

## ג, *Symbolism, and Understanding the General Materials of the Books of Samuel* ♦

David B. Schreiner

Wesley Biblical Seminary

dschreiner@wbs.edu

### **Abstract:**

This brief article considers the impact that the ג passages of 1 and 2 Samuel (1 Sam 3:3a; 21:17; 2 Sam 22:29) have upon understanding the General Materials of the Samuel narrative. It is argued that these three passages cooperate to establish a complex metaphor that communicates an important socio-political and theological principle for the community. These passages also constitute an inclusio, which simultaneously provide a hermeneutical lens for the Samuel narrative and deepen one's understanding of a biographical classification. An explanation for this phenomenon may reside in Samuel's literary diachrony.

**Keywords:** ג, inclusio, general materials of 1 and 2 Samuel (i.e., biographic materials)

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♦ This is dedicated to Dr. David Smith, who first taught me the Inductive Bible Study methodology.

Graeme Auld twice states in the opening pages of his commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, “This book is about David.”<sup>1</sup> According to Auld, “We find David presented and represented with and against a very large supporting cast.”<sup>2</sup> “[A]ll other personalities are there so that we may see and know David better.”<sup>3</sup> Auld is correct. The books of Samuel largely revolve around David and his exploits. In terms of Inductive Bible Study therefore, the general materials of 1 and 2 Samuel can be classified, and often is, as biographical.<sup>4</sup>

According to Bauer and Traina, general materials refer to the “primary emphasis” of a book’s content,<sup>5</sup> and there are at least five possible classifications.<sup>6</sup> Ideological materials describe a primary concern for ideas. Historical materials articulate a focus upon events and the correlation of those events. This is different from chronological materials, which are fundamentally concerned with the sequence of time. Geographic materials emphasize places or the movement between places. Finally, biographical materials involve people. Yet the classification of general materials must proceed past a surface level description of content in order to uncover deeper hermeneutical substance. General materials thus influence a book’s structural breakdown.<sup>7</sup> In fact, this will become an important consideration below.

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1. A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1-2.

2. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 1.

3. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 2.

4. Bauer and Traina also see the characters of Eli, Saul, Hannah, and Samuel as bolstering this classification. David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 83.

5. Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 83.

6. See Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 83-6.

7. Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 86.

This essay will revisit a biographical classification for the books of Samuel. Not so much to argue that 1 and 2 Samuel are not biographical in its material, but rather because the three uses of נִר notably nuance a biographical classification for 1 and 2 Samuel.<sup>8</sup> This essay will argue that the נִר passages of 1 and 2 Samuel constitute an *inclusio* for the books of Samuel. Establishing a hermeneutical key for the narrative that ultimately renders the Samuel narrative as a text that exhorts its readers on the guiding principles for navigating change that inevitably faces every community, this phenomenon deepens the biographical materials and can be traced to Samuel's compositional history. I begin however with a couple of brief methodological comments.

First, this essay assumes a reading that encompasses 1 and 2 Samuel together; the division between 1 and 2 Samuel is artificial to the original narrative. On the one hand, the constraints of scrolls and other ancient literary media often dictated divisions such as those between 1 and 2 Samuel.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there is literary continuity between 1 and 2 Samuel that demands the reader recognize 2 Samuel as a continuation of 1 Samuel. The most fundamental of observations puts this beyond question. Second Samuel recounts the exploits of David who is solidified as the chief protagonist at the conclusion of 1 Samuel in his pursuit of the throne as well as the important events of his reign. This is not to say that 1 Samuel cannot be studied apart from 2 Samuel, or vice versa. Rather, there are external and internal factors that encourage a reading of 1 and 2 Samuel as a continuous narrative.

Second, the principles of recurrence fundamentally inform this presentation. According to Bauer and Traina, recurrence is applicable if certain conditions are satisfied.<sup>10</sup> First, there must be multiple

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8. This essay will draw upon previous publications as necessary to advance ideas found therein. See David B. Schreiner, A Review of John Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David*, *JHS* (2012); David B. Schreiner, "Why נִר in Kings?", *JSOT* 39.1 (2014): 15-30.

9. Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 8.

10. Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 95-97.

occurrences of a word, phrase, or image. Second, the distribution of a word, phrase, or image cannot be isolated to one location. The occurrences also must be significant. The usage of נר meets the criteria. Indeed, נר occurs only three times in the Samuel narrative. However, Bauer and Traina recognize that the number of appearances may be small if the other conditions are met.<sup>11</sup> As this essay will explain, the occurrences of נר, while few, are strategically distributed and highly significant.

