁴ David not only notices this

21. Although this fact is noted by Schulz (1920, p. 128), he does not go on to show how it functions to evoke David’s revealing response.

22. Gunn (1978, p. 41) argues that Nathan’s story could only succeed as a parable if it involved a “successful deception,” that is, if the addressee did not give “the wrong answer.” This misses the point of Nathan’s telling a melodramatic tale. *Whatever* response David might have made to the story would have been equally “successful” in revealing his character and the degree of his insight into reality. If, as Gunn suggests, David had replied that Nathan should “take the case to the local examining magistrate,” this would have provided even clearer evidence of David’s inability to tell reality from melodramatic fiction. And there is no reason why Nathan could not have turned *that* response against the king as well.

23. See Simon (1967, p. 231), Coats (1981, p. 373), and Fokkelman (1981, p. 75).

24. Coats (1981, p. 373) notes that v. 4b does not use *ḥāmāl* to describe “the opposite pole” to the rich man’s “pity” for his own animals, but he also assumes that when David uses this term in his “interpretation,” he is merely responding to what is “clearly intended”

connection but focuses on it. In order to right the inversions of emotional behavior and moral order which he detects in the story, David reverses the sense of *ḥāmal*, by changing the object of the pitying. He shows that the rich man's "pity" for his own property equals "no-pity"²⁵ for the poor man and his little lamb. But by correcting these perversions of justice and sensibility, David creates a *new* opposition between himself and the story, one involving *his* relationship to pity. His pity²⁶ for the victims in the story is in stark contrast to his lack of pity for Uriah, his victim in real life.

Nathan "jolts" David into seeing the story as a mirror of his reality by picking up on David's reference to "the man." When Nathan declares, "You are the man" (*ʿattā hāʿiṣ*, 12:7), he reveals the king's true relationship to the three men in the story. The noun *ʿiṣ* ("man") appears three times in v. 4, once in relation to each of these three men: the rich man, the poor man, and the man who was visiting. In the next verse the word appears twice, both times in reference to David's anger toward "the man" who committed the injustice. When David says "the man," he thinks only of the rich man. It is only when Nathan echoes David's reference to *hāʿiṣ* that "the man" is revealed to be David himself. Nathan provides the connection between the fictional man and the real man. The use of *ʿiṣ* as a key-word increases the climactic impact of Nathan's pronouncement,²⁷ as it instantly binds David to his true reflection in the melodrama.

Nathan shows David that the king's anger at the fictional villainy is mirrored by Yahweh's displeasure with his real deeds (2 Sam 11:27, 12:7–12). David can no longer view either the story or his own actions with godlike detachment. After Nathan tells him *God's* reaction to *his* villainy, he must acknowledge his sin (12:13). His apparent repentance prevents the "death threat" aimed at the fictional sinner from being carried out on the real sinner who issued it (12:13–14).

by the story itself. In actuality, David's response reveals his basic emotional interests, not his skill as an interpreter.

25. This point is lost when MT *lō* is replaced by *lō* (Hertzberg, 1964, p. 307, and others), in which case David condemns the man for sparing that which was his own.

26. Although David is not explicitly said to feel pity, it is implied by his response and is often taken for granted by commentators (e.g., Fokkelman, 1981, p. 79).

27. The LXX reduces the impact of the declaration by adding "*ho poiēsas touto*," so that Nathan exclaims, "You are the man who has done this."

*THE FAILURE OF NATHAN'S STORY TO RIGHT DAVID'S
TOPSY-TURVY EMOTIONS*

Even though Nathan's parabolic use of his story does lead David to repent,²⁸ it does not result in the kind of "self revelation" (Hagan, 1979, p. 323) which might have a lasting effect on his emotions and insight into reality. Fokkelman (1981, pp. 79–82, 281, 420, 423) claims that Nathan's intervention works as "therapy" to bring about a "curative change," eliminating David's alienation from himself and making him whole.²⁹ However, even a brief examination of David's behavior after 2 Samuel 12 will show that in matters involving his guilt and his family, the king is still characterized by fluctuating emotions and an inability to recognize fabricated stories.

Chapter 12 itself indicates that David's emotions will continue to be misdirected and destructive. Nathan prophesies that Yahweh will raise up evil against the king from his own house and that his "neighbor" will lie with his wives in the sight of the sun (12:11). These predictions are fulfilled with Amnon's violation of Tamar, Absalom's possession of David's concubines (16:22) and his rebellion as a whole, and, ultimately, with the deaths of three of his sons. Both 2 Samuel 13 and 1 Kings 2 show that these disastrous events are the direct result of David's continued emotional instability, together with similar behavior on the part of Amnon. Appropriately, David's punishment for his reckless passion and callous murder is carried out through more acts of reckless passion and callous murder, committed by—and against—his children.

