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**KEITH BODNER, CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION: A
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OF ISHBOSHETH**

CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATION: A TEXT-CRITICAL MYSTERY AND THE STRANGE DEATH OF ISHBOSHETH

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A. INTRODUCTION

The troublesome reign of Ishbosheth comes to a graphic conclusion when he is assassinated—audaciously, at midday while reclining on a couch in his own house—by two of his own captains, the brothers Rechab and Baanah. Ishbosheth himself is something of an enigmatic figure in the Deuteronomistic History; he does not do a great deal in the narrative apart from tremble in fear. Ishbosheth only speaks one line in the entire narrative (2 Sam 3:7), and this sentence itself is awkward and indirect. In light of the artful enterprise of the Deuteronomist with respect to Ishbosheth’s characterization, perhaps it is not overly surprising that the manner of Ishbosheth’s death should be shrouded in ambiguity. That Ishbosheth is assassinated (while sleeping in his house at high noon) there is no doubt: the guilty confess, are charged, and duly executed. But the puzzle is *how* exactly the murder takes place—and this is the subject of my analysis—as there are significant discrepancies between the Hebrew and Greek texts. The MT seems to imply that the brothers gain access to the house by impersonation and stealth, and subsequently eliminate their target. The LXX, by contrast, introduces a new character into this somnolent drama: a doorkeeper of presumably feminine gender whose apparent siesta allows the assassins to enter the inner chamber of the Saulide king. After some necessary background discussion of the story as narrated in 2 Samuel 2–3 and 4:1–5, I will assess the problem of Ishbosheth’s murder. My plan is to survey a number of “solutions” posited by scholars and evaluate various attempts that have been made to resolve this text-critical mystery. I will then move toward a conclusion by summarizing the key differences between the MT and LXX in this passage and discussing some of the literary implications that emerge when these textual trajectories are compared. As a witness to the murder, the LXX provides an exciting and compelling testimony, but the MT account features several important details that cannot be ignored in light of the larger storyline.

B. TWO PREVIOUS DEATHS IN THE “FIFTH” DEGREE

I should begin by stressing that Ishbosheth is not the first victim of homicide in 2 Samuel. Indeed, there are two other killings in earlier sections of this narrative that involve the specific anatomical area referred to as *שֵׁנִי*, often translated in English as the “fifth rib.” Since—in my view—the

death of Ishbosheth presupposes these two prior events, it would be wise to give them a brief review.

DEATH #1

After the self-skewering of King Saul on the slopes of Mount Gilboa, David is anointed king over Judah, while Saul's son Ishbosheth is crowned at Mahanaim, largely through the efforts of Abner, the commander of the army. Here the protracted struggle between the houses of Saul and David begins, with formal hostilities commenced at Gibeon in 2 Sam 2:12. In the ensuing battle, the "swift of foot" Asahel chases after Abner, and with a single-minded determination that proves fatal, does not swerve to the right or left. "Abner was saying to Asahel, 'Turn away from following me! Why should I strike you to the ground? How could I lift up my face to Joab your brother?'" But [Asahel] refused to turn away. Then Abner struck him with the end of his spear in the fifth rib (שֶׁהַמָּשׁוּ), and the spear came out behind him" (2:19–23). As one commentator summarizes, "The account seems to be at great pains to show that Abner was forced into combat against his will in killing Asahel. Others come to where Asahel lies and stand ... still, perhaps in shock at the loss of one of these seemingly invincible brothers."¹ This death will certainly be remembered as the narrative continues.

DEATH #2

The central reason for Abner's hesitancy to slay Asahel—in his own words—is the fear of Joab: "Why should I strike you to the ground? How could I," Abner says to fleet-footed Asahel in hot pursuit, "lift up my face to Joab your brother?" It will be some time before this question is finally answered, and other great affairs of state seem to deflect attention from this unreciprocated fatality; yet a brother's death is not so easily forgotten, and certainly not by such a character as Joab—commander-in-chief of the southern forces of Judah. The most controversial affair is probably Abner's surprising offer to "bring around" all Israel to David, to the profound detriment of Ishbosheth's tenure. To this end Abner journeys to Hebron to make a deal with the southern potentate. The hard negotiations take place, one should note, all during the rather convenient absence of Joab who is out "raiding" (מִהַגְדֻד). But Joab returns to Hebron just as Abner has departed and hears the news. Outraged with David for cutting a deal with Abner, Joab proceeds to send messengers to bring Abner back.

Then Abner returned to Hebron, and Joab swerved him toward the midst of the gate to speak with him quietly, and struck him there in the fifth rib [שֶׁהַמָּשׁוּ]. So he died because of the blood of Asahel his brother. ... (But Joab and his brother Abishai killed Abner because he put their brother Asahel to death in Gibeon, during the war.) (3:27–30)

¹ B. C. Birch, "1 & 2 Samuel," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 1217.

“There is a fraternal symmetry,” notes Robert Polzin with respect to this developing theme that is far from over, as “brothers kill brothers for the murder of a brother.”² Such fratricide, I would argue, is woven into the fabric of the larger narrative design, and such killings will be seen again. But for the moment, the death of Abner is an important prelude to the death of Ishbosheth, not least because Joab is palpably a man with *two motives*—blood vengeance and his own job security.³ Since it is not unreasonable to assume that Abner would have assumed control of the army had he lived, Joab’s own interests are obviously threatened, and hence these twin motives should be kept in mind.

C. THE BACKGROUND/BUILD-UP OF 2 SAM 4:1–5

1. A ROYAL REACTION TO ABNER’S DEATH

The prior slayings of Asahel and Abner need to be kept in mind by the reader, as these deaths present essential background information that any reading of chapter 4 must reckon with. Consider v. 1:

Then Saul’s son heard that Abner was dead in Hebron, and his hands hung loose, and all Israel was dismayed.

