

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

Abner Son of Ner

Characterization and Contribution of Saul's Chief General

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the

School of Theology and Religious Studies

Of The Catholic University of America

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Washington, DC

2017

Abner Son of Ner: Characterization and Contribution of Saul's Chief General

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The dissertation represents the first comprehensive, academic examination of the character of Abner in the books of Samuel (1 Sam 14:50-51; 17:55–18:5; 20:25; 26:1-16; 2 Sam 2:8-32; 3:6-39), and it examines Abner's character as it both resembles a real human being and functions as a literary device in the Masoretic Text (MT) and Septuagint (LXX). Following the examples of Sara Koenig and other biblical scholars (e.g., Robert Alter, Shimon Bar-Efrat, Adele Berlin, and Meir Sternberg), this dissertation gives attention to the ways these texts characterize Abner through direct and indirect characterization, narrative gaps, direct discourse, terminology, and grammar related to Abner, and the dissertation discusses the moral presentation of Abner in the texts and his character development from 1 Samuel into 2 Samuel. Moreover, utilizing Alex Woloch's *The One vs. The Many*, the dissertation examines Abner's character-space — the encounter between a character's personality traits and its position within the narrative — in MT and LXX. While Abner's character mimics a real human being in the way he is described, acts, and speaks in the stories, his character also contributes to the plots, structures, and messages of MT and LXX, and he illuminates other characters, especially Joab.

The dissertation first devotes significant attention to Abner's character-space in MT, followed by a discussion of how LXX differs from MT with respect to Abner. The dissertation concludes that Abner is a minor but complex and generally positive character who is integral to the plot of the story. Positively, Abner holds a powerful position within Saul's court, is persuasive and shrewd, relies heavily upon rhetoric and questions, prefers peace over violence,

and is widely respected by other characters. Negatively, he is lustful, presumptuous, and callous, and is an ineffectual military commander. The LXX presents Abner as a more powerful, threatening and yet merciful but less rhetorically shrewd character than does MT. As a literary device, Abner's character symbolizes Saul and his kingdom, signals negative transitions for Saul's house, illuminates other characters, and acts as the catalyst for the peaceful transition of power from the house of Saul to the house of David.

This dissertation by William J. Buracker II fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Biblical Studies approved by David Bosworth, Ph.D., as director, and by Robert D. Miller II, Ph.D., and Edward M. Cook, Ph.D. as Readers.

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To Kimberly, my beloved, whose prayers, patience, love, and support have given me encouragement, hope, and time to write, oftentimes at great personal sacrifice. To Hannah and Eilidh, whose smiles, laughter, and hugs have given me joy even on the most difficult of writing days. And to Mary Esther, whose early arrival has already brought even more happiness to our home.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people I need to thank for their help, love, and encouragement. First and foremost, I am thankful for Kimberly to whom this dissertation is chiefly dedicated. While she knew I would pursue a Ph.D. when we got married, I am not convinced she truly knew what she was getting herself into, yet she has been a faithful companion, sturdy pillar, and loving wife through it all. Likewise, I am grateful that Hannah and Eilidh, my wonderful, happy, and creative daughters, have willingly (and unwillingly) scheduled their daddy time around my writing time. I look forward to spending my weekends and vacations with you and not with my books. In addition, I am glad that Mary Esther has joined our family and is already blessing us greatly. I cannot wait to get to know you over the years.

I am also thankful for my parents, Joe and Lorraine, for constantly encouraging me to pursue all my many interests, teaching me how to work hard, showing me how to live with integrity, and providing me with free room and board when I needed them. My brilliant and beautiful sister Autumn, her family (Eugene, Noah-Bell, and R-JAY) and my in-laws (Scott, Susan, Dr. Cindy, and Andrew) have also brought me nothing but support, prayers, and kind (but occasionally sarcastic) words. While my educational and career paths have been windy, bizarre, and full of classes, my family, both near and far, has been a constant source of love, stability, and joy, and for that I am uniquely fortunate and grateful.

David Bosworth, has been far more than an instructor, director, and mentor to me. He has gone above and beyond all expectations to teach me how to be a scholar, teacher, and writer. From many hours drinking tea and coffee while discussing my academic and career paths to forming mentoring and writing groups, he has ensured that I am leaving my program a better academic and person than when I began nine years ago. Likewise, Bob Miller and Ed Cook have

given me invaluable feedback, advice, and guidance on this project, in the classroom, and beyond. Also, without the cheers and chiding of the late Frank Gignac, I could not read Greek. I have benefited greatly from the faculty at CUA and cannot imagine a better group of scholars and educators to study under. Any flaws in argumentation, research, grammar, or style in this dissertation are because I failed to listen rather than because they failed to teach.

I must, of course, mention my writing and support group: Bonnie Brunelle, Lesley DiFransico, Shannon McAlister, Alison Ralph, and Angela Rasmussen. Their exemplary writing habits, research, publications, pedagogy, and successes have allowed me to grow as a student, teacher, and scholar. In particular, their insightful and brutally helpful comments on my writing and their willingness to hold me accountable have seen me to the finish line. Likewise, I wish to thank Colin Pears, who, although not technically part of my writing group, has been a welcomed and necessary motivator, mentor, and friend through the writing process and in life.

I am also blessed by a great group of pastors, teachers, and friends who have helped me learn, grow, and laugh throughout my life and scholastic career. I am especially thankful for Steve Baluran, Dick Belcher, Tony Boehm, Marcel Brown, Jeff Cagle, Jo-Ann Cohen, Karen Craig, Ryann Craig, Ken Cross, Steven Cummings, Jim DeSart, Kathy Durant, Fred Fauth, Mark Giszczak, Ryan Haber, Steve Hill, Eric Honeycutt, Ben Inman, Ed Kelaher, Douglas Kelly, Vincent Kiernan, Robert Lancaster, Bruce K. Lax, Nate Lee, Jonathan Lindaure, Randt and Sue Lindauere, David Long, Sophia Magallanes, Tom Malionek, Chip McAulay, Joe McDonald, Jessica McGriff, Mark Morozowich, Nicole Pietrucha, Will Rainford, Adam Rasmussen, Tom Riello, Victor Schinstock, Lisa Weaver, Kelly Wilson, Juliann Winn, and the late Ed Salmon for the many ways I have benefited from their lives, love, faith, work, and wisdom. Without these and many others, I would neither have pursued nor finished my doctorate.

Finally, I am highly indebted to the work of Sara Koenig whose book, *Isn't This Bathsheba?*, is the inspiration for the work that follows.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF ABNER'S CHARACTER

In 2011, Sara Koenig published *Isn't This Bathsheba*, the first monograph devoted entirely to the character of Bathsheba.¹ Although no scholar had devoted an entire book to the study of Bathsheba prior to Koenig's publication, there were numerous articles, sermons, and works of art that had focused on Bathsheba's character, most of which depicted Bathsheba negatively.² Koenig reacted to these negative portrayals by providing a comprehensive study of the character of Bathsheba as presented in ancient versions (Masoretic Text, Septuagint, and Peshitta) and in Rabbinic literature, and her goal was "to respect the text by paying close and careful attention to what is said."³ Koenig found that, contrary to most understandings, the character of Bathsheba is portrayed positively and complexly in these ancient versions and that her character develops in interesting ways from 2 Samuel into 1 Kings. Koenig's book, therefore, while reacting against previous negative portrayals of Bathsheba, has become a uniquely comprehensive and innovative study of how Bathsheba is actually characterized in various ancient versions of the story.

This dissertation follows in the footsteps of Koenig's study but with regard to the character of Abner in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel as preserved in the Masoretic Text (MT) and in the Septuagint (LXX).⁴ In 1 Sam 14:51, Abner is introduced in the story as King Saul's chief general (שֶׁר־צָבָא in MT and αρχιστρατηγος in LXX) at the end of a list of Saul's key family

¹ Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba*.

² Studies cited by Koenig include Besançon, *L'Affaire de David et Bethsebee*; Häusl, *Abischag und Batscheba*; Kirk-Duggan, "Slingshots," 37-70; and Moore, "Bathsheba's Silence," 336-46.

³ Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba*, 2.

⁴ Space prevents us from including discussion of Abner in the Peshitta and rabbinic literature.

members (wives, children, etc.). His character appears sporadically in 1 Samuel performing only minor and seemingly inconsequential actions there. For examples, after David kills Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, the Abner of MT merely brings David to Saul so that Saul can learn more about David, and in 1 Samuel 20 of both MT and LXX, Abner just sits beside the king at dinner.⁵ He also converses with David on Saul's behalf in 1 Samuel 26. His character receives more narrative space in 2 Samuel, however, and he becomes a key player in the transfer of power from the house of Saul to the house of David in 2 Samuel 2–3. After Saul's death, Abner sets up Ishbosheth to be king over the northern territories of Israel in 2 Samuel 2:6, and shortly thereafter, Abner initiates a battle against Joab's forces. In 2 Samuel 3, Abner is accused of inappropriate relations with Saul's former concubine, and as a result, he severs ties with Saul's house and hands full control of Israel to David.⁶ Almost immediately afterwards, however, Joab murders Abner, and after David and the people lament his passing, the Samuel text refers to him no more (2 Sam 3:22–4:1).⁷

Despite being a catalyst for David's acquisition of power and despite the amount of narrative space he receives — he receives more narrative space than Bathsheba, Nathan, or Hannah — scholars have not devoted sufficient attention to Abner's character or to his important role in the narrative; there is not a single scholarly article, essay, or monograph devoted solely to the character of Abner.⁸ Although Abner's character is mentioned in several articles, these articles are ultimately about other topics, typically David. For instance, an ATLA search for

⁵ In the LXX, 1 Sam 17:55–18:5 is not reflected, and thus, Abner's character does not perform this action.

⁶ In LXX, the character that offends Abner is Memphibosthe not Jebosthe (=Ishbosheth in MT).

⁷ His grave, however, is mentioned in 2 Sam 4:12.

⁸ For examples of studies on Nathan, see Jones, *The Nathan Narratives*; and Bodner, "Nathan," 43-54. For studies on Hannah, see Abasili, "Hannah's Ordeal," 581-605; and Esler, "The Role of Hannah," 15-36.

“Abner AND Samuel,” returns only thirteen distinct results.⁹ Only one of these results is devoted entirely to Abner’s character, but it is a one-page, popular piece from *Touchstone*, not an academic study.¹⁰ Even the volume edited by Walter Dietrich, *Seitenblicke: Literarische und historische Studien zu Nebenfiguren im zweiten Samuelbuch*, which is dedicated to minor characters in the books of Samuel, does not devote a chapter exclusively to the character of Abner.¹¹ This dissertation, therefore, represents the first attempt at a comprehensive, academic study of the character of Abner as he is presented in 1 and 2 Samuel of MT and LXX.

With regard to the lack of scholarship on Bathsheba, Koenig argued that there were two main reasons that Bathsheba had not been given more attention: ideological (i.e., patriarchal tendencies to ignore female characters) and narratological (i.e., other characters and events are more important to the narrative than Bathsheba).¹² Ideological reasons are unlikely to have led to the neglect of Abner’s character, but narratological reasons certainly have. Like Bathsheba, Abner is a minor character in the text, and because characters such as David, Saul, Joab, and Samuel receive more narrative space than Abner, scholars have understandably given them more attention. Moreover, due to the complexity and multifaceted-nature of David’s character within

⁹ Cryer, “David’s Rise to Power,” 385-94; Dennison, “Joab and Abner,” 27-37; Fensham, “The Battle between the Men of Joab and Abner as a Possible Ordeal by Battle?” 356-7; Freedman, “On the Death of Abner,” 125-7; Hoyle, “The Weapons of God in Samuel,” 118-34; Hugo, “Abner der Königsmacher,” 489-505; Qimron, “The Lament of David over Abner,” 143-7; Quine, “On Dying in a City Gate,” 399-413; Sadik, “Is ‘R. Abner’ Abner of Burgos,” 331-47; Shemesh, “Why Did Joab Kill Abner,” 261-77; VanderKam, “Davidic Complicity,” 521-39.

¹⁰ Reardon, “Abner’s Tough Decision,” 17.

¹¹ The second chapter of the book (Hugo, “Der Mord an Abner und Amasa,” 24-52), which is partly about the death of Abner, is more devoted to the textual variants in the accounts of Abner’s death and how those variants alter the characterization of Joab not Abner. See especially pp. 43-6.

¹² See her discussion in *Isn’t This Bathsheba?* 4-8.

the Samuel text, scholars are understandably more attracted to David than to Abner.¹³ Saul, another complex, multifaceted, and important character, has also received significant attention from scholars such as Shaul Bar, Paul Borgman, Barbara Green, David Gunn, and W. L. Humphries.¹⁴ Abner's character, by contrast, has less than seventy verses devoted to him within the text, so there is less textual opportunity for readers to see him as either complex or essential to the story. Moreover, because Abner dies at the end of 2 Samuel 3, his character has little effect on the narrative from 2 Samuel 4 onward, so it is perhaps not surprising that his character has received little attention by scholars. This dissertation shows, however, that Abner's character is complex (i.e., "round" according to E. M. Forster's definition), crucial to the plot, and thus worthy of more attention than he has previously received from the academic community.¹⁵

Methodology

Because there has been little attention given to Abner's character, this dissertation cannot react to historical depictions or modern discussions of Abner as Koenig did with her treatment of Bathsheba. Instead, the dissertation forges new ground providing the first academic and comprehensive study of Abner's character as presented in MT and LXX. We generally follow Koenig's methodological approach, and we rely on the work of other scholars of biblical literary theory. In addition, we borrow aspects of the methodology of Alex Woloch, upon whom Koenig

¹³ Baruch Halpern (*David's Secret Demons*, 6) even calls David "four-dimensional" and the first "human being" in world literature. Other important monographs on David include Bodner, *David Observed*; Steussy, *David*; McKenzie, *King David*; and Van Seters, *The David Saga*.

¹⁴ E.g. Bar, *God's First King*; Borgman, *David, Saul, and God*; Green, *King Saul's Asking*; Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*; Humphries, "The Rise and Fall of King Saul," 74-90.

¹⁵ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 103-18, especially pp. 103-4, 118; cf. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 23; Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative*, 24.

did not rely in her study of Bathsheba.¹⁶ Like Woloch, we acknowledge that literary characters both resemble real people while remaining only part of the literary world in which they appear. Thus, we use language to describe Abner just as we would a real person, and we discuss how he functions as a literary device to further the purposes of the author and narrator.

Sara Koenig

As stated above, we are highly indebted to Koenig's work and methodology in the study of minor characters in the books of Samuel, and this dissertation follows in her footsteps in several ways. First, like Koenig, we pay significant attention to what is actually stated in the text and make special note where gaps in the text must be filled in by the reader.¹⁷ As in the case of Bathsheba, there are numerous places in the text where important information regarding Abner's intentions, emotions, duties, etc. are left unstated, and the reader must fill in these gaps. Like Koenig's study, this dissertation carefully acknowledges when such gaps are being filled in order that unsubstantiated assumptions about Abner's character may be avoided. Thus, we appeal to clues in the text, to what we know of Abner's character from other passages of the narrative, and to what can be known from other ANE cultures.¹⁸ For instance, Walter Brueggemann states that Abner shows bravery and restraint when he flees Asahel's pursuit in 2 Sam 2:19-23, but the text never specifically attributes to Abner either bravery or fear.¹⁹ Brueggemann, however, fails to take into account Asahel's description in 2:18, Abner's fear of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 (MT), or

¹⁶ Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, especially pp. 14-21.

¹⁷ Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?* 10-7; see also Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 186-229 for a comprehensive discussion of gaps and the reading process.

¹⁸ Compare to Sternberg's (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 186-9) method for gap-filling.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 222.

the dangers of fleeing battle in ANE, and thus, his description of Abner here is unpersuasive.

We endeavor to be more careful.

Second, the dissertation gives attention to the verbs used in relation to Abner and whether or not he is the subject. In her study, Koenig rightly notices how active Bathsheba is in 2 Sam 11:2-5. She is the subject of just as many verbs as David, so she is not a mere object who is always acted upon.²⁰ Nevertheless, Koenig also notices that in contrast to David, she is objectified by the other characters, for she is the object of לקח, whereas David is not the object of any verbs in that passage.²¹ By paying similar attention to verbs used of Abner, we come to the conclusion that Abner is not a passive character in the books of Samuel. To the contrary, Abner is frequently depicted as an active agent who affects both the plot and the characters around him, especially in 2 Samuel 2–3. Except for when other characters speak to him (e.g., 1 Sam 17:55; 26:14; 2 Sam 3:7; etc.), Abner is usually the subject, not the object, of verbs. An important example is in 2 Sam 2:8-9 wherein Abner is the subject of three verbs — לקח/λαμβάνω (“to take”); עבר/αναβιβάζω (“to bring or drag over”); and בגד/βασιλευω (“to make king”) — of which Ishbosheth/Jebosthe is the object. Also in 1 Samuel 17:57 of MT, Abner takes (לקח) and brings (בוא) David to Saul; he is neither taken nor brought by anyone. By paying attention to such verbs and how they are used in conjunction with Abner’s character, we see the power and influence he wields over other characters and over the plot.

Third, especially in the conclusion, we look at the development of Abner’s character throughout the text, especially from 1 Samuel to 2 Samuel. Koenig has shown that Bathsheba is

²⁰ E.g., Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?* 46-51, 91-4; 162.

²¹ Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?*, 46-7.

not a static character but is one who develops from her introduction in 2 Samuel to her deviousness in 1 Kings.²² Whereas she does little in 2 Samuel 11, she displays aspects of intelligence, creativity, and power in 1 Kings 1–2. Likewise, Abner’s character develops and changes from 1 Samuel into 2 Samuel and again from 2 Samuel 2 into 2 Samuel 3. Because 1 Samuel narrates the reign of Saul, Abner is Saul’s subject in 1 Samuel, but because he does not instantaneously become the servant of David or of Saul’s successor in 2 Samuel, we have opportunity to witness him acting independently of Saul for the first time there. It is in 2 Samuel 2 that we begin to see him take initiative and have influence over the characters around him, and in 2 Samuel 3 we read for the first time that Abner’s loyalty to the house is neither static nor permanent; Abner’s devotion to Saul’s house has limits. When confronted about an infraction that Abner seemingly deems petty, he immediately changes his allegiance and begins giving David more power, a rather surprising turn of events. Abner’s character, therefore, develops and becomes complex and rounded according to E. M. Forster’s classic definition.²³

Fourth, we follow Koenig’s example in asking whether or not Abner is portrayed as a positive or negative character within the text. Koenig mostly defines “positive” over and against the “negative” portrayals of Bathsheba common among scholars (e.g., Bathsheba is stupid, sinister, or guilty of seducing David), but she also strives to avoid anachronism by imposing modern morality on the ancient text. Thus, she discusses Bathsheba’s positive and negative characteristics in terms of morality, legality (i.e., adherence to the religious law of HB), and

²² See Koenig, *Isn’t This Bathsheba?* 20-6.

²³ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 118; cf. Berlin (*Poetics and Interpretation*, 23-4, 32) who sees three types of characters: flat, which she calls “types,” round, which she calls “full-fledged,” and functionaries, which she calls “agents.” Bar-Efrat (*Narrative Art*, 86-7) argues that we should see a spectrum of characters along a spectrum and label them by the function they play within the text rather than “blanket statements.”

honor.²⁴ Likewise, this dissertation examines places where Abner's character displays aspects of loyalty, honesty, shrewdness, selflessness, sexual morality, and religious/legal devotion, for these are all praised at various points in HB. As we will see, the Abner depicted in both MT and LXX is generally positive like Bathsheba, but he displays several character flaws that prevent us from seeing him as a biblical paragon of virtue. Thus, like Bathsheba, he is complex.²⁵

General Approaches to Biblical Characters

Just as we follow Koenig in those aspects of her method discussed above, we also follow her reliance upon other scholars who have studied biblical characters and narrative theory before her. Most notably, we are indebted to the works of Robert Alter, Shimon Bar-Efrat, Adele Berlin, and Meir Sternberg, all of whom have made invaluable contributions to biblical narrative theory.²⁶ Robert Alter, for instance, captures the various ways the Hebrew Bible presents its characters when he says, "Character can be revealed through the report of actions; through appearance, gestures, posture, costume; through one character's comments on another; through direct speech by the character; through inward speech, either summarized or quoted as interior monologue; or through statements by the narrator about the attitudes and intentions of the personages, which may come either as flat assertions or motivated explanations."²⁷ These various ways that biblical texts can present their characters have led scholars to organize them into two categories: direct and indirect characterization.²⁸ The former consists of explicit

²⁴ Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?* 17-20.

²⁵ Cf. Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?* 11-7.

²⁶ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114-30; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 47-92; Berlin, *Poetic and Interpretation*, 33-42; Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 321-54.

²⁷ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116-7; cf. Hens-Piazza, *Nameless, Blameless, and without Shame*, 5; Margolin, "Character," 55.

²⁸ E.g. Bar-Efrat (*Narrative Art*, 47-92) divides his chapter on characterization into "Direct Shaping" and "Indirect Shaping." Walsh (*Old Testament Narrative*, 34), however, suggests three categories: the text can (a) tell us

statements in the text about a character's physical appearance, inner life, personality, etc., whether by the narrator or by other characters. For example, with regard to Saul, the text tells us of his unusual height and good looks (1 Sam 9:2) as well as of his intense jealousy towards and fear of David (1 Sam 18:8-9, 29). The latter consists in how the text shows characters acting or speaking in particular ways from which we can glean information about their personalities or desires. Again with regard to Saul, we can deduce that he is dangerously obsessive from his constant pursuits of David at the expense of his kingdom (1 Samuel 24; 26).

In HB, indirect characterization is far more common than direct characterization; the text simply devotes more space to action than it does to psychology or physicality.²⁹ Thus, direct characterization is oftentimes terse and underdeveloped. For instance, although we are told that David is ruddy (1 Sam 16:12; 17:42), we know very little else about his physical description, and although we know that David volunteers to fight Goliath, we are never explicitly told whether he does so for fame and fortune or out of devotion to Yhwh or both (cf. 1 Sam 17:26).³⁰ The relative lack of direct characterization given in HB has led Shimon Bar-Efrat to conclude that such descriptions do more to advance the plot than to develop the characters (e.g., 2 Sam 2:18), and thus, whenever the text does make direct statements about Abner (e.g., his title and familial

about a character, (b) show us a character acting or speaking, or (c) show us other characters speaking about another. However, we group (a) and (c) together as direct characterization as explained below. The major difference between Walsh's (a) and (c) is the trustworthiness of the entity giving the information. The biblical narrator is generally assumed to be trustworthy whereas other characters may not be. In other words, we are more likely to trust the narrator when it tells us that Noah was a righteous man (Gen 6:9) than when Saul says the same thing about even David (1 Sam 24:17). Northrop Frye (*Anatomy of Criticism*, 51; cf. Paris, *Character and Conflict*, 13) also sees two types of characterization: those that tend towards verisimilitude and those that tend towards myth. While this distinction is not relevant to the dissertation, it is worth noting that in Samuel the former is more prevalent. See also, Springer, *A Rhetoric of Literary Character*, 14.

²⁹ Cf. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 34-8. Scholes and Kellogg (*Nature of Narrative*, 165-6, 169) note that the "inward life" of characters is assumed but not presented in ancient literature, and that importance of the inward life in literature is a Christian development.

³⁰ For a good discussion of the ambiguity of David's character, see D. Bosworth, "Evaluating King David," 191-210.

relation to Saul), we pay careful attention to how such information informs us about Abner's character, the plot, and the message of the narrative.³¹

The lack of direct characterization about Abner means that most of our study is a study of indirect characterization through Abner's speech and actions. Rather than being told what Abner is like or what he is thinking, we are shown Abner doing and saying things that reveal "who he is," and it is our job to come to conclusions about Abner's character from his words and deeds. In other words, we make inferences about Abner's personality, motives, and thoughts from what he does and says. As Hens-Piazza says, "Characters' actions tell us about them — and at times their actions speak louder than their words. Their deeds craft a mental image of the character than animates them."³² Oftentimes, crafting this mental image relates back to the gap-filling we discussed above, and the reader must play an important role in constructing an image of the character by "reading between the lines."³³ For instance, when Abner recommends that twelve of his men "play" (שחק) with twelve of Joab's in 2 Sam 2:14, we must infer what he intends from this contest and what that says about his character. Is this contest mere recreation, or does Abner intend it to be violent?

Likewise Hens-Pienza says about direct discourse, "A character's own words can suggest something about his or her personality as well as fashion impressions about his or her

³¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 48-50; also see Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 34; cf. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116-9.

³² Hens-Piazza, *Nameless, Blameless, and without Shame*, 8, cf. pp. 11, 13. See also Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 77, 81-2. Hochman, *Character in Literature*, 39.

³³ Hens-Piazza, *Nameless, Blameless, and without Shame*, 11. See also Cohan, "Figures beyond the Text," 9-15.

relationships with others.”³⁴ For instance, in 1 Sam 26:14, after David steals Saul’s spear and water jug and calls out to Saul’s camp, Abner asks David מִי אַתָּה קֹרֵאת אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ (“Who are you calling to the king?”), and we are led to question whether Abner is merely seeking David’s identity or if his words conceal a hidden intent (e.g., implying that David, as a pursued outcast, has no right to speak to the king). Answering such questions requires us to again fill in gaps left by the text by paying attention to the details in the text devoted to Abner’s character, the flow of the narrative, and other clues the text might provide, and by continuously asking and answering such questions, we begin to form a comprehensive understanding of Abner’s character as presented within the texts.

Nevertheless, while indirect characterization is prevalent, there are a handful of places where the text characterizes him directly — twice by the narrator (1 Sam 14:51 and 2 Sam 3:8) and thrice by other characters (by David in 1 Sam 26:15-16 and 2 Sam 3:38 and by Joab in 2 Sam 3:24-25). The two instances by the narrator reveal to us Abner’s relation to Saul and his title (1 Sam 14:51), which is repeated frequently throughout the text (e.g., 1 Sam 26:5; 2 Sam 2:8), and the lone instance in which Abner becomes angry (2 Sam 3:8). Both of these cases reveal important information about Abner’s social status, influence, and “personality,” and because the narrator is generally trustworthy in the Bible, these cases are relatively straightforward to understand. More difficult to comprehend are the instances in which David and Joab make direct statements about Abner’s character and value, for these statements are contradictory and made by potentially untrustworthy speakers. Both David and Joab disparage

³⁴ Hens-Piazza, *Nameless, Blameless, and without Shame*, 8; cf. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 71-2. Alter (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 117) is more cautious about the importance of a character’s speech for our understanding of that character, saying speech only gives the reader “relative certainty” of a character’s intentions.

Abner, respectively stating that he is derelict as a general (1 Sam 26:15-16) and deceptive (2 Sam 3:24-25), but after Abner's death, David lauds the late general (2 Sam 3:38).

Alex Woloch

Alex Woloch's 2003 monograph, *The One vs. the Many*, continues a lengthy discussion within narrative theory regarding the nature of characters, and his contribution is an innovative approach to the study of minor characters and their effects on the narrative as a whole. Woloch recognizes the problems inherent in *one* narrative containing *many* characters, especially with regard to how different characters — both major and minor — compete for space within that one narrative and how this competition leads to tensions within the story.³⁵ He, therefore, pays close attention to the space that is taken up by these characters and how such space allows these characters to emerge as “unique and coherent” individuals. The purpose of his monograph is to redefine characterization in terms of how the text apportions differing amounts of space to the different characters.³⁶ In order to accomplish this goal, he defines a character space as “that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within a narrative.”³⁷ By studying minor characters and how the narrative space devoted to them makes them “individuals” and “personalities,” Woloch recognizes that characters both mimic actual human beings (i.e., the purist or referential approach) while “existing” only within the confines of the literary text in which they contribute to the purpose

³⁵ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 1-3.

³⁶ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 7, 12-3; cf. Springer (*A Rhetoric of Literary Characters*, 15) who says, “Literary characters exist only long enough to complete their task in the work in which they appear, and this is part of the pleasure they offer.”

³⁷ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 14.

and plot of the story (i.e., the minimalist or formalist approach).³⁸ He thus bridges the gap between those who see characters as “real people” and those who see them as merely “black marks on the page” by combining aspects of both views. His book, then, is a study of the “character-systems” of certain Elizabethan-era novels. This latter term he defines as, “the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces... into a unified narrative structure.”³⁹ In other words, he is concerned with how many different character spaces, especially those of minor characters, combine in such a way to contribute to the purpose of the narrative, such as plot and the development of the protagonist. For instance, in studying the flat characters in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Woloch notes that these characters are constantly contrasted and otherwise juxtaposed with each other and that the text’s asymmetrical representation of these characters is relevant to the structure of the novel as a whole. In the case of Elizabeth Bennet, the story’s protagonist, she needs to get away from her sisters in order to become her own self, but the narrative discourse needs to devote space to her sisters in order for Elizabeth to develop and be contrasted with them.⁴⁰

Using Woloch’s ideas and terminology, this dissertation studies the character-space occupied by Abner in 1 and 2 Samuel, but it falls short of a full examination of the character-system in the books of Samuel. Thus, we apply Woloch’s understanding that literary characters

³⁸ See Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, 14-21. For examples of more referential approaches to character see: Bal, *Narratology*, 114-9; Bradley *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1-23, 401-93; Paris, *Character and Conflict*, 13-19. For examples of more formalist approaches to character, see Barthes, *S/Z*, 190-7; Cixous, “Character of Character,” 383-90; Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 96-145; Greimas, *Structural Semantics*; Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, 239-51; Propp, *Morphology*, 19-24; Tomachevski, “Thematique,” 293-8. For good discussions of the tensions in the study of literary characters, see Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 44-9; Cohen, “Figures beyond the Text,” 5-9; De Temmerman, *Crafting Characters*, 6-7; Jannidis, “Character;” *The Living Handbook of Narratology*; Margolin, “Character,” 52-6; 116-9; W. Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*, 116-22; Taylor, *Shakespeare Criticism*, 48-57.

³⁹ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 14.

⁴⁰ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 43-5, 47; cf. 56-62.

both mimic real people and serve the needs of the literary text specifically to the character of Abner. While Koenig's study only examined Bathsheba's "human" characteristics — which Blakey Vermeuele recognizes is why we are drawn to literary characters — the present study discusses both how Abner's character resembles a real person in the ways he acts, speaks, and is described and how he functions within the narrative discourse to further the plot, communicate the message of the author(s), and enhance our understanding of other characters, particularly Joab.⁴¹ Although Abner's character is minor in 1 Samuel, we show that there is much to glean from Abner's character space even there. Because Abner's character space always interacts with Saul's in 1 Samuel — there is not a single scene in which Abner's character appears without Saul's — we show, by examining how his character space interacts with Saul's, that Abner's character provides us with a point of contrast for understanding how well other characters accept and are accepted by Saul. Likewise, we show that Abner is an extension of Saul's character that helps to bridge the stories of Israel both under Saul and after him.

Our study of Abner's character space becomes pronounced and nuanced in 2 Samuel, for Abner takes up more narrative space there and his character is built off of what occurs in 1 Samuel. As he had been an extension of Saul's character in 1 Samuel, we show that his character now becomes the replacement for Saul's in 2 Samuel. His character also emerges as the protagonist in 2 Samuel 2–3, thereby pushing David's character into the background like Amnon's and Absalom's characters do in 2 Samuel 13–18. Indeed, his character replaces David's for much of 2 Samuel 2–3, and only by fading to the background of the story does David gain both control of a united kingdom and the support of Saul's former subjects without having to usurp such control; had David seized the throne from Ishbosheth, David would be guilty of

⁴¹ See Vermeuele, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*, especially, 1-20, 21-6, 244-9.

shedding the blood his fellow kinsmen. Because Abner is Saul's replacement and because of his narrative function in these chapters, however, the text clearly shows that David is innocent of any and all wrongdoing against the house of Saul. Despite his minor status within the books of Samuel, therefore, this dissertation shows that Abner's character is indispensable to the narrative.

Assumptions and Definitions

Throughout this dissertation, we make various assumptions about the nature and coherence of the text that must be stated upfront. First, we approach the text as literature rather than as historiography. A key corollary of this approach is that all that can be known about the character of Abner is present in the texts as written; even if there were other accounts of Abner's stories — from the northern kingdom, for example — they would be, at best, of supplemental help in providing historical context for the texts under consideration, for we are only interested in the Abners of MT and LXX not in the historical person. Plus, even if the historical Abner had been ruthless, violent, and tyrannical, unless the texts under consideration present him as such, we cannot conclude that the Abners of either MT or LXX are cruel characters. While we reference historical and cultural information periodically, we do so in order to understand the historical contexts in which the texts arose and what is implicitly assumed by the texts in their depictions of Abner. For example, because the roles and duties of a שר־צבָּא and an ἀρχιστρατηγός are not delineated in the biblical texts, examining how these terms may have been understood historically helps us better understand what the text implies about Abner's character and position within the house of Saul. We are in no way interested in reconstructing the historical Abner.

Second, based upon the work of Steven McKenzie, we assume that sections of the books of Samuel in which Abner appears are mostly pro-David narratives.⁴² The importance of this assumption is seen when we discuss the circumstances surrounding Abner's death and the transition of power from Saul's house to David's in chapters 4 and 5. While Stephen McKenzie and others have noted that the text so clearly, forcefully, and repeatedly exonerates David from any participation in Abner's death so as to cast suspicion upon the historical David's involvement, we underscore that the intent of the text is indeed to exonerate David, and thus, as a literary character, we should conclude that David of the texts is innocent of Abner's death and is in good and peaceful relations with Abner.

Third, despite there being numerous textual problems in the narratives (e.g., Saul's age, Goliath's height, 1 Samuel 17, etc.), we assume that the text is overall coherent and uniform in its "final form." By final form, we mean the texts as presented in the Leningrad Codex for MT and Vaticanus for LXX, and we read both of these versions as if they were single literary wholes with continuous plots, consistent characters, etc. While we acknowledge that MT in particular went through significant development, the textual history of the stories is not relevant for the study at hand. This assumption allows us to discuss and analyze the character of Abner in 1 and 2 Samuel as if he were a single, coherent "entity" even if his character appears in texts from various sources. In other words, whatever the textual history of the books of Samuel may have been, in its present form, the narrative is readable and understandable despite the difficulties and challenges posed by the current form of the text.

⁴² McKenzie, *King David*, 30-6. See also McCarter, "The Apology of David," 493-9 and especially 499-502; Weiser, "Die Legitimation des Königs David," 325-54; and Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, 73-6.

Finally, several terms and phrases need to be defined before we can proceed with our study. The first two relate to the ancient versions studied in this dissertation: Masoretic Text (MT) and Septuagint (LXX). For the purposes of this study MT refers to *Codex Leningradensis* as presented in *BHS* and LXX refers to *Codex Vaticanus* as presented in the *Cambridge Septuagint*. Only periodically will we refer to other ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts and then only when the text critical issues lead to significant exegetical differences. The term “story world” indicates only the universe created by the words of the narrative under discussion, namely the books of Samuel in MT and LXX, and by discussing how “Abner mimics a real person,” we refer to the ways that his literary character is described as if he were a real person who actually lived, breathed, and died within his story worlds.⁴³ We acknowledge the characters we discuss herein exist only within MT and LXX and that the Abner of MT is a different character from the Abner of LXX even though they share the same English name and perform similar actions. Finally, in discussing Abner as a “literary device,” we mean the ways that Abner’s character, in whatever version, functions to further the plot, intent, and message of the narrative. While he, like all literary characters, is described as if he were a real person, because he only exists within his story world, he really is just “black marks on the page.” As such, his character only exists for the purposes of the author of the text; were his character completely superfluous to the story, he would likely have been omitted altogether. Because he was not omitted by the author, however, we can discuss how his character furthers the plot, enhances our understanding of other characters, accomplishes the purposes of the text or pericopes (or not), and enhances the message of the story.

⁴³ Cf. Bal (*Narratology*, 80) who says, “The character is not a human being but resembles one.”

Outline of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, we use MT as the point of departure for forming an understanding of the character of Abner in the ancient versions. The bulk of the study, therefore, centers on the details of Abner's character in MT (chapters 2-4) followed by a chapter outlining the differences between LXX and MT (chapter 5). In the chapters that follow we devote most of our attention to how Abner's character mimics a real person, and we approach the text both sequentially — discussing pericopes in the order in which they appear in the text — and thematically — discussing themes holistically as they appear within each pericope. Each chapter ends with a summary of findings including how Abner's character functions as a literary device within the text(s) just examined.

In chapter 2, we examine Abner's character as presented in 1 Samuel of MT. While his character is only mentioned in a handful of places (1 Sam 14:50-51; 17:55–18:5; 20:25; and 26:1-16), there is much to learn about his character. In 14:50-51, we rely entirely on the ways Abner is directly characterized by the title, patronymic, and familial relation to Saul stated by the text. From 17:55–18:55, a passage not extant in LXX, we discuss the implications of Abner's presence at the Goliath episode, his duties as Saul's general, his budding relationship with David, and how his character relates to Saul and Saul's insanity. First Samuel 20:25 provides us with a glimpse into the uniqueness of Abner's role within Saul's court, and we examine how Abner's character space can be used to illuminate other characters. From 1 Sam 26:1-16, we further discuss Abner's role and duties within Saul's court, study the implications of his question to David in v. 14, and examine how David's direct characterization of Abner in vv. 15-16 illuminates Abner's character. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of how Abner's "absence" from key military scenes in 1 Samuel affects our understanding of his character.

Chapter 3 examines Abner's character as he is presented in 2 Samuel 2 of MT. Because Abner is featured so prominently in 2 Samuel 2, we have far more opportunity to explore his characterization there than we do in 1 Samuel. In our discussion of 2 Sam 2:8-11, we explore the implications of Abner as king-maker and how his title is used in this section. Second Samuel 2:12-32 provides us with the first glimpse into how Abner acts and reacts on the battlefield as well as plentiful opportunities to witness him speak. This section of the dissertation, therefore, discusses Abner's competency as a military commander, his rhetorical skill, his physical attributes, and the positive and negative aspects of his "personality." Significant attention is paid to the intent and purpose of the bizarre twelve-on-twelve contest from vv. 14-16, for how we understand Abner's intention there influences how we understand his character as a whole. Finally, we discuss how Abner's character begins to provide us with a point of reference for our understanding of Joab's character later in 2 Samuel.

Chapter 4 continues the examination of Abner in 2 Samuel of MT by focusing attention on Abner as portrayed in 2 Samuel 3. This chapter is divided into four subsections. In the first (vv. 6-11), we discuss the implications of Abner's increased power within Saul's kingdom, his relationship with Rizpah, his use of rhetoric and questions in his response to Ishbosheth, and his threat to abdicate to David's kingdom. In the second section (vv. 12-21), we look at Abner's ability to gain support, from both Saul's and David's houses, in his defection to David, his continued use of rhetoric, and the manner in which he accomplishes his goals. In the third section, (3:22-4:1) we discuss how other characters speak about Abner both before and after his death, Abner's decision to turn aside with Joab, and how the text's last words about Abner influence our understanding of his character. The final section shows how Abner's character

again continues to illuminate our understanding of Joab's character and, more importantly, how Abner's character is indispensable to the plot and message of 2 Samuel 1–5.

In chapter 5, we finally turn to the text of LXX and compare its characterization of Abner with that of MT as discussed in chapters 2 through 4 of this dissertation. This chapter follows the same general structure and approach as those that precede it, but significant attention is given to those places — both big and small — wherein LXX differs from MT. Even slight deviations of the wording of LXX from that of MT, such as his title, lead us to different conclusions about his characterization. Moreover, significant deviations, such as his conversation with Memphibosthe instead of King Jebosthe (= Ishbosheth in MT) in 2 Samuel 3 and the lack of 1 Sam 17:55–18:5 in LXX, prove to the reader that the Abner of LXX is not the same “person” as that of MT. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to show that despite containing similar stories, MT and LXX present two different Abners who are both similar to and different from each other.

Finally, in our conclusion, we summarize our findings from the previous chapters and make recommendations for future research. We also show how the similarities between the two versions show how Abner's character develops from 1 Samuel to 2 Samuel, but because of Samuel's complicated textual history, we cannot discuss how Abner's character develops from one version to another; we simply catalog the differences. We also show how Abner's literary functions are nearly identical in both versions despite the variations between MT and LXX with regard to Abner's character.

CHAPTER 2

ABNER'S CHARACTER IN 1 SAMUEL OF THE MASORETIC TEXT

In this chapter we examine the significance of Abner's character space within the text of 1 Samuel of MT. We first look at the biblical texts in which Abner appears, highlighting the ways in which Abner's character resembles a real person and how he functions as a literary device, especially in relation to other characters. Abner's character is introduced about half-way through the book of 1 Samuel in 14:50 and is only mentioned in ten total verses (14:50-51; 17:55-57; 20:25; 26:5, 7, 14-15). He does very little and does not greatly affect the plot, yet his character is not disposable. As a close relative of Saul who holds a high position within Saul's court, he is an important figure within the kingdom, and as a literary device, he acts as an extension of Saul's character and signals important negative changes in Saul's reign and allows us to better understand the characters around him. Next, we briefly examine the scenes in which we would expect to find Abner's character to be mentioned because of his title, status, and connection to Saul but is not. Because Abner is the head of Saul's army, we might expect his character to be mentioned in passages that narrate Saul's military escapades, so we explore both how inferring his presence in some of these passages might modify our understanding of his character and how his absence from these scenes actually characterizes him. With these two major tasks completed, we conclude that Abner is a minor and not well-developed character in 1 Samuel, but he displays aspects of power, wit, and strong allegiance to Saul. He is not a purely flat character in 1 Samuel, but his character does not take up enough narrative space to develop into a fully rounded character either. As a literary device, Abner's character space always intersects with Saul's thereby suggesting that Abner is an extension of Saul's character, and he is also featured in negative, transitional stories about Saul and Saul's kingdom. Thus, his character

is used to emphasize the slow collapse of Saul's power and kingdom. Finally, the placement of Abner's character in the text oftentimes illuminates our understanding of other characters and highlights the distance between Saul and other important characters, especially David and Jonathan.

Abner in 1 Samuel 14

Beginning in 1 Samuel 8, where the people demand Samuel give them a king, the narrative is chiefly concerned with Saul, the first king of Israel, and the text narrates several of his battles against Israel's enemies. The exciting stories of his victories come to a momentary pause in 14:49-51 with a list of Saul's family members, and the story proper resumes in 14:52 where Saul becomes engaged in the infamous battle against the Amalekites. Ralph W. Klein sees this list as the capstone on the positive section of Saul's reign, and he notices, "From chap 15 on, Saul himself is rejected, and the remainder of the book is full of his paranoid and ultimately unsuccessful struggle with David."¹ The list is, therefore, strategically placed.

It is at this significant transitional point in the plot where we are introduced to the character of Abner (vv. 50-51). While very little is said about him here, what is said is important and shapes our expectations of how Abner's might act and function later in the story.

Specifically, we learn two facts about who Abner is: he is the head of Saul's army (שֶׁר־צָבָא) and the son of Ner (בֶּן־נֵר), who is said to be a close relative of Saul at the end of v. 51. This little bit of information, however, raises a few preliminary questions: what was the nature of Saul's army and what was the presumed role of the שֶׁר־צָבָא in that army? who is Ner? how is

¹ R. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 143.