Immediately after Nathan's intervention, the reader is told of David's behavior during and after the illness of Bathsheba's first-born (12:16–23). His extravagant grief during the illness, followed by his total disregard for normal mourning procedures after the infant dies, baffled not only

28. David's slowness to confess and his less-than-passionate "repentance" are most apparent when his behavior here is contrasted with the speaker's wholehearted contrition in Psalm 51 ("a Psalm of David; when Nathan the prophet came to him . . ."), and with 2 Samuel 24, which describes David's immediate sense of guilt and contrition following the census-taking. In the latter case, he confesses his sins without prophetic provocation (24:10) and humbly begs the Lord to punish him and his father's house, rather than the people (24:17).

29. Fokkelman goes on to use David's allegedly successful "reading" of Nathan's story as a prime example of the way the Old Testament and "every work of art" can change the reader through "living contact" (1981, p. 423). However, the fact that David misconstrues the nature of the tale and its relation to his own life, and is *not* led into increased self-knowledge even after Nathan tells him he is "the man," does not indicate that David is well-suited for the role of ideal "reader."

the members of his court, but also readers and scholars ever since. Some interpreters take the king's attitude after the death as a positive sign, indicating self-sufficiency, strong will, or realism.³⁰ For Fokkelman, the fact that David accepts the death "out of a deep feeling of factuality" is the primary evidence that Nathan's intervention succeeds in curing the king's split ego (1981, p. 91). On the other hand, some scholars believe the king's acceptance of the inevitability of death at such a moment is "all too realistic," "a bit too pious and naive," or "detached and even coldly rational."³¹ However one chooses to evaluate David's behavior, it is indisputable that this radical reversal from excessive emotion to seeming coldness is typical of his emotional life throughout 2 Samuel. In fact, this is the very character trait which Nathan had just exposed by means of his story.

Readers have long been aware of the similarity between David's crime with Bathsheba and the crime of Amnon reported in chapter 13. Both father and son exhibit unbridled lust and callousness toward their victims. This similarity makes David's reluctance to punish Amnon even stronger evidence that he has not been changed by his confrontation with Nathan, or even by his repentance. Who could be in a better position to understand the dangers and sinfulness of such perverse emotions than the David who is enlightened and penitent at the end of chapter 12? Yet he does nothing. Whether or not one considers the sole reason to be his love for his first-born (as in the LXX of v. 21), it is clear that the king will not confront his son the way he was confronted by Nathan, even though he is "very angry" (*wayyihar me'ōd*, 13:21). This response stands in ironic contrast to the king's vehement reaction to the rich man's crime in the melodrama. When he heard of that crime, "his anger was greatly kindled" (*wayyihar- 'ap . . . me'ōd*, 12:5), and he immediately ordered severe punishment. Only the fictional injustice moves the outraged king to take immediate action, even though the victim of the real crime is his real daughter. As Ishida points out (1982, p. 183), David's inaction after Amnon's crime constitutes an "unjust treatment of the affair," which once again "calls into question his competence as a wise ruler." Moreover, there is no mention of any attempt on David's part to help this innocent victim, who therefore remains "desolate" in her brother's house (13:20).

David's feelings toward Amnon prove to be inconsistent, although they are consistently inappropriate to the situation at hand. After failing

30. Von Rad (1966, p. 179), Schulz (1920, p. 135), and Mauchline (1971, p. 256).

31. Hertzberg (1964, p. 316), Gerleman (1977, p. 139), Conroy (1978, p. 75, n. 134).

to punish his son's crime, at least partly out of paternal love, he "did nothing but weep" (Ishida, 1982, p. 182) with his sons and servants after Amnon is killed (13:36). Later, however, he displays cool indifference to his son's demise, on the basis of the same abstract, and possibly melodramatic,³² awareness of the irreversibility of death which he had given as the reason for not mourning the death of Bathsheba's first-born (13:39; cf. 12:23).

