

Hero and Heroine Narratives in the Old Testament

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The Hebrew Bible attests to the fact that the Israelites not only enjoyed good stories, but excelled in crafting them. This article examines briefly three hero and heroine narratives that move comfortably in the circle of world masterpieces. Owing to space limitations, I focus my investigation primarily upon two dimensions of storytelling: principles of selectivity and techniques and devices. I explore these factors in order to discover more about how and why these stories “work.”

The narratives selected are the Abraham cycle, the story of Deborah and Barak, and the career of King David. In the case of Abraham and David I examine the narratives as a whole. The Abraham and David stories are lengthy enough to be designated as “macro-narratives.” The story of Deborah and Barak, on the other hand, is more like an episode in a larger narrative unit—a “micro-narrative.”

The Abraham Cycle

It is hardly surprising that Abraham is so highly regarded. He was, after all, the progenitor of the people of Israel. His life took on heroic proportions in the traditions of Israel and in the subsequent development of the various “Judaisms.” By the second century B.C., he was portrayed as having already observed the Torah (*Jub.* 15.2; 16.28; 20.1-10), and by the time of the first Christian century his piety had achieved such merit that its surplus might be applied to Jews who fell short on judgment day! (See already Lk 3:8; cf. *Bik.* 1:4; *B. Qam.* 8:6; *B.*

Mes. 7:1; *‘Abot* 5:2, 3). In addition to his national and theological significance, the tradition portrays Abraham as a powerful, wealthy chieftain whose roots reached back to the birthplace of earliest civilization. On at least one occasion (Ge 12:10-20), he even encountered the rich and famous, the sort of people that perpetually intrigue us. In short, the story of Abraham possesses inherent human interest.

The Abraham cycle, recorded in Genesis 11:26-25:11, exhibits a narrative unity clearly discernible in its structure and plot. The individual episodes comprising this larger story are not diaries or chronicles, but artfully and delightfully told family stories, a dimension sometimes overlooked by those trained in historical-theological methods. We begin with the most obvious feature, namely, the chronological structuring of the episodes. After a brief outline of our hero’s family tree (Ge 11:27-30), the plot unfolds sequentially, with the bulk of the story occurring between Abram’s 75th and 100th year. Needless to say, we are surprised to learn that he lived another 75 years and, in fact, fathered six more sons well after his 100th year (Ge 25:1, 2). Clearly more is going on here than a story about a man in his retirement years raising a family!

The Abraham cycle is essentially an obstacle story, that is, a narrative in which the hero undergoes a series of trials or tests. The outcome of these trials vindicates the hero, who thus serves as a role model. In terms of classical literary criti-

cism, the Abraham cycle is a comedy because it ends happily. I have earlier suggested that Abraham faced eight crises.¹ This is not a modern observation, for by the second century B.C., the author of Jubilees speaks of “the ten trials of Abraham” (Jub. 19.8 cf. 17.17). I prefer eight because of what I perceive as the unifying theme. The cycle revolves around an urgent question: Who will be Abraham’s heir? Each of the eight crises calls in question Yahweh’s promise that Abraham would be the progenitor of many nations.

The plot is more complicated than this, however. The initial promise to Abram also includes the Land of Canaan as an everlasting possession (12:7). Running throughout the Abraham cycle is the stark contrast between this promise and its non-fulfillment. Sarah’s death throws the disparity into sharp relief, since he does not even own a burial plot (Ge 23:4). Three times the narrative refers to the indigenous peoples of Canaan, which further underscores the tension between promise and fulfillment (Ge 12:6, 13:7, 15:21). The portrayal of Abram as a semi-nomad, moving seasonally back and forth along the central ridge of Palestine, between the desert and the fields, likewise draws attention to the disparity between what Yahweh promises and what Abram actually experiences. Abraham stakes his claim to Canaan by literally driving his stakes into the ground.

But the driving force of the Abraham Cycle is the all-important issue of his heir. Note how the entire cycle is introduced: “Now Sarai was barren; she had no child” (Ge 11:30). The narrator reminds us of this ongoing problem throughout the cycle: “I continue childless” (15:2); “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children”

(16:1). Like a musical reprise the problem recurs. At the end of the story, however, we have a satisfying resolution: “After the death of Abraham God blessed his son Isaac” (Ge 25:11). Between the introduction and the conclusion, Abraham and Sarah endure the eight crises that threaten Yahweh’s promise, a pledge that is reiterated six times in the cycle. This use of an obstacle story sustains the interest of the listener/reader.