Abner related to Saul? and what does Abner's relation to Saul imply about his role in Saul's court?

The text confronts us, however, with several problems that prevent easy answers to these questions. First, the term **שֶׁר־צַבָּא** is not used in relation to Israel's military before Abner's introduction; the only occurrences of this term before 1 Sam 14:51 are in reference to non-Israelites who perform few actions in the text. We have some idea of what the responsibilities of a king or a judge are because the text gives us numerous stories about Samson, Ehud, Gideon, and even David, Solomon, and Josiah, but the text does not give us enough narrative space featuring a **שֶׁר־צַבָּא** for us to form even a preliminary theory about such an office. The facts that David's army is more clearly defined in the text and that Joab, a character with significant narrative space under David, carries the title of **שֶׁר־צַבָּא** allow us to better understand David's military system and Joab's role as **שֶׁר־צַבָּא** within it.² However, we cannot simply impose David's military system onto Saul's even though both occur in the same narrative, for David's organization appears innovative within the Israel of the story world.³

Second, although the title **שֶׁר־צַבָּא** appears in reference to non-Israelites, it does not feature prominently enough in HB for us to form a general hypothesis about its function. Only a handful of men ever receive this title in HB. Among them are Phicol (Gen 21:22, 32; 26:26), the commander of YHWH's army (Jos 5:14, 15), Sisera (Jdg 4:2-7; 1 Sam 12:9), Shobach (2 Sam 10:16, 18; 1 Chr 19:16, 18), Joab and Amasa (2 Sam 19:13; 1 Ki 1:19; 2:5, 32; 11:15, 21; 1 Chr

² See Herzog and Gichon, *Battles of the Bible*, 109-16.

³ De Vaux (*Ancient Israel*, 213) notes that historically, military systems and organizations change very rapidly, and thus, even if the text did not state that David makes significant changes to the army, it would likely be anachronistic to infer a later system applied to an earlier period.

27:34), Omri (1 Kin 16:16), Namaan (2 Ki 5:1), Jashobeam and others (1 Chr 27:2-15).

Nebuchadnezzar also has Judah's unnamed commander executed when he captures Jerusalem (2

Ki 25:18-21; Jer 52:25), and in Daniel's vision, the little horn defeats the **שֶׁר־הַצְּבָא**, which

likely refers to God himself (Dan 8:11).⁴ Nowhere are the duties of these **שֶׁרִים** neatly

delineated, and there are not enough narratives surrounding these men to give us a clear picture

of what their responsibilities are. The most information we have on any of these leaders is in

regards to Joab, but we do not learn that he is a **שֶׁר־צְבָא** until 2 Sam 19:14 when David makes

Amasa Joab's replacement (cf. 17:25). Likewise, even the narrative about Sisera in Judges 4 is

insufficient for us to make inferences about Abner.⁵ In short, the Biblical literature is simply too

gapped for us to form a clear picture of the nature and duties of the **שֶׁר־צְבָא** from the biblical

text alone.

Third, that Abner has not appeared in any of Saul's military campaigns so far prohibits us from being able to infer anything about him at all. The text is gapped both in what is expected of a **שֶׁר־צְבָא** in general and what is expected of Abner in particular. If Abner's title implies that he is a significant military commander, his absence from 1 Samuel 10–14 is rather odd, because we would expect a military official to be engaged in military action. Thus, it might be reasonable to

⁴ See discussions in Seow, *Daniel*, 123-4; Newsom, *Daniel*, 264.

⁵ Sisera, commander of the Canaanite army under Jabin, has been the only **שֶׁר־צְבָא** to have been given significant space in the Deuteronomistic History so far (Judges 4), and he clearly commands both infantry and chariots in battle against Barak (Jdg 4:6-7, 13-16). We are not given a full census of the total number of troops in Sisera's army, but the fact that he has 900 chariots with him in battle suggests that he commands a large division of the Canaanite army. While this may provide us with a preliminary sketch of what a **שֶׁר־צְבָא** does, we must be cautious for two reasons. First, Sisera is not an Israelite, so we cannot assume that the title is identical in both nations without further evidence. Second, the single story in Judges 4 does not provide us with much information other than that Sisera led a large contingent of troops into battle without the presence of his king. Thus, even in the case of Sisera, we learn almost nothing that we can apply to Abner.

conclude that Saul's **שֶׁר־צָבָא** has duties and responsibilities far removed from warfare, but the text is clearly more focused on Saul's actions and victories than on Abner's role and development. We, therefore, cannot simply assume that Abner's roles are more political or administrative than martial simply based upon his absence from military engagements.

Despite these problems, we attempt to arrive at an understanding of Abner's role within Saul's court and family by examining what we can about the nature of Saul's army as presented in 1 Samuel, comparing Abner's title with similar titles in other ANE societies, tracing Abner's ancestry as presented in 1 Samuel, and discussing the implications of Abner's familial relation to Saul. It is to these topics we now turn.

The Nature of Saul's Army and Abner's Role within the Army

We begin by examining Saul's military structure as presented in 1 Samuel and within its historical context so that we can begin to understand what Abner's duties as a **שֶׁר־צָבָא** are.

While the narrative has depicted numerous battles prior to Saul's rise to power — especially in the conquest and judges stories — it does not mention a standing army in Israel prior to Saul.

Instead, the judges appear in the text as local military leaders who rally the people of their regions to combat a common enemy only when necessary.⁶ In 1 Sam 13:2, however, Saul

seemingly establishes the first standing army when he appoints two **אֱלֹפִים** in Michmash and one in Gibeon.⁷ Unfortunately, the text is gapped by not describing the nature or makeup of this

⁶ Scholars have surmised that prior to Saul, Israel's defenses and military exploits were entirely based upon a tribal model where a charismatic warrior was able to rally troops for specific purposes (e.g. Gideon in Judges 7–8). Thus, under the judges, the military was more of a people's militia. Oded Borowski (*Daily Life*, 36) describes this makeup: "Every adult male was expected to participate when he was summoned. The militia was recruited by family and clan, and certain individuals were appointed as leaders of the units... The overall leaders were known as **שֹׁפְטִים** (judges)." Cf. King, "Warfare in the Ancient Near East," 274; de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 214.

⁷ King, "Warfare in the Ancient Near East," 274; cf. Bar, *Israel's First King*, 92-103.

army in any detail other than numbers and location, and thus it is unclear whether Saul's new army has an official structure, hierarchy, or center of operations. The text also fails to state whether these soldiers receive any form of regimented training or whether military service is mandatory. Therefore, from what we can gather from the text as written, this first "official" army may be composed mostly of untrained mercenaries rather than well-organized citizen soldiers. For this reason, Roland de Vaux recognizes significant continuity between Saul and the judges despite his title being called מֶלֶךְ ("king") not שֹׁפֵט ("judge").⁸ Indeed, there are several similarities between Saul and the judges: the spirit of God rushes upon (צָלַח) Saul (1 Sam 10:10) just as it does with Samson (Jdg 14:6, 19; 15:14) and comes upon (הִיָּה) Jephthah (11:29) and Othniel (6:34), and Saul becomes a great military leader who leads his people in defeating the enemies of Yhwh (1 Sam 11:11; 14:47; etc.) like the judges before him. Thus, the literary continuity between the judges and Saul is clear.

Nevertheless, Saul's army in 1 Samuel 13 is better structured than those seen in Judges. Saul organizes his army by allocating one thousand troops to his son Jonathan while he leads the other two thousand himself (1 Sam 13:2-3), thereby establishing the first hints at military rank in the text. It is also noteworthy that Saul appoints David the leader of a thousand (שֶׁר־אֶלֶף) later

⁸ De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 215-6. Diana Edelman (*King Saul*, 60) sees Saul acting as a stereotypical judge in his battle against the Ammonites at Jabesh-Gilead and argues (pp. 38-41, 67-8) that the people's request in 1 Samuel 8 is for the new king to assume traditional responsibilities of a judge in addition to his kingly duties. Paul Borgman (*David, Saul and God*, 21-2) compares Saul in 1 Sam 10:27-11:15 to Samson and Gideon in how he rises "to an occasion of crisis with charismatic leadership." Moshe Garsiel (*1 Samuel*, 78) notes that the description of Saul's father as a גִּבּוֹר חַיִּל ("Great man of strength") links Saul to Gideon or Jephthah (cf. Jud 6:12; 11:1). Albrecht Alt ("Monarchy in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah," 241-259, esp. 243-4) provides a list of similarities between Saul and the judges, most notably his divine commission, his spontaneous calling to defeat Israel's enemies, and the defensive nature of his calling. Cf. Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 110-1; Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 137-9; and McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 205-6. Amelie Kuhrt (*Ancient Near East*, 443-47), however, does not believe that Saul was one of the judges. Whether we should consider Saul a judge or not, we must note the similarities between him and his army and those of the judges.

in the story (18:14; cf. 1 Sam 8:2; 2 Sam 18:1). Unfortunately for our purposes, the text does not present any more information about the army's formal structure under Saul. Not until 2 Samuel, where David's army is clearly better organized (cf. 2 Sam 8:15-18; 18:1-2; 23:8-39) do we see Israel's army more closely resemble those of ANE nations.⁹

From the information the text does provide for us about how Saul's military functions in the midst of battle, we are justified to conclude that Saul himself is in complete control of his army, a structure which parallels the historical reality in many Ancient Near Eastern kingdoms (e.g. Hittites, Assyrians, et al.).¹⁰ For instance, in the battles prior to 1 Sam 14:49-51, the text presents only Saul and Jonathan commanding the troops, planning strategies, and delegating responsibilities, and in all of Israel's victories, Saul alone gets the credit despite the contributions of his subordinates.¹¹ Abner is not mentioned in these texts, and nowhere else does the text state how many men Abner commands, how his leadership differs from Saul's on the battlefield, or under what circumstances (if any!) Abner might participate in battle. Therefore, while Abner's title seems to imply that Abner's character is a top-tier general or field marshal with great authority, the lack of description of Saul's army and lack of narrative space devoted to Abner prior to 1 Sam 14:51 prohibits us from jumping to any specific conclusions about his role within Saul's army. When Abner is introduced, the army is not well defined by the text, and the lack of description regarding a hierarchical structure within the military, including officers above or below Jonathan, means that Abner's function as שר־צבָּא within this army is unclear.

⁹ Herzog and Gichon, *Battles of the Bible*, 87, 109.

¹⁰ See discussion below.

¹¹ The only other person who receives credit for defeating Israel's enemies is Jonathan when he bests the Philistines in 1 Samuel 14.

Towards an Understanding of the Roles and Duties of a שר־צבא

In order to approach an understanding of the roles and duties of a שר־צבא in Saul's court, we investigate two similar but distinct topics. We consider first other Ancient Near Eastern nations and their military structures, focusing particularly on the roles of kings and high military commanders within those structures, and then we study the responsibilities of Joab, David's שר־צבא, as presented in 2 Samuel. From this two-tiered approach, we are able to make some tentative conclusions about the roles and duties of a שר־צבא from which we can make informed assumptions about Abner's character and responsibilities.

We begin by turning to other nations similar in geography and culture to Israel, but unfortunately, our information about military structure in the Ancient Near East (ANE) is quite limited. For example, we know almost nothing about the military organization in Sumer, despite its 2000 years of fighting, and the same is true for Sargon and his army.¹² Regarding ancient Egypt, while numerous military titles and ranks have been found on inscriptions, it is still difficult for us to determine exactly what the duties associated with these ranks were.¹³ In addition, while many other Ancient Near Eastern nations gave specific titles to their military leaders, we do not have any military manuals accompanying these titles. Thus, scholars have had to make inferences from the descriptions of battles found in inscriptions and narratives provided from other ANE kingdoms. From the limited information we do have, however, we can arrive at several conclusions that relate to our study of Abner.

¹² Gabriel and Metz, *From Sumer to Rome*, 7-9; cf. Goetze, "Warfare in Asia Minor," 126.

¹³ Schulman, "Military Organization in Pharaonic Egypt," 289-90.

First, Ancient Near Eastern kings were universally assumed to be in complete control of their respective armies, normally leading their troops in battle and only occasionally delegating leadership to lesser officials. Several examples will suffice to prove the point. Throughout the Middle and New Kingdom eras of ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh himself acted as the supreme ruler in every sense of the term; he was the chief executive officer, primary defender of the nation, appointer of all lesser rulers (nomarchs), etc. He would more often than not personally lead his troops into battle, only delegating such responsibilities to lesser officers when necessary, such as when he had to fight on two fronts.¹⁴ Likewise, the annals of Hattuli I recount the Hittite king's military campaigns in Syria, Turkey, etc., and in each case, he alone takes credit for leading his troops into victorious battles.¹⁵ Even the Assyrian Empire, which was divided into sub-regions similar to the Old Kingdom nomes of Egypt, placed full military leadership into the hands of the kings. The governors of each sub-region claimed full martial authority of their respective regions, but the overarching king ultimately held this responsibility for the entire empire. These governors and other Assyrian officials also participated in intelligence-gathering missions along their borders in order to support the overarching purposes of the emperor.¹⁶ Philistia and Canaan, which did not have strong centralized governments, had military structures similar to those of the Assyrian sub-regions; the rulers of the various city-states within the "nation" held

¹⁴ Shulman ("Military Organization in Pharaonic Egypt," 292-3) comes to this conclusion from the textual accounts of the battles of Megiddo and Qadesh; see also his *Military Rank*, 44, which is a more thorough investigation of New Kingdom military organization based upon inscriptions, graffiti, and texts (see pp. 143-4 for a list of sources). Cf. Gabriel and Metz, *From Sumer to Rome*, 11, 14; Leprohon, "Royal Ideology," 273, 278, 281-2; Stillman and Tallis, *Armies of the Ancient Near East*, 7. Kuhrt (*Ancient Near East*, I/218) notes that after the expulsion of the Hyksos there was a need for a permanent military administration, including a "great army general."

¹⁵ See Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, I/241-2.

¹⁶ Eph'al ("On Warfare and Military Control," 99-103) comes to this conclusion based upon study of numerous Assyrian royal inscriptions; Gabriel and Metz, *From Sumer to Rome*, 41; cf. Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, II/505-6, 510, who cites Esarhaddon's vassal treaties; Saggs ("Assyrian Warfare," 146, 151) who cites *HABL* and *TCL III* for support; and Spaulding and Nickerson, *Ancient and Medieval Warfare*, 21-3.

ultimate responsibility for commanding and leading their armies.¹⁷ It is clear, therefore, that within ANE, the highest military official was the king himself in every nation that had a monarch, and he regularly led his armies into battles. In those nations that lacked a monarch, the responsibility of commanding the military and leading troops into battle fell to leaders of smaller regions or city-states. In every instance, however, the highest political ruler was also the highest military ruler, and whenever he was able, that ruler would personally lead the army on the battlefield. We should not be surprised, therefore, to see that, while Abner has a lofty title within Saul's court, he does not receive any credit for fighting or commanding in battle; Saul receives all the credit just like his ANE royal counterparts.

Second, in other ANE kingdoms, high-ranking military officials had diverse responsibilities within the kingdom. They frequently held administrative, civil, and even religious duties, and they would also occasionally lead armies in lieu of the king. Irnanna, for example, was a military general in Mari, but he was also a governor and a priest of Enki.¹⁸ In discussing administrative texts found at the Review Palace at Kalkhu, Stephanie Dalley summarizes the structure of the Assyrian army from the eighth century onward, and she sees many different officers with overlapping roles. She concludes that the *rab ša rēšē* (possibly the “chief eunuch”) led the central elite unit of the army, the *rab emuqi* (“commander of forces”) or one of the two *turtanus* led the army in the king's stead, and the *rab šaqê* (chief cupbearer) was

¹⁷ See discussion in Gabriel, *Great Armies of Antiquity*, 100-1, 105.

¹⁸ Hamblin (*Warfare in the Ancient Near East*, 96-7, 192-6, 210-1) bases his conclusions on royal inscriptions and letters ; cf. Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 1/36-7, whose insights are based upon the “Vulture Stele” of Eanatum of Lagash. See also Gabriel, *Great Armies of Antiquity*, 50-8; and Dalley “Ancient Mesopotamian Military Organization,” 414-6, 418.

occasionally called upon to lead in battle (cf. 2 Kgs 18:17-37).¹⁹ We see similar structures in Egypt. The overarching king of the Old Kingdom would commission an overseer of soldiers, or general (*imi-r mšr*), who was also the commander-in-chief of his own nome, and this general's duties included civil administration such as overseeing the forced labor or advising the king.²⁰ By the Twelfth Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom there was a generalissimo over the entire army (e.g. Nesmontu and Mentuhotpe), who likely functioned more as a Minister of War, an administrative and advisory position rather than as a commander on the field, which was usually undertaken by either the Pharaoh or a lower ranking general (*imi-r mšr*).²¹ So common was it that one person held political, martial and oftentimes religious responsibilities that it would seem that dividing these spheres of influence may be anachronistic. Therefore, when we learn that Abner holds a high position within Saul's military, we should not limit our expectations of his responsibilities to just martial areas. His title may imply he has responsibilities related to administrative, political, or even religious areas like other ANE military commanders. More information is needed before we can be certain, but we should not limit our expectations of Abner to only the martial sphere. Based upon the similarity of his title to those in other ANE nations, we expect his duties to be multifaceted.

¹⁹ Dalley, "Ancient Mesopotamian Military Organization," 418, 420-1. See also Gabriel, *Great Armies of Antiquity*, 130-7; Stillman and Tallis, *Armies of the Ancient Near East*, 21, 27, 30. For one of the most comprehensive studies of the Assyrian army, despite its age, see Manitius, "Das stehende Heer," 97-149.

²⁰ Leprohon, "Royal Ideology," 278-80; cf. Gabriel and Metz, *From Sumer to Rome*, 10-1; Faulkner, "Egyptian Military Organization," 32-4; Hamblin, *Warfare in the Ancient Near East*, 336-40, 354; Garbiel, *Great Armies of Antiquity*, 60-1; Stillman and Tallis, *Armies of the Ancient Near East*, 5-6.

²¹ Faulkner, "Egyptian Military Organization," 36-7. He cites numerous primary sources in his description of ancient Egyptian military. Cf. Hamblin, *Warfare in the Ancient Near East*, 418-22; Gabriel, *Great Armies of Antiquity*, 61-2.

Third, as ANE kingdoms became more and more centralized, the military structures of each kingdom became more clearly defined, hierarchical, and organized.²² As the nomic structure of the Old and Middle Kingdoms in Egypt gave way to a more centralized government in the New Kingdom, for example, we see that generals, marshals, and other high-ranking officials performed solely military functions.²³ In Assyria, as we will see below, many important posts within the kingdom were originally reserved for the king's close friends or relatives. Over time, however, these posts became competitive, and only the most capable and well-proven men were appointed to the high-ranking positions.²⁴ With regard to Babylon, as noted by Kuhrt's study of sources from Sippar and Larsa, Hammurabi organized his government and military more and more as he acquired more and more power.²⁵ Even as early as Sumer and Akkad, a full-time standing army with strict organization was only reached as power was increasingly acquired by a centralized government. Prior to such centralization, military power was localized, consisted mostly of mercenaries, and fell under the chiefs of various city-states who then owed

²² The fact that the text presents Saul as ruling over a loosely unified group of tribes is significant for our understanding of Abner. As Richard Gabriel (*The Great Armies of Antiquity*, 1-3, 112) and Stanislav Andreski (*Military Organization*, 91-104) have observed, military structure becomes well organized when the social and political powers are more fully defined. As power becomes more and more centralized in one governing authority, the ranks and structures of the military become more rigid and standardized. Thus, since Saul's kingdom is not fully developed and certainly not centralized — the various tribes appear only to be beginning to relinquish control — we should not be surprised that Abner's title is difficult to define with absolute certainty. Since David more definitively unites the kingdom and establishes a permanent capital, it is not surprising that the text devotes more space and explanation to his military organization and commanders.

²³ Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt*, 70-1. However, some military officers still maintained their civic functions. See Schulman, *Military Rank*, 53-6 and Gabriel, *Great Armies of Antiquity*, 63-9 for examples.

²⁴ Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, II/506; Cf. Eph'al ("On Warfare and Military Control," 100-1) who notes that the king's frequent military exploits led to his being absent from his capital for significant lengths of time, which in turn led to significant administrative innovations within the Assyrian nation.

²⁵ Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, I/109-11. See also Harris ("Centralization under Hammurabi," 730-1), who has examined various Babylonian Tablets at the British Museum, for a brief discussion of various officers under his regime.

military aid to the king only when requested.²⁶ The result of such organization was that military and other governing positions became better defined with specific duties and jurisdictions. Early in a nation's history, similar titles or positions may not have included clear and distinct responsibilities, and those serving in such positions may have served at the pleasure and whim of the king, doing whatever the king required. Because Saul's "professional" army is still in its infancy stages, as we saw above, it is unsurprising that there is almost no information about its structure or about its officials. Such poor information simply mirrors the lack of organization in other budding ANE nations. For Abner, the above observations mean that we should assume his roles are numerous and that he is expected to do whatever Saul requires of him.

Fourth, nepotism played a large role in most appointments to high-ranking positions within ANE, especially early in a nation's history. It was very common in antiquity for the king (or other ruler) to appoint his son, brother, uncle, etc. to important military and political positions. Such was certainly the case in Egypt, Assyria, and Hatti.²⁷ For example, King Suppiluliuma appointed his sons Arnuwanda and Sharri-Kushuh as commanders of independent armies in the Syrian region. Also, there were other lesser officers (e.g. dignitaries, gentlemen, and overseers of military heralds), who may or may not have been relatives of the king, but when the commander-in-chief was not the king himself, he was likely one of the king's family members.²⁸ As we will soon see, Abner is Saul's cousin, which likely indicates nepotism is at play, and such information may imply that Abner is not the most skilled or experienced military

²⁶ Hamblin (*Warfare in the Ancient Near East*, 95-6) provides a brief summary of armies before and after Sargon based upon royal inscriptions; see also Gabriel and Metz, *From Sumer to Rome*, 2.

²⁷ Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt*, 73, 269; Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, II/506.

²⁸ Bryce ("Hittites at War," 73-4) cites Goetze's *Die Annalen des Mursilis*; see also Gabriel, *Great Armies of Antiquity*, 72-3; cf. Kuhrt (*Ancient Near East*, I/252-4, 266-70) who provides evidence from "The Deeds of Suppiliuma" (CTH 40) and various Hittite treaties; and Beal, "Hittite Military Organization," 546-7.

commander within the kingdom. While we certainly cannot infer from his relation to Saul that Abner is inept, neither can we infer that he is the most competent soldier and commander within the kingdom. He may be a general, but he is also Saul's close relative.

As we will see throughout our investigation below, Saul's army and Abner's character as presented in 1 Samuel seem to parallel their respective counterparts in ANE. We have already seen that Saul's military structure is not well defined, but from the archaeological evidence we have about other ANE armies, military structures in ANE rarely had strict organization. Plus, since Saul is expected to lead his men into battle and command the army, Abner's lack of narrative space is not surprising since the story is not about him. Finally, we will see Abner perform tasks that are technically not martial in nature, as was common in ANE.

The Role of Joab in David's Court

Having examined the role of high level military commanders in ANE, we turn now to Joab, David's **שַׂר־צְבָא** (2 Sam 19:14; 1 Ki 1:19), and investigate how the text portrays him as a military and political leader. Upon investigating Joab's role under David, we see that Joab's duties parallel those of other ANE military commanders. First, while in many cases King David fights his own battles (e.g., 2 Sam 5; 8; 10; etc.), in some instances Joab fights and commands in David's stead (e.g., 2 Sam 2:12-32; 10:7-13; 11:16-17; etc.), and on occasion, Joab acts on David's behalf even when he does not have the king's explicit orders to do so (e.g., 2 Samuel 3:27; 12:26-29; and 18:14-15), thereby showing that he has the freedom and authority to make decisions on the king's behalf. For instance, when Joab decides to kill both Absalom and Abner, he does so without David's consent (2 Sam 3:24-27, 37) or even against David's explicit orders

(2 Sam 18:5, 10-17), but by killing these men, Joab still benefits David.²⁹ Second, Joab advises David from time to time on political, civil, and military matters. For examples, Joab rebukes David for meeting with Abner (3:24-25); he warns David about consequences for publicly mourning the death of Absalom (19:5-7); and he tells David to conquer Rabbah so that David will receive the credit instead of Joab (11:26-28). In short, Joab is depicted as a military commander, giving orders to his men, as an advisor, giving advice to his king, and as an intermediary between David and the army. Third, Joab, like other ANE officials, is also a close relative of his king. Joab is frequently referred to as one of the sons of Zeruiah throughout 2 Samuel (2:13, 18; 3:39; 8:16; 14:1; etc.), and according to 1 Chronicles, Zeruiah is David's sister (cf. 1 Chr. 2:15-16).³⁰ David's character, therefore, follows his ANE counterparts in picking a close relative to serve as one of his high ranking military official. Unlike other ANE officials, however, Joab never performs any religious duties within the text, and there are no clues in the text that lead us to infer he holds such duties.

Because there are so many parallels between military commanders in other ANE cultures and Joab, it is reasonable to infer that Abner holds responsibilities similar to those of both other ANE leaders and Joab. If so, then we can assume that Abner's duties as שר־הצבָּא include taking direct orders from Saul on the field, advising the king in matters of warfare and politics, performing administrative duties, and leading the men when Saul is not present even if the text never depicts him doing such things. At the least, we should infer that his duties include a subset

²⁹ See Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David*, 67-8, 70-1, for a positive interpretation of Joab's actions in these scenes.

³⁰ See the brief discussion in R. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 142. It is interesting to note that the Samuel text does not explicitly state the familial connection between David and Joab, but the Chronicler does not contradict the Samuel text like it does with regard to Abner's familial relationship to Saul (see discussion below). Thus, we have no reason to reject the Chronicler's information in our discussion of Joab here.

of these roles. In short, by Abner's military title alone, we expect Abner to be a (somewhat) capable soldier, a wise advisor, and/or a competent assistant to the king, both militarily and politically. It is clear, therefore, that his was an indispensable position within Saul's kingdom, and Klein is correct that Abner's prominence within Saul's court is emphasized by the fact that Abner is the only state official under Saul who receives mention in the text, while the story lists many more such positions under David (cf. 2 Sam 8:15-18; 23:8-39).³¹

Abner's Relation to Saul

We next learn about Abner's familial relation to Saul. Abner's introduction tells us that he is **בֶּן־נֵר אַבְנֵר** ("Abner, son of Ner"). His name is most often pointed as **אַבְנֵר** (see 14:51; 17:55, 57; 20:25; 26:5, 7, 14, 15; 2 Sam 2:8, 12, 17; 2 Sam 3:6, 11, 21; etc.), which carries a bit of irony, for this spelling means literally, "Father of Ner," whereas he is introduced as the son of Ner (1 Sam 14:50-51). However, **אַבְנֵר** is probably a defective spelling, and at his introduction, his name includes the *mater lectionis* (**אַבְנֵר**) which means, "My father is Ner." Nevertheless, because the defective spelling is more common in MT, we reflect that spelling throughout the dissertation.

Unfortunately, the text pretty much tells us nothing about Abner's father Ner except his place within Saul's family tree. From v. 51 we learn that Ner is the son of Abiel who we know from 9:1 is the also the father of Kish. As such, Ner and Kish are brothers, thereby making

³¹ R. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 142. Klein's understanding here might be slightly askew, as Jonathan is placed over a third of the standing army, and David later becomes Saul's armor bearer, which may also carry some state responsibilities akin to the roles played by the chief cupbearer or baker in Assyria. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of Abner's status should not go unnoticed. Even if we do not see much more of Abner in the story, his distinct title and introduction within Saul's family list demand a certain reverence from us.

Abner Saul's cousin.³² If this understanding is correct, then the phrase דוד שאול ("Saul's uncle") must refer to Ner not to Abner, and interpreting the verse in this way seems to make the most sense of the text as written. To make this familial relationship even clearer, Ralph Klein has argued that בן-אביאל ("son of Abiel") in v. 51 must be amended to בני-אביאל ("sons of Abiel," following Josephus and some Greek MSS), but such emendation is both unattested in Hebrew and unnecessary.³³ Because 9:1 has already listed Kish as a son of Abiel, we can infer that Ner and Kish are brothers or half-brothers even if the phrase בן-אביאל only modifies Ner in 14:51.

The problem with understanding Abner as Saul's cousin is that the Chronicler presents a different genealogy for Ner. In 1 Chr 8:33, we read ונר הוליד את-קיש וקיש הוליד את-שאול ("And Ner fathered Kish, and Kish fathered Saul;" cf. 9:39). In the Chronicler's version, therefore, Ner is the father of Kish, who is the father of Saul. Although Abner is not actually mentioned in the Chronicler's family list, this genealogy makes Abner Kish's brother and thus Saul's uncle. If we assume that the Chronicler's genealogy is correct, then the phrase דוד שאול in 1 Sam 14:50 would refer to Abner not Ner. Klein acknowledges this possibility but concludes that nothing for certain can be determined.³⁴ Because Chronicles makes no mention of either Abiel, Saul's grandfather, or Abner, the differences between the Samuel and Chronicle texts with respect to this family tree are significant. Scholars have offered several theories to

³² Cf. Vanerkam, "Davidic Complicity," 529; Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 211.

³³ R. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 142.

³⁴ R. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 142.

explain the discrepancies or to harmonize the texts. Diana Edelman, for example, suggests that the Chronicler intentionally edited Saul's genealogy so that Saul could then be related to the post-exilic Gibeonites.³⁵ David Tsumura, on the basis of 1 Chr 9:33-44, concludes that Ner had a brother named Kish and two sons named Abner and Kish, the latter of which was Saul's father.³⁶ James Flanagan, in his study of the chiefs in Israel during the transition to monarchy, approaches the texts from an historical perspective. He, like Diana Edelman, believes the genealogy in Chronicles was modified intentionally:

We see that when Abner lost his life, and consequently neither he nor his lineage continued to figure prominently in the affairs of Israel, his name was dropped from the genealogy [in 1 Chr 9]... Ner, however, was elevated on the vertical line above Kish and Saul, probably because his importance had already been deeply implanted in the consciousness of the community. Even though the reasons for his prominence are no longer evident to us, we might conjecture that as head of a rampage, Ner had been "ranked" because he stood high among the pool of eligibles of all male successors to Saul in the vertical line should have been eliminated.³⁷

While Flanagan's understanding is intriguing, it is speculative and thus difficult to adopt. Nevertheless, whether the genealogy in Chronicles is an edited version of historical facts or not, the family list in 1 Samuel seems to contradict that in 1 Chronicles, and thus, we should be hesitant to impose the Chronicler's version onto the Samuel text. Because our study is focused on Abner as he is presented in the Samuel text, we assume that Abner is Saul's cousin for the purposes of this dissertation.

That Abner is a close relative of Saul, makes his selection as the **שֶׁר־צָבָא** unsurprising, for such nepotistic choices were common in ANE.³⁸ While we can assume he is competent in

³⁵ Edelman, "Ner," *ABD* IV, 1073-4.

³⁶ Tsumura, *First Samuel*, 385.

³⁷ Flanagan, "Chiefs in Israel," 59.

³⁸ Adam Bellow (*In Praise of Nepotism*, 115-28, especially 124-8) has written on the universality of nepotism from basic biological tendencies to modern American culture. In particular, he has briefly traced the large

this post, we cannot assume that he is the best man for the job. For example, David, because he slays Goliath and “has killed tens of thousands,” seems a better candidate to be Saul’s **שֶׁר־צָבָא** than Abner, but David never replaces Abner under Saul.

Conclusions from Abner’s Introduction

From this brief survey of Abner’s potential roles as **שֶׁר־הַצָּבָא** and his relationship to Saul, we make several preliminary conclusions and inferences about his character. Although he holds an important position within Saul’s court, Abner’s absence in the text prior to 1 Sam 14:49-51, especially the stories about Saul’s military victories, is ultimately unsurprising because the king is in charge and takes credit for success, but his absence also emphasizes his minor role within the narrative. That the narrator omits the **שֶׁר־צָבָא**, an important and powerful commander, from his telling of Saul’s battles shows us that the narrator does not in any way intend to give significant attention on Abner at least under Saul. The text here is about Saul, and Abner only “exists” in as much as he is related to and serves Saul. Even at his introduction, Abner’s character is defined by his relation to Saul: he is *Saul’s* cousin and *Saul’s* **שֶׁר־הַצָּבָא**; he is not a significant character in his own right. Therefore, just as most of the rest of the people mentioned in Saul’s brief family list (e.g., Ishvi, Malchishua, Merab, and Ahinoam) are given little to no space later in the narrative, we expect the same to be the case with Abner.³⁹ Nevertheless, his introduction causes us to assume that Abner is a significant and powerful figure within Saul’s kingdom even if we do not expect him to not feature prominently in text. Like

themes of nepotism found within the Hebrew Bible beginning with Abraham and ending with David. He highlights how both David and Saul favor their own families and clans when selecting men of high position.

³⁹ Ishvi may be another name for Ishbosheth who is otherwise not mentioned in 1 Samuel. See Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 120.

Joab and other ANE commanders, Abner likely possesses both military and political power, and as a close relative of Saul, we expect Abner to be devoted to his cousin and king. Because nepotism seems to be present in Saul's choice of Abner, we might expect Abner to be under-qualified for the position, yet because Saul has made mostly good martial decisions up through 1 Samuel 14, we also might expect Abner to be quite competent in this role. Simply put, we are unable to form clear expectations of Abner's abilities without more textual evidence.

Abner in 1 Samuel 17

While Abner is given no narrative space in chapters 15 and 16, including the infamous battle against Agag in chapter 15, the final verses of chapter 17 in MT place Abner at the scene of David's encounter with Goliath.⁴⁰ This chapter ends with a conversation between Saul and Abner about David's identity and heritage, and because this conversation follows immediately after David has slain Goliath and because Saul and Abner have not left the battle scene, we infer that Abner must also be present during the battle itself. Thus, although Abner is not mentioned until the end of the chapter, analyzing the reactions of Saul and "all Israel" (including Abner) to Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 helps us understand Abner's character. In particular, in this section, we see some of Abner's weaknesses as a military commander, an example of what Abner's duties are, and how Abner's character begins to function as an extension of Saul's character.

Abner's Shortcomings

In the first battle scene in which Abner's character is mentioned, he acts in ways inconsistent with a strong military commander by cowering with the rest of Israel's army. This

⁴⁰ This chapter has numerous textual problems that have led to various theories on its compositional history which go beyond the scope of this dissertation. For good discussions of various views see: Auld and Ho, "The Making of David and Goliath," 19-39; Barthélémy, "Trois niveaux d'analyse," 47-54; Gooding, "Literary and Textual Problems, 55-86; Johnson, *Reading David and Goliath*, 9-12; Lust, "Story of David and Goliath," 5-18; Tov, "The Composition of 1 Samuel 16-18," 97-130; and Tov, "The Nature of the Differences between MT and LXX," 19-46.

section of the narrative begins with the Israelite forces encamped across from the Philistines and Goliath standing on a hill taunting the Israelites (17:8-10). The Masoretic Text describes Goliath with terrifying detail: his height is **שש אמות וזרת** (“six cubits and a span,” v. 4), which is ludicrously tall; his armor is made of bronze; and his massive spear is fashioned of iron and shaped like a weaver’s beam.⁴¹ He taunts the Israelites and demands a contest, wherein each opposing side chooses a champion (**איש־הבנים** in 1 Sam 17:4) to fight the battle instead of the entirety of both armies.⁴² By Goliath’s own words, the winner of this contest would gain victory not only for himself but for his entire army; the army of the losing party would become slaves to the victor’s army (vv. 8-9).⁴³ After proposing such representative combat, the Philistine champion then sarcastically reproaches the Israelite army by demanding that Israel provide a suitable foe to face him, which he deems impossible. Roland de Vaux notices how quickly Goliath’s remarks move from challenging to insulting when he says, “De là à des insultes il n’y a qu’un pas, qui est franchi lorsque les deux adversaires s’affronte.”⁴⁴ Goliath’s insults seem well founded since no one from Saul’s army rises up to challenge the giant.

Instead, the text states that Saul and all Israel (**כל־ישראל**, vv. 11, 19) — which because of v. 55 must include Abner — are terrified of the Philistine giant, and no one is willing to fight

⁴¹ Arnold (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 254) sees the description of Goliath’s spear being like a weaver’s beam as reinforcing the mammoth size of Goliath. Others (e.g., Yadin, *The Art of Warfare*, 10; R. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 176; McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 292-3; Hays, “Reconsidering the Height of Goliath, 708-9) understand this language as referring to the shape or function of Goliath’s weapon.

⁴² The word used here (**בנים**) probably denotes someone who goes out in between two armies and fights on his side’s behalf, i.e. a dualist of some sort. See Tsumura, *First Samuel*, 439-40.

⁴³ See discussions of duels in de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 218-9; Yadin, *Art of Warfare*, 266-7.

⁴⁴ “It is only a small step from here to insults, which is what happens when the two adversaries confront each other,” De Vaux, “Les combats singulières,” 498-9.

him because they are dismayed and greatly afraid (יִחַתּוּ וַיִּרְאוּ מְאֹד; v. 11).⁴⁵ In the entirety of HB, this is the only instance in which חָתַת (“to be dismayed”) and יָרָא (“to be afraid”) are used to describe the *current* emotional status of a person or group of people. In the other sixteen places where these two verbs are paired together (Deut 1:21; 31:8; Jos 8:1; 10:25; 1 Chr 22:13; 28:20; 2 Chr 20:15, 17; 32:7; Isa 51:7; Jer 23:4; 30:10; 46:27; Ezek 2:6; 3:9; Mal 2:5), they are always negated and used as words of encouragement (i.e., “Do not be afraid or terrified...”), such as in Jos 10:25; 1 Chr 22:13; 1 Chr 28:20; and 2 Chr 32:7, where they are used as the antonyms to being strong (חָזֵק) and courageous (אַמִּץ). Because Yhwh is with his people to protect and help them prosper and because Yhwh will keep his promises, Israel is often encouraged not to fear or be dismayed (e.g., Deut 1:21; 31:8; Jos 8:1; 2 Chr 20:15, 17).⁴⁶ Instead, Israel should trust Yhwh like David does in this chapter (1 Sam 17:36-37).⁴⁷

Saul and the rest of his army, however, when faced with the threat of Goliath, react with terror, and they eventually flee in fear (v. 24). Therefore, the entirety of Saul’s army, which presumably includes Abner (cf. 17:55), is contrasted with David and portrayed as cowardly and unfaithful. David Gunn rightly notices that the narrator has taken great pains to contrast the approved-by-God and powerful David against the impotent and rejected Saul along with the rest

⁴⁵ Unfortunately, because the text quickly shifts from this battle scene to another introduction of David in 17:55–18:5, many commentators including Ralph Klein and P. Kyle McCarter also allow their attention to be quickly diverted from the terror-stricken Israelites and onto the new Davidic scene. R. Klein (*1 Samuel*, 176), for example, only devotes 1 sentence to verse 11 saying, “Neither the king nor any other Israelite soldier was willing to take up the challenge [of Goliath].” Likewise, McCarter (*1 Samuel*, 295) only offers a one-sentence comment on this verse.

⁴⁶ Isaiah 51:7 is anomalous in that it uses these words to encourage the righteous not to fear the reproach of others rather than physical harm.

⁴⁷ David here actually displays both devotion to Yhwh and selfishness here (cf. v. 26). D. Bosworth (“Evaluating King David,” 201-4, 206), expanding on Lemche (“David’s Rise,” 2-25), shows that David, like other great rulers throughout history, possessed both admirable and loathsome qualities.

of Saul's people.⁴⁸ Because we know from v. 55 that Abner is present for this battle, we infer that Abner too shares in Saul's fear and impotence in the face of the giant. Like Saul and the rest of Israel, Abner does not fight Goliath, select a mighty subordinate to tackle this task, or encourage the people to be strong and courageous.

Nevertheless, Abner's character is not unreasonably cowardly in this story. Instead, Abner's character behaves just like the rest of the people, who act as we would expect given the text's terrifying description of Goliath and his arrogant taunts. It is David's response to Goliath that is surprising and exciting because he of all the characters — due to his youth and size — should die at the hands of a warrior far bigger and more experienced than he.⁴⁹ If the king, his top general, and the rest of his army cannot muster the courage to step out onto the battlefield, why would we expect David, a small shepherd boy, to do so and win? We are not set up so much as to be disappointed in Saul, Israel, or Abner — although we are disappointed in them — as we are to be shocked and elated as the boy-hero conquers the giant enemy. Therefore, while Abner does not do anything commendable during the proposed duel, he also does not do anything worse than any other character, save David. Abner simply follows the rest of Israel by cowering in fear at the sight of a seemingly unconquerable foe.⁵⁰ As a commander of the army of Yhwh's people, we might expect him to lead his troops into battle, take the challenge upon himself, elect a soldier capable of confronting Goliath, or trust in Yhwh's provision, but he does

⁴⁸ Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 79.

⁴⁹ David Jobling (*I Samuel*, 219) notes that the Philistines are presented as stereotypical figures of fear, especially in the middle chapters of 1 Samuel. David is, therefore, one of the few characters to take a direct stand against these fearsome foes. Auld (*I & II Samuel*, 210-1) notes that both Saul and Goliath consider David a mere "lad" (נער), vv. 33, 42) who should be unable to fight let alone conquer the Philistine champion. Auld implies, therefore, that David's ability to both fight and win is surprising to us. Cf. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 51-2.

⁵⁰ Cf. Bar-Erat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 240.

none of those things. Rather than being either deplorable or commendable, therefore, Abner exhibits normal human emotions and responds like every other character, save David.

Abner's Duties as שר־צבא

From 1 Sam 17:55–18:5 we also see Abner act in his capacity as Saul's שר־צבא. First, he has direct access to his king. When Abner appears in this text, he stands beside Saul ready to serve and respond to the king's demands (v. 55). Other than David, he is the only character who stands adjacent to the king in this passage, and David has to be summoned by Saul (17:31) or brought to Saul by Abner (vv. 56-57). His position beside Saul, therefore, confirms that as the שר־צבא, Abner holds a lofty position which has close access to the king and which is expected to receive orders directly from Saul, not through an intermediary. Second, because Saul sends Abner to find out more information about David, it is clear that at least part of Abner's duties is to run errands for Saul and/or be his messenger in some circumstances. That Abner immediately obeys without hesitation also shows his allegiance to Saul which will be a significant aspect of Abner's character later in the narrative, at least until 2 Samuel 3. Third, despite his lofty position as a military commander, Abner may be more expected to perform political or administrative duties than martial. Because the text of 1 Samuel 17 does not portray Saul as expecting Abner specifically to act against Goliath — Saul neither asks Abner to fight nor rebukes him for failing to do so — it does not appear that Abner is expected to *fight* at all. Given that so many ANE commanders had advisory roles, understanding Abner's position as mostly advisory or administrative here is at the least plausible. At the least, Saul's expectations and treatment of Abner in this text confirm that Abner's duties are not exclusively martial.