The death of Abner is no doubt a bitter blow for the house of Saul, yet one recalls that the relationship between Abner and Ishbosheth was not without its acrimonious moments. For instance, in 3:7 the reader is told that “Saul had a concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah; and he said to Abner, “Why have you gone in to my father’s concubine?” The subject of וַיֹּאמֶר (“and he said”) is presumably Ishbosheth, yet the proper name is not used in the MT. But it is clear enough from the context as Abner retorts “Am I a dog’s head for Judah?” and goes on to announce his plans for defection. Of course, Abner never really responds to Ishbosheth’s charge, and neither does Ishbosheth himself as we read in 3:11: “But he was not able again to return a word to Abner because of his fear of him.” This conversation triggers the defection of Abner, a *fellow Benjaminite*, a switch in

² R. Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) 48.

³ Again, Bruce Birch provides a convenient summary: “Joab must be seen as a figure with two interests that work against the acceptability of an alliance with Abner. The first is his hatred and distrust of Abner, stemming from Abner’s killing of Joab’s brother Asahel in the battle described in 2:12–32. Joab sees himself as the legitimate bearer of a claim for vengeance against Abner, although ordinarily bloodguilt would not be recognized for a death suffered in war—i.e., it was not considered murder. The second of Joab’s interests in this matter has to do with influence on David. Joab eventually becomes commander of David’s armies (8:16), but it is reasonable to think that Abner might have assumed this role if he had lived. In any case, Abner would have been a powerful and influential military adviser and leader within David’s kingdom, and this would make him Joab’s natural rival for David’s favor” (“1 & 2 Samuel,” 1225).

loyalty that is certainly not to Ishbosheth's advantage.⁴ As we will see, this is not the last defection that will victimize the hapless Ishbosheth.

When the news comes about Abner's death, the (already weak) hands of Ishbosheth grow limp. 2 Sam 4:1 begins with another avoidance of Ishbosheth's name, continuing the trend from the previous chapter: he is referred to simply as "Saul's son." At least, he is referred to as "Saul's son" in the MT, whereas the LXX reads "Mephibosheth." Scholars agree that this is an error, a judgment with which I readily concur.⁵ I want to stress that avoidance of the proper name in the MT is an intentional part of his characterization, and the textual error in the Greek happens because of this very strategy. Ishbosheth has certainly been afraid at previous points in the narrative, and his limp hands in this case indicate his psychological state of alarm and loss of confidence. Walter Brueggemann understands this image as, "He lost his grip on power."⁶ Further, "all Israel is dismayed" by these events, though whether the disturbance is caused by the death of Abner in Hebron or by the "limp hands" of Ishbosheth is not specified in the narrative. However, the net effect of all these details suggests that chapter 4 is intimately related to the preceding narrative, and that Ishbosheth's failing courage is an ominous portent for things to come. Ishbosheth was fearful when Abner was alive; he remains fearful now that Abner is dead and presumably without protection.

2. TWO MURDERERS AND A MOTIVE

Verses 2 and 3 present us with the two murderers and a motive.

Now there were two men, captains of raiders, they were to Saul's son.
The name of the first one was Baanah, and the name of the second one

⁴ Abner sends word of his intentions to David, who agrees. "However," David says, "there is one thing I'm asking from you, namely, you will not see my face unless you bring before me Michal, daughter of Saul, when you come to see me." There is nothing particularly unusual about David's request; the odd part of the episode comes next:

Then David sent messengers to Ishbosheth son of Saul, saying, "Give up my wife Michal, whom I acquired for myself with 100 Philistine foreskins." So Ishbosheth sent and took her from a husband, from Paltiel, son of Laish. Her husband went with her, weeping as he followed her until Bahurim. Abner said to him, "Go! return!" And he returned.

In all likelihood Abner is guilty of vile treachery, but it must be said that the return of Michal by Ishbosheth himself does paint him in a rather bizarre light, and it is somewhat incredulous that he should so strengthen David's position by acquiescing to this demand. Ishbosheth has been disparagingly labeled by one commentator as a "thoroughly unkingly invertebrate" (P. K. McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* [AB 9; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984] 122) and to be sure he does have weaknesses, but it is hard to deny that his position is a vulnerable one, and he has been ill-used by Abner.

⁵ On this particular matter, and the issue of nomenclature in general (eg., the variants of Ishbosheth/Ishbaal, Mephibosheth/Meribaal), see McCarter, *II Samuel*, 124–25.

⁶ W. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 233.

was Recab. They were sons of Rimmon, the Beerothite from Benjamin—for Beeroth was also reckoned to Benjamin. The Beerothites fled to Gittaim, and they are there as sojourners to this day.