Dialogue is rather sparse in the Abraham cycle. When it occurs between Abraham and someone other than Yahweh an interesting portrayal of Abraham emerges. Except for two times when he must explain his way out of duplicity, in these instances he is preeminently a man who seeks to live peaceably with his family and with his neighbors. Thus, he says to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me...” (Ge 13:8). He solemnly vows to the king of Sodom, “I [will] not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours...” (Ge 14:23). Caught in a nasty dispute between Sarai and Hagar, he meekly defers to Sarai: “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please” (Ge 16:6). He resolves a dispute over the ownership of a well not by violence, but by a gift and covenant (Ge 21:25-34). There is also the interesting negotiation over a burial site for Sarah, for which most commentators agree Abraham paid an exorbitant price (Ge 23). His opening words in each speech before the elders are instructive: “I am a stranger and an alien...” (v. 4); “If you are willing...hear me and entreat for me Ephron...” (vv. 8, 9); “If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field...” (v. 13). A consistent picture of a peace-loving man emerges. He embodies what it means to be a good neighbor; as a

good neighbor he epitomizes hospitality. One thinks immediately of the famous passage in which the Lord visits Abraham (Ge 18). He is not depicted as warlike or aggressive. Only once does he take up arms, and then because the fate of his nephew Lot hangs in the balance. He does not usurp the promised land. This image of Abraham is extraordinary when placed against Israel's history throughout the period of the Judges and the monarchy.

The scenes in which Abraham speaks with Yahweh offer the most significant dialogue. The longest of these when Abraham intercedes for Sodom.² Depicted as a bargaining session, the dialogue creates suspense. As often noted, this is the first time, but by no means the last, when a biblical character calls God's justice into question. More than that, it paints an indelible picture of Abraham: he is one who stands in an unprecedented relationship with Yahweh. It is in this role as a friend of Yahweh that Abraham assumes a heroic stature in the traditions of Israel, and, for that matter, in Christianity.

So what is the significance of the Abraham cycle? Surely we have a hero narrative with more substance than that suggested by Philip Davies. He says, among other quite astonishing things, that the story of Abraham is really about male bonding—a sort of high stakes poker game between Yahweh and Abraham—with, of course, Yahweh holding the winning hand!³

If we allow structure, plot, and characterization to be our guides, we behold something quite different. We discover that

[t]he entire Abraham cycle underscores Yahweh's faithfulness to his covenant promise. It demonstrates that Israel exists only because of divine intervention. This divine initiative, however, calls for a response—a

response of faith and commitment. Abraham is supremely a man of faith.⁴

Abraham's faith, a faith that withstands severe trial, is why he is a national hero and why his story transcends national boundaries: he is "the ancestor of all who believe" (Ro 4:11; cf. Heb 11:8-9). This is hardly a novel observation, and several commentators have come to this conclusion without employing a literary approach. But an appreciation for the literary artistry of this masterpiece provides new ways of seeing the familiar in surprising and unexpected ways. What Leland Ryken said about the parable of the Good Samaritan applies equally to the story of Abraham:

The story does not primarily require our minds to grasp an idea but instead gets us to respond with our imagination and emotions to a real-life experience. It puts us on the scene and makes us participants in the action. It gets us involved with the characters about whose destiny we are made to care.⁵

The Story of Deborah and Barak

Deborah occupies a storied place in Israel's past for good reason. She was not only a prophetess, she was also a military leader. She was granted the highest accolade a Hebrew woman might receive: "a mother in Israel" (Jdg 5:7). The structure of Deborah's story requires special attention. Unique to the hero stories of the Old Testament, this one has both a prose and poetic version. Each sheds light on the other. The plot of the Deborah narrative is also unique in the Hebrew canon because it contains a dramatic role reversal that must have left quite an impression on its original hearers/readers.