Abner as an Extension of Saul

We also begin to see from 1 Samuel 17 how Abner's character functions literarily as an extension of Saul's, especially in his attitude towards and relationship to David. Specifically, we note that Abner's character both mirrors and illuminates Saul's character. By studying Abner's character, therefore, we begin to better understand Saul's relationship with David and Saul's seemingly bizarre question in 1 Sam 17:55.

Abner Mirrors Saul

The first way in which we see Abner's character as an extension of Saul's is that everything Abner does in this section mirrors Saul in almost every respect, and he obeys the only command given him by Saul. Just as Saul is terrified of the giant, so is Abner. Just as Saul is ignorant of David's identity (see below), so is Abner. Just as Saul is shocked to learn of David's victory, so is Abner. Furthermore, when Saul asks Abner to find out David's identity, Abner does not just provide the information, he provides David himself, thereby providing Saul with exactly the information Saul wants. Of course, Saul does more in the text than Abner does (e.g., Saul tries to find someone to fight Goliath, gives David his armor, sends David out to fight, etc.), but everything Abner does either is for Saul's benefit or parallels Saul's actions in some way. Nothing in the Goliath episode suggests that Saul is a fearless leader or that he depends upon Yhwh, and the same is true of Abner's character. Abner's character, therefore, is simply an extension of Saul's by either doing Saul's bidding or mimicking Saul's actions.

More significantly, Abner mirrors Saul in his reaction to David after David kills Goliath. In 18:5, when David becomes a military commander within Saul's army, we see Abner's approval of this promotion and a possible suggestion that Abner may share Saul's jealousy towards David later in the story. Abner initially seems content with David's rise in power rather

than being threatened by it. Saul places David over the men of war (עַל אַנְשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה), and this promotion is pleasing in the eyes of all the people and of all the servants of Saul (וַיִּיטֹב בְּעֵינֵי כָּל הָעָם וּבְעֵינֵי כָּל עַבְדֵי שָׁאוּל). Here עַם (“people”) likely refers to the army specifically not the people generally, while עַבְדִּים (“servants”) likely indicates the close associates of Saul. Abner is clearly a member of the former and almost assuredly a member of the latter. Thus, the text suggests that he too not only approves of David’s rise but is quite pleased with David’s promotion. Because David has proven himself to be a valiant and valuable warrior who is able to kill even giants, Abner’s character, as the commander of the army, is understandably pleased to have David fighting on his side.

Nevertheless, despite Abner’s initial satisfaction with David’s appointment within the army, we are led to wonder if there will be a struggle between Abner and David later in the story. Saul places David over the men of war (אַנְשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה), and the use of מִלְחָמָה (“war”) instead of צְבָא (“army”) suggests that Abner has not (yet?) been replaced by David (cf. 1 Sam 26:5; 2 Sam 2:8). Still, David’s promotion here may be encroaching on Abner’s territory to some degree. Without any input from Abner, Saul appoints David to a position that gives David great influence and power within the army. The current commander of the army, therefore, has just witnessed the promotion of an unknown youth from a shepherd to a commanding position, and the shepherd boy, not the head of the army, has just defeated Goliath. At this point in the narrative, David’s character seems to be a greater fighter than Abner’s. Thus, especially considering the later feud between Saul and David, the text leads us to ask: Will David rise in rank at Abner’s expense, or will David continue to prove to be a better warrior than Abner? The text then begins providing partial answers to these questions. In just two verses, we read the

women sing about how David has killed his tens of thousands and Saul his mere thousands (18:7). Abner is not mentioned, which is not surprising since the song is about David being better than Saul, not Abner, yet that David is praised so highly by the people suggests he has already surpassed Abner in popularity and renown. In chapter 22, David becomes the **נָשִׂיא** (leader) over a small group of men who are disgruntled with Saul's leadership, and in chapter 26, David denigrates Abner for being derelict in his duty. David, therefore, eclipses both Saul and Abner in martial ability and popularity throughout the text, and by showing Abner mirroring Saul's approval of David here, the text prepares us for Abner to mirror Saul again and for a potential conflict between David and Abner akin to that between David and Saul. While Abner is not portrayed as possessing the same hatred of and obsession with David that Saul possesses (see discussion below), there is a later conflict between Abner and David in 2 Samuel 2 where Abner, the most powerful person in the post-Saul northern half of the kingdom, engages David's army at the pool of Gibeon. Ultimately, Abner's true nemesis in 2 Samuel 2–3 is Joab, David's commander, and not David himself, but the text prepares us for Abner to continue the fight between the house of Saul and house of David, which he does in 2 Samuel 2.

Abner's Character Helps Explain Saul's Character

Abner, being an extension of Saul's character, also helps us to better understand Saul's reaction to David's victory over Goliath. Saul's question to Abner in 17:55 seems to imply that he is unaware of David's identity thereby contradicting what we read in 17:31-39 and 16:14-23. As John Van Seters so clearly puts it, "The whole story of David and Saul that follows the Goliath episode seems to have almost nothing in common with that story and makes only a few

passing references to it. David's military career is presented as if it had never happened."⁵¹ Due to these inconsistencies, it is easy to ignore Abner's character, but because the text juxtaposes 17:55-58 with what comes before — both chapters 16 and 17 — we should seek to understand what this story's placement and construction now tell us about Saul and Abner if we read 17:55-58 in conjunction with the stories that come before it. Because Abner functions as Saul's messenger and because he is present with Saul from the beginning, Abner's presence in vv. 55-58 helps us to better understand why Saul asks about David's identity and what that means for Saul's characterization. In other words, Abner functions as a literary device to help us better understand Saul's character. Before discussing how Abner functions in this way, however, a brief discussion of the proposed solutions to the aforementioned contradictions is appropriate.⁵²

One obvious solution for understanding vv. 55-58 in light of what has preceded is that Saul is pretending not to know who David is, but Graeme Auld believes that this is incorrect. He says, "There is no indication that Saul is feigning to Abner his ignorance over David's identity, or Abner to him."⁵³ Because the text does not give any information either explicitly or implicitly to substantiate the Saul-is-feigning-ignorance interpretation, Auld suggests an alternative: "Another possibility is that Saul's non-recognition of David is a sign of increasing unpredictability, even developing madness; and yet it is not until the next day (18:10) that a malevolent spirit impels him to try to kill David."⁵⁴ In other words, perhaps the evil spirit that

⁵¹ Van Seters, *The David Saga*, 316.

⁵² Some scholars, such as Johannes Klein (*David Versus Saul*, 161-2) simply hold that 1 Samuel 16 and 1 Samuel 17 are two distinct and contradictory stories about David's entrance into Saul's court that were juxtaposed by a later editor. For a concise summary of opinions on Saul's question, see Johnson, *Reading David and Goliath*, 200-6.

⁵³ Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 213; cf. Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 162.

⁵⁴ Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 213; cf. Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 162.

descended on Saul in 16:14 is already taking its toll on him. Auld also posits that perhaps Saul cannot believe that David came from such a low family estate. David's defeat of Goliath must imply that he came from some higher origin; he could not simply be a son of Jesse *a Bethlehemite*.⁵⁵

Another solution, proposed by John Van Seters, is that Saul is seeking to learn David's family history and background, not his identity. The patronymic "son of Jesse" is used frequently by Saul later in the story (e.g., 20:27, 30-31; 22:7-8, 13) and always in a derogatory sense. Thus, Van Seters states, "So the point of the unit is not to identify David for the first time... but to highlight this patronymic, 'Son of Jesse,' and its future use by Saul."⁵⁶ This questioning by Saul then foreshadows Saul's later hatred of David and pursuit of his life.

Another interpretation is offered by Robert Polzin. He believes that repetitions in the text are literary devices that serve a narrative purpose. Thus, although he acknowledges that Saul's repeated questioning in 17:55-58 *may* indicate memory loss and a descent into madness, he argues that the three-fold repetition of the question, "Whose son is this?" in only four verses highlights Saul's amazement that David both fought and won. Because David refuses to wear Saul's armor, Saul may think that David has given up and returned home.⁵⁷ However, now that Saul has seen what David is capable of doing, he inquires about where David's loyalties really lie. Polzin summarizes his position thusly:

Finally, Saul's question carried with it a threat of coercion, for Saul thereby asks David formally to renounce Jesse's paternity in favor of his own. After all, after David came before Saul to serve him (16:21), the youth began dividing his time between his father's flock and Saul's court (17:15). Now that David has proven his military usefulness to Saul by leading the Israelites in victory over

⁵⁵ Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 213.

⁵⁶ Van Seters, *The David Saga*, 159; cf. Dick, "The 'History of David's Rise'," 8. Stoebe (*Das Erste Buch Samuelis*, 340) also holds that Saul is interested in David's familial relations.

⁵⁷ Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 172-4.

Goliath and the Philistines, the king recognizes how necessary it is that David give his full allegiance to him by renouncing Jesse's paternal hold over him.⁵⁸

Therefore, Polzin is claiming that Saul fulfills the prophetic warning Samuel makes in 8:11-12 that if the people appoint themselves a king then **יִקַּח אֶת־בְּנֵיכֶם** ("Your sons, he will take"). Similarly, Robert Tsumura argues that the question is actually devised to determine David's loyalties. In fulfillment of Samuel's "prophecy" in 8:11-18, Saul is attempting to take David away from his father's house and place David within his own. Saul's question should then be understood as meaning, "With which family is David most loyal, his father's or mine?"⁵⁹ Finally, Ralph Klein offers what is perhaps the simplest explanation. He says, "David was so insignificant that neither Saul nor his top commander knew who he was."⁶⁰ Thus, despite the fact that David is already employed by Saul and has defeated a great enemy, David's youth and humble ancestry make him more-or-less unknown.

Each one of these options has much to be said in its favor, and given that the text is gapped with regard to Saul's intentions and mental state here, it is not surprising that scholars have come to diverging opinions. Yet, we must look to the text for clues, and there are two significant aspects of the text that often go ignored: Abner's presence in this scene and his inability to answer Saul's question. Because Saul first directs his question to Abner, we know that Abner has been present to witness David's victory, but Abner too does not know whose son David is. Therefore, it seems unlikely that Saul is feigning ignorance or is descending into

⁵⁸ Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 175.

⁵⁹ Tsumura, *First Samuel*, 470. Cf. Lawton ("Saul, Jonathan, and the 'Son of Jesse,'" 35-46) who argues that Saul may be jealous of Jesse (p. 42) and wants David, not Jonathan, to be his son. Barbara Green (*King Saul's Asking*, 68-9) agrees that Saul is trying to take David into his household, and she believes this is surprising considering that David is currently carrying the head of the dead giant.

⁶⁰ R. Klein, *I Samuel*, 181.

madness, for if Saul is either pretending not to know who David is or is already insane, then Abner must be devious or insane as well. Nothing in the text, however, suggests that Abner is either. Although Shaul Bar thinks that Abner might be feigning ignorance so as not to embarrass the king, there is no evidence in the text to support such a theory, for Abner does not interact with David until v. 57 when Abner brings David to Saul.⁶¹ Therefore, it cannot be that Saul is merely pretending to be ignorant or that his memory is being affected by an evil spirit here. Furthermore, although it is true that Saul uses the patronymic in more of a derogatory sense later in the narrative, Van Seters' suggestion that he does so here is unlikely. Saul promotes David to a high position in 18:5, which suggest that Saul is not angry with or jealous of David at this point in the narrative but is rather fond and proud of the shepherd-hero. Because Saul is eager to make this giant-killer a high ranking official in his court it is unlikely that that Saul is addressing David pejoratively here.

However, we cannot definitively argue against any of the other theories presented above — including Van Seters' suggestion that the repeated questioning highlights Saul's *future* use of the patronymic — and the remaining positions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it is possible to understand the text by synthesizing them. In agreement with Klein, we conclude that both Saul and Abner are truly ignorant of David's identity (or at least his ancestry). David comes from a poor shepherding family which means his family is not well known within the kingdom, and the text does not present David as famous before he slays Goliath (e.g., 16:11). The fact that David has previously been employed by Saul does not necessarily imply that the king is familiar with his name and background, for kings and other rulers employ many people of various backgrounds; it is unreasonable to assume that kings know the names and family histories of

⁶¹ Bar, *God's First King*, 50.

everyone in their employ. Thus, it is more appropriate to assume that the conversation between Saul and Abner is one of surprise; they do not expect that an unknown youth can not only fight but also defeat the giant. Saul's repeated questions to Abner betray this amazement (vv. 55, 56, 58), and Abner, equally perplexed, rushes off to find an answer. Yet when Abner returns not just with the desired information but with the boy himself, Saul seizes the opportunity to take advantage of this unknown youth's skill by placing him over the men of war (18:5). Thus, we also agree with Tsumura that Saul probes David to find out his true loyalties and ensure that David is committed no longer to Jesse but to the king himself. Moreover, the quick repetition in vv. 55-58 calls attention to the use of the patronymic which changes over time from pride (here) to derision (20:27, 30-31; 22:7-8, 13). While Saul now desires to have David closely working for him, later Saul uses the same patronymic to highlight his hatred of the more popular David.

In short, the presence of Abner's character at this point in the text allows us to better understand the words and actions of Saul's character, for Saul is not alone in his ignorance of David's identity. Because Abner is mentioned in this passage, we get a sense of what Saul's character intends from the beginning. Abner's character, therefore, functions as an extension of Saul's character and also aids us in interpreting Saul's character. As we will continue to see in our study, the text only places Abner's character in episodes in which Saul is also present — at least while Saul is alive — and Abner's character is frequently used to emphasize how devoted other characters are to Saul. Here, Saul and David are united in their purpose to defend Israel, and Saul promotes David to a high position with Abner's implied consent (18:5). Abner's character, by mirroring Saul's, helps us understand Saul's intent here and contrast it to his later hatred of David.

Abner in 1 Samuel 20

After the scene with Goliath, Abner's character disappears from the text until chapter 20 where he is mentioned in the middle of a scene regarding the plan devised between David and Jonathan in order to determine whether Saul intends to kill David (20:5-7). Abner's only action in this brief section is to sit (יָשַׁב) beside Saul (v. 25).⁶² The text is even unclear as to why Abner is able to attend; because his title is not used in this context, Abner may be attending as Saul's cousin rather than as a military/political figure. Despite the dearth of text devoted to Abner in this portion of the narrative, this scene offers us a few insights regarding Abner's character, and it again shows us how his character functions as an extension of Saul's.

Abner's Position in Saul's Family/Court

Although his title nowhere appears in this narrative, that Abner is mentioned at all suggests that he holds a unique and honored position within Saul's court and family. The text mentions only *four* people who are expected to attend this dinner: Saul, Jonathan, David, and Abner. No other officials or family members are named.⁶³ It is unsurprising that Saul, Jonathan, and David are discussed here — the entire scene is the execution of David's and Jonathan's scheme against Saul from earlier in the chapter — but the mention of Abner seems superfluous since he does not act in any way; Abner merely sits. In other words, the whereabouts of Saul, David, and Jonathan at this dinner are crucial to the plot, but Abner's whereabouts are not. That he is mentioned here at all suggests that he is important within Saul's court and family. Abner

⁶² The verb יָשַׁב is only the fourth active verb attributed to Abner in 1 Sam. The previous three are אָמַר (“to say”) in 17:55 and לָקַח (“to take”) and בָּרָא (Hiphil, “to bring in”) in 17:57.

⁶³ The intimate setting of this dinner has been noted by Firth (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 227) and Polzin (*Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, 243), which they use to suggest that David's absence would have been conspicuous.

sits with part of the royal family and right beside the king (מצד שׁעׁר), a highly honored and exclusive position.⁶⁴

Abner's Character Aids our Understanding of Other Characters

Abner's seated posture beside Saul also highlights for us how close to Saul other characters are, for every character's position and posture in relation to Saul betrays their respective relationship to the king. This scene occurs within David's and Jonathan's plot to uncover Saul's feelings towards David, and we already know the status of every character's acceptance by or of Saul. Saul is jealous of and looking to kill David (1 Sam 18:8-11; 19:9-13; 20:1; etc.), while David flees and hides from the king (20:1-24). Jonathan, however, both loves David (18:3-4; 19:1; 20:17) and serves his father (14:1-49; 20:25; 31:1-7), and he is appreciated by both. Jonathan's loyalties are therefore torn between Saul and David. For instance, he helps David escape Saul's animosity (20:1-42) while still staying beside his father even in death (31:1-7).⁶⁵ With regard to Abner, although his character has not been given much narrative space thus far, in the little space he has been given, he has displayed no signs of disloyalty towards Saul. Thus, at this point in the story, we have no reason not to conclude that Abner is loyal to Saul.

Each character's respective position and posture at this meal underscores each character's relationship to Saul, whether positive or negative. Saul's chair beside the wall is the best and safest seat at the head of the table, a common position for the king.⁶⁶ Every other character's acceptance by Saul is reflected in their relative proximity to Saul. David, who is most hated by

⁶⁴ Cf. Lawton, "Saul, Jonathan, and the 'Son of Jesse,'" 43-4.

⁶⁵ McCarter (*I Samuel*, 344) believes that the episodes from chapters 19 and 20 show that for Jonathan and Michal, allegiance to David is stronger than familial ties. Jonathan, however, never fully rejects or is rejected by his father, as their coinciding deaths show. Jonathan also does not leave his father at this dinner in order to be with David.

⁶⁶ Cf. R. Klein, *I Samuel*, 208; Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 175.

and most afraid of Saul, is hiding out in the fields and is the farthest away from Saul (v. 24). Abner, who has been nothing but loyal to Saul in the stories thus far, is seated directly beside Saul, while Jonathan, who is divided between his affections for his father and his friend, is neither seated at the table beside the king like Abner nor absent from the dinner like David. Instead, he is standing at the ready beside the table.⁶⁷ Shimon Bar-Efrat, who does not discuss Abner here, notes that by mentioning these characters' seating positions, the text highlights David's absence, and we suggest that Abner's presence here is essential to such highlighting.⁶⁸ If Abner's character were absent from this episode, the connection between the characters' posture and their relationship to Saul would be less apparent, for there would be no one loyal to Saul sitting beside him. Thus, the episode would only appear as the execution of David's and Jonathan's plan. With Abner's character present, however, the postures of the various characters become more apparent, thereby underscoring each character's relationship to Saul.

Abner in 1 Samuel 26

After the brief episode in Saul's dining room, Abner's character again receives no narrative space until chapter 26, and although chapter 26 does not devote much space to Abner,

⁶⁷ The verb used of Jonathan (קום ["to rise"] not עמד ["to stand"]) is somewhat problematic. Robert Tsumura (*First Samuel*, 515), who does not discuss Abner's presence in the text at all, believes that Jonathan's action here displays his readiness to serve the king, as Baal is ready to serve El in *KTU* 1.2:I:21. Because Jonathan is intentionally deceiving his father in this episode, Tsumura's conclusion is dubious. At best, Jonathan is feigning his readiness to serve his father while furtively helping his father's enemy. Shaul Bar (*God's First King*, 71; cf. Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 278; Stoebe, *Das Erste Buch Samuelis*, 377) argues that Jonathan has given *his seat* to Abner because he is afraid that Saul might reach over and hit him. The text does not say, however, that Abner sits at Jonathan's place, but Jonathan's posture may nevertheless indicate nervousness due to his plot with David. Perhaps Jonathan fears that Saul, upon learning of David's absence, will turn against his own son. Jonathan might also have arisen because he is anxious to see his father's reaction to David's absence and thereby learn Saul's true intentions towards David. Observing Saul's facial expressions would also be easier from across the room than from right beside Saul. B. A. Mastin ("Jonathan at the Feast," 113-24), however, provides the most extensive study of the text critical and interpretative problems of the verb קום in this context, and he examines how other ancient versions translate the verb. He concludes that קום (not קום as assumed by some ancient versions) should be maintained and understood as "Jonathan took his stand" in a customary fashion (p. 124). Mastin's view is that accepted here.

⁶⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 278.

there is more information about Abner's character here than in any other section of 1 Samuel. As a minor character, he is the subject of only two verbs **שָׁכַב** ("to sleep") and **אָמַר** ("to speak"), but both the setting and David's direct characterization of Abner help us learn more about Abner's character. For instance, from where Abner lies with respect to Saul and from the encampment, we see aspects of Abner's duties as Saul's **שָׂר־צָבָא** that had previously not been depicted in the text, and the way in which David interacts with Abner betrays the amount of respect that Abner's position demanded, even while David insults and denigrates him. We also are given a hint that Abner's character may be somewhat witty from the way in which he responds to David's questioning, and we again witness how the text uses Abner's posture and position to highlight the problems in David's relationship with Saul. Much of this section, therefore, continues to present and utilize Abner in ways that we have seen previously, but it also presents us with new information about his character.

Abner's Role as Saul's שָׂר־צָבָא

Aspects of Abner's role within Saul's army are more evident in 1 Samuel 26 than in the other chapters of 1 Samuel. Both the setting of the text and Abner's actions give us hints about what he is expected to do as Saul's **שָׂר־צָבָא**.⁶⁹ There are no less than four facets to Abner's role as **שָׂר־צָבָא** present in 1 Samuel 26. First, the text again suggests that Abner's character holds a lofty position worthy of respect within Saul's court. Abner is the only character in the text who is allowed to sleep beside the king — the text never states that Jonathan sleeps beside his father — which suggests that Abner's position is unique and exalted within Saul's court. First Samuel

⁶⁹ Cf. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 102.

26, therefore, builds upon previous texts by showing that not only does Abner stand by Saul (17:55) and sit with Saul (20:25), he also sleeps beside Saul and travels with him on occasion. While Abner does not accompany the king on every expedition, his proximity to Saul here suggests that he may hold a position of even greater prestige than Jonathan.

Moreover, David's presuppositions about Abner, evident in the way he first addresses Abner and then insults him, show that Abner's character is admired and respected by others. Robert Alter has rightly noted that the speech of one character about another often contributes to the characterization of the latter, and the way David addresses Abner here has that effect on our understanding of Abner's character.⁷⁰ Although David's quick succession of questions and accusations in vv. 14-16 are sarcastic and insulting, they suggest that other characters, including perhaps David, respect Abner by default. Rather than calling out to Saul or to the camp at large, David addresses Abner directly by asking in v. 14: הלוֹא תַעֲנֵה אַבְנֵר ("Will you not answer, Abner?"). David's character, by singling out Abner, treats Abner as if he knows Abner is the sole character responsible for speaking on Saul's behalf (see below). In other words, David seemingly knows Abner holds a position of respect. After Abner answers David's question, David fires back with three derogatory questions, followed by pointed accusations (vv. 15-16). The first two questions, הלוֹא-אִישׁ אַתָּה וּמִי כִמּוֹ בְיִשְׂרָאֵל ("Are you not a man, and who is like you in Israel?"), build up to the third, וְלִמָּה לֹא שָׁמַרְתָּ אֶל-אֲדֹנָיִךְ הַמֶּלֶךְ ("Why have you not kept watch over your lord the king?").⁷¹ David's first two questions, in other words, call attention to the power and greatness of Abner in order that David's third question can have the

⁷⁰ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116-7.

⁷¹ Cf. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 104.

insulting punch David's character intends. Essentially David asks, "If you really are so great and powerful, how could you fail in such a simple task?" As Shimon Bar-Efrat rightly states:⁷²

David antwortet nicht auf Abners Frage, sondern wendet sich nach der rhetorischen Frage..., erneut mit drei weitem rhetorischen Fragen an ihn. Die ersten beiden weisen auf die Tapferkeit und Wichtigkeit Abners hin und verschärfen die Schmach, die in der dritten Frage liegt...; Abner hat seine elementare Pflicht, das Leben des Königs zu schuetzen, nicht erfuehlt. Das Ziel der Rede Davids an Abner besteht darin, seine grobe Fahrlässigkeit vor aller Augen bzw. ohren offenbar zu machen.

David implies that Abner is considered a powerful man without equal in Saul's kingdom and suggests that because of his great role and responsibility, Abner is unforgivably derelict in his duty to protect Saul here. By building Abner up in the first two questions, David is able to humiliate Abner with the third.⁷³ Such building up is only possible if there is a hint of truth in David's words. David's insult is built upon the implied foundation of Abner's greatness.

Second, Abner travels with Saul on at least some of Saul's military exploits. In chapter 26, Saul is continuing his pursuit of David, and at the beginning of the chapter, Saul learns that David is hiding in Hachilah (26:1). As a result, Saul decides to take three thousand chosen men (בַּחֹרֶר in v. 2) to capture David, but while Abner is clearly a part of the group Saul brings with

⁷² "David does not answer Abner's question, but responds with a rhetorical question..., again with three other rhetorical questions to him. The first two refer to Abner's courage and importance and intensify the shame that lies in the third question...; Abner has not fulfilled his basic duty to protect the king's life. The goal of David's speech to Abner is to make his [Abner's] great negligence obvious to all eyes and ears." Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 341.

⁷³ David's damning statements in v. 16 would seemingly characterize Abner as a negligent and wicked servant, but the narrator undermines David by stating that a deep sleep (תַּרְדֵּמָה) fell upon Saul's men (v. 12). If the text had not provided this extra information, our impression of Abner would be much more negative. Because Abner and his men were asleep rather than at their posts, David places great blame upon Abner's shoulders. David draws attention to the fact that someone had breached the camp and taken Saul's spear and water jug. Barbara Green (*King Saul's Asking*, 97; cf. Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 342) notes David's cleverness in this exchange by implicitly exonerating himself: "David's language places the onus on the man who did not prevent such a breach and on the near-victim, leaving little room to accuse the one who engineered the dead." David further calls Abner's inaction לֹא־טוֹב ("not good") and invokes a death sentence upon Abner by calling him and his subordinates בְּנֵי־מוֹת ("sons of death") because they did not adequately guard the king (cf. 1 Sam 20:31; 2 Sam 12:5). David, therefore, characterizes Abner as incompetent, negligent, and worthy of death. Such statements about Abner would certainly tarnish our understanding of Abner were it not for v. 12 informing us that Abner is not to blame; Yhwh himself intervened and caused Abner and his men to sleep through David's infiltration of the camp.

him to Hachilah (v. 5), he is not specifically named as one of the **בַּחֹרִים**.⁷⁴ His presence, however, is clearly not anomalous or surprising to other characters, including David (cf. vv. 5, 6, 14), and given that we also see Abner serve as Saul's close servant in the Goliath episode (17:55-18:5), it would seem that the **שֶׁר־צַבָּא** is expected to travel alongside the king during some military expeditions. Whether Abner is serving Saul in an advisory role or in a commanding role is uncertain (see below), but it is clear that on at least some occasions, Abner's character serves beside Saul rather than leading his own expeditions.

Third, we see that Abner serves as one of Saul's close bodyguards and possibly as also the head of Saul's security detail. Twice the text tells us that Abner slept beside Saul (vv. 5, 7), and as the **שֶׁר־צַבָּא**, Abner's presence likely keeps Saul safe from external attacks. In chapter 24, a passage similar to 1 Samuel 26, the security around Saul is not as good as it is here, for Saul's men allow Saul to enter a cave alone without any form of protection (24:1-7), thereby giving David an opportunity to creep up to Saul and cut off a corner of Saul's garment. By contrast, here in chapter 26, Saul lies within an entrenchment (**מִעֵגֶל**) surrounded by his army and three thousand choice men and with his **שֶׁר־צַבָּא** sleeping right beside him (v. 7).⁷⁵ While David is still able to penetrate the camp and steal Saul's spear and water jug, he is able to do so only because Yhwh causes a deep sleep (**תַּרְרִמְזָה**) to come over Abner and the other soldiers (v. 12). Without divine intervention, therefore, David would fail to penetrate Saul's camp

⁷⁴ Although Saul has once before picked three thousand **בַּחֹרִים** **אִישׁ** (24:3), like here, the text does not say that Abner was one of them there either.

⁷⁵ See Van Seters, *The David Saga*, 182.

successfully.⁷⁶ From the entrenchment, Abner's presence, and the need for God's intervention, the text shows that Saul is better protected in chapter 26 than in chapter 24.

Moreover, Abner appears to be the reason that for the improved security in chapter 26. While Saul also takes three thousand **בַּחֹרִים** with him in chapter 24 (v. 4), he does not take Abner, and he is approached by David without a divinely induced sleep falling upon Saul's men. Abner is the only difference in manpower between chapters 24 and 26, and divine intervention is needed before David can penetrate the camp here. Abner, therefore, can be credited for Saul's improved security in 1 Samuel 26. In addition, by specifically blaming Abner alone for not protecting Saul (v. 15), David too suggests that Abner is in charge of the security detail in this chapter. This chapter, therefore, shows us that Saul's **שֶׁר־צַבָּא** is an important bodyguard who ensures Saul's safety, and because Saul is so securely protected here, it is clear that Abner is skilled at this job.

Finally, Abner acts as Saul's mouthpiece and representative in this text when David addresses him specifically (v. 14). Although David begins by calling out to the army at large without singling out either Abner or Saul, he directs his taunts towards Abner alone when no one else responds.⁷⁷ Because David has stolen items from Saul and not Abner, it is a bit odd that David addresses Abner instead of Saul, but by doing so, David suggests that he expected Abner to speak for and represent Saul.⁷⁸ Abner's response to David in v. 14 also suggests that he could speak on Saul's behalf, for he asks, "Who are you to call to the king?" (**מִי אַתָּה קֹרֵאתָ**)

⁷⁶ Cf. Tsumura, *First Samuel*, 598; Firth, *1&2 Samuel*, 276; Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 341.

⁷⁷ Firth, *1&2 Samuel*, 378; cf. Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 341.

⁷⁸ See the brief discussion in Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 103.

אל-המלך) not, “Who are you to address me?” (= מי אתה קראת אלי).⁷⁹ Thus, David Gunn also concludes, “For David, to disturb the king’s right-hand man is to disturb the king.”⁸⁰ Abner, therefore, is not only a well-respected, high-ranking official in charge of Saul’s security, he is also Saul’s spokesman, a role that Abner’s character has not previously performed.

Abner’s Potential Wit

We have already briefly discussed David’s questions and insults to Abner in 26:14-16, but Abner’s interrogative response to David’s first three questions suggests that Abner may possess an amount of wit. In the remaining chapters of the dissertation, we will see that Abner’s character relies heavily on wit and rhetoric to get what he wants later in the story, and we get a sense that Abner’s character might be using some rhetorical skill here as well. Rather than answering David’s questions directly or reacting in anger to David’s insults, Abner asks a question of his own: מי אתה קראת אל-המלך (“Who are you to call to the king?”). Not only does he answer a question with a question but also he responds in a manner that can be understood in a multifaceted way, much like Saul’s question about David’s identity in 1 Sam 17:55 (see discussion above). Superficially, Abner is simply asking the one who is calling to identify himself, yet there exists another possible level to Abner’s question: Abner may be implying that David has no right to talk to Saul at all. In other words, it is possible to understand Abner as subtly asking, “Who do you think you are to call out to the king?” or “How dare you call to the king?”⁸¹ With Saul’s army and closest officials with him, there is no one, except

⁷⁹ McCarter (*1 Samuel*, 406) translates this phrase as, “Who are you? You called to the king?” See Tsumura, *First Samuel*, 602.

⁸⁰ Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 103; cf. Tsumura, *First Samuel*, 603; Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 341.

⁸¹ Cf. Firth, *1&2 Samuel*, 378.

maybe Jonathan, who has the right to disturb the king without authorization, and thus, without explicitly insulting David, Abner implies that David is unwelcome or not important enough to speak to Saul. The text is gapped as to whether or not Abner recognized David's voice, but such is quite possible because the two had shared at least one conversation together previously (17:55-18:5) and because Saul recognizes David's voice in v. 17. If we assume that Abner does know it is David speaking, then he is clearly reminding David that, as Saul's enemy, he no longer has the right to speak to Saul. David is outside the camp and no longer welcome within. In addition, if Abner recognizes David's voice, Abner may be thinly veiling his contempt towards David, for as Saul's chief general, Abner may share in some of Saul's hatred and jealousy of David at this point in the narrative. While Abner's character does not suffer from Saul's obsessive jealousy towards David (see discussion below) and does not continue Saul's pursuit of David after Saul's death, he does participate in Saul's pursuit of David here and may, therefore, be expressing disdain towards David. If these possible interpretations about Abner's motives are correct, then David's demeaning questions in vv. 15-16 are understandable, for David is then answering insult with insult. In addition, if Abner's character intended his question to be multidimensional, then we see his character beginning to show hints of the wit and shrewdness he exhibits later in 2 Samuel. Of course, because the text is gapped in regards to Abner's intent and whether or not Abner recognizes David's voice, we are unable to be firm in this conclusion, but the text is open to such an interpretation.

Nevertheless, although we begin to see possible aspects of Abner's wit in this passage, the text clearly shows David outwitting Abner in both deed and word here in chapter 26. David sneaks into the fortifications established by Abner — albeit with divine help — steals Saul's spear and water jug and safely retreats back outside the camp. He then repeatedly insults Abner

by using multiple questions in quick succession (vv. 15-16). David's first two rhetorical questions establish Abner as a well-respected and unequalled man within Saul's kingdom who failed to protect his king. With this solid foundation, David's third question and following statements show how poorly Abner has executed his duties and how Abner now deserves death for his lack of actions; David even calls Abner and his men בני-מוֹת ("sons of death").⁸² Of course, the text has told us that Abner slept because of divine intervention, but the text does not state that either David or Abner know that God has caused the deep sleep. Abner never responds to David's outburst because Saul intervenes in v. 17, but Abner's silence may also be the result of fear or embarrassment (cf. 2 Sam 3:11; 24-25).⁸³ Regardless, that he does not respond shows that David has the upper hand. The text, therefore, hints here that Abner possesses a semblance of wit, but it also clearly shows that David's rhetorical skill surpasses Abner's. Such is significant because, as we will see in our discussions of 2 Samuel, no one else bests Abner in conversation, and thus, David is the only character in HB who outwits Abner.

Abner as an Extension of Saul's Character

As we conclude our discussion of Abner's character in 1 Samuel 26, we once again see that Abner's character functions as an extension of Saul's and is used to underscore the loyalty or lack thereof of other characters. That Abner sleeps beside Saul shows us not only the exclusivity of Abner's position within the military but also that his character is still closely associated with

⁸² Ralph Klein (*1 Samuel*, 258; cf. Alter, *The David Story*, 165) suggests that David's ascription of the death penalty to Abner may later mitigate Abner's murder at the hands of Joab (2 Sam 3:26-27). Joab, however, does not kill Abner for dereliction of duty but because Abner killed his brother Asahel (2 Sam 2:23). Also, David's use of the plural בני-מוֹת refers to both Abner and his men, and thus, David is condemning Saul's entire army. Miscall's interpretation (*1 Samuel*, 160) that David's words anticipate the defeat of Saul's army's defeat at Mt. Gilboa makes more sense in context.

⁸³ Cf. Tsumura, *First Samuel*, 603.

Saul's. As he is in 20:25, Abner is the only character adjacent to the king (cf. 17:55-18:5), but here his association with Saul is also seen when he speaks on Saul's behalf. Once again, Abner's proximity to Saul highlights David's distance from Saul just as it does in 20:25. Since Abner is Saul's שֶׁר־צָבָא, he has access to the king and sleeps right beside the king, but David, who had once been over the army (1 Sam 18:5), is now Saul's enemy and is no longer welcome within the camp at all. Thus, David stands outside the camp when he calls to Saul and his army. If Abner's question carries with it the subtle derision discussed above, then David's outsider status is all the more pronounced, for Abner would underscore that David has no right to speak to Saul. Furthermore, the use of Abner's patronymic at the beginning of v. 14 further reminds us that he is Saul's cousin and that David is the בֶּן־יֵשׁוּ ("son of Jesse"); David is neither Saul's relative nor a welcome member of Saul's court. The narrative also reinforces David's outsider status by mentioning the great physical distance between Abner and David (רַב הַמָּקוֹם בֵּינֵיהֶם in v. 13), which Klein also acknowledges is both geographical and metaphorical.⁸⁴ So interpreted, David is not only physically separated from Saul's camp, he is also emotionally and politically separated from Saul himself. He is no longer welcomed by the king and must remain outside the camp.⁸⁵ In a manner akin to the dinner scene from chapter 20, therefore, the narrative uses Abner's space and posture to illustrate the respective positions of people around Saul, especially David.

⁸⁴ R. Klein, *I Samuel*, 258.

⁸⁵ It may also be significant that Jonathan does not appear in this scene, neither with David nor with Saul. Where he is, the text does not say, but because his loyalties have been split between both Saul and David and because he has not yet appeared with Saul in pursuit of David, his presence here would be difficult to explain both in terms of the narrative plot (i.e., David once again sparing his pursuer) and in terms of the metaphor (i.e., the respective fidelity of each character).

Select Passages Where Abner Is Not Mentioned

Having discussed all the passages in 1 Samuel in which Abner's character is mentioned by the text, it is worth briefly discussing passages in which we might expect Abner's character to appear but in which he is not given any narrative space. As argued above, Abner's position as שר־צבא is one of military and political authority, and Abner is a well-respected member of Saul's court. Given that he is the head of Saul's army and that in every scene in which he appears he is depicted in close proximity to Saul, we might expect his character to be featured in more martial scenes in 1 Samuel. Nevertheless, based upon Abner's title, we might be tempted to infer Abner's presence in some of Saul's escapades even where the text does not mention him explicitly. In this section, therefore, we discuss how his inferred presence might alter our understanding of his character and how his absence from these passages characterizes him.

Abner's Absence from the Battle against the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15)

The first section in which we might expect Abner to appear is chapter 15 where Saul fights the Amalekites with two hundred אלפים ("thousand") foot soldiers from Telaim and ten אלפים from Judea.⁸⁶ Saul fails to heed Yhwh's command to utterly destroy (חרם) in v. 3) everyone and everything of the Amalekites and instead spares Agag keeping the best spoils for himself (15:7-9). God then rejects Saul for the second time (cf. 15:10-11, 26), and even though Saul repents, Samuel proclaims that the kingdom will be ripped away from Saul and given to another anyway (15:27-29). Throughout this story, none of Saul's commanders are mentioned, including Jonathan and Abner. Abner's absence from this battle scene is particularly noteworthy

⁸⁶ The term אלף is likely a technical military term and not an exact grouping of 1,000 soldiers. If so, then Saul here has two hundred companies of soldiers rather than 210,000 total infantry. For further discussions on this term, see de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 216; P. P. Jenson, אלף, *NIDOTTE*, I/416-7.

because his introduction as the head of Saul's army is just three verses prior to Samuel's command to attack and destroy the Amalekites in 15:1-3. If we infer that Abner is part of the military contingent involved in this battle (15:4), then we may speculate that Abner contributed to the defeat of the Amalekites, which would further imply that Abner is a competent fighter and commander. Moreover, because the text always positions Abner next to Saul, we might be led to infer that Abner also hears Samuel's command to Saul but did not stop Saul from sparing Agag, and thus, he would be complicit in Saul's misdoings by not stopping the king from disobeying Yhwh. The text, of course, explicitly places the guilt of Saul's disobedience upon Saul alone, which is unsurprising given that Saul is king and that God gave his command to Saul not Abner (even if we infer Abner heard the command). Just as the text has attributed to Saul alone the victories of the previous chapters, so too it credits Saul alone with the failure to keep God's command. Furthermore, that Abner is not specifically included as part of the army here highlights Abner's minorness even more than in the stories of Saul's victories in chapters 11–14 including the establishment of a standing army in 13:2 because we know about Abner's character here but we did not beforehand. In short, by omitting any mention of Abner from this episode, the text prevents us from drawing negative conclusions about Abner's character while at the same time further suggesting that Abner's narrative space is intentionally small. More importantly, Abner's absence highlights Saul's guilt in sparing Agag. Whether or not Abner heard the command to destroy all the Amalekites, including Agag, or not, the text clearly emphasizes that *Saul* disobeyed this command without implicating anyone else.

Abner's Absence in Saul's Pursuits of David (1 Samuel 18–26)

Abner likewise is not written into the stories of Saul's jealousy and pursuits of David in 1 Samuel 18–26. Despite Saul's initial approval of David at the end of 1 Samuel 17, the

relationship between Saul and David changes quickly in chapter 18, and Saul begins to seek ways to kill David. Saul even embarks on at least two organized pursuits of David (1 Samuel 24 and 26). Abner's character, however, receives no narrative space in chapters 18 and 19, and it is not clear if we would be right to infer Abner's presence in those chapters. It would seem unlikely that Abner would play a significant part in Saul's attempts to capture or kill David (e.g., 1 Sam 18:10-11; 19:11-17, 18-24; 23:24-29; or 24:1-22), for most of these episodes occur in private settings not in open battle. In 1 Sam 18:10-11, Saul tries to pin David to the wall of Saul's house while David plays the harp, and in 19:11-17, Saul sends messengers to kill David in his sleep. In neither instance would we expect Abner or any other court official to be present. Perhaps, then, we are to infer that Abner accompanied Saul when he went to Ramah (19:18-24), Maon (23:24-29), or En-gedi (24:1-22) as a bodyguard or messenger. In the first two cases, the text does not state which, if any, court officials or military forces Saul takes with him, and thus, there is little in those texts that implies Abner's character is expected to be present. At En-gedi, however, Saul musters three thousand **בַּחֲרִים אַנְשִׁים** ("choice men") to pursue David. Because the **בַּחֲרִים אַנְשִׁים** were likely an elite group of fighters, Abner, as **שֶׁר־צָבָא**, may have been a member of this group, and thus, we might rightly infer his presence in this scene.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the text never explicitly lists Abner as one of the **בַּחֲרִים אַנְשִׁים**, so we cannot use that term alone to infer his presence here. Plus, as we concluded above, the poor security around Saul in 1 Samuel 24 suggests that Abner was not present to organize Saul's defenses at En-gedi.

Moreover, in regard to Saul's pursuits of David, the text is gapped about Abner's feelings towards David, and thus, we cannot be certain if Abner wants David killed like Saul does. Given

⁸⁷ Cf. Bar, *Israel's First King*, 93.

that David serves in Abner's army and has been successful in battle, it would be reasonable to infer that Abner continues to be pleased with David's successes and rise in popularity (cf. 17:55-18:5). Yet it would also be reasonable to infer that Abner shares in Saul's jealousy and anger towards David because of his relation and devotion to Saul. If we assume that Abner participates in Saul's pursuits and jealousy of David, then Abner too fails to apprehend David just as Saul does, thereby suggesting that Abner is less militarily savvy than David. Given the text's focus on David and David's ability to outwit Abner in 1 Samuel 26, such would not be too surprising. We would also have to infer that Abner shares Saul's irrational hatred of and obsession with David. In other words, if we assume Abner's "presence" in these texts then we are again led to a negative understanding of Abner's character especially with regard to David. In the end, however, that Abner does not continue pursuing David after Saul's death — even the text of 2 Samuel 2 does not explicitly state that Abner hopes to capture and kill David — and eventually realigns himself with David in 2 Samuel 2–3 suggests that Abner likely does not share in Saul's hatred of David. Thus, we probably should not assume that Abner's character accompanies Saul in his pursuit of David. Even his presence during Saul's pursuit of David in chapter 26 does not necessarily suggest that he shares Saul's obsession with David; he simply accompanies his king on a military escapade. Plus, when David confronts and insults Abner, he does not react in anger, and he makes no moves to capture or kill David. His presence only seems to be to protect Saul and speak on Saul's behalf. Abner's absence from these texts about Saul's obsession with David, therefore, places that obsession with Saul alone. Saul is seemingly the only one who wants to capture and kill David, and thus, only Saul appears to suffer from possible insanity.