## The נר Passages of the Books of Samuel

There are only three occurrences of the noun נר in the books of Samuel: 1 Sam 3:3a; 2 Sam 21:17; 2 Sam 22:29. 1 Sam 3:2-4a reads:

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַהוּא וְעָלִי שָׁכַב בְּמִקְוֵמוֹ וַעֲיָנּוֹ הִחֲלָה לְרֹאֲתוֹ וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים טָרָם יִכְבֶּה וְשִׁמוּאֵל שָׁכַב בְּהִיכָל יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם אֲרוֹן אֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה אֶל-שִׁמוּאֵל

As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> the clause in question, וַיִּנְר אֱלֹהִים טָרָם, functions with the other circumstantial clauses to introduce 1 Sam 3. Furthermore, these circumstantial clauses support the more salient component “And it came to pass on that day . . . that the Lord called to Samuel.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, these circumstantial clauses

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11. Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 96.

12. For additional details other than those summarized here, including the relationship of the נר passage of Samuel with the נר passages of Kings, see Schreiner, “Why נר in Kings,” 21-24.

13. John Cook argues that the *wayyiqtol* in Biblical Hebrew functions psycholinguistically to foreground the most salient components of a discourse. See John Cook, “The Semantics of Verbal Pragmatics: Clarifying the Roles of *Wayyiqtol* and *Weqatal* in Biblical Hebrew Prose,” *JSS* 49.2 (2004): 247-73. The clauses וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה אֶל-שִׁמוּאֵל וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַהוּא . . . (1 Sam 3:2, 4a) function in this capacity.

articulate the necessary background information for the episode of Samuel's call. Yet there are also temporal and symbolic functions associated with this clause. On the one hand, this notation provides insight into when these events took place.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, given that the statement about the lamp is juxtaposed with statements of Eli's failing eyesight and the Ark's proximity, both of which anticipate specific elements of the larger narrative,<sup>15</sup> there appears to be a symbolic function, as suggested by Robert Alter and Auld.<sup>16</sup>

Accepting the symbolic function of 1 Sam 3:3a, the recipient of the symbolism does not appear until the second occurrence of נֵר in 2

14. P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *1 and 2 Samuel*, AB 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1980-84), 1:98.

15. The mention of the Ark in 1 Sam 3:3 anticipates chapters 4-7. The reference of Eli's eyesight anticipates 1 Sam 4:15, which testifies to the complete blindness of Eli. However, McCarter omits 1 Sam 4:15. Asserting that the LXX of vv. 14-16 preserve the conflation of two variants regarding the messenger's report, McCarter suggests that one variant reads, "He asked, 'What is this tumultuous noise?' The man came quickly and reported to Eli." The second reads, "So Eli asked the men who were standing beside him, 'What is this tumultuous noise?' The man came quickly to Eli and said to him . . ." Thus, v. 15 of the MT is undoubtedly a part of the second variant. And so, because McCarter believes that the first variant is "surely original," he proposes that 1 Sam 4:15 in the MT is the remnant of this conflated reading left over from a long haplography and should therefore be omitted. See McCarter Jr., *1 and 2 Samuel*, 1:111-12. It seems that McCarter's preference for the first variant is founded upon his belief that Eli's blindness contradicts v. 13. But unfortunately he offers no insight other than his assertion that it is "surely original." Important is the verb צִפֵּה, which McCarter translates as "watching." However, if one translates צִפֵּה with the sense of "to be on the lookout for" (*HALOT*, 2:1044-45), then this "contradiction" could not only be avoided, but it would also bolster the tragic picture of Eli's deterioration. One of the last images of Eli offered by the narrative is that of a blind man sitting by the road "on the lookout" for news of the fate of the Ark.

16. "The symbolic overtones of the image should not be neglected." Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 16. "The noun *nēr* (v. 3) recurs in Samuel only at the end, where David is Israel's light (2 Sam 21:17), and Yahweh is David's (2 Sam 22:29); that leaves the reader here wondering whether the divine lamp is more than simply a temple lantern" Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 54.

Sam 21:17, the only other context within 1 and 2 Samuel where נֶר and כִּבָּה occur together. Verse 17 belongs to vv. 15-17, which are situated in a context that recounts the exploits of David's famous warriors (2 Sam 21:15-22) and function etiologically to explain why David eventually ceased to personally ride to war alongside his army. Second Sam 21:15-17 testifies that David on one occasion grew weary during battle, which led to his life being threatened by a formidable Philistine warrior. It is not clear whether this fatigue was due to David's age or the length of the battle, but what is clear is that Abishai heroically rescues David by striking down the said Philistine. So in response to this scare, David's men swear an oath never again to allow David to enter with them into battle. "Then the men of David swore to him saying, 'You shall never again go out with us to war lest you extinguish the lamp of Israel.'"