As is easily observed, the story of

Deborah is part of a stereotyped presentation of a series of national “saviors” raised up by Yahweh to deliver Israel from her enemies. The recurring pattern is apostasy, oppression, repentance, and deliverance. Within this pattern the narrator singles out six major judges to illustrate the dismal record of Israel’s failures to remain steadfast to the stipulations of the Sinai covenant. Brief thumbnail sketches are provided of four other “minor” judges bringing the total to ten.

Ehud was a left-handed assassin (clearly a sinister figure!). Gideon needed significant encouragement to serve, and tarnished his illustrious victory by fashioning a golden ephod that “became a snare” to him and his family (Jdg 8:27).⁶ Abimelech, of course, is not one of the judges, but rather is an anti-hero. Nothing is said about Yahweh calling him and the surprisingly full story of his self-proclaimed kingdom speaks for itself. Note that his name (“my father is king”) may bespeak ambitions that Gideon himself suppressed, but covertly encouraged in his numerous offspring. Jephthah was the son of a prostitute and an outlaw. However one interprets Jephthah’s rash vow, it leaves a bad taste in one’s mouth. And what can one say about Samson? He was a womanizer whose deceit and violence toward his enemies beggar description, and one who breaks his Nazirite vows as easily as the city gates of Gaza.

Out of the six judges detailed, only Othniel and Deborah have nothing negative either stated or implied about them. It is obvious that Deborah is quite different from her colleagues. No discernible flaws appear in her character or deportment. She is competent, courageous, and charismatic. The Lord speaks to and through her. The tribes look to her for leadership.

Not only does Deborah outshine the men who served as judges, even the military leader Barak lacks the nerve she possesses. To the best of my knowledge, nowhere else in the Hebrew canon does a woman upbraid a man of considerable standing for his lack of faith. She asserts, “But because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman” (Jdg 4:9). Only the book of Judith contains a similar, perhaps stronger, criticism of male deficiencies in faith and piety (Jdt 8:11-27).

How does the two-sided structure of the Deborah story function? Apparently the narrator/editor effectively suppresses information in the prose version only to supply it in the poetic account and thereby provide a surprise resolution. Deborah’s initial instructions to Barak make perfect military sense. Because the steep slopes of Mount Tabor effectively rule out a chariot charge up the mountain, she orders Barak to occupy the high ground at its peak. Her next order, however, seems to run counter to all sound judgment. She orders a frontal assault on the waiting chariots at the foot of Tabor, which borders on a suicide mission. The narrator records, “So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him” (4:14). We marvel at the transformation. Just a short while prior to this he would scarcely let go of Deborah’s hand and lead the troops on his own (4:8). Suddenly, he is a fearless commander, leading his troops into what seems to be a trap. Perhaps the narrator intends that we understand just such a transformation.

This may not be the story’s intention, especially when chapters four and five are read as one. The poetic version of this famous battle provides details unmentioned

in the prosaic version. For example, 4:15 says, “And the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak....” Judges 5:4 and 5:21 add, “Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water. The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel.... The torrent Kishon swept them away, the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon....” In other words, a violent thunderstorm moves into the Jezreel Valley from the southeast. This cloudburst turns Jezreel into a quagmire and virtually immobilizes the chariots of Sisera, which explains why he abandons his chariot and flees on foot (4:15). The upshot is that this additional information gives the story a new twist. The material provided in the poetic section proves that it was not Barak’s superior military maneuverings that secured a victory, but the Lord’s intercession, just as Deborah had promised. The poetic version does rehabilitate Barak as a bold warrior, who, after initial reservations, waged war effectively. He receives equal billing alongside Deborah. His name, however, is mentioned *after* hers, a point that should not be overlooked (5:1).

The poetic version also underscores a major motif in the larger composition of the book of Judges, namely, the disintegration of the tribal federation. Several lines of the “Song of Deborah” draw attention to lack of participation and indifference on the part of the Reubenites, Gileadites, Danites, and Asherites (5:15b-17). This episode anticipates the major theme of chapters 17-21, signaled by the editorial refrain: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right

in their own eyes” (17:6; cf. 18:1, 19:1, 21:25).