Abner's Absence at Nob (1 Samuel 22)

We note thirdly that the text does not state that Abner is privy to Saul's slaughtering of the priests at Nob in 22:6-23. After learning that the priest Ahimelech had helped David, Saul orders his servant guards (רצים; עבדים; v. 17) to kill all the priests, but these guards refuse to raise a hand against the priests.⁸⁸ Saul then orders Doeg, a foreigner (21:7; 22:9, 18, 22), to carry out the slaughter, and Doeg obediently puts all the priests to death as well as other men, women, children and animals (22:18-19). Nothing is said about Abner's complicity in this event, and due to such gapping in the text, it is difficult to make an inference as to whether he approved or not. Because we have not yet seen Abner kill anyone, let alone slaughtering innocent people, we have no reason to suspect that he would do so here, and yet, because Abner is Saul's highest ranking military commander, we have no reason to assume he would disobey one of Saul's orders. If we infer his complicity in Saul's request, then we learn that Abner puts obedience to Saul over the innocent lives of priests and others. If we infer that he refused Saul's orders, then we see that Abner does not stop the slaughter and that he can be insubordinate when he is given unreasonable orders.⁸⁹ Neither of those inferences portray Abner positively. It is more reasonable, however, to take the text as written and assume that Abner's character is not present for the slaughter at all. He is not mentioned in this episode, and because the text never refers to him as a רץ, we do not have a compelling reason to infer that he was one of the רצים in this episode. Not assuming Abner's "presence" in this scene, therefore, preserves for us a positive

⁸⁸ For a brief discussion on the role of רצים in Ancient Israel, see Bar, *Israel's First King*, 94.

⁸⁹ Moshe Greenberg ("Rabbinic Reflections," 33-7) has cataloged how the rabbis understood Abner in light of this episode. They believed that Abner was present during the slaughter of the priests at Nob and was one of the men who stood up to Saul. Thus, they account Abner as being more righteous than Saul but not innocent since Abner did not prevent the slaughter from taking place.

image of Abner, and it again shows Saul's guilt in making a terrible decision. Just like he spares Agag against Yhwh's command and irrationally tries to kill David, Saul here gives an order to slaughter innocent priests and people, and only Doeg, a foreigner, is complicit. We continue to understand Abner as Saul's loyal and obedient servant, while continuing to see Saul make foolish and wicked choices.

Abner's Absence at Saul's Death (1 Samuel 31)

Finally, that Abner's character is not mentioned during Saul's death scene (1 Samuel 31) is odd, for if Abner functioned as one of Saul's chief bodyguards and accompanied Saul on his military exploits, as 1 Samuel 26 would suggest, then we would expect Abner to be close to Saul here, possibly protecting him, in the battle against the Philistines at Mt. Gilboa. Unlike the previous three examples above, there seems to be clear evidence in the text that Abner's character is not present here because Abner's character is neither killed nor captured by the Philistines. If Abner had been with Saul when the Philistines advance, he too would likely commit suicide with Saul and his armor-bearer or be killed by the Philistines, but we know from 2 Samuel 2 that Abner does not die at Mt. Gilboa. The question is, therefore, "Why was Abner's character not with Saul at the time of his death?" Miscall says that this shows Abner's incompetence as Saul's servant, but this view is problematic.⁹⁰ Abner's character, rather than having been portrayed as incompetent by the text, heightens the security around Saul in 1 Samuel 26, and the 1 Samuel text depicts him doing nothing that could potential harm Saul. Even his "cowardice" implied in 1 Samuel 17 does not characterize him as any more incompetent than Saul or anyone else in the kingdom, save David, and thus, we cannot infer that Abner's absence at Saul's death means he is incompetent. It is more reasonable, given his characterization thus

⁹⁰ Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 160.

far, to assume that Abner is off fighting elsewhere. In fact, given that Ishbosheth is the only son of Saul to survive the battles of 1 Samuel, it might even be reasonable to assume that Abner is protecting Ishbosheth although such an assumption is purely conjectural. Regardless of “where” Abner’s character “is” at this point in the story, we cannot conclude with Miscall that Abner is somehow derelict in his duties when Saul dies, for the text in no way implies that Abner is near Saul or was supposed to be near Saul.

Findings from Abner’s Absence

Abner receives little to no narrative space for much of 1 Samuel, and in many places where we might expect Abner to be mentioned — particularly battle scenes — Saul’s character makes foolish and evil decisions. If we infer that Abner’s character is with Saul and takes part in these scenes, then our understanding of Abner becomes much more negative. He too would share in the same transgressions committed by Saul, and he would become just as culpable as Saul for Saul’s sparing of Agag, slaughtering of priests, and pursuit of David. By omitting Abner’s character from these episodes, however, the text both underscores Abner’s minoriness and suggests that he is not as negative of a character as Saul. Abner does not disobey Yhwh’s commands, irrationally pursue David, or murder innocent people; only Saul does. He is also not negligent in allowing Saul to commit suicide, for we can reasonably conclude that Abner did not witness Saul’s death. By omitting any mention of Abner’s character, who closely mirrors Saul in the passages in which he does appear, from passages containing Saul’s foolish decisions, the text places full blame upon Saul for those decisions. By contrast our impression of Abner is generally positive since he does not share in Saul’s wicked behavior.

Conclusions about Abner's Character in 1 Samuel

From this lengthy discussion of Abner's character in 1 Samuel, we present several conclusions about the way his character mimics a real person and the way the text utilizes his character as a literary device.

Abner's Character as It Mimics a Real Person

In regard to how Abner's character mimics a real person, we first note that despite the little space he receives from the text, his character resembles a typical high-ranking military commander in ANE. Like many other ANE commanders, Abner is a close relative of Saul, and as such, Abner has a unique intimacy with the king. Indeed, Abner never appears in 1 Samuel without being directly beside Saul; he is always standing (17:55-18:5), sitting (20:25), or lying (26:1-15) beside Saul, and he is even introduced in relation to Saul (14:50-51). Being such a close relative of Saul, however, may suggest that Abner's character is not the best qualified for the post — indeed, David seems far more qualified (see 1 Sam 18:6-7) — but since the text does not tell us how Abner became Saul's שר־צבָא and because we do not get to witness Abner's character in the midst of battle, we cannot be certain of Abner's capabilities.

In addition, while Abner is clearly a military commander, he seems also to have non-military duties like other ANE officials. The text presents Abner leading the security detail around Saul, guarding Saul personally, running errands for Saul, speaking on Saul's behalf, and accompanying Saul on at least some of his expeditions. Unlike other ANE officials, however, Abner is never seen performing any sort of religious function, but there is very little in the Samuel text that depicts Saul performing religious duties either — a notable exception is his illicit sacrifice in 1 Sam 13:8-10. Otherwise, each of Abner's duties are consistent with what we find other high ranking military officials playing in other ANE nations.

His position, therefore, is one deserving great respect and admiration from his own people, and David's insults to Abner in 26:14-15, while intended to denigrate Abner's character, imply that Abner is a generally admired man without equal in Saul's kingdom. The text presents Abner as the highest ranking military official in Israel even without ever depicting Abner engaged in battle or leading an army. By not showing him so engaged, however, the text does not allow us to conclude that Abner's character is a strong warrior, and in the only battle scene in 1 Samuel which mentions Abner's character, Abner fears Goliath just like Saul and the rest of the Israelites.

Nevertheless, despite his cowardly reaction to Goliath, the overall impression we get of Abner's character is positive. He is loyal to Saul, always obedient to his king, and never earns his sovereign's anger. In fact, he is the only member of Saul's family with significant narrative space that does not help David against Saul, and when asked to find out which is David's family, Abner does more than Saul asks by returning with David not just an answer to Saul's question.⁹¹ The text also never shows him acting inappropriately, following Saul in his inane obsession with David, or participating in Saul's terrible decisions (e.g., sparing Agag or slaughtering the priests at Nob). The only time we might attribute to Abner some negative quality — other than his cowardice in 1 Samuel 17 — is when he falls asleep while guarding Saul (1 Samuel 26), yet the text exonerates Abner by explicitly making Yhwh the cause of Abner's slumber. In short, Abner possesses a lofty title, performs his duties faithfully, and receives the respect of those around him.

⁹¹ Saul's wife, Ahinoam, and other children, e.g., Merab, are mentioned but do not act within the story. Thus, we are not given enough information to deduce with whom their allegiance may lay.

Finally, from his only question to David (26:14), we are able to infer that Abner may possess some semblance of wit, a trait we will see him exhibit numerous times in 2 Samuel (see chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation). Although there is not enough direct discourse attributed to Abner in 1 Samuel for us to be conclusive on the matter, Abner's question to David in 26:14 seems to have multiple layers to its meaning, and the text leaves open such a possibility. Abner seems to be interested not only in gaining his interlocutor's identity but also in showing that his interlocutor is not important enough or welcome enough to merit an audience with Saul. If this interpretation is correct, then Abner's character is able to insult David subtly while getting the information he needs, thereby preparing us for the rhetorical strategies and shrewdness Abner's character displays in 2 Samuel 2–3.

Abner's Character as a Literary Device

As a literary device, the text utilizes Abner's character in several interesting ways. First, Abner's character space always intersects with Saul's and often with David's; he is neither seen alone nor narrated solely for his own development. His introduction occurs in the midst of Saul's family list, and in every other scene, he either stands (17:55-58), sits (20:25), or lays (26:1-15) beside Saul. He carries out Saul's orders in 1 Sam 17:55–18:5, speaks for Saul in 1 Sam 26:14, and his actions mirror Saul's in several instances (e.g., his fear of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 and his position at the table in 1 Samuel 20). Abner also never acts contrary to Saul's commands or wishes, and he is the only member of Saul's family with significant narrative space not to become devoted to David in 1 Samuel (cf. Jonathan and Michal who both love David). Abner is, therefore, a minor extension of Saul's character, and as such, Abner's position near Saul in two scenes (20:24-34 and 26:1-16) highlights how much *other characters* are devoted to or accepted by Saul. In chapter 20, Abner sits at Saul's side during dinner, David is far away,

and Jonathan stands away from Saul but still at the dinner. Abner's proximity to Saul highlights David's distance from and rejection by Saul as well as Jonathan's divided allegiance to Saul and David. Likewise, in chapter 26, Abner stands with Saul on one side of a great chasm with David on the other, and thus, Abner's position beside Saul again underscores the great distance, both geographical and metaphorical, between David and Saul. While not as immediately evident, Abner's proximity to Saul in 17:55–18:5 has a similar effect, for there David too is next to Saul. That point in the narrative marks the only time that Saul is fond of David, and Saul's acceptance of David is reinforced by the text's placement of David in close proximity to both Saul and Abner. Every time Abner's character appears in the text, therefore, his presence underscores the physical proximity of other characters to Saul and their respective emotional and political proximity to Saul as well.

Abner, however, does not mirror Saul or function as Saul's extension in the areas in which Saul fails. While Abner's character signals negative transitions in Saul's reign, Abner never participates in Saul's poor decisions except in the Goliath episode. Abner's character plays no role in the sparing of Agag or the slaughter of the priests at Nob, nor does he encourage Saul to pursue David. While Abner is clearly depicted as a loyal and devoted member of Saul's court, the text never implicates Abner in Saul's wrongdoings or downfall. Instead, the text places full blame for Yhwh's rejection of Saul upon Saul alone. Abner is, therefore, a symbol of Saul's kingdom but only the political and military aspects of Saul's kingdom, not the moral or religious failures of the kingdom. Contrasting Saul and Abner highlights Saul's failures and downfall.

Second, Abner appears in the narrative at significant transitional points in Saul's reign, especially in relation to Saul's downfall and David's rise. Abner's introduction occurs just after

Saul's rash vow in chapter 14 and just before God rejects Saul in chapter 15. The last time the narrative depicts *Saul* as winning a major battle and victory for Israel is in 14:48 just two verses before Abner's introduction. From that point forward in the narrative, Saul either is unable to defeat his enemies or does not fight. Thus, as Peter Miscall notes, "A summary here and not at the end of his [Saul's] reign hints that his reign is already over."⁹² When Abner's character next appears in the text, he does so at the end of the Goliath episode and just before Saul makes David a significant commander within the army (18:5), and thereafter, the text highlights David's accomplishments and Saul's failures. Abner's next appearance is in chapter 20 in the middle of the plot devised by Jonathan and David to help David escape Saul's anger. This scene marks the last time in the text that Saul interacts with Jonathan, and it also signals the beginning of Saul's active pursuit of David's life. Abner's final appearance in the text occurs at the last interaction between Saul and David in the narrative (1 Samuel 26). After this scene, Saul's character visits a medium (1 Samuel 28) and dies (31:5-7). The above survey shows that Abner's character appears in the text just before Saul's rejection by Yhwh, just before Saul takes David into his service, just before Saul begins his pursuit of David, and just before Saul sees David for the last time. Every appearance of Abner's character in 1 Samuel therefore indicates a forthcoming significant and negative transition for Saul or a positive transition for David. While Abner's character is never the catalyst for these transitions, as he is in 2 Samuel 2-3, the presence of his character alerts the reader that such a transition is about to occur.

Finally, we note that the text develops Abner's character slowly in 1 Samuel. Not much space is devoted to him at all, and his physical appearance and military abilities are never explicitly described or narrated. Abner enters the narrative during a list of Saul's family

⁹² Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 98.

members, and he is not the subject of any verbs there. His next scene (chapter 17) has him speak (אמר) to Saul and take (לקח) and bring (Hiphil of בוא) David to Saul. In chapter 20, he only sits (ישב), and in chapter 26 he sleeps (שכב) and then speaks (אמר) once more. Thus, only five distinct verbs are associated with Abner. His speech moves from displaying ignorance (17:55) to cleverness (26:14), but his actions devolve from taking and bringing in chapter 17 to sitting and sleeping in chapters 20 and 26 respectively. Therefore, although Abner acts creatively on two occasions (17:57; 26:14), his lack of significant narrative space in the text prevents us from considering him as a complex character or as an independent and active agent in 1 Samuel. Such a characterization of Abner changes in 2 Samuel 2–3 after Saul's death, but with regard to 1 Samuel, Abner is a rather flat, inactive minor character who possesses a handful of positive traits but who otherwise remains in the background.

CHAPTER 3

ABNER'S CHARACTER IN 2 SAMUEL 2 OF THE MASORETIC TEXT

Whereas Abner appears only sporadically in 1 Samuel, he is the most prominent character in the early chapters of 2 Samuel. His actions and decisions, more than any other character, drive the plot forward and influence other characters. As a result, we have more opportunity to study Abner's character as he mimics a real person and functions as a literary device. Following the story as presented in MT, we outline the text as follows:¹

- A. David is installed as king over Judah in Hebron (2:1-4a)
- B. David blesses the people of Jabesh-Gilead (2:4b-7)
- C. Abner makes Ishbosheth over Israel in Mahanaim (2:8-11)
- D. The Battle at the Pool of Gibeon (2:12-32)
 - a. The twenty four men compete (2:12-17)
 - b. Abner kills Asahel (2:18-23)
 - c. Joab calls off the battle (2:24-28)
 - d. Reflections on the battle (2:29-32)
- E. David's virility (3:1-5)
- F. Ishbosheth's accusation against Abner (3:6-11)
- G. David accepts Abner into his kingdom (3:12-21)
- H. The Death of Abner (3:22-4:1)
 - a. Joab kills Abner (3:22-27)
 - b. David curses Joab and his family (3:28-30)
 - c. David and the people mourn over Abner (3:31-4:1)

In examining Abner's characterization in 2 Samuel 2–3, we proceed sequentially, discussing Abner's character in the order in which he appears in the text. We skip over those sections in which Abner is not mentioned, referring to them only as necessary, such as when we need to compare Abner's character to David.

Because Abner features so prominently in these two chapters, it is necessary to split our discussion of 2 Samuel 2–3 into two separate chapters of the dissertation. In next chapter, we

¹ For other outlines of 2 Samuel 2–3, see A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, vii; Bar Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 5; Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 8; McKane, *I & II Samuel*, 10; etc.

discuss Abner's character and role in 2 Samuel 3 of MT. In this chapter, we examine Abner's characterization and contribution in 2 Samuel 2 of MT, paying attention first to how Abner's character mimics a real person and second to his role as a literary device. Abner's character takes up more narrative space in 2 Samuel 2 than he does in all of 1 Samuel, and in 2 Samuel 2, he establishes Ishbosheth as king, leads an army for the first and only time in the text, makes rhetorical arguments that influence those around him, and surprisingly kills the swifter Asahel. As such, we learn that Abner is a very influential character who wields great power, is a shrewd rhetorician, is a less skilled commander than Joab, and is physically fast and strong. In addition, his character space continues to intersect with Saul's, even though Saul is dead, and his character provides an interesting point of departure for our understanding of Joab's character. In short, Abner's character begins showing himself as a somewhat rounded and complex character who makes important contributions to the development and plot of the story.

Abner in 2 Samuel 2:8-11

The first of appearance of Abner's character in 2 Samuel in 2:8-11 occurs immediately following the description of David's rise to power in Hebron (2:1-7). Although this passage narrates the succession of a new king to replace Saul within Saul's closest territories, the text gives slightly more attention to Abner than it does to Ishbosheth, the new king. Such is surprising since, although the text has mentioned Abner previously, the text has not featured Abner in any significant way. Indeed, we do not expect *Abner* to be the one to both enthrone a new king and drive the plot forward. From just these four verses, however, we learn that Abner possesses a great deal of political clout within the post-Saul kingdom, is an intelligent and influential decision maker, and has a strained relationship with Ishbosheth. This brief section thus begins preparing us to expect Abner, not Ishbosheth, to be the driving political force within

the post-Saul kingdom, and the text also confirms that Abner is a shrewd and intelligent character. Moreover, by hinting at the strained relationship between Abner and Ishbosheth, the text also anticipates Abner's forthcoming abdication to David which occurs in 2 Samuel 3.

Abner's Power and Influence

We first take note of how the text begins showing the political power Abner wields within the post-Saul kingdom. Immediately, in v. 8, we see that Abner is the subject of three verbs: לקח (Qal, "to take"), עבר (Hiphil, "to bring across") and מלך (Hiphil, "to enthrone"). These three verbs in such close proximity suggest that Abner, and no other character, has the ability to pick and choose Saul's successor, and because the text records Abner receiving no command to perform any of these actions, it would seem that the selection of Ishbosheth as king is Abner's decision alone. Such conclusions are further supported by the fact that whereas Abner is the subject of these verbs, the new king, Ishbosheth, is their object. In other words, Abner's character acts, whereas Ishbosheth's character is acted upon. As this is the first mention of Ishbosheth in the books of Samuel, we only learn of his character because of Abner's actions, not because of his own. Even though the text goes on in v. 10 to make Ishbosheth the subject of מלך, the narrative downplays Ishbosheth's power by having Abner perform most of the action in this passage, and by comparing his brief reign of two years to David's lengthier reign of seven and a half (vv. 10-11), we already sense that Ishbosheth is an ineffectual leader with little power. Furthermore, the comparison of Ishbosheth's coronation with David's anointing further minimizes Ishbosheth's character in the story. Craig Morrison rightly captures the significance of Abner's power over Ishbosheth:

It is hardly surprising that Abner, a leading member of Saul's court, would have little interest in David's kingship. Thus, he takes one of Saul's sons, Ishbaal, and declares him king. The narrator subtly contrasts the two coronations: Abner *took* Ishbaal and *made* him king (2 Sam 2:9), whereas the people of Judah *anointed* David King (2:4 and 2:7). David is acclaimed by the people, Ishbaal by Abner. King Ishbaal is a

mere pawn that Abner takes and uses to preserve his power in Saul's realm. When King Ishbaal attempts to exercise his authority, the general will remind him that he keeps him on the throne (3:8).²

In short, the decision to make Ishbosheth king at Mahanaim is Abner's alone, for neither the people nor Yhwh encourage him to do so like they do with David (cf. 1 Sam 16:12; 2 Sam 2:4). The text, therefore, portrays Abner, not Ishbosheth, as the source of political power in the post-Saul kingdom, and we begin to expect to see Abner's character act as a powerful figure later in the story.

The text is gapped, however, in that it does not specify why Abner selected Ishbosheth to be king and not some other character. The text has not described another character that would be a reasonable candidate to succeed Saul, but neither did the text suggest Ishbosheth would be the character to do so before 2 Sam 2:8. Thus, any other character related to Saul or connected with Saul's could conceivably have been made king. Mephibosheth (2 Sam 4:4), for instance, as Jonathan's son might be a reasonable candidate. Another likely candidate to succeed Saul is Abner himself. As Saul's cousin, he is related to Saul and may have a claim to the throne, and as Saul's chief general, he would be a reasonable candidate since, as we saw in the previous chapter, kings in ANE were military leaders.

There are several possible reasons, however, for why Abner does not take the throne for himself. For instance, Abner may be refraining out of a sense of propriety, honor, or devotion to

² Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 37-8, emphasis original; cf. Scoggin (*Old Testament and Oriental Studies*, 37-9) who discusses the anomalous nature of Abner's choice of Ishbosheth as Saul's successor; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 85. Interestingly, the hiphil of גִּלְיָהּ is frequently used in reference to Saul's and his family's rise to power (cf. 1 Sam 11:15; 12:1; 15:11, 35; 2 Sam 2:9), but it is never used in reference to David. David is always anointed (שָׁחַט) king (cf. v. 4), but Saul and Ishbosheth are made king (גִּלְיָהּ). In short, whereas David clearly has the consent of both the people and of Yhwh (1 Sam 16:12-13; 2 Sam 2:4; 5:1-5), Ishbosheth is only said to have Abner's support, and whereas David is anointed by both the people and by a prophet (1 Sam 16:12-13; 2 Sam 2:4; 5:1-5), Ishbosheth is merely made king by one person. Also see Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 367; Firth, *I & 2 Samuel*, 332; Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 221; McKenzie, *King David*, 117; and McCarter (*II Samuel*, 85) who calls Ishbosheth a mere "figurehead" in reference to vv.8-9.

Saul. While he might be the more powerful character when compared to Ishbosheth, he is not a direct descendant of Saul, and thus, to place himself upon the throne might be considered an act of presumption or aggression against Saul's house; he would thus dishonor Saul to whom he is still closely connected (cf. 2:8; see discussion of Abner's title below). Another possibility is that taking the throne may be considered treasonous by Saul's people and thus lead to civil unrest within a weak and struggling kingdom, so Abner may be refraining from taking the throne in order to maintain peace and order within the kingdom. Yet another possible reason is that he already sees that Saul's house will ultimately fall to David's, and he does not want to be king when that occurs. If so, then Abner is shrewd and observant yet cowardly. The text is unfortunately gapped, and there are not enough clues in the text for us to form an educated opinion. Nevertheless, each of these potential reasons present a mostly positive portrayal of Abner and suggest that Abner may be humble and wise in not taking the throne. Of course, because the text does not state a reason for why Abner does what he does, we cannot be dogmatic about these conclusions.³

Moreover, the geography listed in this section shows the extent of Abner's influence as well as his wisdom in selecting Mahanaim as the capital. In verse 9 we read that Abner made Ishbosheth king **אל-הגלעד ואל-האשורי ואל-יזרעאל ועל-אפרים ועל-בנימין ועל-** Israel king **אל-הגלעד ואל-האשורי ואל-יזרעאל ועל-אפרים ועל-בנימין ועל-ישראל** ("over Gilead, the Assyrians [?], Jezreel, Ephraim, Benjamin, Israel, all of it").⁴

By examining the territories over which Ishbosheth ruled, we learn of the expanse of this

³ However, Scoggin (*Old Testament and Oriental Studies*, 37) argues that Abner ultimately wanted the throne for himself.

⁴ Auld (*I & II Samuel*, 367; cf. Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 37) believes that these events took place before vv. 5-7 and should be understood as, "Now Abner had already taken..." This is noteworthy but does not seriously affect our understanding of Abner's character.

kingdom. The list begins with Gilead, which was clearly devoted to Saul prior to his death (1 Sam 10:27 and 2 Sam 2:5-7).⁵ While a vague term, the region of Gilead mentioned here is possibly a small region located east of the Jordan River and north of the Dead Sea.⁶ Skipping over אַשּׁוּר, which we discuss below, we next read of Jezreel. Despite some scholarly disagreement, “Jezreel” here seems to be a reference to the Jezreel Valley that sat between the hills of Samaria and the hills of Galilee northwest of Mt. Gilboa.⁷ Ephraim and Benjamin clearly refer to their tribal boundaries west of the Jordan and north of the Dead Sea but in the south of what would become the northern kingdom, and collectively, they may also include Manasseh.⁸ The phrase, כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל (“Israel, all of it”), refers to the entirety of the northern area and is a summary of what was just delineated. In short, Abner has established Ishbosheth over a kingdom roughly equivalent in size to what would later become the northern kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam.

The mention of הַאֲשּׁוּרִי (“The Assyrians”), however, is odd in this context. Normally אַשּׁוּר refers to Assyria in HB, but “Assyria” would be anachronistic here; Assyria did not

⁵ See S. Cohen, “Gilead,” *IDB* II/397-8; McCarter, *I Samuel*, 198-207 and *II Samuel*, 87. Graeme Auld (*I & II Samuel*, 367) states that the use of גִּלְעָד in relation to both Abner (here) and David (v. 5) suggests that conflict between the two houses is inevitable.

⁶ See McCarter, *II Samuel*, 522.

⁷ G. W. Van Beek, “Jezreel,” *IDB* II/906-7. McCarter (*II Samuel*, 87), however, thinks that due to the “debacle” that occurred in Gilboa, we should rather understand the reference here to the region immediately surrounding the city of Jezreel and not the entire valley. He suggests this may have corresponded roughly to the borders of the tribe of Issachar, but then one must wonder why the name Issachar was not used. Van Seters (*David Saga*, 82) believes the use of Jezreel is anachronistic, as it was not settled until the Omride Dynasty. Because the other terms in this list refer to geographic regions not specific cities, we should likely take the reference to יִזְרְעֵאל as a region as well.

⁸ See McCarter, *II Samuel* 87-8, 522; W. L. Reed, “Ephraim,” *IDB*, II/119-21, especially p. 120; K. Elliger, “Benjamin,” *IDB* I/383-5; K. Elliger, “Manasseh,” *IDB*, III/252-4, especially, pp. 253-4.

exercise great influence in this area until well after the historical time presumed by the text. Plus, it seems unlikely that the text is suggesting Ishbosheth's rule extended south into Egypt and east into modern day Iraq and Iran. The word **הַאֲשׁוּרִי** thus seems to be defective. The Peshitta has *gshwr* ("Geshur") which is also reflected in the Vulgate, and P. Kyle McCarter has opted for that reading here, despite that term not being attested in early Hebrew MSS.⁹ Diana Edelman argues that instead of **הַאֲשׁוּרִי**, the Assyrians, the text should be repointed as **הַאֲשִׁרִי**, the Asherites, which she believes had an enclave on the frontiers of Benjamin and Ephraim.¹⁰ She argues that Ishbosheth's territory is defined in geographic terms not tribal terms and that even Benjamin and Ephraim should be understood geographically not tribally. She further suggests that the switch between **אֶל** and **עַל** designates different political relations to Ishbosheth and their own territorial administrations (independent or centralized).¹¹ Edelman's is a much more modest and reasonable interpretation than "Assyrians," but unfortunately, we cannot be certain of its accuracy.

Nevertheless, regardless of the exact location and borders of the specific regions listed, by stating that Ishbosheth rules over "all Israel," the text shows that the territory over which Ishbosheth rules is sizable but not as massive as the Assyrian, Babylonian, or Egyptian kingdoms.¹² If we are right in understanding that Abner is the real source of political power in Ishbosheth's kingdom — and such will be confirmed in our discussion of 2 Samuel 3 (see

⁹ McCarter, *II Samuel*, 82-3.

¹⁰ Edelman, "Ashurites" 85-6, 88-90.

¹¹ Edelman, "Ashurites," 88-9; cf. Na'aman, "The Kingdom of Ishbaal," 33-7.

¹² Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 38. See Scoggin (*Old Testament and Oriental Studies*, 41-3) for a terse discussion of the geography over which Ishbosheth ruled.

chapter 4 of this dissertation) — then we see that Abner is influential over a significant but not massive geographic region. Abner exercises authority not only over Ishbosheth (see above) but also over the land that Ishbosheth “rules.” If Abner controls Ishbosheth and Ishbosheth controls “all Israel,” then Abner in essence controls “all Israel.” Such information about Abner’s (indirect?) reach of power anticipates the forthcoming support Abner will receive in 3:12-21 after his confrontation with Ishbosheth in 3:7-11. Indeed, Abner will come close to fulfilling his goal of bringing all Israel (cf. the use of כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל in 2:8; 3:12, 21) over to David — only his murder at the hands of Joab foils his plan — and no one in Israel opposes him. From our first encounter with Abner’s character in 2 Samuel, therefore, we see Abner amassing more power for himself over a sizable territory, and he seems to wield more influence than the new king he enthroned. Indeed, from just these verses we can reasonably conclude that although Ishbosheth technically holds the office of king, Abner is a stronger political character than he.

Abner’s Intelligent Decision Making

The second contribution 2 Sam 2:8-11 makes for our understanding of Abner relates to Abner’s choice to settle in Mahanaim (v. 8). Scholars identify Mahanaim as being located about 44 miles northeast of Jerusalem across the Jordan and near the Jabbok River.¹³ According to J. R. Bartlett, this location would have been ideal for ruling the north and northwest territories of Ishbosheth’s kingdom.¹⁴ That Abner would choose an area located east of the Jordan River is understandable given the turmoil and conflict occurring between Saul’s house and David’s. As David is amassing power and followers in Hebron south of Jerusalem, Abner wisely moves the new king to a distant location so that conflict between the two houses could not erupt

¹³ See discussions in Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 332; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 522; Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 38.

¹⁴ Bartlett, “Sihon and Og,” 264.

immediately and so that Ishbosheth would not be an easy target for assassination. Such a location, therefore, provides more security for Ishbosheth and his capital while also providing a decent site — but not ideal since it is far from Ephraim and Benjamin — from which to rule.¹⁵ David Firth says, “The key point for Abner is that it [Mahanaim] was away from both David and the Philistines, representing a base where he could build his power... Mahanaim was a logical place to claim authority over Gilead, but the influence that could be wielded over Jezreel, Ephraim and Benjamin, all of which were west of the Jordan would be limited.”¹⁶ Van Seters finds this location convenient for the narrative as it puts Ishbosheth far out of harm’s way for the conflict that ensues later in the chapter.¹⁷ The scholarly consensus, therefore, is that the choice of Mahanaim is a wise one since it keeps Ishbosheth away from danger. Moreover, it is interesting that the text in no way suggests that the choice of Mahanaim is Ishbosheth’s. To the contrary, the text consistently implies that the decision is Abner’s entirely, for Abner brings (עבר) Ishbosheth over to Mahanaim; Ishbosheth does not go (הלך) to Mahanaim. Because the strategic intellect of this decision rests with Abner, not Ishbosheth, the text begins confirming what we suspected in our discussion of 1 Samuel 26, namely that Abner is an intelligent character. His decisions here show that he is shrewd both politically and strategically.

These two aspects of the narrative — the peoples over whom Ishbosheth rules and Abner’s choice of Mahanaim — continue to portray Abner as powerful but also as politically intelligent. Not only did Abner make Ishbosheth king, he made him king over a sizable

¹⁵ See McCarter, *II Samuel*, 87; cf. S. Cohen, “Mahanaim,” *IDB*, III/226-7.

¹⁶ Firth, *I & 2 Samuel*, 332-3.

¹⁷ Van Seters, *David Saga*, 272; cf. Mastéy (“2 Samuel 4:6,” 98-9) who holds that Mahanaim was an ideal city of refuge. Scoggin (*Old Testament and Oriental Studies*, 36-7) holds a similar view.

geographic area capable of rivaling David's newfound kingdom. Hence, Abner himself has great political influence in these areas, and such is reinforced by the absence in the text of any sort of opposition from the people to Abner's decisions. In addition, Abner's decision to establish Ishbosheth in Mahanaim suggests that he is thinking strategically. That location is well placed to keep Ishbosheth safe from battle while allowing the new king to have some influence in the western areas of what would become the northern kingdom.

Abner's Strained Relationship with Ishbosheth

Finally, we see a subtle hint that Abner's relationship with Ishbosheth is strained. In v. 8, Abner is once again introduced by his patronymic and title but with a slight difference from what we have seen before. He is called **שֵׁר־צְבָא אֲשֶׁר לְשָׂאוּל** ("head of Saul's army") not **שֵׁר־צְבָאוֹ** ("head of his army;" cf. 1 Sam 14:50; 26:5) or simply **שֵׁר הַצְּבָא** ("head of the army;" cf. 1 Sam 17:55). Because *Saul's* name appears in Abner's title here, Abner is more connected with Saul than with Ishbosheth even though Saul is dead. Abner is referred to here by his position under the *first* king of Israel not the second. Despite Ishbosheth's rise to power, Abner is never called **שֵׁר־צְבָא אֲשֶׁר לְאִישׁ בִּשְׁת** ("the head of Ishbosheth's army"). The only other time he is called **שֵׁר** in 2 Samuel is when David mourns Abner in 3:38, but David does not use his full title there. Hence, the last time that Abner is referenced by his full title **שֵׁר־צְבָא**, he is linked with Saul, the former king, not Ishbosheth, the current one. This syntax suggests that Abner is not closely tied to Ishbosheth. Therefore, while the text does not give us any specific details, we begin to suspect that Abner's relationship with Ishbosheth is imperfect or even strained. Abner may have made Ishbosheth king, but he is not Ishbosheth's general. Such prepares us to see the rift between Abner and Ishbosheth that occurs in 2 Samuel 3.

Abner in 2 Samuel 2:12-32

This section (2 Sam 2:12-32) provides us with a lengthy narrative focused almost entirely on Abner wherein he engages in military combat for the first time in the text. Abner's character commands his army, fights one-on-one with Asahel, influences those around him, drives the plot forward, and speaks more than any other character in this section. In all this space devoted to Abner, we find a character who possesses more complexity than his narrative space in 1 Samuel might otherwise suggest. While his character acts in ways consistent with what we have seen previously, he also begins acting in ways we could not have expected. As he does in 2:8-11, Abner takes control and is the main active agent of the text, wielding influence over those around him, and in every instance, save his conversation with Asahel, his will prevails. New aspects of his character emerge, however, when we begin to see Abner rely heavily on wit, rhetoric, and questions to persuade those around him to do what he wants, and such verbal tactics become his *modi operandi* in 2 Samuel 3 as well. We also witness the first potential weakness in Abner as a military commander, whereby his martial decisions result in the deaths of many of his men, yet we simultaneously learn about his physical attributes in his interaction with Asahel and more about his strategic intellect in his decision to have a twelve-on-twelve contest. In this section of the dissertation, we discuss these aspects of Abner's character — both the continuing aspects and the new — thematically rather than sequentially, for they appear throughout this portion of the story and are not confined to just particular sections. We begin by discussing how the text shows Abner's control and influence, then continue with discussions on Abner's use of rhetoric and impressive physicality, and we conclude by examining his strengths and weaknesses as a military commander within the context of the unique twelve-on-twelve contest.

Abner's Character is Persuasive

We begin by showing Abner's tendency to control the scene and convince other characters to do his will. As they do in 2 Sam 2:8-11, Abner's words and actions in 2:12-32 drive the plot forward and influence the characters around him, including his enemy Joab. Here, Abner leads Ishbosheth's men out from Mahanaim to Gibeon, initiates a contest with Joab's men, and convinces Joab to end the battle to an end after his side is routed. Abner makes requests of Joab, Asahel, the Benjaminites, and his own men, but only one character, Asahel, fails to yield to Abner's wishes. In short, Abner acts as the protagonist of this section of the story and wields more power and influence than any other character in this portion of the narrative.

We first glimpse Abner's ability to influence other characters by his power and authority over his own men. Although it is not surprising that a commander of his stature should garner the respect and obedience of his own subordinates, this is the first passage in which he does so. Abner leads the servants of Ishbosheth (עבדי איש-בשת) from Mahanaim across the Jordan to Gibeon, in Benjamin. We discuss the strategic import of this decision below, but here it is worth noting that the text suggests that the decision to go to Benjamin is Abner's. Graeme Auld, however, argues that it is "unquestionable" that Abner was ordered by Ishbosheth to go to Gibeon, but the text never explicitly states that Ishbosheth gives any orders whatsoever here or elsewhere.¹⁸ In fact, Ishbosheth does not act in this section at all, and Abner, not Ishbosheth, is primary the subject of the masculine, singular verb **צא** ("to go out") in v. 12. Ishbosheth, by

¹⁸ Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 371-2.

contrast, is referenced only in relation to his men (עֲבָדֵי אִישׁ־בִּשְׁת).¹⁹ Contrary to what the text does with Saul in his escapades in 1 Samuel (see 1 Sam 14:47-48; 31:1-7; etc.), the text here does not attribute success, failure, or even participation to Ishbosheth in this scene. In fact, because Ishbosheth is not mentioned as a participant in the action of 2 Sam 2:12-32, it seems that Ishbosheth has remained in Mahanaim, leaving Abner alone to lead the army. Such is odd within the ANE context because, as we saw in chapter 2 of this dissertation, ANE kings typically led their own armies whenever possible, but the Samuel text has not told us that Ishbosheth is otherwise engaged. Thus, although the men are called Ishbosheth's men, such nomenclature seems merely to indicate the king for whom these men are fighting (cf. 2:15), not the officer commanding them on the battlefield. Thus, we are left with the impression that these servants are taking orders from Abner, not Ishbosheth, about where to march and when. Nevertheless, even if this interpretation is incorrect, the text's silence with regard to Ishbosheth makes him seem unimportant, and his men follow Abner's commands throughout the episode, thereby suggesting that Abner, not Ishbosheth, is in charge at Gibeon.

Abner then selects twelve men to engage in a contest with twelve of Joab's men (2:14-16), and all twelve of Abner's men obey without question. While the exact nature of this "contest" (שִׁחָק) is difficult to ascertain (see full discussion below), it seems that because the men enter the contest armed (v. 16), some sort of violent skirmish is intended by the term. Despite the threat of violence, these twelve men engage in the confrontation without protest, and when this contest erupts into a bloody battle, resulting in the death of many of Abner's men (vv.

¹⁹ Of course, Ishbosheth's army is also included in the verb אָצַח. That the army is listed after Abner and the verb is singular, not plural, underscores the importance of Abner here.

16-17, 30-31), the Benjaminites rally around Abner forming a single band of around him (ענדה) (אזח, v. 25). In doing so, these Benjaminite show that they are ready to fight for and protect Abner against assaults by the enemy (v. 24). Abner does not command that such a band be formed around him, yet his followers willingly place themselves between their commander and the enemy. Such actions show the devotion and respect that Abner's men feel towards him even while they are losing the battle. In addition, after Joab calls off the last of the fighting, Abner's men follow him both night and day, through the wilderness (ערבה) and across the Jordan River (הירדן) back to Mahanaim (v. 29). While it would be reasonable, given the routing that occurs, for these soldiers to flee in separate directions or back to their own homes, they instead stay beside their commander until the battle is over. Abner's men, therefore, travel with him, fight for him, defend him, and follow him back to the capital even after losing significant numbers. At no point does the text even hint that Abner's men doubt his leadership or refuse to obey his orders. In fact, because Ishbosheth's character does not feature in this passage, the following Abner has and his leadership in this battle makes Abner seem a bit more kingly than Ishbosheth, the actual king (2:8-11).²⁰

Moreover, the reach of Abner's influence extends even to his enemies, particularly Joab. In v. 14, Abner makes the suggestion to Joab: יקומו נא הנערים וישחקו לפנינו ("Let the young men arise and compete before us"), and Joab immediately agrees. The text is gapped as to exactly what Abner intends to accomplish by having the men compete (see discussion below), but it is significant that Joab displays no signs of hesitation or reservation. He simply agrees to

²⁰ See the discussion of ANE kings leading armies into battle in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Abner's request and allows his men to fight their kinsmen (cf. 27). Given that Joab's forces are clearly superior to Abner's — a fact that we, the readers, only learn after the battle is over — it is somewhat surprising that Joab agrees to the smaller engagement. The text is gapped as to why Joab agrees, but perhaps Joab is not aware of his own men's superiority or perhaps he is taunting and toying with Abner. Regardless of his reason for doing so, however, Joab immediately acquiesces to Abner's wishes and has his men to engage in the contest. Joab again yields to Abner later in the scene when Abner asks Joab to bring an end to the battle (vv. 26-28).

Although Abner utilizes rhetoric and persuasion to convince Joab to cease fighting, Joab admits that had Abner not spoken, the fighting would continue until morning (v. 27). In other words, Joab explicitly credits Abner with ending the battle even though Joab is the one who sounds the trumpet to call off the fighting. Without Abner's initiative, therefore, the battle would neither begin nor end.

In every case, therefore, Abner possesses enough respect and persuasion over others to get what he wants. The only exception is Asahel who repeatedly refuses to heed Abner's command and end his pursuit (vv. 19-23). Despite Abner's numerous attempts to convince Asahel to turn aside, Asahel refuses to do so. As a result, Abner kills him. In short, therefore, every character in this section, except for Asahel, does whatever Abner wants, and the text thereby portrays Abner as a powerful and influential figure.

Abner's use of rhetoric and questions

In wielding his influence over others, Abner's character relies heavily on the use of rhetoric through carefully crafted statements and questions, particularly when he interacts with his foes, Joab and Asahel. Whereas in 1 Samuel Abner speaks only twice (17:55; 26:14), in 2 Samuel 2, Abner utters no less than nine sentences, six of which are questions (vv. 20, 22b, 22c,

26a, 26b, and 26c). Through this relative abundance of direct discourse we learn a great deal about his character, and we are able to confirm that he possesses the wit implied in 1 Samuel 26. We also notice that he relies more heavily on his words than on his sword even though he is a military commander. Passing over v. 14, which is merely a request to have Joab engage his men in a contest, we discuss Abner's speeches in the order in which they occur in the narrative.

Verse 20 marks the first time Abner asks a question in 2 Samuel 2. After the contest of vv. 14-16 erupts into a full-scale battle, Abner's men begin suffering significant losses, and they understandably start to flee the battlefield. Asahel, Joab's brother, pursues Abner with the clear intent of killing him, and while he is being chased Abner asks, "Is that you, Asahel?" (הא אתה ל עשהאל). The use of Asahel's name suggests that this question is nothing more than a clarification of identity, and the text does not give any indication that we are to infer a double meaning like it does in 1 Sam 26:14. Nevertheless, by learning the identity of his pursuer, Abner's character learns two other possible facts: the physical capabilities of his pursuer and the strategy to use that will give him the best opportunity to preserve his own life. Because Abner already knew or knew about Asahel — otherwise, he could not have used Asahel's name in this question — when he learns that Asahel is indeed the pursuer, he learns that he is being pursued by a swift runner. Thus, we infer that Abner now knows Asahel will eventually overtake him, so rather than fighting Asahel outright, he resorts to clever speech designed to persuade his pursuer. Throughout our study, we will see Abner alter his rhetorical approach based upon who his interlocutors are. For example, here he appeals to Asahel's greed, self-preservation, and honor, but with Ishbosheth in 3:8-11, Abner references loyalty, danger, and the promise of Yhwh. Of course, the text here does not explicitly state what Abner hopes to learn other than his pursuer's identity, but because Abner is able to ask multifaceted questions (cf. 1 Samuel 26:14), it seems at

least possible that Abner is already devising how to both save his life and engage Asahel when he asks this question.