Two new characters are introduced to the story, who hitherto have not been seen. The two are brothers, and we learn of their occupation before their names: they are “princes of raiders” (שָׂרֵי גָדוּדִים). Graeme Auld observes that “raiding” is the exact same term applied to Joab in 2 Sam 3:22, when Joab had just returned from “raiding” and the plot was hatched to stab Abner in the “fifth rib.”⁷ Thus, Joab engages in the same activity as the sons of Rimmon: raiding. This similarity could be intended to establish in the reader’s mind that both David and Ishbosheth rely on “royal raiders.” More plausibly the point could be to underscore that some raiders are more or less loyal, or that raiders often act with a hint of self-interest. At any rate, the *character zones* of Joab and the sons of Rimmon intersect at this point of “raiding,” and it remains to be seen if there will be further similarities between Joab and these Benjaminite brothers.⁸ For Bruce Birch, such data is far from irrelevant:

The account is at some pains to establish that they were Benjaminites, even though they were from Beeroth, which was a traditional Gibeonite city. This makes Ishbosheth’s assassins his own kinsmen. Although details are not supplied, it is clear that Beeroth was annexed by the tribe of Benjamin, forcing the Gibeonite inhabitants to relocate in Gittaim (v.3). These events may lie behind the blood feud that led the Gibeonites to exact vengeance upon the house of Saul in 2 Sam 21:1–9.⁹

The extended mention of “Beeroth,” and the identities of Baanah and Rechab as “Benjaminites” has evoked different responses from commentators—some see the brothers as politically disaffected from Saul (Hertzberg), while others see them simply as opportunists looking for profit (McCarter)—but the majority of interpreters suggest that this description of the Beerothites somehow provides a clue as to the motives of the two brothers’ activity in this chapter. As Victor Hamilton notes, “Possibly, their actions were in revenge for what Saul, Ishbosheth’s father, had done to the Gibeonites (2 Sam. 21:4).”¹⁰ Alternatively, Hamilton cites the work of George Mendenhall, who “calls them ‘two disreputable turncoats [that] commit political assassination in order to ingratiate themselves with the

⁷ G. Auld, “1 and 2 Samuel,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (eds. J. D. G. Dunn and J. W. Rogerson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 232.

⁸ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. Vol. 3, *Throne and City (2 Sam. 2–8 and 21–24)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990) 122–23, notes that their occupation and ties to Benjamin are presented in a certain order, an order that in v. 2a “establishes their duty to Ishbosheth as military personnel before 2b divulges their names as Baanah and Rechab ... [from Benjamin, and thus] they are bound to their master by ties of kinship.”

⁹ Birch, “1 & 2 Samuel,” 1230.

¹⁰ V. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 309.

man who will inevitably win power.”¹¹ I would venture to submit that the brothers’ activity in this chapter could be motivated by *both* reasons: a quest for vengeance and an opportunity for profit; after all, this seems to be the case with Joab as I have outlined above. Not only, then, do the brothers have “raiding” in common with Joab, but they also have the twin motives of “vengeance” and opportunism on their *curriculum vitae*.

At the same time, these two brothers also resemble *Abner* in certain ways, as made evident in chapter 3. They are all from the tribe of Benjamin, and this, at the very least, will continue the trend of treason against Ishbosheth by fellow Benjaminites. With Abner, there is expected loyalty, but instead there is a deal with David. With the Beerothite brothers, there is expected loyalty, but instead there is interest in the Davidic cause. A slight complication emerges, however: the brothers are Benjaminites (tied by kin, therefore, to Ishbosheth), but are also Gibeonites (genetically predisposed to deception, perhaps, according to Joshua 9) and the victims of annexation (possibly by Saul). The brothers are supplied with an ostensible motive for murdering Ishbosheth, and if so, then the “blood feud” theme continues to drive this plot similar to the case in chapters 2 and 3. As far as opportunism, Abner is dead, and the two brothers seem to be looking to do what is right in their own eyes. “All Israel is dismayed,” and so these two captains take matters into their own hands and, following the example of Abner, attempt to curry favor with David.

3. A PARENTHETICAL ASIDE

Verse 4 presents a brief “interruption” of the main storyline and by means of a flashback provides an introduction to another Saulide:

(But Jonathan son of Saul had a son, stricken of feet. He was five years old [בֶּן־חַמִּישׁ] when the report of Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nurse lifted him up and fled, and as she was hurrying to flee away, he fell and became lame. His name is Mephibosheth.)

With the son of Saul on his “deathbed,” as it were, the Deuteronomist pauses and provides the reader with information about *another* relative of Saul. Commentators have strenuously argued that this notice about Mephibosheth is “out of place” and “accidentally” slipped in through faulty editing. Just as Mephibosheth has an unfortunate accident, so this verse itself is an accidental inclusion. Alternatively, other readers find a certain narrative currency in the mention of *another descendant of Saul* appearing *immediately before* the murder of the present king of the north. Whether this implies that the house of Saul will live on, or that loyalties to the house of Saul may linger, is beyond my scope just now, but it is worthwhile to keep this verse in mind for two reasons. First, there is a wordplay between the description of Mephibosheth as “five” years old and the “fifth” rib of Ishbosheth, a rib that is about to be on the wrong end of a knife: one Saulide is “struck” of the feet at five, and the other is “struck” in the fifth.

¹¹ G. E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) 86.

Second, the negligent nurse who drops young Mephibosheth will have a parallel character—at least in the Greek version of our story—in the form of a negligent doorkeeper who falls asleep at the wheel.

D. THE REGICIDE(S) OF KING ISHBOSHETH

We now arrive at the central moment of the story: the murder of Ishbosheth himself. It is a great shame that Ishbosheth sleeps throughout the entire ordeal, that is, until his otherwise forgettable reign is abruptly terminated by the sons of Rimmon; however, given the paralysis of his rather short period in office, it is somewhat fitting that he is reclining in the horizontal. Compare, though the MT and LXX, of the regicide itself:

MT: ⁵ And sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, departed and came during the heat of the day to the house of Ishbosheth, while he was laying down: the laying down of noon.⁶ And there they came, as far as the middle of the house, taking wheat, and they struck him in the fifth rib [שִׁחַ]. Then Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped.⁷ And they entered the house, but he was lying upon his couch in the inner part of his bedroom, and they struck him, and killed him, and turned aside his head, and took his head and went the way of the Arabah all night.