It is David's vacillation between excessive, misplaced affection and callousness which finally drives Absalom to rebel. After forcing Absalom to punish Amnon and then flee, David's ineffectual yearning for his son (13:38, 14:1) must be turned upside down³³ by Joab's scripting of the wise woman's fictitious tale. Once again David responds quickly and decisively to a fabricated story which actually refers to a real situation in which he has failed to act. And once again the increased awareness prompted by the wise woman has a very short term effect. After allowing Absalom to return, David callously ignores his proud son for "two full years." By the time they are outwardly reconciled (14:33), David has made his son hate him. Like Amnon, Absalom creates the occasion for his violent deeds by disguising his emotions and fooling his father (15:7-12; cf. 13:23-34 and Amnon in 13:6-7).³⁴ This is possible because

32. David's cool acceptance of death in 12:23 and his being "comforted" about Amnon's death imply a stoical detachment from his emotions which is continually belied by his actual behavior. These verses should be viewed together with 14:14, in which the wise woman interjects a similar statement on the inevitability of death into her plea for the king to bring home "his banished one." This difficult verse has been subjected to many interpretations (see Hoftijzer, 1970, p. 431, n. 3). Hoftijzer rejects the idea that the woman is referring to the inevitability and irrevocability of death in order to imply that if David waits too long for a reconciliation it may be too late. He believes that "such a sentimental reference to human mortality does not fit the context" (p. 432). Yet, in light of David's melodramatic inclinations and the fact that he himself makes a similar reference after the death of Bathsheba's first-born, a "sentimental reference to human mortality" would be exactly the kind of argument which might move David to bring about a reunion with his exiled son. Of course, such unrealistic sentiments do not translate into a true reconciliation when Absalom *does* return.

33. As the wise woman puts it, Joab wants to "turn around (*sabbēh*) the face of the matter" (14:20). This is an unusual use of *sbh* with *pānim* (See Conroy, 1978, p. 148) and the only appearance of the *piel* of *sbh*. This verse is one of several verses in 2 Samuel 12-19 which specifically mention reversals or inversions in the affairs and feelings of David and his family (e.g., 12:21, 13:15, 19:3, and 19:7).

34. On David being fooled by his sons, see Hagan (1979, pp. 308-313). According to Whybray (1968, pp. 36-37), David's inability "to distinguish between a true and a fictitious story whether it is Nathan . . . or the wise woman . . . who tells it," shows his "absurd ineptitude" as king and statesman. This judgment should be qualified. The wise woman's

David's tendency to misperceive reality is reinforced by his sentimental love for his sons as well as his actual indifference to them. It is especially ironic that Absalom gains the power to challenge his father by offering to dispense justice for those who had come to David (15:1-6). Apparently David, who was so quick to seek justice for the fictional victim in Nathan's story, has not been so effective in addressing the grievances of his real subjects. How appropriate that the "judge" Absalom is in this position due to a chain of events which began with his having to "judge" and punish his half-brother, because David failed to do so!

After Absalom is killed, David's feelings swing violently over to the side of excessive, misdirected emotion. Gunn (1975, p. 25) believes the king's reaction is "genuine grief." It is said that David's behavior "elicits heartfelt sympathy" (Wharton, 1981, p. 343) and forces admiration, so that only a cold reader could remain unmoved by this account (Gunn, 1975, pp. 24-25). In fact, Conroy calls 2 Samuel 19 "one of the most pathetic and moving pages of the Bible" (1978, p. 49). Yet readers who remain aware of David's continual³⁵ vacillation between callousness and unrealistic, "maudlin sentimentality" (Whybray, 1968, p. 38) may doubt his capacity for "genuine" feelings. They will be inclined to agree with Joab's accusation that "you love those that hate you, and hate those that love you" (19:7). Although this famous statement has been labeled an "exaggeration" and "colossal hyperbole" (Conroy, 1978, p. 79; Fokkelman, 1981, p. 272), it accurately reflects the topsy-turvy nature of the king's extreme emotions. Its similarity to the description of Amnon's swing from love to hatred (13:15), reminds the reader that such emotions are common to father and son, both of whom commit grave acts of injustice.

Joab sees David's actions that day as evidence that his princes and servants "are nothing" to him. This shows that David's "hatred" of those who love him involves callous insensitivity, rather than active hate (cf. Gen 29:31 and Deut 21:15). David's callousness toward Tamar and, later, Absalom led the latter to show his "hatred" of his father in a very active way. Now David's overreaction to the death of that same son, a death

fabrication is far less transparent than Nathan's blatantly unrealistic fiction. Moreover, it is only when fictions too clearly recall unpleasant truths about David's actions, when they allow him to abandon reality for melodrama, and when they involve his family, that this "ineptitude" manifests itself.