Focusing upon the final clause of v. 17, וְלֹא תִכְבֶּה אֶת־נֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל, the subject of תִּכְבֶּה is David and the verb's object is נֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל. Thus, the issue of concern in this context is that David's actions could "extinguish the lamp of Israel," symbolizing the end of the community's vitality and fortune.<sup>17</sup> The fear is that David's premature death would cripple the state of Israel's existence. In short, "The life of the people is tied up in the life of the king."<sup>18</sup> Yet the nexus between 1 Sam 3:3 and 2 Sam 21:17 transcends the mere repetition of lexemes. It addresses Israel's socio-political transition documented throughout the Samuel narrative. First, in 1 Sam 3:3, נֶר occurs in construct with אֱלֹהִים but with יִשְׂרָאֵל in 2 Sam 21:17. Second, the derived stem of כִּבָּה differs in each passage. The Qal stem in 1 Sam 3:3a manifests a stative nuance

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17. A. Baumann, "כִּבָּה," *TDOT* 7:38-39; D. Kellermann, "נֶר," *TDOT* 10:19-20.

18. Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1977; repr., 1988), 202. Also Veijola, who rightly articulates that the concern of the episode is uncertain succession in the wake of David's death. "The statement is most sensible in a situation where the succession had not yet been settled; Die Aussage ist höchste sinnvoll in einer Situation, da die Thronfolge noch nicht geregelt ist," Timo Veijola, *Die ewige Dynastie: David und die Entstehung seiner Dynastie nach der deuteronomistischen Darstellung* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1975), 118.

and lacks explicit agency. It simply states that the “lamp of God” had yet to go out, which incidentally implies that the lamp would go out if things proceed unchecked. כֹּבֵה in 2 Sam 21:17 appears in the Piel stem and David is the subject. Here, the king, with his actions, is the agent responsible for keeping the lamp of Israel burning. This implies that the lamp will continue to burn if things continue as normal, which contrasts the nuances of 1 Sam 3:3. In other words, with David, an agent who is responsible for the community’s endurance and preserving its vitality is clearly distinguished. The inept leadership that characterized the milieu of Samuel’s call has yielded a confidence that the royal institution, fully realized under David, could lead the community well into the future.

The third occurrence of נֵר in the books of Samuel appears in 2 Sam 22:29. In the midst of a thanksgiving psalm that commemorates David’s salvation from his enemies (2 Sam 22:1b), David proclaims, “Surely you are my lamp, O Lord, for the Lord brightens my darkness.” Here, the nominal clause כִּי אֶתָּה נֵרִי equates the Lord with the lamp. Furthermore, the “lamp” is the agent of salvation. Yet when one reads this passage in light of the previous two occurrences of נֵר, an important theological nuance is imported while creating a significant confession on the lips of the one who has been credited with solidifying the community’s leadership. While David as the king may be responsible for the vitality and endurance of the community, David confesses that *the Lord* is *his lamp*. Thus, the Lord is, at least on some level, the ultimate source for the community’s vitality moving forward.

Consequently, the three occurrences of נֵר within 1 and 2 Samuel that appear at the beginning and end collaborate to create a complex metaphor that articulates important socio-political and theological convictions. The rise of Samuel inaugurated a dispensation that eventually saw the community’s leadership develop into the royal institution, which climaxes with David, and becomes the responsible agent for the community’s vitality. Yet the narrative in due course proclaims that the ultimate source of the community’s vitality and endurance is through the Lord by way of the king.

## The Implications of the נר Passages for 1 and 2 Samuel and Its General Materials

Having established that the נר passages cooperate to establish a complex metaphor, these passages can be understood as an *inclusio* for the Samuel narrative.<sup>19</sup> It follows then that the נר passages constitute a hermeneutical lens<sup>20</sup> through which one reads the narrative.<sup>21</sup> To this end, 1 and 2 Samuel is a narrative that addresses communal transition and the role that the Lord and his covenant plays in the process. It recounts Israel's socio-political transition to emphasize that the Lord's relationship with his people is not fundamentally compromised by any socio-political transition so long as the covenant continues to provide the governing principles for his people, and in particular the leadership, as they move forward.