After learning that his pursuer is Asahel, Abner then attempts to persuade him to end the chase, but because Asahel stubbornly refuses to turn aside, Abner addresses him using multiple rhetorical tactics. Abner begins by commanding Asahel to turn to the right or left (על-ימינך) and take the spoils (חליצה) from one of Abner's own men (v. 21). The reference to the right and left connects Abner's request with the text's own statement in v. 19 that Asahel refused to turn to either the right or left, but it also shows that Abner does not wish to personally engage in combat. Instead of recommending a fight, Abner encourages Asahel to turn aside peacefully, but when this command does not immediately have the desired effect, Abner offers Asahel some incentive to turn aside — the life and spoils of one of Abner's own men — thereby appealing to Asahel's presumed bloodlust and greed.

The word for spoils (חליצה) here is rather vague. It is only otherwise used in Jdg 14:19 when Samson kills thirty Philistines and takes their spoils to give to those who solved his riddle. Nevertheless, it is related to the verb חליץ ("to equip for war") and likely refers to the entirety of the soldier's equipment: sword or spear, armor, shield, tunic, etc.²¹ Abner's offer is thus quite generous; if Asahel would only turn aside and take the spoils of one of Abner's men, Asahel would gain a lot of valuable equipment. He would also sate any desire to shed blood by killing

²¹ A. Anderson (2 *Samuel*, 44) only briefly mentions the ambiguities of the word. Schneider (*Judges*, 211) simply describes it as "What is stripped off a person as plunder in war," whereas Boling (*Judges*, 232) more specifically defines the word as "the outer equipage, including the outer garment and the belting from which weapons and adornments were hung." C. Gordon ("Belt-Wrestling," 132) argues that it is a wrestling-belt worn (see our discussion of Gordon's view below). Boling and Gordon appear to limit the term to simply clothing associated with war, which fits the Samson context, but it seems highly unlikely that a soldier (e.g., Asahel) would loot clothing but neither weapons nor armor. See also Els, חליץ, *NIDOTTE*, II/157-9.

Abner's servant. Such an appeal to Asahel's greed and bloodlust, while ultimately unsuccessful, is quite shrewd, for rather than just pleading for his life, Abner gives his pursuer tangible reasons to turn aside.

Unfortunately for Abner, Asahel is not distracted by the offer of spoils and continues the pursuit, so Abner alters his tactics again by asking two different rhetorical questions. Abner's first question, **למה אככה ארצה** ("Why should I strike you to the ground?") is an obvious taunt, appealing to Asahel's sense of self-preservation. Abner implies that if Asahel's pursuit culminates in a physical confrontation, Asahel will likely be the one to die. By making this taunt in the form of a question rather than as a direct threat, Abner does not only puff himself up but also forces Asahel to ponder the question. Unfortunately, the text is gapped in that it does not state which character is the bigger, stronger, or more skillful fighter; it only mentions Asahel's speed (v. 18). Thus, it is unclear whether Abner's question is merely rhetorical and intended to distract Asahel or a question designed to emphasize the "reality" of Abner's superiority. Some commentators, like Walter Brueggemann, have seen Abner's taunting question as the latter and thus a genuine attempt to save Asahel's life.²² If his interpretation is correct, then Abner is speaking from a position of strength, showing both boldness and mercy; he draws attention to his superiority while offering Asahel a way of escape. Because Abner is the one being pursued by a swifter soldier, however, it is also reasonable to interpret Abner as speaking out of fear and self-preservation (see further discussion below). If this understanding is right, Abner's question is designed to distract and frighten Asahel, so that Asahel will turn aside.

²² Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 222. See the fuller discussion of Brueggeman below.

While the text is gapped in not explicitly stating Abner's intent or physicality in relation to Asahel, we hold that the latter interpretation makes more sense based upon both the immediate and wider context. Because we have been given no opportunities to witness Abner engaged in combat or any descriptions of his physical strengths, it is difficult to infer that Abner is the superior fighter, especially in light of v. 18 where we were told that Asahel is as swift (קל) as a gazelle in the field (כאחד הצבים אשר בשדה). When we are told in v. 19 that Asahel pursues (רדף) Abner relentlessly, we sense that Abner, not Asahel, is in trouble. Asahel with his speed and determination has the upper hand, for the one fleeing a battlefield is almost always at a deadly disadvantage. Thus, the text presents Abner as the one in danger, not Asahel. Plus, because Abner cowers in fear in 1 Samuel 17 (vv. 11, 55-58), MT has already established that Abner has a tendency toward cowardice without providing us with any opportunity to witness Abner's character acting with bravery and strength. Concluding that Abner flees from Asahel out of fear and self-preservation rather than out of strength and mercy, therefore, is more consistent with his previous characterization and makes more sense in the present context. If this interpretation is correct, then Abner is making an empty boast in the hopes that Asahel will be intimidated and ultimately turn aside. His weapon is his rhetoric alone.

When Asahel still refuses to turn aside, Abner asks a second question in v. 22, ואיך אשא פני אל-יואב אחיך ("And how could I lift up my face to Joab your brother?"). This question builds upon the previous one and also appeals to Asahel's sense of kinsmanship. While some scholars seem to believe that Abner is truly attempting to forestall an actual blood feud between Saul's house and David's, it seems more likely that Abner is trying every tactic at his

disposal to save his own life.²³ Thus far, Abner, in the midst of being pursued by someone trying to kill him, has tried both to convince Asahel to kill someone else and take the spoils (v. 21) and to scare Asahel into giving up the chase. He has now exhausted his other options, so he appeals to Asahel's desire to avoid a shameful outcome or possible blood feud between Abner's house (= Saul's) and Joab's (= David's), which we know already exists from the current battle (see also 3:1). Abner thus continues to imply that peace, not pursuit, is best for Asahel. In doing so, he here adds that were he to kill Asahel then he would face long term tension and shame with Joab, Asahel's brother. If Asahel would only turn aside and end the pursuit, he would preserve his own life and make peace between his family and Abner's. Abner's tactic here is clever, innovative, and distinct from those he has employed previously, but it fails like the others. Only now, with all of his rhetorical options exhausted and with Asahel on his heels, does Abner resort to a physical confrontation, and he kills Asahel with the back of his spear (v. 23).

As mentioned above, some scholars disagree that Abner is fleeing in fear. For instance, Walter Brueggemann, in discussing Abner's flight away from Asahel, says, "Abner is not as fast and cannot escape. He is bold and brave, however, and in his masterful self-control he is condescendingly gracious... Abner understands that Asahel wants blood, so Abner offers him some blood... Twice he [Abner] tells him [Asahel] to desist. Abner is not frightened; he is utterly confident... Abner does not want the issue forced, because it will only extend and escalate the hostilities."²⁴ There are at least four problems with Brueggemann's position. First, because Abner is on the losing side of the battle, fear is the more logical emotion contextually.

²³ E.g., Firth, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 339, 342; Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 42; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 98-9; Tushima, *Fate of Saul's Progeny*, 126; Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 222.

²⁴ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 222. Morrison (*2 Samuel*, 42), Robinson, (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 162), and Smith (*The Books of Samuel*, 271-2) also hold that Abner is aware of his own physical superiority despite him being pursued.

Not only will a prolonged fight increase the bloodshed in general but it will increase the bloodshed on Abner's side in particular. Thus, Abner has reason to be concerned about his own safety and the safety of his men. Second, the text has not portrayed Abner acting bravely or boldly in any situation thus far in the narrative. The only time that Abner approaches bravado is when he suggests the young men "play" in v. 14, for if he were not convinced that his men could win the contest, he would not suggest it.²⁵ Nevertheless, Abner himself does not engage in the contest, and sending other people to fight is hardly a brave act. Thus, we have no pattern within the text upon which to construct a brave and bold characterization of Abner. Third, rather than being "gracious," Abner is callous and selfish in offering the blood and spoils of one of his own men to Asahel (v. 21). Such an offer seems to be motivated more by desperation, fear, and self-preservation than by mercy and bravery. Finally, although Brueggemann holds that Abner flees because he is bold, brave, and self-controlled, nowhere in the Hebrew Bible is flight ever equated with bravery or considered an act worthy of emulation (cf. Exo 4:3; 9:20; 14:25-27; Num 10:35; 35:11; Jos 7:4; Jos 10:11, 16; Jdg 4:15-17; etc.), except in cases where a character flees immoral activity (e.g., Gen 39:12-13;) or flees deceptively (e.g. Joshua 8), and the text gives no hint that Abner is fleeing deceptively here.

Having discussed Abner's dialog with Asahel at length, we are now able to move to his last three questions in 2 Samuel which are directed to Joab (2:26). Once again, we see Abner employ a multi-faceted approach, appealing to Joab's multiple interests. Abner's stated intent is to bring the fighting to a close, and to that end, he asks his questions in quick succession without

²⁵ Cf. Bar-Efrat (*Das Erste Buch Samuel*, 240) who says regarding Goliath who also called for representative combat: *Goliath hegt also keinen Zweifel an dem Ausgang des Zweikampfes: Anstatt Knechte Sauls zu sein, werden die Israeliten zu Knechte der Philister* ("Goliath fostered no doubts about the outcome of the duel; instead of being slaves of Saul, the Israelites would become slaves of the Philistines").

giving Joab a chance to respond. His first question, **הֲלֹנְצָח תֹּאכַל חֶרֶב** (“Should the sword devour perpetually?”), uses a metaphor typically found in the prophets (e.g., Isa 1:20; 31:8; 2:30; 12:12; 46:10, 14; Hos 11:6; Nah 2:13; cf. Deut 32:42) of the sword, not the sword-wielder, devouring people. The metaphor brings to mind the ferocity and length of war and is never used to emphasize the glory or benefits of war. Abner does not specify which army will be devoured by the sword, and thus, he implies that continued battle will be perpetual (**נְצָח**), onerous, and devastating for both sides, including Joab’s army. In other words, Abner states that even though Joab has the upper hand, Joab has the responsibility to avoid prolonged fighting by calling an end to the battle. The onus to end bloodshed lies with Joab not with Abner, so Joab must command his men to stand down.

In case his point was not clear, Abner’s second question in v. 26, **הֲלוֹא יָדַעְתָּה כִּי־ מֵרָחֵק תִּהְיֶה בְּאַחֲרוֹנָה** (“Don’t you know that it will be bitter in the end?”), builds upon the first and hints that only Joab will be responsible for future bloodshed if he does not end the battle. Abner emphasizes the horrendous results that will accompany prolonged fighting by stating that bitterness (**מֵרָחֵק**), that is pain and anguish, will be the unavoidable result of battle. If Joab does not want to engage in extended bitterness and bloodshed, then Joab must stop the battle. Without explicitly saying so, therefore, Abner again implies that the onus to end the battle rests with Joab alone. Unless Joab specifically sounds the trumpet, Abner argues, the sword will devour and the end will be bitter.

At the end of v. 26, Abner is more direct. He asks specifically how long it will be until Joab commands his troops to turn aside from pursuing their brothers (**אֲחֵיהֶם**). In asking this question, Abner accomplishes three things. First, while he had previously implied that Joab

alone possessed the power to end the battle, here Abner makes that point explicit. There is no ambiguity about what Abner wants. Second, Abner admits his defeat by recognizing that he is incapable of ending the battle himself. If Abner were capable of ending the battle, he surely would do so, but by asking *Joab* to command *his* men to stop fighting, Abner indicates that he knows he has already lost. Third, in a move that Walter Brueggemann rightly calls “deft,” Abner refers to his men as brothers of Joab’s men (אֶחָיוֹתָיִם) and places the guilt of kin-slaying upon Joab and his army.²⁶ Here, Abner heightens his argument and places even more responsibility on Joab. Not only will Joab will be guilty of bloodshed if he allows the battle to continue, he will also be guilty of allowing Israelites to kill fellow Israelites (cf. Absalom’s rebellion in 2 Samuel 15–18 and Sheba’s rebellion in 2 Samuel 20).

In short, Abner begins his argument by suggesting that Joab must see the brutality of continued fighting; he continues by reminding Abner that regardless of who wins, the end result will be bitter; and he concludes by laying the blame of kinslaying solely upon Joab. Abner has persuasively and convincingly argued that Joab must end the fighting in order to avoid all of these horrendous consequences. He has been so persuasive, in fact, that Joab, unlike Asahel, concedes the point and calls an end to the battle, even crediting Abner with changing his mind (v. 27).

Abner’s direct discourse in this section shows us several aspects about his character. First, we are able to confirm that Abner does in fact possess the wit and intellect implicitly seen in 1 Sam 26:14. Abner’s questions in 2 Samuel 2 are not uniform; they make different appeals based upon the person with whom he converses and the particular situation being addressed. He

²⁶ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* 223.

shifts his strategy on the fly and approaches each character differently. He appeals to Asahel's greed but to Joab's desire to end bloodshed. He threateningly exalts himself in order to try to convince Asahel to turn aside, but he humbles himself by admitting defeat and placing the blame of continued fighting and death upon Joab alone. Therefore, Abner appears to be a good judge of character and to possess the ability to perceive and appeal to the motivations of his interlocutors.²⁷ Abner further displays his intellect in that he varies his tactics even with the same character. Abner utilizes no less than three tactics in his conversation with Asahel and at least two with Joab. Abner may ask a lot of questions, but they are neither static nor repetitive; they are specifically directed to the character and situation Abner faces. Second, only when his wit and rhetoric do not work does Abner resort to physical violence. Abner depends more on his words than on his sword. He only attacks Asahel as a last resort but does not otherwise fight any other character in this episode. Because Abner is the **שֶׁר־צַבָּא**, it is rather surprising that Abner's first tactic in battle is to speak not to fight; Abner only fights once and that as a last resort when Asahel refuses to turn aside. Third, we get a sense that Abner does not highly value his own men. By offering the life and spoils of one of his servants, Abner places his own life above those of his people. While we will not see Abner act in such a manner again, we cannot ignore how he callously he acts here. Finally, considering that Abner is able to convince the winning general to end the fighting, we see that Abner's character is not only intelligent and clever but also persuasive and influential. He commands a significant authority when he speaks, even convincing the opposing and winning general to end the battle. Only Asahel refuses to listen to Abner, and Abner kills him shortly thereafter.

²⁷ Brueggemann (*First and Second Samuel*, 222-3) also notes the different strategies that Abner employs. Cf. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 253.

Abner's Physical Abilities

Another unique contribution that 2 Samuel 2 makes to Abner's characterization is its implicit depiction of his physical abilities. Unlike with his martial duties and abilities, where we could make some inferences from his title and proximity to Saul, we have not been given any information by which to make any intelligent assumptions about Abner's physicality. Here, however, by depicting Abner on the run and engaged in physical combat, the text gives us an opportunity to glean some information about his age, speed, and strength, even if the text falls short of direct characterization about such matters. In 2 Sam 2:10 we read that Ishbosheth is forty years old when he began to reign, and because we know from 1 Sam 14:50-51 that Abner is Saul's cousin, we can make inferences about Abner's age here. Van Seters, who holds that Abner was Saul's uncle based upon 1 Chronicles 8 and 9, argues from 2 Sam 2:10 that Abner must be at least in his upper forties since Ishbosheth's character is forty years old when he begins to reign.²⁸ Although we hold that Abner is Saul's cousin not uncle, Van Seters' argument still applies. As Saul's cousin, Abner is Ishbosheth's first-cousin-once removed but from one generation above Ishbosheth. Thus, it is reasonable to infer that Abner is older than Ishbosheth. Even if Ishbosheth's age in 2:10 is a literary trope, we must conclude that Ishbosheth is of majority when he begins to reign.²⁹ That Ishbosheth is not mentioned in Saul's family list in 1 Samuel 14, may also suggest that Ishbosheth had not been born by that point in the narrative. If so, then because Abner already held his post, he was likely in his early twenties or upper teens at

²⁸ Van Seters, *David Saga*, 271. Of course, the number forty could be a literary device all of its own, but since forty is the only age we are given, we are forced to take it seriously for the purposes of evaluating Abner.

²⁹ Aron Pinker ("Number 40," 169-71) argues that the age of forty was the symbolic age at which a man became fruitful, that is when he would begin making new starts. A. Anderson (*2 Samuel*, 34-6), believes that Ishbosheth was quite young and the number 40 is a late addition, but he does not fully explain why the number 40 was chosen. Cf. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 250; Stoebe, *Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 99.

the youngest and would be close to the age Van Seters suggests even if Ishbosheth is only twenty when he begins to reign. It would be helpful to place Abner's age within the context of Saul's reign, but because 1 Sam 13:1 is corrupt and because Saul's age at death is not given in 1 Samuel 31, we are unable to do so. Thus, our conclusion about Abner's age is tentative, but we have no reason to assume that Abner is a young man in his physical prime at the start of 2 Samuel 2.³⁰

If our tentative conclusions about Abner's age are correct, then the examples of his physical abilities become noteworthy, for he performs several feats that are impressive in their own right but even more impressive if he is forty or older. First, while Abner's character is clearly not as fast as Asahel, the text suggests that he is still quite fast. In 2:18, we read that Asahel is *קל ברגליו כאחד הצבים* ("swift in foot like a gazelle"), that is, incredibly fast.³¹ As Shimon Bar-Efrat notes, physical descriptions are given in the Hebrew Bible as a means towards moving the plot forward.³² In this particular instance, Asahel's swiftness means that Abner is in serious trouble, for Asahel should be able to overtake Abner and kill him with little effort. Surprisingly, Abner kills Asahel instead.

Van Seters notes the lack of realism in the text when Abner is able to avoid immediate capture from such a swift character: "One cannot read this as a realistic episode with the young and swift Asahel chasing the old man Abner, loaded down with weapons and with a dialogue carrying on between the pursuer and the pursued. The scene is purely for dramatic effect."³³

³⁰ In the LXX, Abner is a generation younger than Saul, and thus, would be in the same generational line as Ishbosheth. Thus, determining his age in LXX is far more difficult, for it is possible that Abner is younger than Ishbosheth. See chapter 5.

³¹ Cf. 2 Sam 1:23; 18:23.

³² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 48-50.

³³ Van Seters, *David Saga*, 273.

Surely, Van Seters is correct in understanding that the details are for dramatic effect, and as we read this text as fiction (not as historiography), we are nevertheless startled that Abner can converse with his pursuer for any length of time at all; he has the opportunity to question and reason with Asahel, even offering the spoils of another soldier to Asahel, before needing to engage in physical force.³⁴ Given the initial description of Asahel, the outcome of this event is unexpected, for no one expects “the old man Abner” to be able to run with and ultimately kill Asahel.

Moreover, when Abner finally does kill Asahel, he does so using the back (אָהַרִי) of his spear, thereby suggesting that Abner is also strong and skilled. Now the phrase באַהַרִי הַחֲנִית (“with the back of the spear”) in 2:23 is a little awkward and has led to some disagreement as to what exactly it is that Abner does. Some scholars like Walter Brueggemann and Hans Hertzberg understand that Abner used the butt of his spear.³⁵ Others, like William McKane, argue that we should understand that Abner turned his spear upside down and ran the head of the spear backwards through Asahel’s belly.³⁶ While the text is admittedly somewhat unclear, if Abner’s character kills Asahel with the blade of his spear here, there would be no reason to include the word אָהַרִי. The text could easily have read: וַיַּכְהוּ אֲבִנֵר בַּחֲנִית אֶל-הַחֲמוֹשׁ (“And Abner struck him with his spear in the belly”), and nothing would be particularly noteworthy. The inclusion of the word אָהַרִי, therefore, suggests that Abner dealt a backwards stroke with the

³⁴ For discussions of the description and weight of Abner’s spear (חֲנִית) and likely armor, see De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 242-3, 244-6; Yadin, *Art of Warfare*, 80, 83-6.

³⁵ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 223; Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 252; cf. Firth, *I & 2 Samuel*, 339; Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 27; Morrison, *2 Samuel* 56.

³⁶ McKane, *I & II Samuel*, 186. Graeme Auld (*I & II Samuel*, 372-3) does not comment on the manner of Asahel’s death.

butt of his spear. If so, Abner's physical strength and skill are as noteworthy as his speed since the spear exits through Asahel's back (וּתְצֵא הַחֲנִית מֵאַחֲרָיו). From archaeological records, we know that the חֲנִית was designed with only one blade on the top and none on the bottom.

Although some spears had a small metal point on the butt, this end was not intended for attack.³⁷ Even if the butt of the spear pierced a soft spot in Asahel's armor, given that the spear exits Asahel's body through his back, we know that the force of the thrust must be great. Therefore, the combination of Asahel's great speed and Abner's strength generated a powerful and well placed hit.³⁸ In addition, that Abner is able to kill Asahel in this fashion potentially shows his skill, for he places the butt of his spear on a sensitive area of Asahel's body and uses Asahel's greatest asset against him. Were Asahel not as swift as a gazelle, it is unclear whether Abner's blow would have been lethal.

In short, although we cannot be certain about Abner's age and although the text contains literary exaggerations, it still nevertheless suggests that Abner possesses great physical strength and speed. Even if Abner is not in his fifties or upper forties, he is still able to run and kill the swifter Asahel. As the only text in which Abner performs any sort of physical activity beyond walking, the brief impression this text gives us of Abner is that he is a strong, capable, and skilled fighter.

Abner as a Military Commander

In 2 Sam 2:12-32, we read the first and only scene wherein Abner acts in a command role on the battlefield. We have already discussed how his men follow his orders and how he acts

³⁷ Yadin, *Art of Warfare*, I/10.

³⁸ Cf. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 339.

like a king in this passage, so now we turn to discuss the efficacy and appropriateness of his decisions in this text. From this perspective, we see Abner make both good and bad decisions. Because the text does not show Ishbosheth telling Abner to move from Mahanaim to Gibeon, we can infer that doing so was Abner's decision, and this decision proves to be shrewd. Yet his inability to lead his men to victory shows he is ultimately ineffectual on the battlefield. Within the context of battle, therefore, we can conclude that Abner's character is at least somewhat complex and rounded, for he makes both good and bad decisions in this passage.

First, Abner marches his men from Mahanaim to Gibeon which is only about 6 miles northwest of Jerusalem and lays within the boundaries of Benjamin, Saul's (and Abner's) home tribe.³⁹ As such, it is assuredly to be understood as allied with Saul's house. David Firth disagrees, and in discussing the historicity of the text, he argues that Saul would have lost Gibeonite support when he broke a treaty and killed many of them (cf. 2 Sam 21:1-3).⁴⁰ The narrative, however, does not discuss the slaughter of the Gibeonites until nineteen chapters after the present one, and nothing in the text up to this point has implied that any hostilities exist between Gibeon and Saul's house. To the contrary, as we just read in 2 Sam 2:8, Ishbosheth rules over Benjamin, including Gibeon, and, as we will read in 2:15, the Benjaminites fight for Abner. The text also never says that the Gibeonites are opposed to Abner's presence in their territory, so it seems reasonable to interpret Abner's actions here as moving his men into allied territory rather than invading an enemy land.

Unfortunately, the text is gapped in that it does not specify the reason why Abner marches his army south to Gibeon at this point in the narrative, but scholars generally

³⁹ J. B. Pritchard, "Gibeon," *IDB*, II/391-3; Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 95; Van Seters, *David Saga*, 272.

⁴⁰ Firth, *I and 2 Samuel*, 337; cf. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 95.

acknowledge that geographically Gibeon holds strategic import as it is near the border of both the northern and southern “kingdoms” (cf. 1 Kings 3).⁴¹ These scholars, therefore, believe that moving to Gibeon helps Abner either defend against or attack David’s forces. For instance, McCarter argues that Abner is responding to David’s aggressive move to Jabesh-Gilead (2:5-7) Abner is attempting to expel David’s forces from Ishbosheth’s territory.⁴² A. F. Kirkpatrick takes **צָנַח** (“to go out”) in v. 12 as the technical term for going to war and states that Abner is the aggressor.⁴³ Firth believes that Gibeon helps Abner and Ishbosheth defensively strengthen their southern border against a potential, not yet actual, invasion from David’s armies.⁴⁴ Likewise, Henry Smith argues that since Gibeon, being located in Benjamin, would be allied with Ishbosheth, David’s troops must be the aggressor and that Abner is marching out to defend his territory.⁴⁵ A unique view is offered by Stoebe, who believes that the meeting between Joab and Abner here is not necessarily military, because the verb **פָּגַשׁ** (“to meet or encounter”) in v. 13 does not imply a military encounter, but since Saul’s kingdom is now open to further attacks from the Philistines, fortifying Gibeon is likely a good idea at a strategic location.⁴⁶ Whether Abner is acting offensively or defensively, therefore, scholars seem to agree that Abner’s decision to move his troops is a good one that displays his martial intelligence.⁴⁷

⁴¹ E.g., Firth, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 342; Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 372; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 95.

⁴² McCarter, *II Samuel*, 97.

⁴³ Kirkpatrick, *Second Book of Samuel*, 256; cf. McKane, *I & II Samuel*, 184.

⁴⁴ First, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 337, 342.

⁴⁵ Smith, *The Books of Samuel*, 270; cf. Ackroyd, *Second Book of Samuel*, 35-6.

⁴⁶ Stoebe, *Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 115.

⁴⁷ Van Seters (*David Saga*, 272) by contrast believes this entire narrative presents nothing more than a stylized ritual and suggests that Abner and Joab met at the pool of Gibeon by some sort of prearrangement. See the full discussion of Van Seters below.

Abner's next decision occurs in v. 14 where he suggests that both he and Joab select twelve young men (נערים, v. 14) to engage in a contest against each other (שחק, v. 14), a rather baffling term (see discussion below). At first glance, it would seem that this contest is a modification of the representative combat we saw in the Goliath episode (1 Samuel 17), but the participants are not referred to as אנשי־הבנים ("champions [?]") like Goliath (cf. 1 Sam 17:4, 23, 51), גבורים ("mighty men," cf. 2 Sam 17:10), or even בחורים ("chosen men;" cf. 1 Sam 24:3), which may suggest that neither Abner nor Joab are selecting their best fighters. Nevertheless, however skilled the men may or may not be, Abner seems comfortable enough about his chances of his men overcoming Joab's in this contest.

Significantly for our understanding of Abner's character, none of Abner's men express fear or hesitation when asked to contest with Joab's men in stark contrast to the Israelites' reaction to Goliath (1 Sam 17:11, 24). Such a non-reaction by Abner's men clearly shows that Joab's troops are not as terrifying as Goliath but also that Abner's men trust Abner here more than Saul's men trust Saul in 1 Samuel 17. As such, it appears that Abner's men believe that Abner is making good martial decisions, so they follow his orders and engage in the contest. Unfortunately, the twenty four "contestants" stab each other and die simultaneously (v. 16), and the skirmish quickly becomes קשה ער־נאד ("very harsh," v. 17), suggesting that the battle is brutal, bloody, and devastating (e.g., Gen 35:16-17; Ex 1:14; 6:9; 1 Sam 1:15; 5:7; Ex 18:26; Jdg 4:24; 1 Kgs 12:4). In the end, Abner's army loses 360 men in contrast to Joab's loss of only 20. We might conclude, therefore, that despite the support that Abner receives from his men, Abner's initial decision to suggest this contest is a poor one, for it leads to the decisive defeat of his army. However, because the text is gapped as to why Abner initiates this contest — the text

gives neither Abner a motive nor the contest a stated purpose — we must be cautious in arriving at a conclusion prematurely. While Abner’s ultimate defeat at the hands of Joab appears to suggest that Abner should never have engaged Joab at all, we must examine the nature and purpose of this contest and especially the meaning of קחש before being certain.

The text presents us with several problems regarding the nature of this contest — the meaning of the word קחש, the purpose of the contest, and the reason for twenty four combatants — and most modern interpreters do not adequately address all these problems.⁴⁸ Of these problems, the most significant is the meaning of the word קחש. The root meaning of קחש is to laugh, make sport, or mock, and occasionally it can mean to perform for someone else’s amusement (e.g., Jdg 16:25, 27; 1 Sam 18:7; 2 Sam 6:5, 21; etc.).⁴⁹ None of these meanings make any sense in context here, for those engaged in קחש in 2 Samuel 2:14-16 are clearly engaged in a violent endeavor not in amusement or laughter.⁵⁰ Outside of 2 Sam 2:14, the word never unambiguously indicates violence in the Hebrew Bible (although see Eissfeldt’s interpretation discussed below), and thus, most texts outside of 2 Samuel 2 do not seem to shed much light on our current passage.

The other two problems — the purpose of the contest and the number of contestants — are somewhat interrelated. At first glance, this scene in 2 Samuel 2 appears to be similar to the Goliath episode — the twenty four contestants fight on behalf of their respective armies like

⁴⁸ Cf. Batten (“Helkath Hazzurim,” 90) who lists similar problems with the text’s description of the event.

⁴⁹ For a brief but comprehensive discussion of the usual meaning of קחש, see Eissfeldt, “Ein gescheiterter Versuch,” 118.

⁵⁰ See קחש, *DCH*, VIII/120-1; קחש, *HALOT*, III/1315-6.

Goliath and David. Unfortunately, there are important differences between the two texts that prevent us from reading 2 Samuel 2 through the lens of 1 Samuel 17 without more evidence suggesting we should. In particular, the Goliath episode clearly states that the purpose of that combat is to settle the larger military dispute and that the losing side will be enslaved by the victors (1 Sam 17:9), but such a statement of purpose is absent from 2 Samuel 2. Moreover, the Goliath episode depicts one-on-one representative combat, but in 2 Samuel 2, we find a contest of twelve men against twelve (2:15). Thus, 2 Samuel 2 is different enough from 1 Samuel 17 that we should be cautious before using the latter to interpret the former without further evidence that compels us to do so. Different scholars have approached these problems differently, so in an attempt to arrive at solutions to the problems of this text, we examine scholarship on this passage.

Some scholars have tried to maintain the merriment meaning of שחק by arguing that Abner wants the young soldiers (נער) to participate in some sort of sport or mock battle. They argue that Abner wants the young men to perform before him and Joab, but that somehow tensions escalate, the “show” gets out of hand, the “players” begin killing each other, and a full scale battle ensues. W. Nowack, for instance, argues that because שחק cannot imply actual combat, Abner must intend the contest to be playful. Passion on both sides overtakes the combatants, however, to the extent that the play turns into seriousness (*Ernst*).⁵¹ D. August Klostermann also states that Abner and Joab are not engaged in warfare, and he believes that they are instead entertaining themselves (*unterhalten sie sich*) like leaders do in peacetime (*Friedenszeit*). Instead of the players escalating the battle, however, he argues that the

⁵¹ Nowack, *Die Bücher Samuelis*, 157.

spectators, enlivened by party spirit (*Parteihgeizes*), enter the contest and turn it into an actual battle.⁵² Karl Budde argues similarly that שחק must indicate play (*ein Spielen*) and that v. 17 is needed to show the change from sport to seriousness (*Ernst*).⁵³ Graeme Auld notes the ironic tone of the word “to play,” given the violent outcome, and suggests that a possible interpretation is to see the scene as “sportive martial arts or jousting.”⁵⁴ Robert Polzin’s position offers a more nuanced discussion of these events, and he argues that the character-soldiers are participating in a ritualized performance with spectators on each side.⁵⁵ He supports his performance view by also noting that the language of this passage is also stylized and used rhetorically. For example, the frequent use of the word אחר־י — fifteen times in chapter 2 alone — leads him to conclude, “Both techniques (the ritualization of action and the stylization of language) sharpen the thematic focus of the chapter. The Deuteronomist uses both semantic and ritual sequencing to reinforce an ongoing theme concerning royal succession: the pursuit of kings and the pursuit of one’s brethren are to be intimately connected in Israel’s coming history. Both are tantamount to turning from (following) after the LORD.”⁵⁶ Polzin also points out that the phrase על-הימין ועל-השמאל (“to the right or to the left,” v. 19) is normally used to indicate disobedience to God, and he thus makes a connection between Asahel and Josiah from 2 Kings 23. He says, “Like Josiah after him, Asahel indeed swerved neither to the right nor left. Nevertheless,

⁵² Klostermann, *Die Bücher Samuelis und der Königs*, 135.

⁵³ Budde, *Die Bücher Samuel*, 204.

⁵⁴ Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 372.

⁵⁵ Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 26-29.

⁵⁶ Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 29-30.

Asahel's life was lost just as Josiah's reform would fail. Both represent royal pursuits that fail, one at the rise of the house of David, the other near its fall."⁵⁷

Polzin's argument of a stylized ritual makes some sense of the merriment meaning of *קִשׁוּ*, for this ritual itself could be seen as a form of sport or play that escalates far beyond what Abner initially intends, yet Polzin and the other scholars mentioned fail to answer several important questions. Among these are: if this was a ritual performance, why do all of the men enter the ritual armed?, what reasons would Abner have for suggesting a ritualized performance with his enemy at this point in the story?, and how does a poor performance lead to simultaneous deaths and an all-out slaughter of Abner's men? There do not appear to be any logical answers to these questions, given the "playful" positions of Polzin's, Smith, Budde, Nowack, et al., and thus, we tentatively reject such interpretations.

Other scholars, believe that the "contest" is intended to be violent from the beginning. For instance, P. Kyle McCarter believes it was some sort of gladiatorial combat, but he does not elaborate beyond that conclusion.⁵⁸ Along the same lines, Stoebe likens this confrontation to the infamous battle between the Horatii and the Curiatii, wherein two sets of triplets fight to settle the war between the Romans and the Curiatti Alban (cf. Livy, *History of the Romans*, 1.24).⁵⁹ Jon Van Seters notes the ambiguities of Abner's purpose in suggesting the contest but still concludes that it was purposely violent, stating:

The two generals begin the hostilities by arranging a contest of arms between the two battle groups, consisting of twelve men from each side. The objective of this contest is never indicated. Perhaps it was intended that the winner would settle the dispute between them and the loser would

⁵⁷ Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 30-31.

⁵⁸ McCarter, *II Samuel*, 95-7; cf. Smith, *The Books of Samuel*, 270.

⁵⁹ Stoebe, *Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 115; cf. Kirkpatrick, *Second Book of Samuel*, 257.

have to agree to the terms of the victor. This sort of limited contest of arms is typical of sagas in settling a feud or grievance, but it hardly works in the case of hostilities between two states.⁶⁰

Graeme Auld finds verbal links between this scene and the Goliath episode, implying it is intended to be violent, for in both accounts, the armies meet together (1 Sam 17:10; 2 Sam 2:13) and are each gathered on opposing hills (1 Sam 17:3; 2 Sam 2:13).⁶¹ Similarly, Craig Morrison believes that this incident is a direct parallel to the Goliath episode, and he reads 2 Samuel 2 through the lens of 1 Samuel 17:

Abner and Joab negotiate for a limited number of troops to engage in combat, a procedure similar to how David engaged the champion Goliath, who challenged the Israelite army to produce a soldier who could oppose him... When David routed the Philistines' prize fighter, the rest of the Philistine army ran away. Thus, when Joab accepts Abner's challenge, we can assume that both leaders will choose their twelve best fighters in the hope that this limited contest will determine the outcome. But when it is over, twenty-four corpses lie on the battlefield. To describe the result as a draw would be an understatement. Both sides are perfectly matched and, with no apparent victor in this first round, the battle continues.⁶²

Thus, for Morrison, the entire episode occurs to avoid a full-scale battle that could (and does) lead to numerous deaths.

Unfortunately, there are at least three problems with Morrison's approach and those like his. The first is what we have already stated above: the scene in 2 Samuel 2 does not mirror 1 Samuel 17 well enough for us to read the former through the lens of the latter. The twenty-four initial combatants in 2 Samuel 2 does not parallel the one-one-one combat of the Goliath episode, and unlike the Goliath episode, no terms of battle are given. Thus, we cannot simply assume that Abner intends the victor of the events in 2:14-16 to enslave the loser as in the Goliath episode or that the result of this combat will settle the disputes unless we find further evidence to support this position. The second problem is that the vocabulary used to describe the

⁶⁰ Van Seters, *David Saga*, 272.

⁶¹ Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 197. This interpretation is found in his discussion of the Goliath episode, not his discussion of 2 Samuel 2, and the two discussions may be contradictory.

⁶² Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 39.

contestants (נערים, v. 14) is a common word for servants or adolescent males; it does not imply that the men were the “best fighters” as Morrison argues. Had these men been called אנשי־אנשי (“champions [?]”), בחורים (“chosen men”), or גבורים (“mighty men”), we might more reasonably conclude that these fighters are elite, but we cannot come to that conclusion from the use of נער alone. Finally, Morrison does not well account for the use of שחק, which is not used in the Goliath episode at all. If Abner were recommending some sort of representative combat, then it is unclear why Abner uses a word that means to make sport or to be merry and not more common words for fighting (e.g., לחם). Morrison does not adequately address the meaning of this verb in context, and thus his position cannot be held without further support and explanation.

Because the meaning and intent of the word שחק is so important for understanding the 2 Samuel 2 scene, it is worth discussing an innovative interpretation of the word given by Charles Halton in his article on Jdg 16:25-27.⁶³ In this text from Judges, the Philistines request that the captured Samson entertain (שחק) them, and he is forced to perform (צחק) between two pillars (v. 25). These pillars give Samson the opportunity to call out to God for one final act of strength which he uses to topple the pillars, destroy the temple, and kill all those inside when the temple falls on top of them (v. 30). Halton’s interpretation of the term שחק in this context centers around the phonetic and graphic similarity between שחק (to laugh) and שחק (to crush), and he emphasizes that when these verbs are unpointed, they are graphically identical (שחק), which, as

⁶³ Halton, “Samson’s Last Laugh,” 61-4.

he notes, has led to confusion amongst scholars studying recently discovered inscriptions.⁶⁴ From this foundation, Halton argues that the word קחש in Judges 16 is used as a pun; the Philistines want Samson to entertain (שחש) them, but he ultimately crushes (קחש) them, even though this latter word is not found in the Judges text.⁶⁵ While the Samson scene and 2 Samuel 2 do not contain many parallels, it is perhaps possible that the narrator of 2 Samuel has utilized קחש to make a similar ironic pun, for ultimately Abner's forces are "crushed," that is routed, by Joab's. Unfortunately, while Halton's interpretation makes some literary sense and allow us to view the term as a possible form of wordplay — a possibility not otherwise discussed in the scholarly discussions of 2 Samuel 2— it implies that the text is utilizing קחש in a metaphorical not literal way. Abner's forces are not actually crushed by something heavy as in the Sampson story or ground into powder (e.g, Exo 30:36; 2 Sam 22:44; Job 14:19; and Ps 18:43). The way in which they are "crushed" in 2 Samuel 2 stretches the meaning of קחש beyond its normal usage. Plus, the problems of interpreting קחש in its playful manner discussed above still apply even if it is a pun in 2 Samuel 2. If this contest is simply to entertain or be playful, as in Judges 16, then it is unclear why the contestants enter the playful contest with lethal weapons. Thus, while Halton's interpretation opens up to us the possibility that קחש may be ironic in this context, we cannot link it with קחש in the way Halton does.

⁶⁴ Halton, "Samson's Last Laugh," 62.

⁶⁵ Halton, "Samson's Last Laugh," 63-4; cf. Kim, "More to the Eye than Meets the Eye," 11-12.

An example, that seems to bridge the divide between the “playful” interpretations and the “violent” ones, comes from L. W. Batten. Batten is unwilling to even entertain the possibility that **לחם** could indicate violence, and he argues that Abner intends to trick Joab by proposing that “some of the soldiers should amuse the opposing armies by some sort of athletic contest.”⁶⁶ Joab, of course, falls for Abner’s ruse, and he sends his men into this contest that they assume will be harmless and non-violent. Abner then shows his devious intent by having the Benjaminites, the “left-handed tribe,” enter the contest secretly armed on their right sides, much like Ehud in Judges 3, in order to kill the twelve men from Joab’s army.⁶⁷ When Abner’s Benjaminites fulfill their ruse and kill their opponents, the rest of Joab’s men become incensed and slaughter both the twelve Benjaminites and another 348 of Abner’s men. Batten places a lot of stock into the meaning of **לחם** as well as the meaning of **רע** (“friend” or “neighbor”) in v. 16, which he argues cannot mean “opponent” or “enemy.”⁶⁸

While his attention to the vocabulary of the text is commendable, there are several problems with Batten’s interpretation. First, v. 16 appears to speak directly against his suggestion that Abner’s men survive the fight.⁶⁹ To the contrary, the statement **ויפלו יחדו** (“They fell down together”) implies that all twenty four contestants fell not just the twelve from Joab’s side. Second, the text nowhere states that Abner’s twelve men were all specifically

⁶⁶ Batten, “Helkath Hazzurim,” 91. See his repeated statements that **לחם** cannot mean “to fight” on pp. 90, 92.

⁶⁷ Batten, “Helkath Hazzurim,” 91.

⁶⁸ Batten, “Helkath Hazzurim,” 91-2.

⁶⁹ Batten (“Helkath Hazzurim,” 93) briefly attempts to address this problem, but even his justification explicitly states the way he stretches the text to fit the interpretation.

Benjaminites. Verse 15, which reads, *עשר לבנימין ולאיש בשת* (“twelve for Benjamin and Ishbosheth”), is better understood as meaning that the twelve men *represent* Benjamin and Ishbosheth, not necessarily *come from* Benjamin and Ishbosheth exclusively. While some of the men may be Benjaminites, we cannot conclude that they all are. Third, the text likewise does not say that all (or any!) of Abner’s men are specifically left-handed. In fact, if all twenty four men are able to grab their opponents’ heads and stab them in the side, it would seem that all twenty four men shared the same handedness. In short, other than his attention to vocabulary, there seems to be little to commend Batten’s exegesis.

From this brief survey of common interpretations, we see that scholars do not adequately account for all the difficulties in the text. Either they take seriously the common meaning of *שחק* and downplay the violence or they downplay (or ignore) the merriment meaning of *שחק* and seriously account for the violence. Two articles from the mid-twentieth century, however, better account for all the difficulties in this text and use sufficient evidence (e.g., archaeological parallels and other biblical texts beside Goliath) to arrive at their conclusions, and it is to these articles that we now turn.