In addition, the poetic version provides something quite extraordinary in Hebrew storytelling. The narrator momentarily adopts an “inside” view of this decisive encounter from the vantagepoint of Sisera’s mother. One thinks of *The Iliad* and the scene depicting Andromache moments before she hears the report of the death of her husband, Hector. She is described as busying herself in domestic duties, reminding her maids to prepare Hector’s bath when he returns (*Iliad* 22: 437-445). In Judges five, Sisera’s mother, peering out the latticed window, tries unsuccessfully to allay her rising fears about Sisera’s delay by suggesting plausible reasons for it. Her maids hover about, also trying explain away what is becoming increasingly and appallingly evident. This scene, conveyed primarily through dialogue, is poignant and universal in its appeal. The sympathy created does not last long, for it is quickly erased by the rather jarring, nationalistic conclusion, “So perish all your enemies, O Lord! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might” (5:31).⁷

The exaltation of Deborah, and later on of Jael, draws attention to a theme worthy of epic poems. They eclipse the achievements of Barak and his ten thousand warriors. Here are women who achieve what men cannot. This kind of unexpected role reversal is the stuff of ancient Canaanite epics. The “Song of Deborah” thus reflects its common roots in the Canaanite literary tradition (as attested at Ugarit) as well as in the larger Mediterranean world.⁸ The poetic narration of Jael’s murder of Sisera is conveyed with masterful artistry. The poet writes, “She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet; she struck Sisera a blow, she

crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple....He sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell dead" (5:26-27).

Given the way the narrator chooses to recount the events, the meanings of the lead character's names possess irony and humor. As many scholars have noted, when the story is read in light of these meanings, readers experience a delightful sense of recognition.⁹

The Canaanites formed a coalition under the able leadership of Sisera, whose name still remains unexplained and unattested elsewhere. He may have been a Philistine. Remarkably, a name similar to that of Jabin, king of the Canaanites, has been discovered in excavations at Hazor, suggesting that it was a dynastic name for Canaanite kings who ruled from Hazor.¹⁰

The Canaanites' primary deity was Baal, a fertility god reputed to have power over the rains who was often depicted as shaking a thunderbolt menacingly above his head. The irony here is that the Israelites succumb to the debasing ideology and ritual of Baal worship only to find themselves subdued by the indigenous worshipers of Baal. To the rescue comes Barak, whose name means "lightning." His lightning attack upon the immobilized Canaanite charioteers was like a thunderbolt.

Barak, however, is hardly the real hero. He takes a backseat to two heroines, Deborah and Jael. Deborah's name means "honey bee." She stings the usurpers with her charismatic leadership, reminiscent of the "hornet" whom Yahweh promised to send ahead of the Israelites in their conquest of Canaan (Ex 23:28; Dt 7:20; Jos 24:12). She is further identified as the wife of Lappidoth, a word also connected with lightning. In which case, we may say that Sisera was struck twice by lightning! Jael's name, "nanny goat," is delightfully appro-

priate, inasmuch as she "drugs" the villain Sisera with goat's milk. After running many miles, he is totally exhausted, and Jael has just the concoction for him. Jael's husband was named Heber, a term related to a Semitic root connoting community and friendship. Ironically, it is her pretense of being "a friend in time of trouble" that finally does in the villain.

The Career of King David

The story of David is a compelling example of a Hebrew epic narrative. Spanning 1 Samuel 16 through 1 Kings 2:12, this portrayal of Israel's most illustrious hero is without peer in the literature of the ancient Near East. David's popularity is not hard to understand. He was an immensely successful politician with all the glamour that goes with such an achievement. As with all popular politicians, his story contains the elements that virtually every generation finds fascinating: power, intrigue, treachery, violence, romance, sex, and scandals. The overall story falls into two distinct parts: 1 Samuel 16 – 2 Samuel 10 (the Rise and Success of David) and 2 Samuel 11 – 1 Kings 2 (the Fall and Failures of David). The turning point is, of course, David's affair with Bathsheba. As with the Abraham cycle, we have an essentially chronological portrayal of the hero.