35. David's relationship with Michal is perfectly consistent with this pattern, whether or not one accepts Gunn's arguments for viewing 2 Samuel 2-4 together with chapters 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2 (1978, pp. 68-70). David forces Michal to be separated from a husband who is crushed by his loss (2 Sam 3:13-16). He finally turns her love for him (1 Sam 18:20) into hate (2 Sam 6:16, "she despised him in her heart").

for which he might be considered responsible, “turns victory into mourning for all the people” (19:3). Once again his unrealistic feelings have very real effects; in fact, they almost make his kingdom an inverted world.³⁶ At this point Joab cannot afford the luxury of disguised storytellers to coax the king into becoming aware of reality by catering to his interest in fictional disorder and injustice. Only direct and violent accusation can pull David out of his obsession with his own emotions, so that he can deal, however passively, with the people. Yet once again the positive effect of the confrontation is short-lived. David’s hatred of Joab, one who loves him, leads the king to replace his loyal general with the former head of the rebel forces, even though this causes further disorder in the kingdom.

*CONCLUSION: 2 SAMUEL 12 AND THE “PURPOSE”
OF THE COURT HISTORY*

Our analysis of the relationship between Nathan’s story and David’s topsy-turvy emotions has a direct bearing on the unending debate over the purpose and *Tendenz* of the Court History. For example, some scholars argue that the account of David’s response to the lamb story is an attempt to restore his image as a just king, which was damaged in the Uriah affair, through a process of “whitewashing” (Whitelam, 1979, pp. 129, 135). Yet we have found that, far from reinforcing the image of David as just judge, the report of the king’s emotional response to Nathan’s melodrama reveals a glaring inconsistency between David’s idealized image of himself as just judge and his real acts of injustice. Nor does our study support the notion that David’s repentance in chapter 12 counteracts the negative impression created by the earlier report of his crimes. The following chapters show that the king is not changed by Nathan’s intervention and the acknowledgement of his sin. His repentance does not teach him what he needed to learn in order to rule more justly when similar situations arose. Similarly, we cannot agree with McCarter that stress on David’s “gentleness” serves a function as “court apologetic” (1981, pp. 365–366). McCarter cites David’s description of himself as “gentle” (*rak*) in 2 Sam 3:39, in contrast to the “harsh” (*qāšim*)

36. Although several commentators have recognized that Joab is telling David how he has “turned the whole victory upside down” (Ackroyd, 1977, p. 173), and created a “topsy-turvy” world (Fokkelman, 1981, p. 295; cf. pp. 91, 271), they have not connected this with David’s behavior throughout 2 Samuel, or with the inversions in Nathan’s story.

sons of Zeruiah.³⁷ But we have found that David's *unacknowledged* "gentleness" is often indulgent sentimentality, which can be just as disastrous for a king as callousness. To say that "David's very gentleness leads to trouble" (p. 365) is to gloss over the damage caused by David's sentimentality, as reported in the text. In the same way, to claim that the description of David's inaction after Amnon's crime has a "sympathetic tone" (p. 366) is to ignore both the grave consequences of that inaction and the fact that David's conduct here is only one example of a larger pattern of emotional behavior which has catastrophic effects for both king and kingdom.³⁸

On the other hand, the fact that David's topsy-turvy emotions are shown to interfere with his performance as a just king does not necessarily support Delekat's contention that the author of 2 Samuel 12 and the rest of the Court History is an opponent of monarchy in general (1967, p. 131). According to Delekat, the author believes that it is necessarily disastrous to give one person so much power. But we must ask whether the Court History implies that the causes of David's particular failures would necessarily affect every king. Certainly the narrative does not affirm Schopenhauer's belief that because a king is given so much power, wealth, and security, "*for himself* there is nothing left to desire," thus enabling him to practice justice and consider only the public welfare, "just as if he were not a human being" (1966, p. 595). The juxtaposition of 2 Samuel 11 and 12 shows that at the very time David listens to Nathan's supposed "case" in the disinterested posture of a just king, he remains equally indifferent to the implications of his own acts of injustice, which stem from his private desires. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the Court History is against monarchy *per se*, any more than Deuteronomy is against all forms of kingship because it warns that prosperity and power can lead both the king and the people into arrogance, forgetfulness and sin (Deut 17:16–20, 6:10–11, 8:12–13; cf. Weinfeld, 1972, pp. 169, 280–281). Thus, not even the fact that David commits

37. Although David's reference to himself as "*rak*" cannot be used as evidence of a positive portrayal of the king's "gentleness" in the Court History, the same term is used later to describe King Josiah's commendable "tenderness" of heart, that is, his humility and receptiveness to Yahweh's *tôrâh* (2 Kgs 22:19).