In 1948, Yigael Sukenik published, “Let the Young Men Arise, I Pray Thee, and Play before Us,” in which he discusses a relief (no. 182B), dated between the 11th and 9th centuries BCE and found in Tell Halaf by Max von Oppenheim, and its relation to 2 Sam 2:12-32.⁷⁰ This particular relief depicts two fighters grabbing each other by the hair and are simultaneously stabbing each other in the side. Sukenik concludes, “This scene [in the relief], which obviously represents a ‘life and death struggle,’ proves that one of the common ways of fighting was to get

⁷⁰ Sukenik, “Let the Young Men Arise,” 110-6; see especially 112-6. Sukenik specifically cites von Oppenheim, *Der Tell Halaf*. 36b.

hold first of the opponent's head and thus deprive him of freedom of movement, and then — since the fighters clung to each other — stab the exposed side of the opponent.”⁷¹ He then makes references to cylinder seals found in Mesopotamia, which were studied by William H. Ward in 1910, that also depict men fighting in similar fashion to those of Relief 182B.⁷² Based upon these archaeological findings, Sukenik concludes that the scene in 2 Samuel 2 is not a sporting event at all but is intended to be a real and violent battle from the beginning, yet he further concludes that like the Goliath episode, the event is intended to reduce casualties by having only a few representatives from each side engage in the contest. Because the contestants are intended to represent their respective sides and because the outcome of the battle would be settled by only twenty four men — or two in the case of the Goliath episode — both sides need to agree to the terms and form of representative combat. Thus, according to Sukenik, fighting only commences once Abner has proposed the contest and Joab has agreed.⁷³ He then explains that the term שִׁחֵק is used here because the method of fighting *resembles* a sport or form of amusement “inasmuch as only a *few* people are involved and the rest act as spectators.”⁷⁴

Just three years after Sukenik's publication, Otto Eissfeldt came to similar conclusions in his article, “Ein gescheiterer Versuch der Wiedervereinigung Israels (2 Sam 2, 12-3, 1).”⁷⁵ As the title suggests, Eissfeldt's main argument in the article is that both the house of David and the house of Saul are interested in reunifying the kingdom which has become divided after the death

⁷¹ Sukenik, “Let the Young Men Arise,” 113.

⁷² Sukenik, “Let the Young Men Arise,” 113; W. H. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia*, 53-8.

⁷³ Sukenik, “Let the Young Men Arise,” 115.

⁷⁴ Sukenik, “Let the Young Men Arise,” 116, emphasis his.

⁷⁵ Eissfeldt, “Ein gescheiterer Versuch,” 110-27.

of Saul and that the incident in 2 Samuel 2 is a failed attempt to bring about such unification. Unlike Sukenik, he devotes significant space to the more typical meanings of the term לָחַם such as *spielen* (“to play”), *tändeln* (“to flirt”) or *tanzen* (“to dance”), and he provides a helpful review of scholarly interpretations of the word in 2 Samuel 2.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, he concludes that the playful meaning is not obvious in the current text, so he focuses attention on two other texts in which the “play” meaning is also not so obvious: Ps 104:26 and Jdg 16:25-27. In the case of the former, he argues that Ps 104:26 suggests that Yhwh made Leviathan in order to fight it (cf. Ps. 74:14), and in the case of the latter, he argues that Samson may have been forced to fight other prisoners for “sport.”⁷⁷ In doing so, Eissfeldt makes a convincing case that the word לָחַם is not always used to indicate play in the Hebrew Bible, a view not typically considered among more recent scholars. He then discusses several examples of representative combat in ancient art and myth, and comes to the conclusion that 2 Samuel 2 is one more example of such combat.⁷⁸ Like Sukenik, he sees the use of representative combat as an attempt to preserve life and avoid kinslaying (cf. 2 Sam 2:26), and that Abner in particular attempts to spare lives both in suggesting representative combat and in trying to convince Asahel to turn aside.⁷⁹ To further show that this event is an attempt by both sides to end the war, unite the kingdom, and establish peace, Eissfeldt focuses on the number of combatants put forward by each side: twelve. While he admits that it is unclear when the people of Israel and Judah understood themselves as related

⁷⁶ Eissfeldt, “Ein gescheiterer Versuch,” 118-20.

⁷⁷ Eissfeldt, “Ein gescheiterer Versuch,” 120-1.

⁷⁸ Eissfeldt, “Ein gescheiterer Versuch,” 121-4.

⁷⁹ Eissfeldt, “Ein gescheiterer Versuch,” 124-5. Here he seems to be following in the footsteps of Thenius (*Die Bücher Samuels*, 148), who suggests לָחַם be translated *fechten* (“to fence”) and who views this contest as an attempt to avoid a long-term *Bürgerkrieg* (“civil war”).

to each other by twelve tribes, he nevertheless suggests that by the time this event occurred in history, the people likely saw themselves tribally related. Hence, the number twelve here represents the number of tribes thereby implying the victorious side would take control of all twelve tribes, unite the kingdom, and end the civil war.⁸⁰ The problem, however, is that the representative battle does not result in a clear victor, and thus, the battle and the war continue. Eissfeldt's understanding of the passage is important because it explains the use of קָרָב , the presence of violence, and the use of the number twelve, which even he admits (p. 126) receives little to no attention. Eissfeldt's interpretation is quite convincing. Nevertheless, his claim that the contest is an (the?) attempt to unite the kingdom again is tenuous at best, for there is no stated reason for the contest by either Abner or Joab. Abner simply requests it take place. Thus, we cannot be certain that the victors of the battle would become the ruling house of all Israel, especially since there is not a clear victor in the contest. While such an interpretation makes sense in context, we must avoid being firm in this aspect of his argument.

Using the extra-biblical evidence of similar Mediterranean battles discussed by Sukenik, Eissfeldt and others, including a specific Hittite example cited by V. Korošec, F. Charles Fensham argues that Abner intends this contest to be an ordeal by battle.⁸¹ As such, the victorious side would be understood by both parties as the side on which Yhwh's favor rests. Fensham states, "Although nowhere in the narrative of 2 Sam. ii 12 ff. the Lord is *expressis verbis* called in as Judge to decide the ordeal by battle, the role of the Lord who has chosen David and

⁸⁰ Eissfeldt, "Ein gescheiterer Versuch," 126-7.

⁸¹ Fensham, "The Battle between the Men of Joab and Abner as a Possible Ordeal by Battle?" 356-7; Korošec ("Warfare of the Hittites," 164) cites Muršiliš II and Ḫattušiliš III proclaiming war to settle a lawsuit and asking the weather god for help.

rejected Saul is clearly discernable in the background.”⁸² Therefore, according to Fensham, like with the conflict between Goliath and the army of Saul, the purpose of the twelve-on-twelve melee here between Abner’s men and Joab’s is to avoid a full scale battle, but unlike the Goliath conflict, here the purpose is to allow God to decide the just party.⁸³ Although the ordeal ends in a draw, Fensham is emphatic that the clear victor is Joab. Unfortunately, Fensham does not discuss why the word *שחק* is specifically used in this context, but because he is building off of Sukenik and Eissfeldt, who do explain the term, and because his purpose is to argue that this contest represents an ordeal specifically, we may excuse him for omitting discussion of *שחק*. The arguments taken by Sukenik, Eissfeldt, and Fensham are clearly similar to that of Morrison, but their positions have the benefit of relying on archaeology, other ANE texts, and more than just one biblical example for support. The lack of any mention of the divine name here may disqualify Fensham’s view from any long-term consideration, but he is not the only scholar to posit that the outcome of this battle may indicate the direction of God’s favor.

Cyrus Gordon has studied the practice of belt-wrestling in the Ancient Near East from Mesopotamia to Egypt, and he notes that, “Israel and Judah lived in a world where belt-wrestling had long enjoyed popularity.”⁸⁴ He holds that the battle between Abner and Joab in 2 Samuel 2 is an example of such belt wrestling, and he argues that the spoils (*חליצה*) Abner offers Asahel is actually a fighting belt (cf. Josh 4:13; Num 32:30; etc.).⁸⁵ More important for our discussion

⁸² Fensham, “The Battle between the Men of Joab and Abner as a Possible Ordeal by Battle?” 357.

⁸³ Fensham, “The Battle between the Men of Joab and Abner as a Possible Ordeal by Battle?” 357; cf. Ackroyd, *Second Book of Samuel*, 36.

⁸⁴ C. Gordon, “Belt-Wrestling,” 131.

⁸⁵ C. Gordon, “Belt-Wrestling,” 132.

here, he shows that in some instances, belt-wrestling was considered a court ordeal in which the guilt or innocence of a defendant could be determined by whether or not the defendant was victorious.⁸⁶ Because other ordeals in HB function this way (e.g., Num 5:11-31) and because battles were often seen as indicating which army has divine favor (e.g., Jdg 11:27), inferring divine favor from the outcome of the battle in 2 Samuel 2 is reasonable enough to consider.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, other than the mention of **הליצה**, which is not a term unambiguously limited to the belt, the text does not clearly show that the contestants are grappling for each other's belts. Thus, Gordon's understanding is interesting but speculative at best.

Nevertheless, if we do seriously consider the conclusions of Fensham and Gordon and view 2 Sam 2:12-32 as a battle by ordeal that reveals to the contestants the house upon which God's favor rests, then we are given some interesting insight into Abner's character. Because Abner is the one to initiate the ordeal, Abner may believe his forces are both stronger and more divinely favored than Joab's. As we know from 1 Sam 15:22-23, however, Yhwh has shifted his favor from Saul's house to David's, but Abner is not present in 1 Samuel 15 to witness this divine change-of-heart. We never read that Saul tells Abner about his divine rejection, and we have no reason to infer that Abner otherwise learned of God's change of heart. Thus, if Abner is in fact suggesting a battle by ordeal, he is doing so with the assumption that the house of Saul has Yhwh's blessing and favor, and he intends this battle to prove it. When he then loses the battle, we can infer that Abner has now gained the insight we have known since 1 Samuel 15, namely that God sides with David not Saul. Such an epiphany would then explain Abner's later references to Yhwh's promise to David in 2 Sam 3:9-10, 18. By allowing the ordeal (i.e., God)

⁸⁶ C. Gordon, "Belt-Wrestling," 134-6.

⁸⁷ See discussion in Hoffner, "A Hittite Analogue," 224.

to determine the victor, Abner learns that God's favor now rests with David's kingdom and no longer with Saul's. That David's house became strong (קָזַח) while Saul's weakened (לָדַל) in 3:1 only confirms to both the reader and to Abner's character that Yhwh's favor now lies with David. If this episode is a battle by ordeal, therefore, we better understand how Abner is able to speak of God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 3 without having witnessed God give such a promise beforehand.

Unfortunately, the problems with both Fensham's and Gordon's interpretations and the significant gaps in the 2 Samuel 2 text prevent us from coming to an unshakeable conclusion about whether or not this is a battle by ordeal. Nevertheless, based upon the evidence provided by Sukenik and Eissfeldt, it seems reasonable to interpret Abner's request that the young men rise up and engage in a contest (קָחַשׁ) as some form of representative combat. Compared to the other interpreters discussed above, their understanding best explains the use of קָחַשׁ, the violence inherent in the confrontation, the intent of the contest, and the reason for twenty four contestants. Therefore, while the problems and gaps in this text are many and prevent us from being dogmatic, we can arrive at no better conclusion than to see this episode as representative combat and possibly an ordeal by battle.

By concluding that Abner recommends representative combat to Joab in 2 Sam 2:14, we learn three new aspects of Abner's character. First, Abner's character attempts to avoid or tamper violence whenever possible. Abner's peaceful approach is seen throughout the text, especially in his interaction with Asahel and in his conversation with Joab in 2:26-27, but by requesting a form of representative combat, Abner betrays his intent to avoid a large number of casualties by having the matter settled by a select few. Second, Abner acts as a wise and capable military commander by engaging Joab's troops on a small scale rather than in open battle. From

Saul's defeat at the hands of the Philistines in 1 Samuel 31, we sense that the house of Saul has been weakened by both battle and defeat, and from the routing Abner's troops receive at the end of 2 Samuel 2, we know that Abner's forces are outmatched by Joab's. Thus, by suggesting representative combat, Abner attempts to avoid both bloodshed in general and a specific, devastating loss at the hands of Joab's forces. Abner appears to know that he cannot defeat Joab's men in open battle, so he places the outcome of the battle into the hands of a few. Thus, even if he loses this contest, his casualties should amount to no more than twelve. Finally, we see that because Abner is unable to control the battle or lead his men to victory, he is ultimately an ineffectual commander. If we were right to see Abner acting aggressively by moving his men to Gibeon first, then we must conclude that doing so was ultimately a bad martial decision, for Abner's men are subsequently routed by Joab's. By leading his men into what ultimately becomes a massacre, Abner displays a lack of strategic shrewdness that is only momentarily covered over by the wise suggestion of representative combat. In short, therefore, we see complexity in Abner's character from this episode. While he is foolish to engage Joab's troops at all, he is smart to suggest representative combat from a force stronger than his, and although he is a military commander, he seems to prefer to peace to martial conflict.⁸⁸

Conclusions from 2 Samuel 2

From the above analysis of Abner in 2 Samuel 2 of MT, we can now draw conclusions about Abner as he mimics a real person and how he functions as a literary device within the text. Although these two aspects of his characterization are interrelated, we discuss them in sequence beginning with Abner as a quasi-person and ending with his role as a literary device. Because

⁸⁸ See Hoffner ("A Hittite Analogue," 222-4) who notes a similar request for representative combat by the Hittite commander Ḫattušiliš against the superior Pišḫurwian army that resulted in victory for Ḫattušiliš.

the majority of this chapter has already discussed Abner's "human" attributes, more attention will be devoted to his role as a literary device within the narrative.

Abner's Character as It Mimics a Real Person

To summarize our findings of how Abner's character mimics a real person, we present our findings in a thematic order rather than sequentially as presented by the order of the text. We first note that Abner is consistently in charge throughout the narrative, and thus, he is the true source of power and authority in Saul's house. Abner chooses Saul's successor, takes him to Mahanaim, and enthrones him there (2:8-9). He then leads Ishbosheth's troops to Gibeon (2:12), and he both initiates (2:14) and ends the battle (2:26) that takes up most of the narrative space in the chapter. Moreover, his twelve chosen men fight and die for Abner without question, and the rest of Abner's troops, especially the Benjaminites, rally around him at the end (2:25). Even Joab acquiesces to Abner's wishes twice in the chapter (2:15, 27) despite his men clearly being superior to Abner's. Throughout the chapter, Ishbosheth's character is passive; he is the subject of only one verb (נִלְחַם in v. 10), does not appear in 2:12-32, and neither makes a decision nor gives a command throughout the entire chapter. He thereby appears to be a weak and ineffectual leader who does little to control either his kingdom or the narrative. Abner, by contrast, makes decisions and performs actions that affect other characters, drive the plot forward, and have consequences for Saul's kingdom. Abner's character, therefore, is in control and is presented as the source of actual power and decision making in Saul's kingdom.⁸⁹

Our second observation is related to the first: Abner's character consistently influences the characters around him and gets what he wants from every character except Asahel. As such,

⁸⁹ We will see more of his character acting as such in our discussion of 2 Samuel 3 in the next chapter.

his character is portrayed as charismatic and persuasive. This aspect of Abner's character is obvious in his dealings with his own people: Ishbosheth accepts the throne, Abner's troops obey his commands, and the Benjaminites rally around him. More surprising is that Joab, Abner's enemy, twice yields to Abner's wishes in both starting and ending the battle in 2:12-32. Only Asahel refuses to listen to Abner, but Abner quickly kills him when he refuses to end the pursuit. That other characters, both friend and foe, follow Abner's lead shows that not only does he possess authority but also that he is charismatic — liked and trusted by other characters — and persuasive — able to get others to do what he wants.

Third, we notice that in persuading others to do his bidding that Abner relies heavily upon wit and rhetoric instead of violence or martial might. Abner speaks no less than nine clauses throughout the chapter, and at least six of them are questions, five of which are intended to convince his interlocutor to change behavior. By contrast, Abner is only the subject of two or three verbs that indicate martial combat: **יָצָא** (“to go out”) in v. 12, **נָכַח** (“to strike down”) in v. 23, and possibly **עָמַד** (“to stand”) in v. 25. Abner clearly speaks more than he fights or commands, and he displays verbal skill when he speaks. He alters his verbal approach depending on his desires, the identity of his interlocutor, and the success or failure of previous approaches. In trying to save his own life from Asahel, Abner appeals to Asahel's greed, honor, and sense of self-preservation, but in trying to convince Joab to end the battle, he raises questions of long-term violence, numerous casualties, and fratricide. In other words, Abner's verbal tactics are not monolithic in either structure (e.g., questions and commands) or tactics (e.g., various appeals), and his first resort is always to speak to rather than fight his enemies.

Yet, despite his tendency not to fight, we fourth note that Abner is fast, strong, and physically capable for his age. Based upon Abner's relation to and role under Saul as well as

Ishbosheth's age upon ascension to the throne, we conclude that Abner is likely at least in his forties. Nevertheless, Abner is able to run and speak with the swifter Asahel and then skillfully impale Asahel on the butt of his spear. Such physical accomplishments are neither common nor expected from what we have seen of Abner, and thus, Abner's ability to kill Asahel is surprising and impressive, indicating that Abner is faster and stronger than we would otherwise expect.

Fifth, Abner's character pursues peaceful resolutions to his conflicts in 2 Samuel 2. Because Saul relentlessly pursues David in 1 Samuel, we might expect Abner to do the same in 2 Samuel after Saul's death, yet although Abner's character does aggressively move his troops to Gibeon, he takes multiple steps to ensure that lives are not lost carelessly in the chapter. His request to Joab to have the young men engage in representative combat is best understood as an attempt to avoid a full-scale battle in which hundreds of lives could be lost (cf., 2:30-31), and once the representative combat fails, over three hundred men die in battle. At that point in the story, when his men are being beaten by Joab's army, Abner's desire turns to ending the battle he had started, and his arguments to Joab are all focused on avoiding prolonged violence; ending the battle would avoid the devouring sword, a bitter end, and fratricide (2:26). Finally, when Abner attempts to have Asahel turn aside and end the battle, he also includes the preservation of life, not his own but Asahel's (2:22). Of course, one may respond that in verses 22 and 26 Abner wants to end Asahel's pursuit and the battle in order to save his own life and the lives of his men, as we see from the example of Ḫattušiliš in Hatti, representative combat can be suggested by the outmanned general in order to save his own men.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, that Abner never rushes into battle himself, prolongs fighting, or attempts a covert plan to assassinate Joab is significant and

⁹⁰ See Hoffner, "A Hittite Analogue," 222-4.

suggests that Abner does not wish troops — whether his own or Joab's — to die, especially at the hands of their own kinsmen.

Sixth, Abner is on the whole a martially shrewd character who makes wise decisions more often than not in 2 Samuel. Both his establishment of Mahanaim as the capital of Ishbosheth's kingdom and his march to Gibeon appear to be smart moves. By placing Ishbosheth in Mahanaim, Abner puts his newly established king east of the Jordan, out of the way of potential combat, yet close enough to the northern tribes to be an effective and influential ruler. By marching to Gibeon, Abner seems to see the strategic import of the territory in the war with David's house. In addition, because his men are outmatched by Joab's, Abner pursues the only possible path towards victory by requesting Joab's forces engage his through representative combat rather than through a full-scale battle, and regardless of the outcome, his request would save lives by not leading to a bloody, lengthy, and harsh confrontation between kinsmen (see 2:26). All of Abner's decisions in this chapter, therefore, are either motivated by strategic insight or a desire to preserve lives and pursue victory.

Finally, Abner displays at least two shortcomings in this episode, neither of which we have seen previously. The first occurs in his conversation with Asahel when he recommends that Asahel kill one of the troops and take his spoils. In doing so, Abner displays an affinity to put his own life above those of his own men, and such hardly paints a positive image of him. Instead, we see an Abner that is willing to use his own troops as pawns or bargaining chips in order to preserve his own life. The text thereby presents him as callous, fearful, and self-serving. Abner's second shortcoming comes from his inability to lead his men on a successful campaign. When the contest with Joab's men fails to result in a clear victory, Abner almost immediately loses control of his men and the battle. The text neither records him giving any further

commands to his men nor indicates that Abner is able to regroup his men into a tactical arrangement or lead them into a potentially victorious position. Instead, the text shows Abner flee the battlefield and attempt to save his own life, first from Asahel (2:19) and second from Joab and Abishai (2:24). Rather than depicting a strong and capable fighter or commander, the text presents Abner as initially wise but ultimately weak, ineffectual, and possibly cowardly.

In the end, therefore, Abner's character in 2 Samuel 2 is somewhat complex — he possesses both positive and negative qualities. He is shrewd, commanding, and persuasive. He pursues peaceful resolutions and commands the respect of those around him, but he is also callous, fearful, and ultimately ineffectual in battle. His character also shows development and growth from 1 Samuel to 2 Samuel 2. In 1 Samuel, Abner makes no decisions, leads no men, and does very little at all. Indeed, other than in 1 Samuel 17:55–18:5 wherein Abner seeks out, finds, and brings David to Saul, Abner's character only sits (20:25), sleeps (26:5, 7) and speaks (26:14). In 2 Samuel 2, however, Abner enthrones a king and establishes a capital (2:8-11), leads an army into a strategic position (2:12-13), proposes the war be settled by representative combat (2:14), flees and fights the swift Asahel (2:18-23), and uses rhetoric and questions to attempt to influence the characters around him (2:20-22, 26). Whereas Abner shows no signs of holding significant power or authority within Saul's house while Saul is alive in 1 Samuel, Abner is the clear source of power after Saul's death; Ishbosheth is portrayed as a mere puppet king at best (see further discussion in chapter four).

Abner as a Literary Device

In addition to mimicking a real human person, Abner's character also functions as a literary device in several interesting ways. Some of these key functions have already been noted by scholars, such as providing a motive for Joab's later murder of Abner and even speaking in

ways that foreshadow his own death, and we discuss these below. There are other ways that Abner's character functions as part of the "black marks on the page," that further the interests of the author and advance of the plot of the story. In particular, we show that Abner's character space has replaced Saul's and that Abner continues to function as an extension of Saul's character in much the same way he had in 1 Samuel. As such, even though Abner is not the king, Abner's character acts kingly and serves as the symbol of Saul's kingdom; he, not Ishbosheth, makes decisions that affect Saul's house. Moreover, the presence of Abner's character again signifies an important, negative transition for Saul's kingdom, and his actions and failures hint that Saul's kingdom will soon collapse. Finally, the text uses Abner's character in a way that provides us with a point of departure for later understanding how Joab's character will act and function within the Samuel text. In short, despite his minoriness which we noted in the previous chapter, Abner's character functions as an important literary figure that begins preparing the reader to expect David and Joab to rise to complete power and replace Saul's kingdom.

Perhaps the literary function of Abner most often noticed by scholars is that in slaying Asahel, Abner gives Joab a clear motive for murdering Abner in 2 Sam 3:27, 30. For example, Cephas Tushima states:⁹¹

In the context of the [History of David's Rise], however, this battlefield account serves to furnish a motive for Joab's slaying of Abner (cf. 2 Sam 3:27, 30). The goal clearly is to shine the spotlight on Joab's guilt and David's innocence. Abner is shown to have been unwilling to engage Asahel: Asahel is cast as the unrelenting aggressor (2 Sam 2:19); twice he was implored by Abner to turn aside and engage a less experienced foot soldier, but he would not listen (vv. 20-23). Indeed, Abner's second address to Asahel in verse 22 already anticipates the animosity and blood feud that Asahel's death would engender between Joab and Abner.

⁹¹ Tushima, *Fate of Saul's Progeny*, 126.

Likewise, Steven McKenzie, while eventually arguing that David was historically complicit in the killing of Abner, says, “The story of Asahel’s death serves an important literary function in the context of the apology of David. Abner himself hints at the function of the story in his speech to Asahel... (2 Sam. 2:22). The story provides a motive for Joab to kill Abner, which is important for the claim that Joab acted alone and for reasons of personal revenge.”⁹² Were it not for the violent scene in chapter 2, Joab’s appearance and subsequent murder of Abner in 2 Samuel 3 would feel somewhat out of place. Indeed, providing Joab with a motive appears to be a major reason that the author included this specific periscope in the narrative for several reasons. First, we would lose very little of the plot had the narrative had simply skipped from 2:11 to 3:1, especially considering that Abner and his army return to Mahanaim in 2:29 (cf. 2:8). Saul’s house would still be losing the civil war against David’s; David would still be working to gather support; Abner would still be gaining in power (3:6); and Ishbosheth’s capital would still be Mahanaim. Second, not much character development would be lost either. Of the four named characters in 2:12-32, Asahel dies within the story, Abner dies shortly thereafter, and Abishai does little here or elsewhere (cf. 2 Sam 10:10; 16:9, 11; 18:2-12; 19:21; 20:6, 10; 21:17; and 23:18). Only Joab goes on to be a significant character in the remainder of the narrative, but his later roguish behavior is not on display in 2 Samuel 2. Third, as the thrust of the narrative in 2 Samuel 1–5 is mostly about David’s rise to power, that David does not feature at all in 2 Sam 2:12-32 implies that this section is more of an aside than an essential pericope of the story. Hence, if 2:12-32 were omitted from text, we would only lose a scene in which Joab’s forces defeat Abner’s and in which Abner kills Asahel, giving Joab a semi-legitimate reason for killing Abner in 3:27 (cf. v. 30). Fourth, and most importantly, the text twice mentions that Joab kills

⁹² McKenzie, *King David*, 121.

Abner out of revenge for death of Asahel (2 Sam 3:27, 30). By explicitly stating the reason for Abner's murder, the text itself suggests that narrating the death of Asahel is the key reason that 2 Samuel 2:12-32 is included. Because we read of Abner killing Asahel, we are unsurprised by Joab's brutal and unauthorized actions in 2 Samuel 3. Nevertheless, regardless of exactly how essential depicting this motive is for the plot, Abner's character, by killing Asahel, gives Joab the reason for seeking revenge against him later in the story.

Furthermore, Abner's defeat in the battle of 2 Sam 2:12-32 foreshadows Abner's ultimate demise. Despite being powerful in Ishbosheth's realm (cf. 3:6), leading his men to Gibeon, and initiating the contest between his men and Joab's, once we see Abner defeated in battle, we do not expect to see him be victorious or to rise to lasting power later in the narrative, especially given his minor role in 1 Samuel. Because this is the first (and only) scene in which Abner commands his troops, his loss suggests he will not be victorious in many (or any!) other battles. From this scene, we are not led to view Abner as a formidable commander that will expand Saul's kingdom. To the contrary, the routing of Abner's troops suggests he will not long live, and because we already know that God's favor rests with David not Ishbosheth, we expect Ishbosheth's kingdom, including Abner, to soon perish (see further discussion below). Abner's loss in battle, therefore, foreshadows his character's ultimate demise.

More specifically, however, Abner's words to Asahel in 2 Sam 2:22 foreshadow his death at the hands of Joab specifically, as was noted in the Cephas Tushima quote above. In his petitions to Asahel to turn aside and end the pursuit, Abner asks Asahel: **וַאִךְ אֲשָׂא פְנֵי אֵלֶיךָ** ("And how could I lift up my face to you, my brother?"). William McKane compares this question to the common English idiom, "How could I look your brother Joab in

the face?”⁹³ Abner thereby asks why he should be forced to encounter *Joab* in shame for killing *Joab*'s brother when such a killing could be avoided. Within the context of the story, however, Abner's mention of *Joab*'s name raises two significant questions. First, why should Abner experience shame from his enemy (i.e., *Joab*) for killing his enemy (i.e., *Asahel*), and second, what opportunity does Abner have in mind in which he may have to stand ashamed before *Joab*? Nothing in the text has suggested that Abner is close to the sons of *Zeruiah*, and Abner has never been shown to be in their presence with the possible exception of *Abishai* in 1 Samuel 26. The text has given us no reason to infer that Abner will later want to seek companionship or even an audience with *Joab*, and thus, we have no reason to expect Abner to feel shame later in the story for killing *Asahel* here. To the contrary, 2 Samuel 2 presents Abner and *Joab* (and Abner and *Asahel*) as enemies, and the text provides no clues that would suggest that their relationship will change later in the story. There are no clear answers to the aforementioned questions; it is simply unclear why Abner's character states that he will later experience shame in front of *Joab* for killing *Joab*'s brother. In addition, the use of *חַמְזִישׁ* (stomach) in both 2:23 and 3:27 further connects the death of *Asahel* with the death of Abner.⁹⁴ Abner first kills *Asahel* by impaling *Asahel* in the *חַמְזִישׁ* with the butt of his spear and then Abner dies when *Asahel*'s brother stabs him in the *חַמְזִישׁ*. Therefore, Tushima is surely correct for seeing Abner's question in 2 Sam 2:22 as a foreshadowing of 2 Sam 3:26-30, where Abner faces *Joab* and is murdered.⁹⁵ Rather than being able to lift his head to face *Joab*, Abner is struck dead by *Joab*.

⁹³ McKane, *I & II Samuel*, 186.

⁹⁴ Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 373; cf. Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 56; Steussy, *David*, 57.

⁹⁵ Tushimna, *Fate of Saul's Progeny*, 126.

We next note how Abner's character functions as the replacement for Saul's character in 2 Samuel 2. In chapter 2 of this dissertation, we showed that in 1 Samuel Abner's character space always intersects with Saul's and that Abner's character never acts in ways contrary to what Saul desires. Now that Saul's character is dead, we expect that one of Saul's sons — if any have survived — will stand in for Saul and further Saul's kingdom. Once Ishbosheth is introduced and ascends the throne, he becomes the best candidate to do so. Abner, however, fits the role of Saul's replacement much better than does Ishbosheth, for Abner, not Ishbosheth, is the more active agent in the text and the one who acts more kingly in 2 Samuel 2. Not only does Abner pick Ishbosheth to be Saul's successor, but he also makes strategic decisions to settle in Mahanaim, march to Gibeon, and engage Joab's forces. In addition, he commands the troops in battle while Ishbosheth remains safe at Mahanaim, and although fighting on the king's behalf was a common duty of royal officials in ANE (see chapter 2), ANE kings were assumed to lead in battle unless they were otherwise engaged. The text does not state that Ishbosheth is off fighting or attending to important business elsewhere, so we cannot help but view Abner as the kingly general in battle. Such contrasts with Saul, for Saul never sends another character to fight on his behalf — even when Jonathan fights the Philistines in 1 Samuel 14, neither Saul nor the people know that he has gone (14:3) — and he is frequently engaged in military endeavors throughout 1 Samuel (e.g. 11:1-11; 13:3-10; 31:1-13; etc.). When Ishbosheth fails to lead in battle but Abner both initiates a confrontation and leads on the battlefield, we note that Abner looks more like Saul here than does Ishbosheth.

In addition, by moving to Gibeon and eventually engaging David's army, Abner continues the Saulide tradition of pursuing David without provocation. Repeatedly throughout 1 Samuel, we see Saul relentlessly and illogically attempt to kill David out of jealousy and

madness, and Abner even accompanies Saul on one such pursuit in 1 Samuel 26. The text, of course, does not tell us that Abner possesses the same compulsive obsession with David — and as we argued in chapter 2, he does not share this obsession — but it seems possible that Abner intentionally engages David’s army here in 2 Samuel 2. Ishbosheth, by contrast, stays at home in Mahanaim rather than participate in the pursuit of David, and thus, he does not follow Saul in opposing David, whereas Abner does.

Finally, from his first appearance in 2 Samuel, Abner is closely linked with Saul by being referred to as Saul’s **שֶׁר־צָבָא** rather than Ishbosheth’s (v. 8). Calling Abner *Saul’s* commander is odd because Saul is dead, but this is the term used by the text to describe Abner in his first appearance in 2 Samuel. Because Abner can no longer obey orders from, run errands for, sit and sleep beside, or provide security for Saul, it is unclear how he still functions as *Saul’s* general. He can only do these things for the current monarch, Ishbosheth, not for the dead one. Thus, it would make far more contextual sense for Abner to be called *Ishbosheth’s* general, but Abner is never called Ishbosheth’s **שֶׁר־צָבָא**. Also, he does not serve Ishbosheth in the way he does Saul in 1 Samuel. He never takes orders from, advises, protects, or runs errands for Ishbosheth. By calling Abner Saul’s **שֶׁר־צָבָא**, the text thereby simultaneously distances Abner from Ishbosheth and further connects him to Saul. In short, by acting like a king in battle, by continuing the pursuit of David, and by remaining Saul’s general even after Saul’s death, Abner’s character remains closely connected to Saul’s and acts as Saul’s replacement in 2 Samuel. Abner’s character is not just the political replacement but also the literary replacement for Saul.

Three important corollaries can be drawn from the above conclusion. First, Abner is the symbol of Saul’s kingdom within the narrative. When Abner marches out to Gibeon, we know that it is Saul’s forces that are fighting on the battlefield, and when Abner loses the battle, we

know that Saul's army is weaker than David's. In other words, the actions Abner takes are on behalf of Saul's kingdom. He acts in the interests of Saul's kingdom; the consequences of his actions affect Saul's house; and therefore, where his character is, there too is Saul's kingdom. Second, as the replacement for Saul's character and as the symbol of the kingdom, Abner's loss foreshadows the coming end of Saul's kingdom. As the first and only battle of Saul's house after Saul's death, this particular defeat highlights the weakness of Saul's kingdom. It is not just Abner who loses; it is the entire kingdom as symbolized by Abner. Hence, we are now prepared to see Saul's kingdom lose again and likely collapse. Thus, when Saul's kingdom crumbles and Ishbosheth dies (2 Samuel 3–4), we are unsurprised. Third, the presence of Abner's character continues signaling important negative transitions with regard to Saul's house. Because Abner's character clearly functions in this way in 1 Samuel, we expect that something negative must be about to occur right after his mention in 2 Sam 2:8, and such expectations are met when Abner's troops are defeated. Instead of simply signaling this negative turn for Saul's house, however, Abner's character instigates it by proposing the contest that leads to the battle. Thus, even though Abner's first act in 1 Samuel is positive for Saul's house — he enthrones Saul's successor — it is soon followed by a crushing defeat to Saul's house, which is unsurprising given Abner's literary role in 1 Samuel.

One final way that Abner's character functions as a literary device in 2 Samuel 2 is that it provides us with a point of departure for understanding and evaluating Joab's character. Joab's introduction occurs in 2:13, right after Abner leads his troops from Mahanaim to Gibeon, and he is thereby introduced in immediate opposition to Abner. While we do not learn that Joab is David's **שֶׁר־צָבָא** until 2 Sam 19:14 when David transfers the title to Amasa — although 2 Sam 8:16 says that he is over the army (**עַל־הַצָּבָא**; cf. 20:23) — he is the clear rival to Abner in 2

Samuel, for both men lead and fight on behalf of their respective kings. We are encouraged by the text, therefore, to compare and contrast the two commanders. By doing so, we learn a good deal about Joab's character from the ways in which he conforms to or departs from the characterization of Abner, and much of what we learn about Joab from this episode is consistent with his later characterization in 2 Samuel.

By comparing and contrasting the two generals, we first note that whereas Abner is portrayed as a skilled rhetorician who relies heavily on his intellect, wit, and rhetoric to accomplish his goals, Joab is portrayed more like a powerful and successful military commander. Nothing in this text suggests that Joab possesses any rhetorical skills at all, for he only speaks twice (vv. 14, 27), acquiescing to Abner's wishes both times. He does not attempt to convince Abner or any other character to conform to his will, and he does not engage in any interesting wordplays or rhetorical arguments. Instead, Joab allows his forces to engage Abner's, calls the official end to the battle, and otherwise fades into the background as the battle unfolds and Abner kills Asahel. As such, the text portrays Joab as a commander who is capable of leading his troops to victory without suffering great casualties. The ease and extent to which Joab's forces defeat Abner's indicates that both Joab and his men are powerful and successful fighters who do not lose, and throughout the remainder of the Samuel text, we continuously see Joab both engage in military confrontations and lead his men to victory (e.g., 2 Sam 3:27, 30; 10:7-19; 11:14-21; 18:9-15; 20:8-22; etc.). Only occasionally do we read about Joab engaging in rhetorical persuasion (e.g., 3:24; 12:27-28; 19:6-8; 24:3), and twice, David is unpersuaded by Joab's argumentation (3:24; 24:3). He is thus far more likely to fight than to persuade, and when he does rely on rhetoric, he is less persuasive than Abner. By having his character space intersect

with Abner's here, therefore, the text contrasts Abner's verbal skill with Joab's martial skill, and as a result, we are prepared to see Joab fight instead of argue.

We next note that Joab's character space begins to relate to David's in a manner akin to how Abner's relates to Saul's. While David's character does not make an appearance in this episode, the text narrated David's enthronement (2:4, 11) just prior to this scene, and the text introduces Joab by stating that he traveled with *David's* servants to Gibeon (2:13). Thus, the text implicitly and explicitly connects Joab with David and his men. In addition, just as Abner represents his king in battle like other ANE commanders so too does Joab. Neither Ishbosheth nor David attend the battle, but their two chief generals do. Joab's character space supplements David's from 2:1-7 and replaces it in 2:12-32. Joab's character thereby functions as a stand-in for David's and, by extension, for David's kingdom, at least in this chapter. In other words, when Joab fights and wins the victory, he fights and wins for David and David's kingdom just as Abner's loss is a loss for Saul's son, and Saul's kingdom. That Joab stands in for David here prepares us to see him do so later in the text, which he does frequently. For instance, after David's messengers are insulted by Hanan in 10:1-5, Joab is assigned to fight the Ammonites and Arameans on David's behalf. Joab decisively defeats his enemies despite having to fight on two fronts, and his victory is really David's. He also fulfills David's wish to have Uriah die in battle (11:14-21), and he ensures that David gets the credit for the defeat of Rabbah (12:26-31). Even when Joab acts out of accord with David's wishes, such as when he kills Abner (3:27), Absalom (18:14-5), and Amasa (19:10), he eliminates potential political threats to David's reign. Thus, whether or not he acts in accord with David's orders and desires, Joab consistently acts in ways that benefit David and either expand or restore David's rule, and as a result, his character is an extension of David's character and symbol of David's kingdom.

There is one area, however, in which the text presents us with a false expectation of Joab's character: his passivity. Because Joab twice acquiesces to Abner's wishes in this episode, the reader may be led to assume that Joab will be timid and passive later in the text, but such is clearly not the case. Although Joab often obeys David's orders, including the infamous censure which Joab opposes (24:1-9), he acts as his own agent and occasionally acts against David's wishes. Three examples, which have already been mentioned, should suffice to prove the point. Joab murders Abner in cold blood without David's consent, and he earns David's ire as a result (3:28-30). He then disobeys a direct command from his king by killing Absalom (18:5, 14-15), and he murders Amasa, David's newly appointed **שֶׁר־צָבָא**, without David's approval (19:13; 20:9-10). These examples show that Joab, far from being passive and submissive, has a tendency to act on his own or even disobey orders, despite his interactions with Abner in 2 Samuel 2 suggesting otherwise.

CHAPTER 4

ABNER'S CHARACTER IN 2 SAMUEL 3 OF THE MASORETIC TEXT

As we conclude our discussion of Abner in MT, we examine his character and role in 2 Samuel 3. This extended section can be divided into three smaller scenes (3:6-11; 3:12-21; and 3:22-4:1) which we will use to organize the present discussion. In these three sections, we see Abner leave Ishbosheth's service, join forces with David, bring his own people over to David's side, die by Joab's hand, and be lamented by the people of Israel. Collectively, these sections present us with a picture of Abner's character that is consistent with what we have seen previously (e.g., Abner continues to influence others through rhetoric and questions) while also adding new dimensions to his characterization (e.g., his defection to David). In addition, because other characters laud him and grieve his death, we have the best example of indirect characterization with regard to Abner in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, Abner's character is utilized by the text to symbolize Saul's kingdom, signal important transitions within the text, provide us with a point of contrast for Joab's character, and provide proof that David acts blamelessly in his rise to power. In 2 Samuel 4, Abner is mentioned in passing only twice (vv. 1, 12), and afterwards, his name does not appear in the narrative at all. As the final word about Abner in the book of Samuel, 2 Samuel 3 solidifies our final impressions of Abner and his contribution to the narrative. In short, the text concludes its depiction of Abner by showing him as a generally positive character with a decent amount of depth who makes significant contributions to the plot and development of the story.

Abner in 2 Samuel 3:6-11

Second Samuel 3:6-11 depicts several aspects of Abner's character that we have seen previously. Abner's political clout within Ishbosheth's kingdom continues to grow, and he acts

as an independent agent capable of making decisions that affect those around him. Abner's character continues to be more active and decisive than Ishbosheth's, and he continues to rely heavily on questions and rhetoric in his direct discourse. This section, however, also shows us new and surprising dimensions to Abner's character, most notably his angered response to Ishbosheth and his willingness to leave Saul's house to serve with David. The text also calls into question Abner's moral and political integrity by suggesting he had relations with Saul's concubine. We begin our discussion of Abner in 3:6-11, therefore, with an examination of the areas of Abner's characterization that continue the trends we have seen previously and conclude by discussing the new dimensions of his character presented in 2 Sam 3.

Continuity in Abner's Character from 1 Samuel into 2 Samuel

Abner's Power and Influence

The first noteworthy aspect of Abner's character in chapter 3 is his strong and consistent influence over other characters throughout 3:6-11. When we read in v. 6, **וַאֲבִנֵר הָיָה מִתְחַזֵּק**, **בְּבַיִת שָׁאוּל** (“But Abner was making himself powerful in the house of Saul”), we learn that Abner's influence within Ishbosheth's kingdom has increased even more since 2 Samuel 2. Of course, one must wonder along with Craig Morrison what more power Abner could accumulate considering he is the one who placed Ishbosheth on the throne (cf. 2:8-9).¹ The text is gapped in regard to what sort of power Abner gained. As a **שָׂר־צָבָא**, Abner has both martial and political influence in the kingdom, and thus, he may have grown either in one sphere only or in both together. It seems unlikely however, that his power over the military has grown, for Abner already holds the highest military rank within the kingdom and has lost the only battle he has led

¹ Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 46.

so far.² Abner's political clout, however, has room for growth because other than establishing Ishbosheth as king, he has neither wielded much political power nor been publicly praised by the people within the narrative. Thus, we cautiously conclude the text intends to show the strengthening of Abner's political power within the kingdom, which suggests that we will soon see Abner exert some of his power over his king, the people, or both. Regardless of which sphere is in view, however, he is clearly more powerful now than he was previously.

The text is further gapped in that it does not tell us how Abner attained the great power he now has. Did he usurp power from another figure (e.g., Ishbosheth), or was he given more responsibility by the king? Has he gained power through popular support or has he had to fight for his exalted position? There are no clear answers in the text, but the reflexivity of the Hithpael in 3:6 suggests that Abner was responsible for making himself powerful. The use of the participle (בַּתְּחִיבָה) with הָיָה also indicates that Abner's growth in power is a continuous process (e.g., "Abner was making himself stronger").³ The statement in v. 8 thereby indicates that Abner purposely and continuously worked within Saul's house to improve his own status and to fortify himself. Such may even suggest that Abner's character now wields more power and influence than even the king himself, for Ishbosheth is never called strong and Abner is the one who ensures Ishbosheth keeps the throne. John Mauchline argues that Abner hereby shows

² Bar-Efrat (*Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 37) holds that Abner gained strength through the war with David since he was the head of the army.