The record of David's early life employs a common plot technique, namely, a story about a hero who must overcome a number of trials or obstacles. David's story begins with a meteoric rise from obscurity to a national hero. The youngest of eight sons of a quite undistinguished Judean family, David first catapults to the very center of national power by becoming a musical therapist for the tormented King Saul. Then, in a spectacular victory over the gigantic Goliath, David captures

the gratitude and affection of an entire nation (1 Sa 18:16). Saul promotes him to the rank of “commander of a thousand” and even makes him a son-in-law by marrying him to his daughter Michal. This is heady business and the stuff of which epic heroes are made. It is truly a “rags to riches” story.

But the ensuing fame and adulation were too much for a paranoid Saul. David becomes *persona non grata* in the eyes of the monarch and is plunged into the first of several low points, and Saul cannot rest until David is dead. David must live the life of an outlaw in the Judean wilderness, matching wits with Saul’s henchmen, who hunt him like an animal.

During each low point of David’s career, the narrator conveys the certainty of David’s manifest destiny. For example, Jonathan’s covenant with David already anticipates the outcome of the struggle between Saul and David: “Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt” (1 Sa 18:3-4). On at least two occasions, David could have killed Saul, but did not. He refused to take matters into his own hands. Instead, he trusted in Yahweh’s providence, which was something Saul demonstrated he could not do. At one particular low point during this deadly cat-and-mouse game, the text says, “Saul’s son Jonathan set out and came to David at Horesh; there he strengthened his hand through the Lord. He said to him, ‘Do not be afraid; for the hand of my father Saul shall not find you; you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be second to you; my father Saul also knows that this is so’” (23:16-17).

Like Abraham, David occasionally wavers in his faith in Yahweh’s protection. Twice David defects to the Philistine enclave under the protection of Achish. The first time he must degrade himself by feigning madness and the second nearly pits him against Saul’s army at Gilboa. The detailed account of the battle of Mount Gilboa and its aftermath highlights David’s surprising, continuing loyalty to Saul. This is conveyed not only by the prose account of the Amalekite’s execution (2 Sa 1:1-16), but also by a poetic composition of great pathos, the “Song of the Bow” (2 Sa 1:19-27).

David’s last-minute reprieve at Aphek—our narrator does not tip his hand whether David would actually have fought against Saul—is quickly followed by another near disaster, a sneak attack by the Amalekites upon David’s village of Ziklag (1 Sa 30:1-20). The narrator places this episode right before the account of the Battle of Gilboa. A similar technique for slowing down the narrative and creating suspense is employed when Abraham’s intercession for Sodom in chapter eighteen appears before the account of its destruction in chapter nineteen.¹¹ Beyond that, the juxtaposition of two episodes involving Amalekites is striking and the irony of an Amalekite’s presence at Saul’s demise is certainly intentional (cf. 1 Sa 15).

Regardless, the Amalekite raid signals an all-time low. “Then David and the people who were with him raised their voices and wept, until they had no more strength to weep.... David was in great danger; for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in spirit for their sons and daughters” (1 Sa 30:4, 6). The narrator laconically concludes this episode with a virtually the-

matic statement: "But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God" (v. 6b). This phrase reminds us of a similar thematic statement in the Abraham cycle following the Lord's announcement that Sarah would have a son of her own: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? (Ge 18:14). In similar fashion we have the announcement of Deborah that "...the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (Jdg 4:9). Obviously the narrator greatly admires David and portrays him as a role model.

This low point is followed in quick succession by events that elevate an erstwhile exile to the rank of tribal king. After a long civil war, during which the House of David steadily increases its power *vis-à-vis* the House of Saul, a key defection occurs. Abner agrees to side with David and, for all practical purposes, hand the kingship of all Israel to David. He is on the verge of scaling the summit. But just as the summit is in sight, a disastrous fall threatens when a vengeful Joab assassinates Abner, and the carefully laid plans to unify the country are at risk. David must convince a substantial majority of northerners that he did not personally authorize Abner's murder. He is able to do this, and his rise to greatness is back on track.

David at last ascends the throne of a united Israel. The narrative adds an ever-increasing list of impressive accomplishments to his résumé. He repels the most dangerous enemy, the Philistines, and captures Jerusalem, unifying the region of Canaan and the Transjordan for the first time in history. He creates Jerusalem as the religious center of his new, fledgling state. One by one, neighboring states are either subdued or forced into alliance with the House of David. Israel becomes the

most powerful nation state in the region, reminiscent of the modern State of Israel. David stands victorious.