Therefore, to revisit briefly the quotes from Auld that began this presentation, David is certainly *the* major character and one even could say that Samuel in its canonical form *is* about David. Yet Auld's

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19. Indeed, these occurrences do not occur precisely at the beginning and the end. However, as Bauer and Traina suggest, an *inclusio* is not required to appear precisely at the beginning and end of a segment. Discussing the *inclusio* of Matthew, Bauer and Traina state, "The Gospel of Matthew may also be structured according to *inclusio*. *At almost the beginning* of the book...And at the very end of the Gospel, we have this strikingly similar statement." Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 118, emphasis mine.

20. An *inclusio* "establishes the main thought of the book (or passage), pointing to the essential concern of the book (or passage)." Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 117.

21. The idea that the canonical form of 1 and 2 Samuel manifests an *inclusio* is not without precedent as both Brueggemann and Childs have interpreted elements at the opening and closing of 1 and 2 Samuel in this capacity. Walter Brueggemann, "2 Samuel 21-24: An Appendix of Deconstruction?," *CBQ* 50 (1988): 398-97; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 271-80.



statement deserves qualification. Samuel is about David insofar as he is the chief vehicle through which the narrative communicates theological truths about communal transition, formation, and the role that the covenant should enjoy.

Admittedly, such observations may cause one to question the general materials of 1 and 2 Samuel as biographical. If the נִר passages are an *inclusio* that functions as a hermeneutical lens for the narrative and communicates an ideological truth, then does it not follow that the general materials of the narrative be ideological? However, such a conclusion is certainly not definitive, particularly since the structural breakdown of 1 and 2 Samuel corresponds with the presentation of persons, which should be expected if the general materials are biographical.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, it is preferable to conclude that the נִר passages nuance the biographical classification. More specifically, the *inclusio* elaborates any generic or simplistic biographical classification by adding depth to Samuel's focus upon people. The narrational focus is upon people that are integral to the process of communal transformation.

An explanation for this phenomenon may reside with the literary diachrony of 1 and 2 Samuel. It is incontrovertible that 1 and 2 Samuel betrays a lengthy and complex history of composition. While the specifics of Samuel's textual history will continue to be debated, the observations offered here suggest at least two distinct phases of Samuel's literary development. Initially, Samuel was composed with an overt biographical concern, which resulted in the still-observable

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22. See Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 89. More specifically, 1 Sam 1:1 opens with וַיְהִי אִישׁ אֶחָד מִן־הָרִמְתִּים צֹפִים מֵהַר אֶפְרַיִם וּשְׁמוֹ אֶלְקָנָה, which is mirrored in 1 Sam 9:1 with only minor variation—וַיְהִי אִישׁ מִבְנֵי־יִמִּין וּשְׁמוֹ קִישׁ. Through this syntactical echo, the introductions of Samuel and Saul's fathers demonstrate that the Samuel narrative can be divided into a pre-monarchal and monarchal dispensation. Within these two major sections, the narrative can be further broken down according to the exploits of Samuel, Saul, and David. Permeating these subdivisions are the episodes of Eli, Jonathan, Abigail, David's royal family, and others.

structural breakdowns that are in accord with biographical materials.<sup>23</sup> Yet the final stages of Samuel's editing, probably in light of the aftermath of the Exile, can be characterized as a tempering of the pro-Davidic posture of the earlier forms. It was with this final stage that the Samuel narrative offered a more sobering assessment of the importance of the dynastic founder and the institution of the monarchy. The Davidic dynasty is the answer, but it must be a dynasty with the proper theological perspective. The formulation of the נר *inclusio* appears to have been one component to the final stages of Samuel's composition.<sup>24</sup>

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23. Scholars have long conceded that the earliest forms of the Samuel narrative were pro-Davidic in posture. The proposal offered here comports well with the consensus.

24. In "Why נר in Kings," I argue that 2 Sam 21:17 is the oldest of the נר occurrences in Samuel and that 2 Sam 3:3a assumes the occurrence of 2 Sam 21:17 in a critique of its ideology. In my review of Van Seters, I suggest that the formulation and insertion of the Appendix of 2 Sam 21-24 represents the final stage of Samuel's composition. I envision that 2 Sam 21:17, and its immediate context for that matter (2 Sam 21:15-22), was displaced from its original context (2 Sam 5) to create Samuel's chiastic conclusion (2 Sam 21-24). While it possible to understand 1 Sam 3:3a as a deft redactional insertion sometime prior to the construction of Samuel's Appendix, thus representing a middle phase of assessment surrounding Davidic ideology, it is clear that 1 Sam 3:3a prepares the reader for the symbolism that is finally realized in the Appendix.