LXX: ⁵ And the sons of Remmon the Berothite, Rechab and Baana went, and they came in the heat of the day into the house of Μεμφιβοσθε and he was sleeping on the bed at noon.⁶ And behold, the doorkeeper of the house cleaned wheat, and slumbered and slept, and the brothers Rechab and Baana escaped notice, ⁷ and went into the house, and Μεμφιβοσθε was sleeping on his couch in his bedroom, and they smite him, and slay him, and take off his head, and they took his head, and went the way of the west all that night.

The most striking divergence between the Hebrew and Greek texts occurs at verse 6, where the MT reads “And there they came, as far as the middle of the house, taking wheat, and they struck him in the fifth rib, then Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped” while the LXX text has “And behold, the doorkeeper of the house cleaned wheat, and slumbered and slept, and the brothers Rechab and Baana escaped notice.”¹² A. F. Campbell’s recent commentary on 2 Samuel in the FOTL series has a useful summary of the problem: “The account of Ishbaal’s murder,” says Campbell, “has caused textual confusion (the RSV follows the LXX for v. 6;

¹² For a convenient clarification and overview of the complicated matter of the LXX and its variety of witnesses, see P. K. McCarter, *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). In this article I am simply following the widely disseminated version of the Septuagint edited by A. Rahlfs. Unfortunately, the text of 2 Sam 4:5–8 is not attested in the fragments of 4QSam^a (for the portions of 2 Samuel 4 that are attested in 4QSam^a, see F. M. Cross, D. W. Parry, R. J. Saley, and E. C. Ulrich, *Qumran Cave 4. XII. 1–2 Samuel* [DJJD 17; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005] 113–120).

the NRSV notes that the meaning of the Hebrew of v. 6 is uncertain).” As an aside, I find it remarkable that it is the RSV that follows the Septuagint; in the vast majority of cases that I am aware of in 1 & 2 Samuel, it is the NSRV that is usually far more Greek friendly than its predecessor, so this runs counter to expectation. Campbell continues: “Verse 6 has both captains enter the house, kill Ishbaal, and escape. Verse 7 goes into greater detail; Ishbaal was having an afternoon nap; after killing him, the murderers cut off his head and traveled through the night with it. Verse 6 is needed for entry into the house; v. 7 is needed for the gruesome beheading.”¹³

While Campbell’s comments are helpful as far as the general sense of the Hebrew story is concerned, there have been nonetheless some objections to the MT on textual grounds.¹⁴ There have been various attempts to explain the reason for the divergence and attempts to recover the original text, an enterprise that has had mixed results. The positions of earlier scholars are admirably summarized and critiqued by Dominique Barthélemy and the CTAT committee.¹⁵ They begin by saying: “*M and *G offer for this verse two very different texts. The one from *M inconveniently presents us with the murder of Ishbosheth and the escape of the two assassins before the next verse again describes for us their entrance into the house, the murder and the long nocturnal journey of the murderers. The text from *G is much more satisfying: the description of the caretaker who dozes off while picking over the wheat well explains how the two assassins were able to intrude into the house.”

Not surprisingly, a host of commentators opt for the Greek reading, and Barthélemy lists upward of 25 scholars or translations that prefer the LXX. But what is the best explanation for the divergence between the Greek and Hebrew texts?

We would be tempted to consider the two very clear forms of 6a offered by *G and by *M as distinct in literary terms and refuse to consider this a case of textual criticism. However, the quasi-identity of what precedes and what follows invites one to research whether these two textual forms do not have more in common than “the house” and “some wheat”. Wellhausen has noted the similarity between **ב(או) עַד ת(וּד)** and **שוערת** which separates **והנה** from **הבית** in the two textual

¹³ A. F. Campbell, *2 Samuel* (FOTL 7; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 48–49.

¹⁴ The first **והנה** has caused problems. It seems obvious that the LXX reflects “and behold” (**καὶ ἰδοὺ**) while the MT points the word as either a 3f pronoun, or, and this is more likely in my view, as an adverb of place (this is how the Authorized Version translators understood the matter: “And they came thither into the midst of the house”). But this is a minor difficulty compared with the considerable difference between the MT and the LXX on verse 6. For the use of **הנה** as an adverb of place, the best comparable use is in 2 Sam 1:10—where ironically, the Amalekite miscalculates David’s reaction just like Rechab and Baanah! Another similar use is Joshua 2:2.

¹⁵ D. Barthélemy (ed.), *Critique textuelle de l’ancien Testament 1. Josué, Juges, Ruth, Samuel, Rois, Chroniques, Esdras, Néhémie, Esther* (OBO, 50/1; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1982).

traditions. *One of these textual traditions seems, therefore, to have constructed the beginning of its verse on the ruins of the other's. But, in what follows 6a, innovative textual tradition has improvised much more liberally since no one has put forward a convincing relationship between *M and the eventual Vorlage of ἐκάθαιρεν ["cleaned"] or of καὶ ἐνύσταξεν καὶ ἐκάθευδεν ["grew drowsy and fell asleep" in the Greek text].*

The absence of a “convincing relationship” through known mechanical lapses or errors of transmission strikes me as containing the heart of the matter. As Stanley Walters has cautioned: “When the text critic assumes that two *MSS* have developed from each other or from a common original text—however many generations of copyists back—the posited original text should be one from which the development of both texts can be accounted for by known processes of textual change; and the reconstruction is plausible only as the critic shows what those processes might have been. You cannot simply replace the actual texts with a theoretical one that reads more smoothly; you must account for the given texts.”¹⁶ It is this “accounting” that has not, in the committee’s judgment, been persuasively demonstrated, and hence they move closer toward a resolution:

Let us restate: *G is much more satisfying than *M, because it offers us in one colourful scene exactly what is needed to advance the narrative. But does his Vorlage render the original text more probably than does *M?