This situation does not endure. The narrator's relation of David's affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent unraveling of his family and kingdom are masterpieces. To this point the plot resembles the Abraham cycle with its series of crises or trials. Now, however, we have a story of retribution. A deep sense of tragedy hangs over most of the ensuing episodes.

When Nathan appears with a supposed case of stolen sheep for the king to adjudicate, David virtually sentences himself (2 Sa 12). In accordance with the Mosaic Law, fourfold restitution was required for theft of a sheep. "Four little lambs" were exacted from David: the unnamed child by Bathsheba, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah. As each son dies, three violently, David is plunged into sorrow. But this sorrow is nowhere more poignantly portrayed than when he learns that Absalom is dead: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sa 18:33 [MT 19:1]).

At the end of his life, feeble and diminished by the infirmities of old age, David is almost oblivious to matters of state. Even more dangerous is his unawareness of the intrigue surrounding the choice of his successor. Influential figures must prod him to be decisive and end the power vacuum. His final words of advice to Solomon reflect a curious mixture of piety and politics: observe the Law of Moses, but make sure Joab and Shemei die (1 Ki 2:1-9). This last speech by David points to an inherent tension within the narrative: the tension between faith and politics.

Is the story of David a tragedy after all? I think it is. And this is related to the larger

question of the significance of this matchless epic. What does the narrator seek to convey? In spite of all the obstacles overcome, the trials endured, and the enemies repulsed and subdued, the story does not end on a happy note. Part two of the story of David features rape and murder within his own family, two major rebellions, one led by his own son, a three-year famine for which the remedy was a public execution of surviving Saulides, and finally, a major plague killing seventy thousand people. The one whom the Lord chose as “a man after his own heart” (1 Sa 13:14) was also capable of adultery and murder. He unified a nation, inspired thousands to follow him into the valley of death, but failed as a father and, in certain respects, as a monarch.

Finally, I call attention to the women in David’s life. Only three female characters are developed to any degree, but each one plays a key role in David’s life at transitional points in his career. Michal, daughter of Saul, is his first love. One gets the impression that initially their relationship was affectionate, even passionate. She is the only woman in the Old Testament of whom it is said that she loved a man.¹² Michal was important to David politically. She represented a connection with the royal house of Saul and the northern tribes. She imparted to him a certain legitimacy in the eyes of northerners that he would not otherwise have had. Michal stood by him despite of her father’s fond hopes to the contrary. But this relationship soured. A forced separation and marriage to Paltiel certainly did not help matters, nor did David’s relationships with Ahinoam and Abigail. Be that as it may, the narrator does not offer explanations; he lets description and dialogue convey the breakup. The dialogue is particularly

effective—a bitter exchange followed by a laconic announcement that Michal had no children.

The second woman is Abigail, the sensible wife of the fool, Nabal. The text does not use the same passionate language it employed with Michal, but one gets the impression that David’s relationship with Abigail was one of sincere admiration and respect. She provided the needed stability for David during a momentous transition from tribal chieftain to that of king of all Israel. Curiously, she drops out of the narrative once David is firmly ensconced in Jerusalem. My impression, however, is that her contribution was considerably more than our narrator chooses to disclose.

The third woman is the most notorious. Indeed, the story of David’s affair with Bathsheba tantalizes as much by what it omits as by what it narrates. Interestingly, this relationship apparently outlives the others. None of the other wives figures in the struggle for succession except Bathsheba. Of course, Abishag, the young virgin selected for the aging monarch, plays a role in the struggle for succession, but it is a passive role. She is the object of desire by one of the aspirants to the throne, and the narrator pointedly tells us that her relationship to David is strictly as a nursemaid, not a lover. In the end it is Bathsheba’s second son by David who succeeds to the throne.

David’s human frailty is seen through his interaction with these women. Though the narrator does not moralize, he expects the reader to read with discernment. He also wants readers to appreciate grace and forgiveness. Thus, Bathsheba is not remembered primarily for her infidelity, but as another “Mother in Israel.”