³ Cf. Robin Wakely, "חִיבָה," *NIDOTT*, II/77; Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 38. A. Anderson (*2 Samuel*, 55), however, understands the verb here in the sense of, "kept faithful to," and translates it as, "remained the mainstay in the house of Saul." While Anderson's translation is technically correct and probably captures the essence of Abner's allegiance and influence within Ishbosheth's kingdom, he misses the parallelism between vv. 1 and 6, especially the repetition of the verb חִיבָה ("to grow strong") in both verses. Abner did not simply remain strong; he grew stronger, and the syntax suggests that he did so intentionally and purposely.

his desire to rule over Ishbosheth, but Mauchline goes too far.⁴ Nothing in the Hebrew text indicates that Abner is interested in taking the throne or is working to do so. Had he wanted the throne, he could have placed himself on it rather than Ishbosheth, and in vv. 8-11, when he has a chance to fight against Ishbosheth, he instead uses his authority to make David king. At no point in the narrative does he ever act in a way so as to make himself king.

We are told, however, that Abner is now the greatest political/military figure within Saul's house; he is the one jewel in an otherwise failing kingdom. Graeme Auld thus says, "The house of David is going from strength to strength. Of the house of Saul, the opposite is true; yet within that weakening house, the figure of Abner represents an exception."⁵ David Firth notices that the text completely marginalizes Ishbosheth in 3:1 by referring to his kingdom as the house of Saul instead of the house of Ishbosheth (cf. 2:8).⁶ By contrast, Abner's character is mentioned by name in 3:6. Ishbosheth's weakness is further seen in v. 11 where Abner silences him. Because Abner's speech to Ishbosheth in vv. 8-11 includes explicit treason and threats of defection, Ishbosheth is well within his rights to have Abner arrested and executed, but instead he cowers in silence (v. 11).⁷ By contrast, when David is faced with explicit treasonous claims, he puts the speakers to death (e.g., 1:15-16; 4:9-12), and although David does not instantly respond to Shimei's insults (16:5-14), he eventually commands Solomon to have him executed for his mockery (1 Kgs 2:8-9). Ishbosheth, however, does nothing to punish Abner for

⁴ Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 208.

⁵ Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 377; cf. p. 373 where Auld suggests that Ishbosheth's kingdom is likely fractured whereas David's is not. Bar-Efrat (*Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 37) agrees that v. 6 parallels v. 1.

⁶ Firth, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 340.

⁷ Cf. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 226-7.

insubordination or even respond because he is afraid. In short, while 2 Sam 3:1 represents the nadir of Ishbosheth's power, 3:6 represents the apex of Abner's.

Abner's Use of Rhetoric and Questions

Abner also continues his reliance upon rhetoric and questions when interacting with others. In 3:6-11, Abner engages in a heated conversation with Ishbosheth about his relations with Rizpah, Saul's former concubine. While Abner does not initiate the conversation, he quickly proves that he is verbally cleverer and stronger than Ishbosheth. Ishbosheth begins by accusing Abner of impropriety of sleeping with Saul's concubine: **מדוע באתה אל-פילגש**: **אבי** ("Why have you [Abner] gone in to the concubine of my father?"). Without answering the questions directly, Abner argues that Ishbosheth's charge is petty in light of what Abner has done for Saul's house, and his answer of three verses, which dwarfs Ishbosheth's five-word question, renders Ishbosheth too afraid to respond (3:11).⁸ To show his own faithfulness to Ishbosheth and the foolishness of Ishbosheth's accusation, Abner uses both pointed questions and rhetorical arguments. He begins by responding to Ishbosheth's question with a question in v. 8: **הראש**: **ליהודה** **כלב אנכי אשר ליהודה** ("Am I a dog's head to Judah?"). This question is peculiar in HB, and scholars are unsure how best to understand it. All commentators agree that the entire phrase is one of opprobrium or dysphemism, but there is no consensus concerning what Abner means by

⁸ Some scholars (e.g., Bright, *History of Israel*, 197; Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 225-6; Sackenfled, *Meaning of Hesed*, 28) hold that Ishbosheth's question amounts to an accusation of treason. Hertzberg (*I & II Samuel*, 257-8), however, notes the potentiality of treason in this text but ultimately rejects such as interpretation on the basis that Abner had the opportunity to take the throne previously but established Ishbosheth instead. See the fuller discussion below.

his reference to a dog's head.⁹ Because the words **אֲשֶׁר לַיהוּדָה** do not appear in LXX, some scholars inappropriately ignore them in their discussion of MT.¹⁰ Yet because this phrase is extent in most major Hebrew MSS, we must consider it in our interpretation of the text. Arnold Anderson argues that Abner's question is a reference to canine sexual promiscuity (i.e., "Am I as promiscuous as a dog in Judah?"), which fits the context, but the dog metaphor is not typically employed in his manner (cf. 1 Sam 17:43; 24:15; 1 Ki 22:38; Ps 22:17; 59:7, 15; 68:24; etc.).¹¹ Graeme Auld suggests that a dog's head could easily be kicked around like a ball, so Abner is denying that he is a pushover.¹² Auld's interpretation, however, fails to recognize that Ishbosheth is not pushing Abner around or commanding Abner in any way; rather, he is accusing Abner of sexual and political impropriety. David Firth translates the phrases as, "Am I a dog's head belonging to Judah," and argues that Abner is stating that he has not stooped so low (i.e., to the level of a dog) so as to help Judah.¹³ Firth's interpretation seems best, for it takes the reference to Judah (**אֲשֶׁר לַיהוּדָה**) seriously and fits the context of Abner's overall argument, namely that Abner has been faithful to Saul's house rather than delivering Ishbosheth into David's hands. As such, Abner's response from the outset highlights his faithfulness to Saul's

⁹ A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 56; Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 377-8; Firth, *I & II Samuel*, 347; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 106, 113; Miller, "Attitudes toward Dogs in Ancient Israel," 495-6.

¹⁰ E.g., A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 56; Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 377-8; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 106, 113. Brueggemann (*First and Second Samuel*, 226) ignores this section of Abner's response entirely.

¹¹ A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 56. Jeffrey Tigay (*Deuteronomy*, 216) discusses the possibility that a **כֶּלֶב** may refer to a male prostitute in Deut 23:19, which may bolster Anderson's association of dogs and promiscuity, but Tigay is not dogmatic on the matter and also discusses the possibility that dogs may have played a role in pagan temple practices. Miller ("Attitudes toward Dogs in Ancient Israel," 497) surveys scholarly approaches to Deut 23:19 and argues that no firm conclusions can be reached.

¹² Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 377-8.

¹³ First, *I and II Samuel*, 347. Bar-Efrat's (*Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 38) interpretation is similar to Firth's, but he does not seriously consider the reference to Judah.

house and the pettiness of Ishbosheth's accusation, and it can be summarized as, "If I have never stooped so low as to help Judah, why are you [Ishbosheth] so concerned about something as trivial as a concubine?"

Abner then employs a two-pronged rhetorical approach that further shows the foolishness of Ishbosheth's words. He begins with a positive statement of his constant and ongoing faithfulness to Ishbosheth's house followed by a negative claim of what he has not done that would have allowed Ishbosheth to come to harm. Abner first draws attention to the **חסד** (loyalty) he has repeatedly shown to Ishbosheth's family, namely his father, his uncles, and his father's friends (v. 8): **היום אעשה-חסד עם-בית שאול אביך אל-אחיו ואל-מרעהו** ("Today, I am acting loyally with the house of Saul your father and to his brothers and to his friends"). Katharine Sackefeld notes four aspects of the secular use of **חסד**, all of which Abner exhibits in his relationship to Ishbosheth:¹⁴

1. The subject (i.e., Abner) has real responsibilities to show **חסד** to the object (i.e., Ishbosheth)
2. Yet the subject is free to not show **חסד** to the object
3. The act of **חסד** fulfills a real need to the recipient
4. The recipient is unable to perform this act of **חסד** for himself

Abner's relationship and responsibilities to Ishbosheth transcend the professional, for Abner has both familial and political bonds to Saul's house. Nevertheless, because Abner is faithful to Saul (not Ishbosheth) who is dead and because Ishbosheth is dependent on Abner, as argued above, Abner's acts of **חסד** are rightly understood as being freely made; Abner is not coerced by

¹⁴ Sackefeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 24.

Ishbosheth into showing חסד.¹⁵ While Abner, especially as the שר־צבא, has a duty to continue his loyalty to Saul's family, he still has the ability to cease displaying such allegiance, and in 3:12-21, Abner breaks all ties with Ishbosheth and realigns himself with David. Furthermore, the narrative has shown that Abner is an asset to Ishbosheth — but not *vice versa* — and without Abner, Ishbosheth would not now be king (cf. 2:8). In short, Abner's previous acts on behalf of Ishbosheth fulfill all four of Sackenfled's aspects of חסד, and thus we conclude that he is not fabricating his loyalty to Ishbosheth but is reminding the king of what he has actually done to benefit Ishbosheth.¹⁶ Moreover, the imperfect form of עשה implies that Abner's loyalty is, for the moment, continuous. He is currently still loyal to Ishbosheth, but, as we will soon see, he is about to end such loyalty.¹⁷ Whatever may or may not have happened with Rizpah (see discussion below), Abner has never acted directly against his king, and thus, Abner's previous and continued behavior should be proof enough for Ishbosheth not to concern himself with such a petty infraction.¹⁸

¹⁵Sackenfled (*Meaning of Hesed*, 30) translates the phrase in v. 8 as, "At this moment, I am doing..." (cf. NRSV).

¹⁶ Cf. Firth (*1&2 Samuel*, 346-7) who comes to similar conclusions about Abner's acts without formally defining the term. Walter Brueggemann (*First and Second Samuel*, 226) argues that the חסד Abner has shown Ishbosheth is akin to that shared between David and Jonathan, but in actuality, there are few parallels between Abner's relationship with Ishbosheth and David's with Jonathan. Nothing in the text has even hinted that Abner had any sort of emotional connection to Ishbosheth, and when Abner leaves, no tears are shed (cf. 1 Sam 20:41). Instead, Abner simply claims that he has freely and responsibly kept his obligations to his own kin, the royal family, and he implies that Ishbosheth should be grateful not accusatory. Clark (*The Word Hesed*, 176-8) argues that while Abner had deep commitments to Saul, he did not possess such devotion towards Ishbosheth. Thus, because Abner was not committed to Ishbosheth, the word חסד is not appropriate. Such would explain why Abner uses the word in connection to Saul but not Ishbosheth.

¹⁷ Sackenfled, *Meaning of Hesed*, 27; cf Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 38.

¹⁸ David Gunn ("David and the Gift of the Kingdom," 17-18) raises the possibility, however, that Abner might be making excuses in order to desert a "sinking ship." He asks, "Is this talk of loyalty and ingratitude merely a cover for his own skin-saving disloyalty?" Unfortunately, the text does not give us any insight into Abner's thought other than what he says here. Therefore, there is nothing to contradict Abner's stated reasons for being upset or deserting Ishbosheth, and the self-characterization he presents is consistent with how the text has portrayed

Interestingly, Abner's use of **חסד** here may also indicate that he views himself only as Ishbosheth's subject rather than also as Ishbosheth's family member. As Saul's cousin, Abner is still closely linked to Ishbosheth through family ties, but Abner's description of his loyalty to Ishbosheth draws more heavily on ruler-subject obligations than on family expectations. Nelson Glueck surveys the use of **חסד** in person-to-person relationships, and notes the implications of the word in familial and related-tribal contexts.¹⁹ Glueck, however, places his discussion of Abner's conversation with Ishbosheth within the context of king-subject obligations not in his discussion of familial obligations.²⁰ This placement makes sense given the content of Abner's speech, for the second prong of Abner's response, wherein he proclaims what he could have done to harm Ishbosheth but did not do (see below), further illustrates the **חסד** he has shown Ishbosheth by preventing harm from befalling the king. Abner, rather than discussing how he has shown familial loyalty to Ishbosheth, outlines how he has not allowed a rival king to usurp the throne or kill Ishbosheth. If Glueck's assessment is correct, therefore, then we find in Abner's only recorded conversation with Ishbosheth in the Hebrew text, that he treats Ishbosheth as only a weak king and not as a blood relative. While we must be cautious to avoid being overly certain in this matter — it is unclear what familial obligations first cousins once removed

Abner in the narrative thus far. Abner had been beside Saul during the ordeal with Goliath in 1 Samuel 17–18; he sat at Saul's table in 1 Samuel 20; he slept in Saul's camp in 1 Samuel 26; and he fought Saul's enemies in 2 Samuel 2. In short, prior to 3:9-10 when Abner defects to David's side, Abner's character has never given even a hint that his loyalties might lie with another. Even when Jonathan, Saul's son and heir apparent, joined forces with David in 1 Samuel 20, Abner did not (cf 1 Sam 20:25). While the text itself does not discuss Abner in 1 Samuel 21–25, we as the readers are forced to infer that Abner's character stayed loyal to Saul even as Saul descended into insanity and his kingdom fell away. Even after Saul's death, Abner, who is still *Saul's* **שֶׁר־צָבָא** (2 Sam 2:8), continued to show loyalty to Saul's house by establishing Ishbosheth as king, rather than handing the kingdom to David, and by fighting on behalf of the new king (2:9).

¹⁹ Glueck, *Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, 38-43.

²⁰ Glueck, *Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, 50-1.

were expected to show towards each other in ANE — making such a conclusion further indicates the frail ties between Ishbosheth and Abner; Abner has not loved Ishbosheth as his kinsman but has faithfully served Ishbosheth as king and has been a loyal subject despite the king’s weakness.

The second prong of Abner’s rhetorical response is to highlight what he has not done that could have hurt Ishbosheth. Not only has Abner demonstrated חסד to Saul’s house, he has also not delivered Ishbosheth into the hand of David (v. 8). By using the second, masculine singular suffix on the Hiphil verb הִמְצִייתָ (“deliver you over to”), Abner singles out Ishbosheth specifically not Saul’s house generally.²¹ Rather than saying that he has not delivered *Saul’s house* into David’s hand, he says that he has not delivered *Ishbosheth himself* into David’s hand.²² That Abner singles out Ishbosheth in this negative portion of his argument but not in the previous positive portion again shows that Abner’s allegiance to Ishbosheth is tentative at best in the first prong. Abner claims he has been loyal to Saul’s house, Saul’s brothers, and Saul’s friends, but he does not say he has been loyal to Saul’s son (i.e., Ishbosheth). Describing Saul as Ishbosheth’s father (אָבִי) suggests that the omission of Ishbosheth’s name previously is intentional. In other words, Abner claims he has been loyal to Saul’s house in general but not to Ishbosheth in particular. Then, when Abner states that he could have delivered Ishbosheth specifically into David’s hand, he omits everyone he had mentioned in the previous list. Thus,

²¹ Since Abner had grown in power within the house of Saul (3:6), if Abner had decided to be derelict or treasonous in his duty, Ishbosheth could have faced disastrous consequences. In fact, because of his political strength, Abner may have been able to rally his troops and either stage a coup against Ishbosheth or organize a mass defection to David’s kingdom, which is exactly what he does later in 2 Samuel 3. In his response to Ishbosheth, however, Abner suggests that even though he had the opportunity to do any of these things, he chose not to do so.

²² Cf. Auld (*I & II Samuel*, 378) who also notices that Abner’s loyalty to Saul and his house is stated positively but his loyalty to Ishbosheth is stated only negatively.

Abner's **חסד** to Ishbosheth is not due to his devotion to Ishbosheth but his devotion to Saul.²³

Abner's character is still *Saul's* general (see 2:8), serving *Saul's* house, preserving *Saul's* kingdom, and is not closely connected to Ishbosheth.

Abner's argument calls to mind the battle scene in 2 Samuel 2, where even though Abner suffers significant losses to Joab's men, Abner still kills Asahel and keeps Ishbosheth safe at Mahanaim. Because of Abner's actions, Ishbosheth's army is not crushed by David's, and Ishbosheth is unharmed. Yet Abner's words in the second half of 3:8 go beyond what Abner has done to protect Ishbosheth and his kingdom. Abner states that he has actively and intentionally chosen not to lead Ishbosheth's kingdom into David's hands. In other words, Abner argues that he could have permitted David's forces to overtake Ishbosheth, but he has thus far decided not to do so. In his two-pronged defense, which is his only instance of self-characterization in MT, Abner presents himself as one fully devoted to Saul's house to the extent that he has acted, both actively and passively, in ways that would perpetuate Ishbosheth's kingdom rather than end it. Nevertheless, while he has shown **חסד** to Ishbosheth, Abner does not describe himself as Ishbosheth's servant but only as Saul's.

Abner concludes his argument with the terse statement: **ותפקד עלי עון האשה היום** ("Yet today you charge me with a crime about this woman"). After having suggested that he has been loyal to Ishbosheth (i.e., Saul's house) not Judah (i.e., David's house) and then proving that he is still loyal to Saul, Abner wonders how Ishbosheth could possibly charge him with a crime, especially a crime involving a woman. Even if his alleged relations with Rizpah were defiant, Abner's loyalty to Saul's house should trump any infraction he may have committed with the

²³ Cf. Sackenfled, *Meaning of Hesed*, 28.

concubine. As the culmination of his argument, Abner's words are sarcastic and accusatory, and Abner thereby answers Ishbosheth's accusation of impropriety with an accusation of impropriety of his own: Ishbosheth's question is irresponsible and out of line. Given all that Abner has done for Ishbosheth, the king should not concern himself with a crime as petty as having relations with a royal concubine. While having relations with a royal concubine may be an affront to Ishbosheth and his authority (see discussion below), Abner states that Ishbosheth is out of line to broach the subject and that Ishbosheth should show more respect and appreciation towards Abner.

Abner then changes from making an argument to proclaiming an oath that he will fulfill what Yhwh promised to David (v. 9-10). While this oath may suggest that Abner has some devotion to Yhwh (see discussion below), it also again shows Abner's rhetorical savviness. After having proclaimed his devotion to Saul's house, Abner invokes the divine name in order to silence Ishbosheth. Shimon Bar-Efrat, in noting the rhetorical power of this oath, states, *Abner begründet seinen Beschluss mit einem göttlichen Schwur, dem man nicht widersprechen kann.*²⁴ In other words, by finishing his speech with an invocation of the divine name, Abner makes it impossible for Ishbosheth to respond; if Abner is fulfilling God's will by making David king, Ishbosheth has no recourse by which to rebut Abner.²⁵

²⁴ "Abner justifies his decision by invoking a divine oath, with which no one can disagree," Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 38.

²⁵ Michael Dick ("The 'History of David's Rise,'" 12-18) compares David's rise to power with Nabonidus' and suggests that both of their predecessors had lost divine approval while they themselves never personally sought the throne.

New Aspects of Abner's Character

Abner's Inappropriate Relationship with Rizpah

As we turn now to the portions of 2 Sam 3:6-11 that present us with new dimensions of Abner's character, we begin by discussing Abner's relationship to Rizpah and its implications for Abner's characterization. Prior to 2 Samuel 3, we have seen Abner engage neither in any sort of romantic or sexual encounters nor in acts which might be offensive to his sovereign, whether Saul or Ishbosheth. With the introduction of Rizpah in 3:6 and Ishbosheth's accusation in 3:7 — אֲבִי מָדוּעַ בָּאתָ אֶל-פִּילגֶשׁ אָבִי ("Why did you go in to my father's concubine?") — the text causes us to question Abner's sexual pursuits and even his loyalty to Ishbosheth. The text unfortunately is gapped in at least two important respects. First, the narrator does not confirm Ishbosheth's claim that Abner went into Rizpah, and thus, some doubt is left as to whether Abner's character "really" had relations with Rizpah. Second, we are not told about the severity of such a deed, despite Abner calling it עוֹן ("iniquity" or "crime") in 3:8, so we are left wonder as to how offensive Abner's alleged actions would be to Ishbosheth's character. In order to better understand Abner's character, we need to examine what if anything we can infer from context and similar stories that might help is in filling these gaps appropriately.

Because the text has not previously narrated Abner having sexual relations with Rizpah, it is not immediately obvious whether we are meant to infer that Abner performed such an act or that Ishbosheth is accusing Abner falsely. In order to better understand whether this event "occurred" within the narrative world, we examine two similar unnarrated events within the Deuteronomistic History: Saul putting the Gibeonites to death (2 Sam 21:1-3) and David's promise to Bathsheba that he will make Solomon king (1 Ki 1:11-14). In the former, Yhwh tells David that because Saul killed the Gibeonites (21:1), he is at fault for the famine that now

plagues the land. In a short parenthetical statement, the narrative then flashes back to when Saul violated Israel's alliance (שבע) with the Gibeonites by trying to destroy (נכה) them. Because the text has not previously narrated Saul's slaughter of the Gibeonites, there could be reason to doubt the "truthfulness" of the parenthetical.²⁶ Nevertheless, that Yhwh himself states that Saul is guilty of bloodshed, that the parenthetical then clarifies Yhwh's words, and that David acts as if Yhwh's words are true, it is clear that we are intended to infer that Saul has indeed slaughtered the Gibeonites.²⁷ There is, therefore, precedent in the Samuel text of un-narrated events being assumed to have occurred in order to further the plot and flow of the text.

More uncertainty surrounds David's alleged promise to Bathsheba in 1 Kings 1, for the 1 Kings text lacks any supporting parentheticals or statements from Yhwh. In 1 Kings 1, Adonijah declares himself king (v. 5), then the prophet Nathan goes to Bathsheba and advises her to visit David on his deathbed and to remind him of his promise to make Solomon king (vv. 13, 17). Such a promise, however, is never recorded in the text, and the narrator provides no confirmation that David made this promise. Thus, the reader is left to examine the clues in the text to fill in the gap as to whether or not Nathan is lying about this promise, but the clues are ambiguous.

²⁶ McKane (*I and II Samuel*, 284-7) accepts Yhwh's claim in v. 1 without acknowledging any problems of the text. A. Anderson (*2 Samuel*, 251-2) also appears to accept the validity of vv. 1-2 although he briefly discusses the difficulty of the text and the possibility of a propagandist agenda. Cf. Firth, *I and II Samuel*, 504.

²⁷ Even scholars who deny the historicity of such an event, appear to assume that the text is intended to persuade the audience that Saul committed these acts. Steven McKenzie (*King David*, 136), for example, finds this back-telling to be a rather convenient way of exonerating David from committing murder against Saul's progeny. By stating that Saul had violated Israel's agreement with the Gibeonites, thereby causing a famine, David has a "thinly disguised" excuse to execute seven of Saul's descendants. Walter Brueggemann (*First and Second Samuel*, 336-8) agrees with McKenzie and argues that because the reason for the famine is given only to David in private, we cannot assume its historical accuracy. Instead, he sees v. 1 acting merely as a device to mask the brutality of the David presented in chapter 21. Yet even if McKenzie and Brueggemann are correct in their interpretations of the purpose and historicity of the text, both admit that the narrator intended vv. 1-2 to be accepted by the audience as "factual" events within the story world so that David's character may be considered innocent of bloodshed. In other words, both scholars accept that literarily, the text is intended for us to assume that the fault of the famine lies with Saul and that David's subsequent actions are justified regardless of what the historical facts may actually be.

Several clues suggest that Nathan invented David's promise. Because David lies enfeebled on his deathbed, he may have been easily deceived by Nathan into "recalling" a promise that had never been made, and because Bathsheba has a vested interest in seeing her son becoming king, her participation in a ruse to trick David would be understandable.²⁸ Based upon the inaccuracy of Nathan's statement that Adonijah is already at his coronation feast (v. 11), David Gunn concludes, "The strong possibility exists... that we are witnessing an act of deliberate deception."²⁹ Keith Bodner holds that because Nathan has a history of inventing stories (e.g., his parable about the rich man and the sheep in 2 Sam 12:1-6), he may be doing so here.³⁰ Nevertheless, there are also clues to suggest Nathan is not fabricating the story. For instance, contra Bodner, the text itself indicates that Nathan's story in 2 Samuel 12 is a fable if for no other reason than that in v. 6 Nathan accuses the king of being "the man" of the story. The text of 1 Kings 1, however, does not have such an indicator. Furthermore, that no one in the story — including the narrator — contradicts Nathan's version of the events suggests that Nathan's story is "accurate." Because there are conflicting clues as to what is the "truth," the text is ambiguous. As a result, the majority of modern scholars find the question of Nathan's truthfulness or duplicity here unanswerable. Jerome Walsh believes that such ambiguity in the text is intentional: "The conventions of biblical Hebrew narrative would easily allow the narrator to make the situation clear. Yet there is no information here or elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to answer the question one way or the other. That fact is itself significant: we are *meant* to

²⁸ Cf. Würthwein, *Das Erste Buch der Könige*, 13-4. Nathan's motive for fabricating this story is less clear than Bathsheba's complicity.

²⁹ Gunn, "David and the Gift of the Kingdom." 31.

³⁰ Bodner, "Nathan," 50-1, 53-4; cf. Marcus, "David the Deceiver, David the Dupe," 166-7.

wonder.”³¹ Unfortunately, it is impossible to reach any stronger conclusion than Walsh’s because of the ambiguity of and gaps in the text.

Returning now to Ishbosheth’s accusation against Abner in 2 Samuel 3, we cautiously suggest that, despite gapping similar to that in 1 Kings 1, we as the readers are meant to infer that Abner’s character has, in fact, gone into Rizpah. There are at least four reasons for this conclusion. First, while the question in 2 Sam 3:7 is not asked by Yhwh (cf. 2 Sam 21:1-2), it is also not asked by a character who has a vested interest in making a false claim like Bathsheba has in 1 Kings 1. Ishbosheth would not benefit from falsely accusing Abner, and hence, there is no reason to assume that he has done so. Second, the introductory statement at the beginning of v. 7 feels out of place if Ishbosheth is merely fabricating the story. While not as definitive as the parenthetical in 2 Sam 21:2, the mention of the concubine’s name prepares the reader to learn more about Rizpah. Neither Ishbosheth nor Abner call her by her name in their dialog, and thus, the brief sentence by *the narrator* in v. 7 prepares us to learn about a previous event that “occurred” outside of what has been written.³² Third, Ishbosheth does not ask *if* Abner has gone into Rizpah but *why* he has done so, thereby implying that the infraction has “occurred” and that Ishbosheth wants to know Abner’s motivations. Finally, at no point does Abner deny the accusation.³³ Despite becoming irate and defensive, Abner never explicitly states that Ishbosheth’s premise is misguided or unfounded, and he never claims his own innocence. Abner

³¹ Walsh, *1 Kings*, 12, emphasis original; cf. Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 19; Henz-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, 15; Koenig, *Isn’t This Bathsheba*, 89; Sweeney, *1 & II Kings*, 56. McCarter (“Plots, True or False,” 360), however, simply takes the text at face value and assumes David had made the promise long before.

³² A similar statement is not made before Nathan’s claim in 1 Kings 1, and so that text leaves open the possibility that Nathan could be lying.

³³ A. Anderson (*2 Samuel*, 56), however, believes that Abner’s response is tantamount to a denial of the accusation, yet it must be emphasized that he never explicitly rebuts Ishbosheth’s claim.

does not become angry because Ishbosheth has falsely accused him of wrongdoing but because Ishbosheth has made such a big deal out of something relatively minor (in Abner's eyes).³⁴ Therefore, Abner's words, Ishbosheth's accusation, and the beginning of v. 7 all suggest that Ishbosheth's accusation is "true" despite the narrative not otherwise depicting such an event.

Recognizing that the text allows us to infer that Abner "actually" went into Rizpah, we must now ask how significant of an infraction this action is. Abner himself calls it עוֹן ("iniquity" or "crime") in v. 8, thereby suggesting his infraction may be serious. While going into Rizpah, a royal concubine, would be a clear act of disrespect against his king and close relatives, some scholars argue that this act is akin to treason.³⁵ Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin, for instance, argue that certain instances of rape in ancient Israel were challenges against another's honor and power: "The assailant asserted the right of his household to the resources of another. If a household could not protect its women, then it was declared insolvent or shamed and unable to fulfill its responsibilities as a whole."³⁶ Thus, the taking of a wife could be understood as nullifying one's authority over the household (or kingdom). Likewise, Tomoo Ishido argues that in ANE, a successor to the throne could legitimate his rise by marrying

³⁴ Van Seters ("Love and Death," 121) also holds that Abner finds it an insult to be rebuked "over a woman;" cf. Stoebe, *Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 128.

³⁵ E.g. Chavel, "Compositry and Creativity," 43; Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 225-6; Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch*, 38; Sackenfeld, *Meaning of Hesed*, 28; Bright, *History of Israel*, II/192. McCarter ("Plots, True or False," 364-5) does not discuss Abner specifically but notes that both Absalom and Adonijah made attempts at the throne by having relations with concubines. Scholars who believe it was not a political move: Van Seters, "Love and Death," 121; Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 208-9. Stoebe (*Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 127-8) argues that Abner was not making an attempt to take the throne because Ishbaal had not assumed Saul's harem as Absalom does (cf. 16:20ff). Instead, Stoebe argues that Abner's interest in Rizpah was purely romantic.

³⁶ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 180; cf. Giovanni, "Female Chastity Codes," 68.

the former king's wife.³⁷ Rizpah, however, is not Saul's wife or relative (אִשָּׁה) but his concubine (פְּלִגְנָה), and as such, the same power politics are not necessarily in place here; the taking of Rizpah may equate only to the taking of Rizpah not the taking of the kingdom.³⁸ Furthermore, A. Anderson notes that if sleeping with a king's concubine is akin to treason, then the bases of Abner's protestation are rendered moot, for Abner's defense is focused entirely on his devotion and faithfulness to Saul's house.³⁹ Van Seters also reminds us that because Abner makes Ishbosheth king and brings the kingdom to David, nothing about Abner's actions thus far suggest he wants the throne for himself.⁴⁰ In addition, Ishbosheth does not react as if Abner has committed treason by attempting to imprison or execute Abner. Instead he simply asks Abner why he went in to Rizpah. It is difficult, therefore, to interpret Abner's relations with Rizpah as being in any way treasonous.

Nevertheless, from the account of Absalom sleeping with David's concubines in public, we see that relations with royal concubines are insulting and affront to the king. While not necessarily a claim to the throne, going into the royal concubines shows the weakness of the monarch, the bravado of the aggressor, and the taking of the king's property.⁴¹ When Abner

³⁷ Ishido, *Royal Dynasties*, 74.

³⁸ Mace, *Hebrew Marriage*, 129, 134; cf. de Vaux, (*Ancient Israel*, 24-25, 115-7), who notes the differences between the "queen" or wife of the king and the king's concubines but who also sees Abner's actions as a power play against Ishbosheth.

³⁹ A. Anderson, 2 *Samuel*, 56; cf. Clark, *The Word Hesed*, 176.

⁴⁰ Van Seters, *David Saga*, 274; cf. McKenzie, *David*, 118. Scoggin (*Old Testament and Oriental Studies*, 43-6) argues that Abner originally wanted to claim the throne for himself and thus went into Rizpah, but Abner changed his mind when Ishbosheth confronted him. Such a change of mind, however, is not stated in the text, and Abner has not heretofore shown any interest in taking the throne for himself. Stoebe (*Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 130), believing that Abner originally wanted to take possession of the throne, finds his negotiations with David in 3:12-16 surprising.

⁴¹ Absalom had already declared himself king in Hebron (2 Sam 15:10), and he had widespread support of the people (15:12, 13) prior to sleeping with David's concubines. Ahitophel's reason for telling Absalom to go into

goes into Rizpah, therefore, he disrespects Ishbosheth and claims for himself what belonged to the king, namely the king's father's concubine.⁴² Abner also undermines the authority of the king, for if the king cannot control even his own concubine, one must question whether he is really able to control the kingdom.⁴³ Yet because Rizpah is called *Saul's* concubine not Ishbosheth's, Abner disrespects Saul as well.⁴⁴ Such disrespect certainly warrants a rebuke from the king, and the classification of this act as עָוֹן fits well; Abner has transgressed against the king and the king's father and broken any trust that existed between himself and Ishbosheth.

That Abner then minimizes the seriousness of this act in vv. 8-10 in light of his previous faithfulness to Ishbosheth suggests that Abner feels he deserves a great deal of freedom and can do whatever he wants within Ishbosheth's court. Such an attitude makes Abner's character appear presumptuous and arrogant as well as lustful and dishonorable. These aspects of his character have gone unmentioned by the text prior to 2 Samuel 3, so this scene is surprising and provides rounding to his character since Abner's character is portrayed with more dimensionality and complexity than what we have seen before.

the concubines is so that the people would know that Absalom has become odious (שִׂנְאָה) to David and his supporters would be strengthened (16:21). He is not, therefore, taking the throne by going into the concubines, for he had already done so. Rather, by publically spurning his father, Absalom boosts the morale of his people and continues turning them away from David. Henry Smith (*The Books of Samuel*, 350) states that Absalom's act was the "public affirmation" of his usurpation of the throne, not the actual taking of the throne, and Brueggemann (*First and Second Samuel*, 310) interprets Absalom's public display with the concubines to be the "accoutrements of office." Cf. Jobling, *1 Samuel*, 224-5. Firth (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 466-7), however, holds that going into the royal concubines was an act of usurpation in and of itself. McKane (*I & II Samuel*, 357) straddles the two positions by holding that Absalom's act is both a dishonor to his father and a claim to the throne.

⁴² Smith, *The Books of Samuel*, 275.

⁴³ Linafelt, "Taking Women in Samuel," 102.

⁴⁴ The detail that Abner went into Saul's concubine also continues to link Saul's character space with Abner's and shows the chasm between Ishbosheth and Abner. Such disrespect against Saul is shocking, because Abner has been depicted as entirely united with Saul. Going into Rizpah, however, may also continue to show that Abner's character space has replaced Saul since Abner, not Ishbosheth, lays a claim to Saul's concubine.

Abner's Anger

The text provides us with even more depth to Abner's character when Abner becomes "very angry" (חָרָה אַנְרָה) at Ishbosheth's charge in 3:8. Here we experience the only time that the text *explicitly* attributes to Abner any emotions whatsoever. In his battle against Joab, he is not described as fearful; in his relationship with Rizpah, he is not said to love her; and the text ascribed to him no emotions towards Saul. The only other instance where emotional language may have applied to Abner is in the Goliath episode, but there we have to infer that Abner shared in Israel's great fear (1 Sam 17:11); he is not explicitly singled out as being afraid. From this explicit statement of emotion in 3:8, we learn that some personal attacks against his character can kindle emotion within him and cause him to lash back with angry verbiage. Rather than answer Ishbosheth's question directly or retaliate physically, Abner retorts with a brief rant that is both defensive and treasonous, and yet, despite his anger, his argument is well structured (see discussion above).⁴⁵ Hence, even in his anger, he maintains control of his faculties by not physically assaulting Ishbosheth and by making a cogent, rhetorical argument.

Furthermore, there is something specific in Abner's relationship with *Ishbosheth* that leads to his anger, for he does not react similarly when accused of wrongdoing by others. In 1 Sam 26:15, David personally attacks Abner's character for being a poor bodyguard who had not keep a good watch over or protect Saul. David even questioned Abner's masculinity, but Abner does not respond in anger. Abner also does not become angry at Goliath's insulting and blasphemous taunts against the people of Israel (1 Samuel 17) or when he loses the battle of Gibeon to Joab (2 Sam 2:26). In each of these incidents, Abner is peaceful and silent, but when

⁴⁵ Cf. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 347. Bar-Efrat (*Narrative Art*, 58-9) notes the important of narrative descriptions of characters' moods for better understanding those characters.

Ishbosheth is involved, Abner becomes enraged and verbose.⁴⁶ As the only conversation between Abner and Ishbosheth in the text, this one instance suggests that Abner dislikes Ishbosheth despite making him king.

Abner's Threat against Saul's House

Abner's interaction with Ishbosheth here also shows that while Abner's devotion to Saul is strong, his faithfulness to Saul's house is not permanent, especially in Saul's absence. The surprising aspect of this portion of the story is not that Abner leaves Ishbosheth — we have seen numerous hints in the text that have suggested a rift existed between them even before 3:6-11 — but is that Abner leaves *Saul's* house to join *David's*. Not only does Abner resign his high-ranking post within Ishbosheth's courts, he joins Saul's enemy and threatens to attack Ishbosheth directly, thereby breaking his allegiance to Saul's house forever.⁴⁷ Nothing in the text has previously suggested that Abner either wants to leave Saul's house, unite with David, or attack Saul's kingdom. To the contrary, Abner has been referenced as *Saul's* שֶׁר־צָבָא even after Saul's death (2:8), once joined Saul in pursuit of David, and has just proclaimed his continued loyalty to Saul and his house in 3:8. Now for the first time, Abner makes an actual threat against Saul's house and vows to fulfill Yhwh's promise to install David as king. Thus, Abner's words in v. 9 are a complete surprise and add no less than three new layers to our understanding of his character.

⁴⁶ It may be possible to suggest that Abner reacts in anger because of his relationship with Rizpah. Nevertheless, because Abner has no further interaction with Rizpah in the text, we cannot conclude that Abner's anger was a result of his love or passion towards her. He shows no emotions towards her whatsoever, and she disappears until chapter 21.

⁴⁷ Grønbaek (*Geschichte*, 236) states that Abner's actions here amount to “*schaendlicher Verrat*” (disgraceful treason).

First, Abner has a very high view of himself and a low view of Ishbosheth. In stating that he will transfer power from Saul's house to David's, Abner's character assumes that he has the power and support to do so and that Ishbosheth either will not or cannot stop him. Thus, his character seemingly believes that not only will he have enough public support to make this transition successful but also that he will have enough military backing to ward off any attempt to stop it. Considering that Abner lost the only battle in which he has commanded troops in the text, Abner may be acting foolishly here; because he was not strong enough to defeat Joab's division, it is not clear how he will defeat Ishbosheth's entire army. The text leaves open, however, the possibility that Abner relies on Ishbosheth's weakness rather than on his own strength, which is a more reasonable assumption given that the text does not portray Ishbosheth as a strong character or monarch. Whatever his assumptions, 3:12-21 shows that Abner is not misguided after all, for he accomplishes everything he threatens in 3:8-11.

Second, Abner has at least a superficial or expedient devotion to Yhwh. Verse 9 marks the first time that Abner uses the word יהוה in the Samuel text. His only other use of the divine name comes in 3:17-18 when he references the same promise in an attempt to convince the elders of Israel and the Benjaminites to make a join him in forming a covenant with David. Until this point, Abner's character has had no interaction with the deity at all. In every instance in which God speaks to Saul in 1 Samuel, Abner's character goes unmentioned in the narrative, and in passages in which Abner is present, no mention of Yhwh is made. Because Abner has had no stated connection to Yhwh until 2 Samuel 3, it is difficult to determine how devout, if at all, Abner may be from just vv. 9, and 17-18. In fact, given the context in which these references appear, Abner may be invoking the divine name solely to get what he wants. In the first instance, Abner threatens to harm Ishbosheth and his kingdom by fulfilling the divine promise

made to David, thereby stating a reason for his abdication. In the latter case, Abner promises the elders that he will fulfill the same promise, thereby convincing them to trust him and follow him into David's kingdom. In both cases, Abner gets what he wants — he safely leaves Ishbosheth's kingdom and is followed into David's — and were it not for his untimely death at the hands of Joab, the text hints that Abner would have held an important position within David's court. Therefore, it is unquestionable that whenever Abner invokes the divine name, he does so for his own benefit, yet the possibility remains that Abner's character is genuinely devoted to Yhwh to some degree. Invoking religion for political expediency does not negate the possibility of genuine piety.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the text is gapped by never describing Abner's religious piety or impiety. We have no way to make an informed conclusion one way or the other, and thus, all we can conclude is that Abner is devout enough to use Yhwh's name for political expediency.

Third, we see that Abner is rational and decisive even when emotional. In 2 Samuel 2, we see Abner exert his will over other characters utilizing rhetoric and questions to influence the actions of others. While battles are obviously stressful, Abner's emotions are only described in 2 Sam 3:7-11, yet he continues to be decisive and rational there despite his anger and the possibility of significant personal consequences to his threat. In joining David's forces, Abner's character is giving up his high-ranking position within Ishbosheth's kingdom, his freedom to move about freely within the kingdom, his connection to his own family, and his social status. In addition, he is putting his own life in danger by threatening to abdicate to David's house and give David Ishbosheth's kingdom; Ishbosheth has the authority as king to have Abner arrested or put to death. Despite the stress of putting his life in danger and despite the consequences that may

⁴⁸ D. Bosworth ("Evaluating King David," 191-210) shows that a political figure (e.g., David) may act out of both genuine piety and political expediency. Cf. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 1-21 for a description on how religion has been used by (pious) American politicians for political gain.

come from this threat, Abner argues reasonably with Ishbosheth and follows through on his threat.

Abner in 2 Samuel 3:12-21

In 2 Samuel 3:12-21, Abner makes good on the threat he posed to Ishbosheth in 3:6-11 by making peace with David and by bringing Saul's people under David's rule, and this section continues rounding out our understanding of his character. Here, we see Abner's political clout and influence over Ishbosheth's people, and we also witness Abner's continued use of rhetoric and questions. Furthermore, Abner's wit and intelligence become more evident by what he does in addition to what he says. The manner in which he approaches David and rallies Saul's people behind David is shrewd, and by engaging other characters individually (e.g., David, the elders of Israel, etc.), he accomplishes his goal and preserves his life. Finally, because Abner has been nothing but loyal to Saul's house until 3:10, that he carries out on his threat from 3:10 is surprising. Thus, because his character can act in surprising ways, his character displays aspects of roundedness here. In short, we continue to see Abner as an intelligent and powerful figure who manipulates the characters around him, yet this section shows that Abner's intellect and power are greater than seen previously and that Abner can be a surprising character.

Abner's Influence Extended

Abner's brief exchange with David in vv. 12-13, his demand of Michal from her husband in v. 16, and his ability to convince Saul's people to join David all continue to show us the influence that Abner exhibits on those around him, and once again we witness everyone in the text conceding to Abner's wishes without argument or hesitation. Abner begins by sending messengers in his stead (תַּחַתָּיו, qere) to David requesting that David make a covenant with him

(כרתה ברייתך אתי).⁴⁹ He then promises that if David will concede to do so, his hand will be with David to turn Israel over to David's side (והנה ידי עמך להסב אליך את-כלל-ישראל). Considering that Abner has fought against David since 1 Samuel 20, Abner's is no small request. By changing his and the people's allegiance to David, Abner would secure David as king over all Israel without any further bloodshed between the two houses. Of course, David has no reason to trust that Abner's intentions are sincere — he did not witness Abner's outburst in 3:6-11 — so we expect David to be skeptical. Other than asking Abner to send back Michal, however, David shows no signs of doubt or skepticism.⁵⁰ It would seem then that David's character either trusts Abner from the beginning or is somehow instantly persuaded by Abner's question למי-ארץ (“Whose is the land?”).⁵¹ Either way, Abner gains David's initial consent and begins the process of re-uniting his people under David.

Abner continues to get what he wants from David in vv. 20-21. After having garnered the support of the elders of Israel and the Benjaminites, Abner awaits final confirmation from David before bringing them to David and forming a permanent alliance with him. In v. 20, Abner arrives with an official delegation of twenty men, and David warmly receives his guests with a feast.⁵² After the feast, Abner asks in v. 21 for David's permission to leave so that David

⁴⁹ McCarthy (“Social Compact and Sacral Kingship,” 79, 84) sees a lot of covenantal language in this chapter (e.g., the meal shared between David and Abner in 3:20, the peace when Abner leaves in 3:21, and the divine oath in 3:9).