Since the Committee goes on to discuss various points in favor of the MT and reasons why Greek differences can result from secondary clarification, one suspects that their answer to this question is negative.

I will return to the types of divergence between the two texts in my conclusion, but it first should be noted that other solutions to the strange death of Ishbosheth have also been proffered, and here are two. Consider, first, H. W. Hertzberg. He translates 4:6–7a as follows: “And they had already [Hertzberg notes, “Read *nʿhinneʿ*”] come into the midst of the house (as though) fetching wheat, when they found a woman cleaning wheat. And they smote her in the belly; and thus Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped, and came into the house, as he lay on his bed....”¹⁷ Hertzberg then comments as follows:

MT is so completely different that corruption or paraphrase is out of the question; in its present form, however, it is incomprehensible. It seems that the murderers sneaked into the house as wheat-carriers, where they then meet someone whom they killed by stabbing in the belly. Perhaps this person was originally the woman found cleaning wheat, and whom LXX made into a doorkeeper. The alteration of the originally feminine suffix to the masculine suffix *vayyakkuhu* can easily be explained, because the person stabbed was expected to be Ishbaal, and because a

¹⁶ S. D. Walters, “Hannah and Anna: The Greek and Hebrew Texts of 1 Samuel 1,” *JBL* 107 (1988) 386.

¹⁷ H. W. Hertzberg, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Trans. J. S. Bowden. OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 262.

sentence such as *n'binne 'iššā boreret hiṭṭim*, 'and behold there was a woman cleaning corn,' fell out after the word *hiṭṭim*. It is in any case improbable that the king's house was watched over only by a woman worker. But if the two had come in appearing to have some business at the house, they could easily have got past the guard, which would, of course, have been there. It continues to remain strange that LXX should merely have retained the clause supposed to have fallen out here and should have given it its present form. One reason could be the corruption of *wayyakūhā*; after that, the whole sentence would have become obscure.¹⁸

For a second opinion from another textual coroner, consider A. A. Anderson. He contests Hertzberg's position, though his criticisms are not necessarily posited on precise text-critical grounds, but rather on the overall sense of the story's construction. Anderson translates 4:6–7a: "So they came inside the house pretending to fetch wheat, but they stabbed him in the abdomen; subsequently both Rechab and his brother Baanah escaped. Thus they entered the house while Ishbosheth was asleep on the couch in his bedroom, and they struck him and killed him. ..." ¹⁹ Anderson notes that in 6a he is "[f]ollowing G 'and behold' and repositing MT's הִנֵּה 'thither' to read הִנֵּה 'behold,'" while of 6b he says: "The translation of the ptc. לִקְחֵי by 'as though fetching wheat' (cf. KJV) is doubtful (see Driver, 255); perhaps, we should read the qal inf. Constr. לִקְחַת 'to fetch'."²⁰ Anderson proceeds to comment on the text as follows:

These verses have created considerable problems for the exegetes. It is possible that we have here not only a textual corruption (in v 6) but also a conflation of two alternative accounts (cf. Ackroyd, 51). The words, "...and they escaped" in v 6 may well mark the end of one version while v 7 may form part of another more detailed account. ...

Many scholars follow G in v 6, rendering "And behold, the doorkeeper of the house had been cleaning wheat, but she grew drowsy and slept; so Rechab and Baanah his brother slipped in" (RSV). However, it is somewhat odd that the king's residence had no guards and that a female doorkeeper (cf. John 18:16) was the only "security officer"! Of course, it is not impossible that the sons of Rimmon were part of the royal bodyguard. Kirkpatrick (77) suggests that they gained entry to the house by mixing with the "wheat-fetchers" (לִקְחֵי חֲטִיִּם), but this interpretation would create further exegetical difficulties. Equally speculative is the view that v 6 refers to the killing of an unnamed guard or porter (so Hertzberg, 264; Stolz, 203).

It is by no means certain that G has preserved the authentic reading of v 6; it may well be an ingenious attempt to make one version out of two.

¹⁸ Hertzberg, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 264–65.

¹⁹ A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC 11; Dallas: Word, 1989) 66.

²⁰ Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 68, Citing S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913).

We prefer the MT (with minor alterations), and we assume that vv 6 and 7 provide a parallel account of the slaying of Ishbosheth.²¹

E. HUNG JURY

This brief survey indicates to me that as far as the text-critical murder mystery of the assassination of the hapless Ishbosheth is concerned, the jury is still out. In this instance it seems that among the various commentators the disputed zone is not so much a text-critical decision as it is a governing literary sensibility.

It is, by any measure, a literary decision for J. P. Fokkelman, who in the end opts for the Greek reading in a manner somewhat counter to expectation, given his general regard for the MT throughout his massive four-volume 2,441 page treatment of the books of Samuel. Fokkelman observes the different emphases on *time* and *space* in verses 5 and 7, and as for verse six, notes that “The subtle play of repetition and consecutiveness is now catastrophically disturbed if we leave the corrupt sixth verse as it is.” He argues, *contra* S. R. Driver, that *nimlatu* must mean to “escape,” not “slipped in.” “That is why verse 6c can only refer,” and here Fokkelman is surely right, “to the departure of Rechab and Baanah.”²²

In fact, Fokkelman goes on to argue that for him the crux of the matter does not involve a text-critical decision. He says: “I will not be undertaking an attempt to trace the Greek text back to, or employ textual criticism to link it with, the Hebrew original. But I do consider defending the matter of the porter worthwhile, on grounds which, to my surprise, have not been put forward earlier, and which are narratological or structural.”²³ Fokkelman’s position vis-à-vis the Greek text will be further delineated in a moment, but his footnotes do contain a good deal of interaction with Barthélemy and others. Yet Fokkelman seems to concede that the Hebrew and Greek readings are so different that it must result in a decision that is, as he puts it, “narratological.” Fokkelman’s honesty here is laudable: given that a putative “original” is hard to find on text-critical grounds, his decision in the matter is made according to literary sensibility: this is what makes the best sense in the context.