The achievements of David in terms of the geopolitical history of Israel are monu-

mental, but this does not seem to be the primary reason for the epic. All one has to do is compare it with the Chronicler's version and it is clear that we are dealing with quite different agendas.¹³ To be sure, our narrator is an admirer of David, and it is no doubt true that one purpose is to reflect on how much better things were during the united monarchy than they had been during the days of the tribal federation, though the narrator also does not shirk from reporting his shortcomings and failures.

First Maccabees provides another instructive comparison for it lionizes a famous family who resists religious persecution and restores the nation to sovereignty. But what a contrast! This author chooses not to see, or at least record, the shortcomings others saw. Witness the different assessments found in some pseudepigraphic works and the Dead Sea Scroll community (cf. *Jub.* 23:20-21; *1 Enoch* 12-16; 89:73; *T. Mos.* 4:8; 5:3; *Pss. Sol.* 8:9-14; *CD* 5:6-7; *11QTemple* passim; *4QMMT*). First Maccabees is best labeled as propagandistic. The epic of King David is not.

Furthermore, a good case can be made that the personal history of David should be read as a mirror image of the national history of Israel. That is, there is a certain ambiguity present in the narrative about the rise of kingship and the establishment of a bureaucratic state.¹⁴ The narrative as we have it reflects this vagueness. The second half points to an underlying purpose that transcends both a significant milestone in national history and the theological tension inherent in Hebrew kingship. In this connection, the two poems in 2 Samuel 22 — 23 convey programmatic significance.¹⁵ The first chapter recounts the rise of David to power. The song celebrates the Lord's providential guidance and protection of the man after his own

heart. The second is a tacit admission that David's personal reign was not all it should have been. It does this by drawing attention to God's covenant promise to David. The Davidic kingdom will ultimately prosper and be secure. But the song looks beyond David to one of his descendants who will rule over the people justly, in the fear of God, and will be like the light of morning (2 Sa 23:3-4). The messianic overtones are clear.

The story of David sends a strong message about the abuse of power. In this connection, the Abraham cycle and the story of Deborah are relevant to the national epic of King David, since the stories illuminate each other. Abraham and Deborah are positive role models in the matter of faith and politics. The story of David, however, depicts just how seductive power can be. After all his successes, David violates the fundamental principle that, as the king of Israel, it was incumbent upon him to uphold the Sinai Covenant and to be subject to its stipulations. In the Uriah incident he fails miserably and acts as if he were above the law by taking another man's wife and committing murder.¹⁶ David, the greatest king Israel ever had, was not above abusing his power, and it hardly needs mentioning that no other king had a perfect record in this regard either. If, in the days of the tribal federation, "there was no king in Israel: all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Jdg 21:25), it was also the case that when there *were* kings in Israel, they did what was right in their own eyes (cf. 1 Sa 8:10-18).

Conclusion

This brief survey of hero and heroine narratives in the Old Testament has barely scratched the surface of this great topic.

The longer one ponders their construction, the more one's admiration for their artistry grows. The narrators select and craft episodes in light of carefully conceived plots. The Abraham cycle and the first part of the career of King David employ the obstacle story (or trial by ordeal) as the basic pattern of plot development. Deborah's story centers around a major crisis in the history of Israel and features a nice example of the role reversal so prevalent in the ancient Near Eastern stories. The second half of the story of King David consists of a fall from morality and its tragic consequences.

Clearly, the genius of these stories lies as much in what is *not* said as by what is. In other words, good storytelling consists in the fine art of omission. The reader must "read between the lines" and infer meanings, motives, and intentions. This plot development includes delightful instances of irony, type scenes anticipating the direction of the story, delay for special effect, word plays on the meanings of names, and dialogue that advances the story line, discloses motives, signals major themes, and occasionally conveys the viewpoint of the implied narrator.

Finally, it is crucial to observe that behind the various plots and techniques a larger agenda operates. These stories are really part of a larger story. The Old Testament is, simply put, part one of a two-volume story of redemption. The final reference point for all the individual stories is the overarching story of the coming of God's kingdom to earth.¹⁷ As this mega-story unfolds, many theological insights emerge from the individual stories, such as how one gets right with God and lives a life of faith. The abuse of power, so graphically depicted in David's life, is symptomatic of an even more profound

and pervasive problem, the problem of human sin. When all the individual hero stories are finally read as part of one story, we realize that, ultimately, there is only one true hero in the Old Testament stories. This hero is none other than the God of Israel who stoops and saves fallen heroes and heroines.