38. This is even more true when the verse is read as emended by McCarter: "[he] did nothing to chasten (*ʿašab*) his son. . . ." The inclusion of *ʿašab* refers the reader to the account of David's failure to chasten Adonijah in 1 Kgs 1:6, as McCarter points out. But this connection only underscores the fact that David's consistent failure to discipline his sons consistently proves disastrous.

his crimes during a period of relative prosperity and security,³⁹ and does so “in secret,” like crimes condemned in Deuteronomy (2 Sam 12:12; Deut 27:24), is sufficient to prove that the narrative is anti-monarchical.

David’s specific problems as king involve more than the misuse of power to satisfy illicit desires. The most serious political and judicial crises of his reign are brought about by his emotional vacillation and not-always-reliable “reality sense,” together with his obliviousness concerning the implications of his actions. In the Hebrew Bible, obliviousness is often coupled with complacency. According to Psalm 10, the wicked one who slays the innocent and seizes the poor in “secret places” (vv. 8, 9) arrogantly assumes that God will never see or punish him (vv. 6, 11). Although David also commits crimes “in secret,” he certainly does not display the presumptuousness of this godless sinner. Yet, 2 Sam 11:27–12:6 gives no indication that David is any more aware that he might have to pay for his crimes than the wicked man in the Psalm. He simply takes and marries Bathsheba after murdering her husband, and proceeds to exercise his judicial authority in relation to Nathan’s story as though nothing had happened. Only when Yahweh sends Nathan to express His “displeasure” is David forced to apply his public judicial authority to his private crimes.

Several scholars have noted the importance of the “private and public theme” in the story of David (see Gunn, 1978, pp. 88–94). Perhaps the most important point made about a king’s “double life” in the Court History is that his exalted station and great power not only increase the temptation to indulge illicit private passions, but make it especially easy for him to maintain the kind of idealized self-image which allows him to remain oblivious to his guilt. Because kings are so susceptible to self-deception about their righteousness and the implications of their deeds, it is incorrect to say that it is “merely an accident” that the “judgement-eliciting parables” in the Hebrew Bible happen to be addressed to kings (Gunn, 1978, p. 41). Considering the opportunities for bad faith furnished by their double identity, it is no accident that this sort of intervention is needed to expose a monarch’s blindness to his personal and public guilt.

The psychological portrait of King David in the Court History can serve an important function for the reader when it is viewed together with the conflicting image of the “ideal” David in the books of Kings. It

39. If David’s sins are prompted by prosperity and security, it should not surprise us that in the Court History he is “at his greatest when his external circumstances are at their worst, in his flight from Jerusalem” (Hertzberg, 1964, p. 378).

is usually assumed that the "perfect" David of Kings is merely a "different and unrelated conception" (von Rad, 1966, p. 218) produced by different authors at a different time, for different reasons. Scholars often take it for granted that the "later" ideal David obscures or replaces the fallible David of the Court History for the reader. However, the reader of the book of Kings may well be intended to keep the Court History firmly in mind when he reads about the sins of later kings. For example, when an attentive reader learns that Yahweh accused Jeroboam of not being like "My servant David . . . who followed Me with all his heart, to do *only* (*raq*) that which was right in My eyes" (1 Kgs 14:8), he must recall that "the thing that David had done" with Uriah and Bathsheba was "*evil* in the eyes of Yahweh" (2 Sam 11:27). He must also recall that, like Jeroboam, David was rebuked by a prophet who had earlier proclaimed Yahweh's offer to "build him a house" (2 Sam 7:11; 1 Kgs 11:38), and that, in both cases, the rebuke included the announcement of the impending death of the king's son and other evils for his "house" (2 Sam 12:10-11; 14; 1 Kgs 14:10-12). Such a reader will not be able to ignore the fact that, in spite of these parallels, Jeroboam's punishment is immeasurably greater than David's. In fact, Jeroboam's name becomes synonymous with apostasy and the evils of kingship in the Deuteronomistic History, while David becomes the symbol of faithfulness and perfect kingship. The reader must ask why the two kings meet opposite fates. Comparing the two, he will discover that, in spite of his failings, David never played God by "making gods," thereby leading his people into sin. The comparison reveals that the historical books, taken as a unified whole, consider the sin of apostasy to be infinitely more dangerous than the crimes caused by David's topsy-turvy emotions and obliviousness. The reader's continuing awareness of the Court History also serves a prophylactic function when he confronts later references to the perfect David doing "only" what was right in the Lord's eyes. His memory of David's all-too-human failings will prevent him from "idolizing" the king whose "perfection" is based on the fact that he did not make idols like Jeroboam or let his wives "turn away his heart after other gods" in his old age, like his prosperous son Solomon (1 Kgs 11:4).

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