I am reminded here of the historical appraisal of James Sanders in his programmatic essay “The Task of Text Criticism.” “Text criticism,” says Sanders, “since the formulation of its task by Johann David Michaelis in the mid-eighteenth century, had been understood to be a part of exegesis of the text in the sense that one can better judge which reading to choose if one knows first what the fuller context is about. There can be no doubt that the

²¹ Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 70.

²² Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 124–25. He further notes, “Consequently the whole of verse 6 must be described and recognized as a coherent system in itself: in 6a is the entry of the murderers, in 6b the murder, and in 6c the unimpeded departure. Well then, what can be said of all three parts is that they are intolerable, or much too redundant duplications which add virtually no information, and do a lot of damage, to the report enclosing v.6.”

²³ Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 126.

observation is true. But the practice developed to the point that, by the time of Julius Wellhausen's work on Samuel in the mid-nineteenth century, text-criticism was not limited to choice among available 'variants' but was obligated to include conjecture in the conviction that it was possible to reconstruct *Urtexte* of much of the biblical text.²⁴ In the case of 2 Sam 4:6, a consensus has not emerged on a probable *Urtext*, and thus we are left with two stories, each having, in my view, its own literary integrity.²⁵ The absence of a definitive text-critical explanation and the fact that the two texts unfold such alternative readings cause me to posit that a qualitatively different dramatic sequencing is at work in the MT and the LXX.

I would propose, then, to explore the strange death of Ishbosheth from a new angle, and in the remainder of this paper I will focus on some of the key differences between the MT and LXX in this passage, and highlight some of the literary implications and *interpretative possibilities* that emerge when these textual trajectories are compared. Indeed, as Moshe Greenberg has already argued at length, there can be a host of advantages that accrue during a close reading of divergent texts: "...although there is no logical basis for choosing one version over another when they both make sense, a comparison of the divergences, each read in its own context, provides a powerful heuristic resource that can alert us to the particular focus of each version."²⁶ Along such lines, the remainder of my analysis will be a comparative study of what I understand as two rather different texts. In placing the MT and the LXX side by side, as it were, I am primarily interested in the various configurations of plot, character, and point of view that are discernable in each narrative.²⁷

F. SOME CONCLUSIONS

So, if a case can be made that there are two different stories here, then let me move toward a conclusion by summarizing the literary advantages of the respective Greek and Hebrew texts. First:

²⁴ J. A. Sanders, "The Task of Text Criticism," in *Problems in Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Rolf Knierim* (edited by H. T. C. Sun and K. L. Eades, with J. M. Robinson and G. I. Moller; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 316.

²⁵ Note also, in general terms, the approach to the LXX by J. J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

²⁶ M. Greenberg, "The Use of Ancient Versions for Interpreting the Hebrew Text," *VTSup* 29 (1977) 131–48

²⁷ There are grounds for suggesting that certain exigencies of storytelling exist here. One way or another, the MT has made enough sense to enough readers that one is forced to concede that it *can* be understood in its larger context. Yet the LXX has an undeniable attractiveness and is adopted by a legion of commentators. A neutral observer might say that there is value in each, and make the assertion that both versions are governed by their own literary logic. The Greek text has a certain internal consistency, since a new minor character emerges, and this phenomenon is attested elsewhere in the books of Samuel. The Hebrew is also consistent, since there is thematic repetition that integrates within the larger context of the story. Each narrative can be read on its own terms, and attending to the unique subtleties of both has that "heuristic" value which Greenberg adumbrates.

1. LITERARY ADVANTAGES OF THE GREEK READING

To reiterate the words of Dominique Barthélemy, “*G is much more satisfying than *M, because it offers us in one ‘picturesque’ scene exactly what is needed to advance the narrative.” Since other commentators do not have dissimilar reasons, I would outline the advantages of the LXX as follows:

a. There is an uninterrupted focus on the brothers Rechab and Baanah as they enter, destroy, and exit. Indeed, they resemble Hemingway’s killers, with a string of verbs tracing the lineaments of their movement. Even their perception is refracted through the “and behold” (καὶ ἰδοὺ), and the camera angle on the sleeping doorkeeper is presented from their visual perspective.²⁸ The killers enjoy a generous slice of luck in the Greek text: the doorkeeper *could* represent an obstacle, but the drowsiness caused by cleaning wheat eliminates any opposition, and they enter the bedchamber unimpeded within and without to dispatch their mission with clinical effectiveness. Whether the (female!) doorkeeper was supposed to restrain them or sound the alarm (both ideas have been proffered) I suppose is up for debate, but from Rechab and Baanah’s point of view, the plan unfolds perfectly. As far as a linear unfolding of event on the temporal plane, from the vantage of the killers the Greek text is the smoother. By the end of verse 6 in the Hebrew text, the murder is committed; in contrast, by the end of verse 6 in the LXX the brothers have just slipped by the sleeping doorkeeper and—for those who prefer suspense—they are only *about to* enter the bedchamber.