ENDNOTES

¹Larry R. Helyer, "The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26 (1983) 77-88; and Helyer, "Abraham's Eight Crises: The Bumpy Road to Fulfilling God's Promise of an Heir," *Bible Review* 11/5 (October 1995) 20-27, 44.

²I have profited greatly from the close reading of Genesis 18 and 19 by Robert Ignatius Letellier, *Day in Mamre: Night in Sodom: Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18 and 19* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995). See my review of his book in *Shofar* 16/2 (Winter, 1998) 99-101.

³Philip R. Davies, "Abraham & Yahweh—A Case of Male Bonding," *BRev* 11/4 (August 1995) 24-33, 44-45. For a further sampling of Davies' approach to reading the Bible see his *Whose Bible is It Anyway?* *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplemental Series* 204 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) and a review of the aforementioned work by Dale Patrick in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117/1 (1998) 116-117.

⁴Helyer, "Abraham's Eight Crises," 44.

⁵Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 15.

⁶See Daniel I. Block, "Will the Real Gideon Please Stand up?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/3 (September 1997) 353-366, for a negative assessment

of Gideon and the other judges, except for Othniel. Curiously, though he mentions Deborah, he says nothing about her.

⁷Jasper Griffin draws a sharp contrast between the *Iliad* in which there is sympathy for enemies and the Old Testament “where the national enemy is the enemy of God and where there can be no question of sympathizing with the defeated foe” (“Reading Homer After 2,800 Years,” *Archaeology Odyssey* 1:1 [1998] 36-37). One should not, however, conclude that the Greek tradition was thereby morally superior to that of the OT.

⁸Canaanite epic glories in telling about interesting women, especially those who eclipse their male associates. In Judges 4 and 5, Deborah and Jael surpass Barak and all their other male contemporaries. This attitude may possibly explain the prominence given in Greek epic to the Amazons, the peers of men in battle” (Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1965] 145).

⁹See John H. Stek, “The Bee and the Mountain Goat: A Literary Reading of Judges 4,” in *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Ronald F. Youngblood (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 53-86 and most recently, Steven D. Mathewson, “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (October-December 1997) 410-435.

¹⁰See Wayne Horowitz and Aaron Shaffer, “A Fragment of a Letter From Hazor,” *Israel Exploration Jour-*

nal 42 (1992) 165-167.

¹¹See Shimon Bar-Efrat, “Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative,” in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, ed. Paul R. House (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992) 191-193.

¹²I disagree with Adele Berlin’s conclusion that Michal was a wife whose love was unrequited. Furthermore, her characterization of Michal as masculine is not convincing to me. See “Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David’s Wives,” in *Beyond Form Criticism: Essays in Old Testament Literary Criticism*, ed. Paul R. House (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992) 221-222.

¹³A point ably made by John W. Wright, “The Founding Father: The Structure of the Chronicler’s David Narrative,” *JBL* 117/1 (1998) 45-59, especially his conclusion on p. 59.

¹⁴As argued by Joel Rosenberg, “1 and 2 Samuel,” *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1987) 141-43.

¹⁵See Herbert K. Klement, “Structure, Context and Meaning in the Samuel Conclusion (1 Sa. 21-24),” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47.2 (November 1996) 367-70. Note especially his opinion that “(t)he last section (2 Sa. 24), which deals with David’s sin, is therefore not to be regarded as accidental. It acts as an unmistakable warning, that the greatness and might of the Davidic empire and the wide extent of its borders must not give rise to self-deception. Yahweh is prepared to maintain his faithfulness to the house of David, but not even a

David can reign against the will of Yahweh” (370).

¹⁶Bar Efrat says that the primary concern of the narrative about David, Bathsheba, and Uriah is David’s treatment of Uriah. “Observations,” 205.

¹⁷See Larry R. Helyer, *Yesterday, Today and Forever: The Continuing Relevance of the Old Testament* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 1996) 10-18, 175-80, for a further discussion.