b. The Greek text has the exciting new character of the doorkeeper. This napping character produces symmetry in the story: everyone is sleeping, which in turn symbolizes the rather dormant state of the house of Saul in general. But the more compelling argument—and this is Fokkelman’s point at length—is that the drowsy doorkeeper of 4:6 matches the butterfingerted nurse of 4:4. Fokkelman examines the larger context of the unfolding chapter, and sees here “another example of an anonymous woman as a functionary in a literary unit on Saulide misery.”²⁹ Just as Rizpah and Michal are crucial in the political earthquake that rocks the house of Saul in chapter 3, so here two more female characters further underscore “the decline of the house of Saul.”³⁰ On the two characters in chapter 4, Fokkelman says that “Their contributions are, in themselves, unfortunate. In her haste to flee with Mephibosheth, the ... nurse has the terrible misfortune of crippling Jonathan’s little boy, and the porter, when it

²⁸ As Fokkelman (*Throne and City*, 128) puts it, “One might interpret the line as what the brothers come across and what they see with their own eyes after their entry. The reader, who has gradually become uneasy, can almost feel, between the words, the vulnerability of the man who lies asleep, and who is about to become the target throughout the entire length of his armorless body.” It is possible that Rechab and Baanah’s point of view continue right into the entrance of Ishbosheth’s bedchamber, since there is an uninterrupted succession of verbs.

²⁹ Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 126.

³⁰ Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 127.

is her turn, is unable, through tiredness, to help her master, Ishbosheth, by sounding the alarm for instance.”³¹ This provides, by Fokkelman’s reasoning, a cogent reason for “postponing” the report of Mephibosheth’s crippling accident to this point in 2 Samuel 4: the “flashback” is now downloaded immediately before the fatal accident to his regal relative Ishbosheth, thus heightening the theme of the entire chapter, “the adversity of the house of Saul.”³² In both cases, a woman’s negligence (to whatever degree) results in a serious injury to a Saulide: in the case of the nurse in 4:4, she drops Mephibosheth; in the case of the doorkeeper in 4:6, her drift into subconsciousness allows unfettered access to the royal bedchamber.

It should be noted in this discussion that this is not the first occasion where a “new” minor character appears in the Greek text of Samuel. One recalls a previous occasion in 1 Samuel 1:14, where a hitherto unknown “servant of Eli” is the one who delivers the rebuke to the (allegedly) drunken Hannah:

MT: And Eli said to her, “How long will you be drunken? Put away your wine from you.”

LXX: And *the servant of Heli* said to her, “How long will you be drunken? Take away your wine from you, *and go out from the presence of the Lord.*”

Similarly, servants of Joab in the Greek text of 2 Samuel 14:30 have no Hebrew counterparts:

MT: And he said to his servants, “Behold, Joab’s field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire.” So Absalom’s servants set the field on fire.

LXX: And Abessalom said to his servants, “Behold, Joab’s portion in the field is next to mine, and he has barley in it. Go and set it on fire.” And the servants of Abessalom set the field on fire, *and the servants of Joab come to him with their clothes torn, and they said to him, “The servants of Abessalom have set the field on fire.”*

The relevant scholarly literature on these subjects naturally proffer the standard arguments to account for the differences (haplography or the like), and of course, the customary arguments on the other side of the ledger as to why the secondary characters are secondary additions.³³ So it is that our case of the doorkeeper in 2 Samuel 4 is not altogether unique. It is hard—in absolutely every case—to point to mechanical errors in transmission that give rise to the alternative reading; instead, I would submit that it is another way to tell the story, with different shades of plot, character, and point of view that hails from an alternative literary imagination. In each of these

³¹ Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 127.

³² Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 127–28

³³ See A. Rofé, “The Methods of Late Biblical Scribes as Evidenced by the Septuagint Compared with the Other Textual Witnesses,” in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of M. Greenberg* (eds. M. Cogan, B. L. Eichler, and J. H. Tigay; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997) 259–70.

cases, there is a dramatic element that is added in the LXX through the actions of minor characters, and the respective profile of a nearby major character is enhanced or diminished accordingly. In the judgment of A. F. Campbell, the breathless report of Joab's servants that relay the news of Absalom's arsonists: "offers a classic case of what may be regarded as a reminder to storytellers of the possibilities of the situation."³⁴ At the very least, a case could be made that 2 Samuel 4:6 provides an example of the same kinds of narrative possibilities.

2. LITERARY ADVANTAGES OF THE HEBREW READING

Let me turn, finally, to some perceived literary advantages of the Hebrew text. The MT portrays no sleeping doorkeeper. Only the king is slumbering in what appears to be a comparatively less insomniac household. Consequently, the MT captures a different profile of the Gibeonite killers: the stealth of the brothers as they gain access to the center of the house as "takers of wheat"—presumably a handy charade for "taking" the head of Ishbosheth out of the house without raising a host of inconvenient questions. Such deception, incidentally, would not be out of character for Gibeonites; one recalls disguise and deception in Joshua 9, so such Gibeonite activity does have some precedence. In the Greek text the brothers can walk right past the sleeping doorkeeper with the head of the king, whereas the MT implies at least some modest opposition that requires the pretence of "taking wheat." A number of commentators understand that verses 6 and 7 provide two views of the death of Ishbosheth: hence, the MT has a different plot configuration that requires a different use of the imagination: verse 6 is one view of the killing, while verse 7 provides a flashback with added data.³⁵ Only the MT, it should be stressed, brings out the *disguised* dimension of the Gibeonite assassins.

Many scholars incline toward the LXX not just because it is a smoother reading, but also because of the "picturesque" quality of the scene, no doubt heightened by the nodding portress. However, there is a crucial piece of evidence that the Greek text does not include: in the MT, the assassination of Ishbosheth is a murder in the "fifth" degree; that is, the "fifth rib" (שִׁמְחָה) is the place of the stabbing, and I would submit this physiological location of the king's death is a vital organ within the larger narrative design. With the mention of the fifth rib, the reader gains insight into the motive for the killing and connects the death of Ishbosheth with other slayings in 2 Samuel.

³⁴ Campbell, *2 Samuel*, 127.

³⁵ In favor of the MT, Dominique Barthélemy and the CTAT committee observe: "The repetitive character of verse 7 in relation to the form of *M in verse 6 can be explained by the fact that 7 resumes the tale of the murder so as to add a new fact: the removal of the head as proof to be taken to David. Elsewhere *we also find repetitions of the arrival of Joab in 3,22.33 and in the coming of the tribes of Israel to Hebron in 5,1.3.*" The flashback of 4:7 indicates that a different kind of dramatic sequencing is at work here.

First, with respect to the motive, in my view Martin Noth is a fine detective when he describes the crime scene as follows: “One day the weak Eshbaal, who now lacked the strong hand of Abner, was murdered ... during his midday sleep by two professional soldiers (‘captains of bands’) from the originally Canaanite city of Beeroth which had been absorbed by the tribe of Benjamin, and the inhabitants of which had probably been forced to leave the city in a conflict with Saul and [whose relatives] now took their revenge on the son of Saul.”³⁶

Of course, the death of Ishbosheth represents a forthcoming public relations problem for David, just like the fifth rib murder of Abner in chapter 3. Abner’s funeral is deftly handled by David as he distances himself from the *brothers* Joab and Abishai who are responsible for the dirty deed. So, just as chapter 3 is a public relations triumph, the public hanging of more killers, the *brothers* Rimmon, successfully distances David from the murderers. So, the “fifth rib” represents two problems for David with respect to the deaths of Abner and Ishbosheth, but it also serves to align the perpetrators of the deeds; that is, the brothers Rechab and Baanah are now aligned with the brothers Joab and Abishai. These two sets of brothers have something in common: namely, a twin set of motives for the respective killings. As I discuss above, the motives of the brothers Joab and Abishai are both blood vengeance for a previous crime (the slaying of their brother Asahel) by Abner *along with* the fact that the interests of their military careers are served in having Abner eliminated. The situation is not dissimilar with the brothers Rechab and Baanah. As Martin Noth argues, they have an opportunity for revenge on the house of Saul by killing Ishbosheth (their boss) and simultaneously they have a chance to further their careers in the new regime of David by ingratiating themselves to a new employer with the severed head of their (previous) master. The fact that they underestimate David and end up impaled by the pool of Hebron is merely beside the point: it is their motives that are of interest here, and their motives resemble those of Joab and Abishai.

This is the reason why, I would propose, the MT provides the reader with two different descriptions of the murder. In verse 6 the stress is on the body part of the fifth rib: “And there they came, as far as the middle of the house, taking wheat, and they struck him in the fifth rib. Then Rechab and Baanah his brother escaped.” In verse 7 the stress is on the body part of the head: “And they entered the house, but he was lying upon his couch in the inner part of his bedroom, and they struck him, and killed him, and turned aside his head, and took his head and went the way of the Arabah all night.”

The twin motives are thus represented by the twin description: verse 6 underscores the motive of revenge while verse 7 shows the crass opportunism of the “head” which represents their hope for compensation. On the latter, Julius Wellhausen noted years ago in his *Prolegomena* that David indeed becomes king in succession to Saul, but “What a length of time these affairs demand, how natural is their development, how many human elements mingle in their course,—cunning, and treachery, and

³⁶ M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (London: A. & C. Black, 1960) 185.

battle, and murder!” It would not be a stretch to add that a specific literary device for representing David’s throne secured by “cunning, and treachery, and battle, and murder” is through the use of the unique term “fifth rib” (שִׁמְחָה).

The deliberate emphasis of the “fifth rib” in verse 6 connects the death of Ishbosheth with other murders in 2 Samuel. The term שִׁמְחָה, according to the statistical data of BDB, only occurs 4 times and is unique to the books of Samuel. It is used in chapter 2 to describe the killing of Asahel, in chapter 3 for the death of Abner, here chapter 4 for the death of Ishbosheth, and later in 2 Samuel 20 for the death of Amasa at the hands of Joab. Conspicuously, each of the four deaths all have something to do with the stability of the Davidic throne, and competition among and within *houses*. Through this specific use of “fifth rib” the Deuteronomist is connecting all four deaths and showing the fraternal cost of this stability. As Polzin comments: “Murder and mayhem caused by the pursuit of kings not only include intra-tribal killing within the house of Saul but will even involve intra-familial murder within the house of David. Thus we have a variegated series of capital crimes revolving around matters of royal succession, with each instance in the narrative series progressing toward an ever more narrow meaning for *fratricide*.”³⁷ (1993: 52). If we consider the reason for inclusion of the “fifth rib,” we gain this subtle narrative critique, and Ishbosheth’s death thus takes place within this larger network of allusion. Similarly, the two descriptions of the murder in 6 and 7 highlight the dual motives that the MT is at pains to show.

And so, finally, at the risk of turning this higher-critical issue into the low art stuff of murder mystery pulp fiction, I would contend that there are different shades of plot, character, point of view, and theme configured in the Hebrew and Greek texts, leading to different reports of execution in the narrative. While I think this kind of literary analysis has value in itself, a corollary of such (a comparative) exploration is that it may well help formulate a new solution in the future to this assassination in the house of Saul, and shed light on reasons for the textual divergences that we find in 2 Sam 4:5–7. As far as the history of interpretation goes, this offers some evidence that the dramatic contours of this narrative were not lost on early audiences; someone went to the trouble to preserve the Greek text, and it behooves me as an interpreter to try and make sense of the variant descriptions of the strange death of Ishbosheth.

³⁷ Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 52.