⁵⁰ Aschkenazi (*Eve's Journey*, 142-3) notes the political import of David's request, wherein the return of Michal symbolizes the final surrender of Saul's family. Cf. Firth, *I & 2 Samuel*, 348; Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 258-9; Vanderkam, “Davidic Complicity,” 532; Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 39-40.

⁵¹ See the discussion below.

⁵² Bar-Efrat (*Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 42) believes the delegation showed Abner's sincerity in transferring the kingdom to David.

can rule over all that he desires (וּמַלְכָּת בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-תִּחְאַוֶּה נַפְשֶׁךָ). If David doubts Abner's intentions, he now has a final opportunity to act on those doubts through capturing or killing him, but instead, David allows Abner to depart in peace and rally his people. Seemingly the benefits of aligning with Abner — Abner's people will submit to David, David will gain a powerful and popular general, the war with Saul's house will be at an end, etc. — have persuaded David that Abner is trustworthy. In both vv. 12-13 and 20-21, therefore, Abner convinces the enemy king (David) to accept him and his people as new allies.

Next we see Abner display his influence over Michal's current husband Paltiel. After demanding that Abner send Michal back to him, Ishbosheth quickly concedes. Her husband Paltiel reacts with grief at having his wife taken from him and follows her with weeping as she journeys back to David (3:15-16). Abner then tersely commands Paltiel to return home with only two imperatives: "Go, return" (לֵךְ שׁוּב), and Paltiel instantly obeys (v. 16). While Abner's influence over Paltiel is similar to his influence over Joab (2:12-32) and David (3:12-13, 21) in that Abner gets what he wants quickly, his ability to influence Paltiel is significant, for unlike Joab and David, Paltiel receives no benefit from obeying Abner. Whereas Joab is able to end a battle and preserve his men's lives, and whereas David gains a powerful ally and ends a bitter war, Paltiel loses his wife and departs in grief. Nevertheless, with only two words and without recourse to his typical questions and rhetoric or offering anything to console Paltiel, Abner convinces him to return his wife to David.⁵³

Finally, in vv. 17-21, the narrative depicts Abner exhibiting the greatest amount of influence over his own people. Beginning with the elders of Israel and ending with the

⁵³ Bar-Efrat (*Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 40) suggests that Ishbosheth's willingness to force Paltiel to give up Michal was also due to Abner's influence over him.

Benjaminites, Abner succeeds in convincing Saul's people to unite with David. It is not possible to reconstruct exactly how the elders of Israel were organized or would have been understood to have been organized, but we can reasonably infer that within the story world they are a source (or sources) of political power in Israel.⁵⁴ Their lack of rebuttal to Abner's statement **הייתם מבקשים את־דוד למלך עליכם** ("You have been seeking David to be king over you") in 3:17 suggests that they are not happy with Ishbosheth's rule in Israel and are seeking to sever ties with Saul's house.⁵⁵ Abner, thus, convinces them to follow him by appealing to both their desires and the will of God. Abner promises to do what the elders already want while fulfilling Yhwh's promise to David, and the elders quickly accept Abner's offer. Quite impressively, Abner also gets the Benjaminites, the people from Saul's own tribe, to realign with David.⁵⁶ If any tribe would remain defiant of David's rise to power, we would expect Benjamin to be that tribe, yet Abner convinces them to follow David without any recorded trouble, opposition, or negotiation. Thus, by the time that Abner returns to David at Hebron in v. 20, Abner's ideas are well received by both Benjamin and the entirety of Israel (**כל־אשר־טוב בעיני**), and they follow him over to David's side. Not only are individual characters (e.g., Joab, David, Ishbosheth, etc.) impressed with and easily persuaded by Abner but the entire kingdom is as well. Abner is now, therefore, truly acting like the king — he makes decisions, creates alliances, and gives orders to the elders and tribes — even though he does not hold the title.

⁵⁴ Historically, the elders may have been an organized group consisting of representatives from each of the "tribes" in the text or simply tribal leaders with no formal connection between them. See Hertzberg (*I & II Samuel*, 259-60) for discussions regarding their seat of authority and possible influence. Cf. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 59

⁵⁵ Cf. Stoebe, *Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 132.

⁵⁶ Cf. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 60; Firth, *I & 2 Samuel*, 349; Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 41.

Abner's Use of Questions and Rhetoric

Of course, in exerting his power and influence over others, Abner again utilizes questions and rhetoric, although this tactic is less pronounced here than in previous passages. When interacting with David in vv. 12 and 21, Abner appeals to David's self-interests and desire to rule. The connections between v. 12 and v. 21 are unmistakable although rarely mentioned by scholars.⁵⁷ In both verses, Abner mentions a covenant (ברית) and states how he will bring כל-ישראל ("all Israel") over to David's side, and Abner uses similar grammar and in both.⁵⁸ In 2 Sam 3:12, Abner begins his correspondence with David by asking the rhetorical question: למי-ארץ ("Whose is the land?"). The obvious answer for David is that the land, including the people, belongs to him because Yhwh has given it to him (1 Sam 16:1-13), but at this point in the narrative, the land still remains under Ishbosheth's rule.⁵⁹ With the promise of the land and the people that come with it, David agrees to make a covenant with Abner upon the condition that Abner has Michal returned to him.⁶⁰ Abner expands his appeal to David's self-interest in v. 21

⁵⁷ A. Anderson (2 *Samuel*, 60), Firth (1 & 2 *Samuel*, 349), Hertzberg (I & II *Samuel*, 260), et al. do not mention this connection at all.

⁵⁸ Cf. ... להסב אליך את- ("To make... turn to you") in v. 12 to ... ואקבצה אל-ארני המלך את- ("Let me gather for my lord the king...") in v. 21

⁵⁹ Some scholars (e.g., Kirkpatrick, *Second Book of Samuel*, 69; Kennedy, *Samuel*, 205; Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 258; Tushima, *Saul's Progeny*, 134-5) believe that Abner is suggesting that *he* is the lord of the land. This interpretation, however, is inconsistent with Abner's scheme and characterization. David would likely not be moved by a threat from a general his army has already defeated, and Abner has consistently appealed to what is likely to persuade his audience (see discussions above). Abner, thus, is more likely to butter up David rather than boss him around. Moreover, A. Anderson (2 *Samuel*, 57) has argued that because Abner's argument rests on Yhwh's oath not his own power, Abner cannot be stating that the land belongs to him (cf. 3:9-10). Bar-Efrat (*Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 39), notes this possible interpretation, but ultimately he argues that Abner's point is only David is worthy to possess the land.

⁶⁰ Bar-Efrat (*Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 39) suggests that the long-form imperative of כרתה and the emphatic personal pronoun (אני) in v. 13 may indicate that Abner is appealing to David's pre-existent desire to establish a peaceful agreement between the two houses. This interpretation is highly plausible but not beyond

by promising that if David will grant Abner's request to leave and rally Israel, then **ומלכת** **בכל אשר-תאווה נפשך** ("You [David] will rule over all you desire"). Abner's rhetorical tactics with David, therefore, are almost identical in both v. 12 and 21, and the results are the same: David makes a covenant with Abner and begins the peaceful process of bringing the house of Saul under David's control. At the end of the scene, Abner leaves David **בשלום** ("in peace") indicating that the two are on excellent terms.⁶¹ By appealing to David's desire to rule, therefore, Abner has safely made an ally out of David.

Abner's savvy use of rhetoric is on greater display when Abner persuades the elders of Israel to join him in defecting to David, for there he uses a two-pronged argument to convince the elders to follow him over to David's camp. First, he appeals to their pre-existent desires to follow David in v. 17: **גם-תמול גם-שלשם הייתם מבקשים את-דוד למלך עליכם** ("For days and days you have been seeking to make David king over you."). John Mauchline notes, "[Abner] did not appear to be consulting his own interests at all but to be acting in good faith in the interests of his people."⁶² Thus, he presents himself as the elders' altruistic servant in order to gain their support. Abner's second prong is an appeal to the elders' religious devotion to Yhwh. Rather than utilize the divine promise to threaten his interlocutors as he does in 3:8-11,

debate, for the text is gapped by not stating what David's desires are concerning Abner and the war between the houses.

⁶¹ R. Gordon ("Covenant and Apology in 2 Samuel 3," 42-4) notes the covenantal aspects of the text, including the feast shared between David and Abner, and he says that the **בשלום** ("in peace") highlights that David is truly won over by Abner and not secretly plotting to kill him. Joab then disregards the pact and murders Abner, but the text makes it clear that David is not complicit in said murder. Stoebe (*Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 133), however, believes that the feast was a "guest meal" (Gastmahlzeit) or "sacrificial meal" (Opfermahlzeit) rather than as part of the negotiation process.

⁶² Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 210; cf. Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 41.

Abner holds out a promise of hope for these elders: once the elders follow Abner over to David's kingdom, Yhwh will deliver them from the Philistines and other enemies.⁶³ Abner, thus, alters how he quotes the divine promise in vv. 17-17 from what he says in vv. 9-10.⁶⁴ Abner's rhetorical skill, therefore, allows him to use the same data (i.e., divine promise to David) with different emphases in different situations to different people but with the same effect: he does or gets whatever he wants.

Abner's Wise Actions

Just as Abner's shrewdness is evident in this section by his speech, so too is it evident by his actions. Throughout this section, Abner skillfully achieves his goal of bringing the kingdom under David's rule by proceeding through a specific order of events that allows him to avoid facing the dangerous consequences that could result from his defection to David's kingdom.⁶⁵ Because Abner has been an enemy of David for so long, Abner risks capture by speaking to David in person, and because he is committing treason against Ishbosheth, he risks arrest by visiting with the elders of Israel and the Benjaminites. Both at home and abroad, therefore, Abner's safety and life are in danger, yet he avoids peril by engaging the necessary parties appropriately and in proper order. Rather than beginning his defection by meeting with David in person, Abner first sends messengers to David (v. 12), thereby eliminating any opportunity of

⁶³ Cf. Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 209-11. Van Seters (*David Saga*, 275) shows that the promise which references the Philistines was actually made to Saul not to Abner (1 Sam 9:15-17; 10:1). He suggests that Abner is thereby transferring the oracle from Saul to David. Regardless, this appeal to Yhwh is enough to convince the elders to do what Abner says.

⁶⁴ Cf. Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 41.

⁶⁵ Grønbaek (*Geschichte*, 240) believes that while David owed Abner gratitude for the future union between the two houses, the negotiations between Abner and David became a failure with Abner's death. The text, however, still shows a peaceful union between Saul's house and David's. It would seem, therefore, that Abner was successful in his bringing his people over to David.

being arrested or killed.⁶⁶ Then, when David does not arrest his messengers, Abner further ensures a covenant with David by fulfill David's lone stipulation, and he returns Michal to him. David, therefore, seems satisfied with Abner and is willing to make a covenant with him. Only at this point, after most of the political persuasion with David is complete, does Abner attempt to convince the elders of Israel and the Benjaminites to follow him (vv. 17-19). After he receives the elders' backing, Abner finally meets with David face-to-face (vv. 20-21), and now David would be foolish to renege on his commitment to ally with Abner; were he to backstab Abner or call off the negotiations, David would likely lose all the support Abner has garnered for him. Thus, Abner has truly given David an offer he cannot refuse, and now with the backing of Israel's leaders and with a warm welcome from David, Abner is able to return to Israel and to rally the general populace around David (v. 21). By progressing through these events in the sequence outlined above, Abner protects his own life and acts with political expediency.⁶⁷ He does not meet David face-to-face until it is safe to do so, and the elders do not know of his plot until he has already solidified David's trust. As a result, no one confronts him or threatens his life, and by the end of the episode, Abner has safely brought the general Israelite populace over to David's side. Such shrewdness is consistent with Abner's previous depictions, and by

⁶⁶ Cf. Bar-Efrat (*Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 39) who holds that Abner could not appear in person because of the war between David's house and Saul's. That Abner is able to appear before David in v. 20, however, suggests that Abner could have appeared before David even during the war. Stoebe (*Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 130) recognizes that Abner is "feeling out" David's position here, but he does not go so far as to note the shrewdness in Abner's actions.

⁶⁷ Cf. Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 210. R. Gordon ("Covenant and Apology in 2 Samuel 3," 41-2) does not believe the text presents a sequential narrative in which Abner makes two visits to David in Hebron: first to deliver Michal and second to transfer the allegiance of Israel to David. He then takes the verbs in vv. 17, 19 as pluperfects (i.e., "Abner had spoken with the elders..." and "Abner had also spoken to the Benjamites..."). Whether Abner made one trip or two, even in Gordon's view, the shrewdness of Abner solidifying his position with David before talking to the elders/Benjamites and solidifying his position with the latter before finalizing negotiations with David is still evident.

witnessing Abner *act* shrewdly not just *speak* shrewdly, we learn that Abner is able not only to talk his way through difficult situations but also to fulfill his goals safely and carefully.

Abner in 2 Samuel 3:22-4:1

Except for a handful of references scattered throughout 2 Samuel and 1 Kings (e.g., 2 Sam 4:12; 1 Ki 2:5, 32), Abner's character is not mentioned again in the Deuteronomistic History after 2 Sam 3:22-4:1, and thus, this section gives us our final impression of Abner's character in the books of Samuel. More specifically, in a manner akin to his lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:19-26), David's words concerning Abner's death (3:33-34) provide us with an example of how Abner should be remembered in a manner akin to how the books of Kings places the evaluation of the kings of Israel and Judah at their introduction (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:51; 2 Kgs 8:18, 27; 13:2; etc.).⁶⁸ Of course, because Abner is killed in v. 27, Abner's character does not feature prominently in this section, yet while other characters, especially Joab and David, receive more narrative space than Abner, the entire section is focused upon Abner's death and how other characters' react to it. Hence, there is much in this section that contributes to our understanding of Abner's character. We first examine Abner's decision to trust Joab in v. 27, and then we discuss how other characters talk about Abner and mourn his death. In short, while Abner's decision to trust Joab makes him appear both gullible and pitiful, the other characters leave us with a positive impression of his character, reminding us that Abner is a great and well-respected character within the story world.

⁶⁸ For discussions on David's Lament over Saul and Jonathan see: Freedman, "The Refrain in David's Lament over Saul and Jonathan," 115-26; R. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 210; Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 198; Shea, "Chiasmus and the Structure of Lament," 12-25; Holladay, "Form and Word-Play in David's Lament over Saul and Jonathan," 153-89; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 66-79; Noll, *Faces of David*, 98-9; Linafelt, "Private Poetry and Public Eloquence," 497-526.

Abner's Death

Soon after he becomes an ally and servant of David, Abner's character is murdered by Joab as revenge for killing Asahel in 2 Sam 2:12-32 (3:27, 30; cf. 2:23).⁶⁹ By the way the text narrates Abner's death, it presents us with two new aspects of his character: his poor judgment in trusting Joab and his pitiful death. First, Abner's character meets his doom by foolishly trusting Joab. After learning that Abner has left David in peace, Joab calls Abner back to speak to him privately (v. 27), and Abner foolishly follows Joab inside the gateway thereby giving Joab an opportunity to kill him. The text is gapped as to why Abner turns aside with Joab — perhaps Abner's character is eased by the supposed safety of the city gates or he assumes Joab will be friendly since he is at peace with David — but it is clear that he shows poor judgment in trusting Joab directly here.⁷⁰ Based upon his own words in 2 Samuel 2, we know that Abner's character knows better than to trust Joab or his messengers. In 2:22 when Abner attempts to convince Asahel to turn aside, Abner says, **איך אשא פני אל-יואב אחיך** (“How will I [be able to] lift my face to Joab your brother?”) thereby showing he knows that his relationship with Joab would be strained were he to kill Asahel. Thus, we expect Abner's character to show more caution in his dealings with Joab in 2 Samuel 3.

Second, Abner's death is a pitiful ending to his story.⁷¹ Rather than dying in the midst of battle attempting to conquer his foes, Abner dies in secret having been fooled by a presumed

⁶⁹ McCarter (*II Samuel*, 120-1) argues that the entire point of this episode is to show David's guilt by placing the blame entirely on Joab. A. Anderson (*2 Samuel*, 61) argues that Abner is not a murderer for killing Asahel, even though Joab seeks revenge as if Abner is.

⁷⁰ Mauchline (*I and 2 Samuel*, 211) argues that Abner may have been overrun by Joab's swiftness rather than being duped. Mauchline's view, however, is not supported by the text, for the narrative does not mention Joab's quickness in drawing his sword but does state that Abner willingly turned aside.

⁷¹ See Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 351; Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 230-1.

ally. By contrast, Saul dies in battle against the Philistines, and even his suicide has been considered honorable by some.⁷² Unlike Saul, Abner does not have the opportunity to draw a sword or defend himself before being cut him down by the vengeful Joab. Thus, we pity Abner for being too trusting and for falling victim to simple trickery. Interestingly, the text has ceased calling him **שֶׁר־צַבָּא**, and instead refers to him as just **בֶּן־נֵר** (2 Sam 3:23, 28, 37). Prior to 2 Samuel 3, Abner's lone patronymic occurs only twice before (1 Sam 26:14; 2 Sam 2:12), but in 2 Samuel 3, his patronymic is used four times (vv. 23, 25, 28, 37) without reference to his title. While the omission of his title makes sense in context — by leaving Saul's house, he is no longer Saul's **שֶׁר־צַבָּא** — the last three instances of the patronymic occur within the pericope of Abner's death, possibly suggesting that Abner's character has fallen in status. The once former Head of the Army and source of power within Ishbosheth's kingdom has died a foolish death, so he is now simply known as Ner's son. Even David acknowledges the foolishness of Abner's murder in v. 33 and says it is a tragedy imposed by wicked hands in v. 34.⁷³ David Jobling states, "David presents Abner as a man of natural power who has fallen to people inferior to himself."⁷⁴ The once powerful (cf. 3:38) and influential general has suffered the death of a fool due to his own gullibility.

Abner Characterized by Others

Because Abner is a very minor character in 1 Samuel and has taken up significant narrative space for only two chapters (2 Samuel 2–3), there have been few opportunities for other

⁷² See Shemesh, "Suicide in the Bible", *JBQ* 37 (2009) 157-68, especially pp. 161-3 and 167-8; and Humphries, "The Rise and Fall of King Saul," *JSOT* 18 (1980) 74-90, especially pp. 82-5.

⁷³ A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 63; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 119; et al.

⁷⁴ Jobling, "Power of Parenthesis," 241.

characters to speak about him, but in this brief section numerous characters do so: Joab claims that Abner has ulterior motives in coming to David, and both David and the general populace verbally and physically lament Abner's death. Most of what Joab says about Abner is contradicted by David and to a lesser degree the people, yet what all of the characters say about Abner contribute to his characterization.

Abner's Character Warrants Both Suspicion and Trust

When Joab hears that Abner has visited David and been allowed to leave in peace (v. 22), he reacts with frustration and violence. He questions David's wisdom in allowing Abner to leave, **למה עשית...? למה-זה שלחתו וילך הלוך** ("What have you done...? Why have you sent him away so that he left?"). To show David the folly of allowing Abner to leave, Joab then accuses Abner of deceiving (**פתה**) David so that he can spy on David and learn about all that David does (**כל-אשר אתה עשה** in v. 25). If Joab's accusation is correct, then Abner is an enemy infiltrator who has duped David, but it is unclear whether Joab has accurately assessed Abner's motives. On the one hand, Hans Stoebe argues that Joab's accusation has merit since Abner has successfully and safely already betrayed (*verraten*) Ishbosheth.⁷⁵ On the other hand, John Van Seters thinks that Joab is being insincere with David and that his protest is merely to justify his murder of Abner.⁷⁶ Van Seters' interpretation fits the context of the story better than Stoebe's, for there are several reasons for why Joab's character would not want Abner to be a part of his army. For example, Joab's character clearly wants revenge for the death of his brother (cf. vv. 27-30), and he may be concerned that Abner as a **שר-צבא** would keep his title

⁷⁵ Stoebe, *Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 137; cf. Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 38-41.

⁷⁶ Van Seters, *David Saga*, 276; cf. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 350.

under David thereby replacing Joab in David's court.⁷⁷ Also, in the episode with Ishbosheth, Abner is not deceitful but is upfront about his intentions to abdicate to David's house (cf. 3:8-10). Thus, while Abner does betray Ishbosheth as Stoebe claims, he is transparent about his intentions and not devious in any way.

Nevertheless, regardless of the truth of Joab's accusation, Joab's words about Abner are believable based upon Abner's previous characterization. Joab characterizes Abner as shrewd and cunning, which Abner has consistently been throughout the story. While we have not witnessed Abner resort to any form of deceitful trickery before, we know that Abner is clever. Thus, Joab's claim that Abner is smart and shrewd enough to warrant suspicion is believable, and David's lack of response in v. 25 allows the reader to infer that David accepts Joab's premise.⁷⁸ Therefore, while we hold that Joab's assessment of Abner is inaccurate here — Abner has been sincere not deceitful in his dealings with David — Joab's assessment of Abner is believable and consistent with Abner's characterization elsewhere in the text. Abner is a character worthy of suspicion.

David's character is depicted as neither afraid nor skeptical of Abner when he receives Abner, speaks with him, and sends him away in peace (vv. 12-21). He does not apprehend Abner or utter any words of doubt about Abner's intentions. Instead, he dismisses Abner in peace (vv. 21, 22, 23). When Joab confronts him about his exchange with Abner (v. 24), David

⁷⁷ Cf. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 260; McKenzie, *King David*, 119; Vanderkam, "Davidic Complicity," 531-2; Chavel, *Compositry and Creativity*, 41; Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 37; McCarthy, "Social Compact and Sacral Kingship," 79. Robert Gordon ("Covenant and Apology in 2 Samuel 3," 40), however, rejects the possibility that David offered command of the army to Abner because there is nothing in the text stating that such was David's intent. Nevertheless, because the text is gapped and no reason is given for why Joab's men report Abner's interaction with David to Joab, it is possible to infer that they (and Joab) may have been jealous. Certainty on the subject, of course, cannot be attained.

⁷⁸ Cf. Vanderkam, "Davidic Complicity, 531-3.

remains silent, thereby making his reaction to Joab hard to gauge, and the text is gapped by not explicitly stating whether David is persuaded by Joab or not. Nevertheless, while it is possible to infer that Joab has convinced David concerning Abner, several aspects of the text suggest otherwise. There is no explicit statement that David doubts Abner or knows that Joab will kill Abner, and nothing in the text states that David is complicit in Abner's death. To the contrary, David, after learning of Abner's death, immediately both exonerates himself and invokes a curse over Joab and his family (vv. 27-29), and his public statement and actions, especially his fasting (vv. 31-39), display elements of true mourning rather than just a desire for publicity.⁷⁹ The narration itself also exonerates David by declaring the peace that exists between David and Abner three times (3:21, 22, 23) and laying the blame solely with Joab two times (vv. 27, 30). The text suggests that David has found Abner to be trustworthy. Although Abner may be smart enough to warrant suspicion, he is honest enough to be believed. David's lack of recorded response to Joab's accusations allows the reader to hold these two opposing views of Abner's character in tension without resolution, thereby providing depth and complexity to Abner's character.

Abner Mourned by Many

We continue learning a great deal about Abner's character from other characters as we look closely at David's lament of Abner's death, the reaction of David's people, and the despair experienced by Ishbosheth and his subjects. Such reactions to Abner's death leave us with a very positive impression of Abner's character, and we are led to view him as a respectable

⁷⁹ Given that David executes those who (claim to have) murder Saul (1:15) and Ishbosheth (4:12), David seems both disingenuous and hypocritical by not killing Joab for this murder. See discussion in McKenzie, *King David*, 121-2. Bar-Effrat (*Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 43) also states that David's lament over Abner in vv. 33-34 shows that David was not convinced by Joab.

character worthy of admiration and praise. Despite Abner having once been their enemy, both David and David's people mourn his death.

David's lament (3:33-34) is only the second time that David weeps and mourns the loss of another (cf. 1:12), but unlike when laments the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, David calls for the people to tear their clothes, put on sackcloth, and join him in weeping (3:31-32).⁸⁰ While the surface reading of the text suggests that David's grief here is genuine, the text is gapped by not stating what David's emotions actually are. Graeme Auld highlights the possibility of multiple interpretations of the text in regard to David's reaction to Abner's death: "The narrator assures us that David knows nothing of this [i.e., Joab's murder of Abner] beforehand: we cannot be sure whether this is true in actual fact, or only by turning a diplomatic blind eye. When he is told, the king makes elaborate protestation of his innocence, not only for those present but also for posterity. Not only he but also his kingdom too is innocent... He may be protesting too much!"⁸¹ In other words, both the narrator and David proclaim David's innocence to such a degree that one would be reasonable to suspect David's guilt.⁸² Tushima agrees with Auld's assessment and stresses that David's self-referential statement in v. 28, a tactic he does not utilize in the cases of other politically beneficial deaths (e.g., Saul's in 2 Samuel 1), shows that David is trying to exonerate himself in the public's eye.⁸³ Eileen de Ward, by comparing this lament ritual to others in ANE, states that Abner's death, "cannot have been a source of grief to David" because

⁸⁰ Elisha Qimron ("The Lament of David over Abner," 143-7) provides a possible reconstruction of this text to make it more aesthetically pleasing and consistent with Qumran discoveries and other Hebrew poems. His reconstruction, however, does not alter the content of the lament.

⁸¹ Auld, *I and II Samuel*, 380.

⁸² Cf. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 117, 120-2.

⁸³ Tushima, *Saul's Prodigy*, 141, cf. 142-4.

public displays of weeping were a common part of mourning rites in ANE culture.⁸⁴ A. Anderson, however, holds that David would have gained nothing by instigating Abner's murder and that his decision to fast, despite the people's urging (3:35), suggests sincerity.⁸⁵ Tomoo Ishida, likewise, argues that David does not desire Abner's death at this stage of the story.⁸⁶ Brueggemann straddles both possibilities in stating that David's grief is sincere, while at the same time, the funeral is a necessary political drama.⁸⁷ Such a dualistic interpretation is reasonable and is consistent with David's characterization elsewhere (e.g., 1 Sam 17:26).⁸⁸ It is clear that David's words and actions are pleasing to the people and secure for him political acceptance (v. 36-7), yet David's true sadness can be seen in his fasting, calls for public mourning, his lament, and in that he lost a newfound competent general and ally.⁸⁹ David has reason to be both politically expedient by following ANE customs, but he also has reason to be upset by Abner's passing. We need not prefer one interpretation over the other.

⁸⁴ De Ward, "Mourning Customs II," 153, 159-60. She goes on to argue (p. 154) that the only instances of sincere grief in the books of Samuel occur when David and Jonathan weep together (1 Sam 20:41), when Saul becomes ashamed when David spares his life (1 Sam 24:17), and when Paltiel is forced to return Michal to David (2 Sam 3:16). For other comparisons between David's actions here and other ANE and biblical mourning rituals, see de Ward, "Mourning Customs I," 1-27; de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 59; G. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn*, 59-97.

⁸⁵ A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 61, 62; cf. Firth (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 353) who simply takes the narrator's word at face value (v. 26).

⁸⁶ Ishida, *Royal Dynasties*, 73.

⁸⁷ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 230.

⁸⁸ See D. Bosworth, "Evaluating King David," 191-210.

⁸⁹ Cf. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 351; Stoebe, *Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 142. In the second chapter of his book, Gary Anderson (*A Time to Mourn*, 59-97) shows the interconnectedness of inward emotion and outward expression and how the latter invites others to react to the mourner's grief (see p. 96). By citing Walter Burkert (*Greek Religion*, 80), he concludes (pp. 96-7), "This externalization of feeling should not be confused with the act of denial or even diminishment. To the contrary, the act of externalization serves to exaggerate the feelings of grief." Johannes Pedersen (*Israel*, IV/455-8) shows how even when David's son dies in 2 Samuel 12, David's genuine spontaneous reactions both reflect and contradict the typical mourning customs seen in 2 Samuel 3.

The words of David's lament over Abner are both touching and laudatory. David begins in v. 33 by asking **ימות אבנר נבל** (*hkmot nabl*) ("should Abner have died like a fool?"). A handful of scholars (e.g., Auld, Noll, et al.) have noted the possibility that the use of **נבל** ("fool") may link back to the death of Nabal (**נבל**) in 1 Samuel 25 which is possible at the linguistic level, but the differences between Abner and Nabal are stark. Whereas Nabal deserved the death he received, Abner is presented as guiltless of any wrongdoing.⁹⁰ If there is a connection between Abner and Nabal, therefore, it serves to highlight the contrasts between Nabal and Abner not their similarities. Whereas Nabal is a **איש קשה ורע מעללים** ("A harsh man of evil deeds," 1 Sam 25:3) who refused to help David by giving him provisions (1 Sam 25:1-12), Abner is a great general (**שר ונגדול**, 2 Sam 3:38) who initiated a covenant relationship that benefits David (2 Sam 3:12). Such differences between Abner and Nabal suggest that it is better to translate **נבל** as "fool" rather than as the proper name "Nabal."⁹¹ Regardless of any intended connection to Nabal, however, David hereby sets the theme for the entire lament: Abner's death is unnecessary, foolish, and beneath his dignity. Abner had been a great man and a general (cf. v. 38), not a fool or worthless person.⁹² He should not have died like a fool but should be faithfully serving in David's court.

⁹⁰ E.g., Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 382-3; Noll (*Faces of David*, 85-6) argues that David blames Yhwh for the deaths of both Nabal and Abner.

⁹¹ LXX, however, translates **נבל** as $\text{N}\alpha\beta\alpha\lambda$, the proper name. See discussion in the next chapter.

⁹² Cf. de Ward, "Mourning Customs II," 159.

In v. 34, David continues by saying that Abner was neither a criminal nor a prisoner of war, for his hands were not chained nor his feet bound (יָדָיו לֹא־אֶסְרוּת וּרְגָלָיו לֹא־) (לְנַחֲשֵׁתִים הַגִּשּׁוּ). Unlike Joab, whom David curses and deems worthy of divine vengeance (v. 39), Abner is innocent and deserving of life (cf. v. 29), and thus, his untimely death is a tragedy; according to David, it should never have occurred. David concludes his lament in v. 34 by stating that Abner has fallen by the hand of the wicked (כַּנְפוּל לְפָנַי בְּיַד־עוֹלָה נִפְלָת). Joab, not Abner, is the villain (בְּיַד־עוֹלָה in v. 34; cf. vv. 28-29).⁹³ It almost seems that David has more respect for Abner than for Joab and thinks that the wrong man has died. While David is surely condemning Joab for and exonerating himself of Abner's murder, he is also painting an exalted picture of Abner. Abner should be lamented as a great and mighty man, worthy of respect and admiration. His death is tragic and warrants the people's grief.

In fact, David treats Abner as if he were a king and close friend by giving him honors only otherwise reserved for Saul and Jonathan. The only occurrences of the root קָוַן in the Samuel text are in David's lament over Saul/Jonathan and in his lament over Abner. Thus, when David laments (קָוַן) Abner, he honors Abner in a manner similar to how he also honors Saul and Jonathan. Neither David's sons (12:19-4; 18:33) nor Samuel (1 Sam 25:1) receive Davidic laments when they die; only Saul, Jonathan, and Abner do. Moreover, although not technically part of his lament, David describes Abner using language similar to that in his lament over Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1. David refers to Saul and Jonathan as גְּבוּרִים ("mighty ones")

⁹³ Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 351.

repeatedly crying **נפלו גבורים** (“How the mighty have fallen” in 1:19, 25, 27). Similarly, in 3:38, David says of Abner, **שר וגדול נפל** (“A general and great man has fallen”). While the vocabulary between the two laments is not identical — **גבור** and **גדול** are neither identical nor, strictly speaking, synonyms — the use of such superlative language in conjunction with the verb **נפל** link the two laments; great and mighty men have fallen and should be mourned. David’s words here mark the first time that Abner has been called great or mighty by in the text, and the same is true of Saul when David calls him mighty. Abner thus receives the honor that David has otherwise reserved only for for Saul, the former king, and Jonathan, his former friend. While David does not utilize animal metaphors (cf. 1:23) or flowery language (cf. 1:19, 25, etc.) as he does in the previous lament, David, by singing a lament for Abner and by using a phrase similar to the refrain in his lament over Saul and Jonathan (cf. 1:19, 21, 25, 27), both draws attention to Abner’s importance and declares Abner’s greatness. As the last words spoken by a character about Abner, David’s speeches here leave us with a positive view of Abner; he is an admirable character.

Although there has been debate about the sincerity of David’s grief, scholars have not questioned the sincerity of the people’s grief, and the people’s sorrow prove that Abner is a character who is respected by even David’s people. We have already seen evidence that Abner is admired by his own people, such as when the Benjaminites twice rally behind him (2:25; 3:19) or when the elders of Israel follow him over to David’s side (3:17), but here we see explicit proof that his popularity extends beyond those of his own tribe (cf. 1 Sam 26:15). *David’s* people weep for him multiple times (3:32, 34), and Ishbosheth’s people become terrified (**בהל**) as the

news of Abner's death spreads to them (4:1).⁹⁴ In fact, there is more recorded public grief over Abner's death than any other character in the books of Samuel including Saul (cf. 2 Samuel 1). The only people whom the text records as weeping over Saul's death are David and the few men who are with him (1:13). Not even the people of Jabesh-Gilead, who keep Saul's body from being defiled, weep over his death (2:4-7). The same is true concerning Ishbosheth, whose death in 4:6-7 does not affect anyone at all (cf. 4:11). Only the death of Samuel seems to have a similar effect on the people, but his death is minimized by the text. Whereas the text devotes eleven verses to how other characters react to Abner's death (2:28-29, 31-39), with regard to Samuel's death, the text devotes only a half verse to state that all Israel gathered, lamented, and buried Samuel (1 Sam 25:1a) before moving on to David's interactions with Nabal and Abigail. In other words, Abner's death is so important that the Samuel text slows the narrative to devote more space to showing how his death affects the general populace more than the death of any other figure.

Finally, although they do not mourn, it is worth examining briefly how Ishbosheth and his people react to Abner's death. Because Abner has previously rebelled against Ishbosheth and threatened to make David king in place of Ishbosheth, we might expect Ishbosheth to be glad to hear of Abner's demise; his newest foe is now gone. Instead, 4:1 tells us that Ishbosheth becomes dejected by the news, and his strength (יָד) fails (רָפָה) him. While it may be reasonable to infer Ishbosheth's sadness stemming from the loss of a family member, the language here suggests that he is more than grieved. Linking the verb רָפָה with the noun יָד

⁹⁴ Stoebe (*Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 141) holds that the "people" in vv. 31-39 are only the people of Hebron. Such is certainly possible, but if so, this fact only reinforces the reaches of Abner's popular. If it is only David's people who attend the funeral and mourn Abner's death here, then we know that he was well loved beyond Benjamin.

usually emphasizes fear and despair, sometimes resulting in paralysis (e.g., Ezra 4:4; Isa 13:7; Jer 6:24; 50:43; Ezek 7:17; 21:12).⁹⁵ Thus, the sinking of Ishbosheth's strength suggests that he has lost all hope. With Abner — the former source of Ishbosheth's power — dead, Ishbosheth's character reacts as if he knows that his hold on the kingdom is all but at an end. Such fears are quickly confirmed by the text, and by the end of 2 Samuel 4, Ishbosheth loses both his kingdom and his life.⁹⁶

The reaction from Ishbosheth's people mirrors that of their king. When they learn of Abner's death, they become terrified (בְּהַל), the second and last time this word is used in the books of Samuel. The first instance (1 Sam 28:21) occurs when Saul visits the medium at Endor and hears Samuel declare that Saul's kingdom will be stripped from him and that he will soon die (1 Sam 28:18-20).⁹⁷ Saul becomes terrified (בְּהַל) when he is told of his looming death and the imminent collapse of his kingdom, so when Ishbosheth's people become terrified at the death of Abner, we sense that they have lost all hope of being a prosperous nation. In short, Ishbosheth and his people appear to know that Abner's death marks the end of Saul's kingdom; without Abner to help them, they simply have no hope.⁹⁸

From the reactions of other characters in this text, therefore, we see that Abner's character is beloved, admired and feared by all. His death greatly affects David, Ishbosheth, and their respective people in significant ways. Such widespread mourning does not occur after the

⁹⁵ McCarter, *II Samuel*, 85, 127; First, *I & 2 Samuel*, 353-4. Brueggemann (*First and Second Samuel*, 233) holds that this phrase shows that Ishbosheth has lost his "grip on power" over his kingdom. Graeme Auld (*I & II Samuel*, 389) states that Ishbosheth's response to Abner's death is akin to paralysis.

⁹⁶ Bright (*History of Israel*, 197) notes that without Abner, Ishbosheth is unable to wage war.

⁹⁷ See discussion in Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 389.

⁹⁸ Cf. McCarter (*II Samuel*, 129) who calls Ishbosheth's death an "anticlimax."

deaths of Saul, Jonathan, Ishbosheth, Samuel, or anyone else in the Samuel text, and thus, the text presents Abner as a well-respected and much-admired character. Moreover, that his death results in hopelessness and despair for Ishbosheth and his subjects, shows that Abner is seen as a powerful and an invaluable ally within the story world; while he lives, there is hope that Saul's house will continue to prosper, but with his death, David's rise is inevitable. Abner has been a minor character throughout the text, but his importance to other characters is evident in how everyone reacts to his death. His character may not have been the most important to the plot of the story, but his character was treasured by all within the story world.

Conclusions about Abner's Character in 2 Samuel 3

From our investigation of 2 Samuel 3, we have seen that despite still being a minor character within the larger Samuel corpus, Abner's character possesses a surprising amount of depth and complexity for the amount of narrative space devoted to him. Rather than being flat or static in the text, Abner's character possesses both strengths and weaknesses and surprises us by joining David's kingdom and leaving Saul's. The text thereby presents Abner's character as at least somewhat rounded. In the paragraphs that follow, we present the conclusions from our study of 2 Samuel 3 with regard to how Abner's character mimics a real person and how his character functions as a literary device to further the plot and development of other characters.

Abner's Character as It Mimics a Real Person

Beginning with the mimetic aspects of Abner's character, we first note that Abner is a powerful political and military figure who receives the respect of friend and foe alike and who possesses the keen ability to influence those around him. While Ishbosheth is technically the king, it is Abner who wields the real power and gains followers wherever he goes. Even Paltiel does what Abner says despite receiving nothing but grief in return. Moreover, Abner stands up

against Ishbosheth, scaring the king into silence, and when he dies, his death affects everyone, friend and foe alike. Abner is even mourned and lamented like a king (cf. 2 Sam 1:17-27). Ishbosheth by contrast is the subject of only six verbs in 2 Samuel 2–3: **נָלַךְ** (“to rule,” 2:10), **אָמַר** (“to speak,” 3:7), **לֹא-יָכַל** (“to be unable to,” 3:11), **יָרָא** (“to be afraid,” 3:11), **שָׁלַח** and **לָקַח** (3:15), and the text portrays him as neither leading nor governing anyone. When Ishbosheth dies, no one mourns publicly or otherwise, and the only character influenced by Ishbosheth is Paltiel. The text, therefore, portrays Abner as the strong political force within Ishbosheth’s kingdom.

Not only is Abner powerful, but he is also well-respected and persuasive. The extent of his likeability is perhaps most clearly seen after his death where both his friends and his foes are affected by his passing. David and the people of Hebron grieve his death while Ishbosheth and his subjects become terrified. For David’s people to lament the death of their former enemy with tears and by putting on sackcloth, clearly shows how much they admire and respect him. In addition, that Abner is buried in Hebron, David’s capital, not in Benjamin, Abner’s homeland, further shows how well-liked Abner is by David and his people. Moreover, everyone in 2 Samuel 3, with the exceptions of Ishbosheth and Joab, does whatever Abner wants. David accepts Abner as an ally, Paltiel unwillingly accents to return Michal to David, and the Benjaminites agree to follow Abner over to David’s side. Simply put, Abner’s character tends to get whatever he wishes, proving that he is both a charismatic and persuasive character.

Second, Abner is a cunning character, in both word and deed, who relies heavily on wit and rhetoric to get what he wants. Abner does not have enough narrative space in which to speak at length, but he uses every word he speaks to great effect. In 2 Samuel 3, he speaks in vv. 8-10, 12, 16, 17-18, and 21, and in each instance, he argues a point to either to exonerate himself

(vv. 8-10) or to get other characters (e.g., Ishbosheth, David, Paltiel, and the elders of Israel) to do his bidding (vv. 12, 16, 17-18, 21). In addition, as he does in 2 Samuel 2, he approaches each character differently and varies his strategy to fit the context and accomplish his goals. He is blunt and direct with Ishbosheth, but he is passive and submissive with David. He appeals to the interests and desires of the elders but tersely commands Paltiel to give up his wife. He approaches Paltiel with only a two-word command, but on two other occasions — in his apology to Ishbosheth (vv. 8-10) and in his argument to the elders of Israel (vv. 17-18) — he employs a two-pronged rhetorical strategy to win his argument. Abner also uses the same divine promise in two different ways — as a threat with Ishbosheth in vv. 9-10 and as an appeal with the elders in vv. 17-18 — and gets what he wants each time. Abner also continues his frequent use of questions in 2 Samuel 3, and he asks at least one question of every character with whom he speaks in 2 Samuel 3 except for Paltiel. All of these questions are rhetorical, and the answer is obvious from the beginning: Abner is not a dog's head (v. 8), the land rightfully belongs to David (v. 12), and the elders truly have wanted David to rule over them (v. 17). By employing such questions, Abner's character has almost ensured he will get what he wants even before he makes his wishes explicit. In short, Abner's character uses rhetoric, reason, and pathos to great effect in 2 Samuel 3, and as a result, he consistently gets what he wants.

In addition, Abner acts cunningly by carefully bringing about the transfer of power from Ishbosheth to David by proceeding through particular steps. By first sending messengers to David, only approaching the elders after he has secured David's approval, and then meeting David face-to-face once he has the elders' support, Abner ensures that the transfer of power will be successful while also securing his own safety. Abner's every action and every word appears calculated, and his almost perfect rate of success shows Abner's intellect and cunning. His only

lapses in judgment in 2 Samuel 3 are in trusting Joab and in possibly having relations with Rizpah. Otherwise, everything Abner does or says suggests he is both shrewd and intelligent.

Third, whereas MT presents Abner as a strong political figure, it suggests he is a weak military commander. In his only two battle scenes from the previous chapters, Abner either cowers in the face of the enemy (Goliath) in 1 Samuel 17 or loses decisively to his foes (Joab's army) in 2 Samuel 2. His only physical confrontation in 2 Samuel 3 leads to his untimely death, and interestingly, although David accepts him into his court, David does not give Abner any assigned duties that prove he will continue as a general under David. Because Abner dies before having the chance to serve under David, we simply cannot be certain of the role Abner would play under David. Abner's character within David's court simply has no narrative space in which to prove his martial effectiveness under David, and thus, because Abner has been ineffectual throughout his space in the story, we are left with the impression that Abner is weak militarily. His poor military record, however, contrasts with and emphasizes his political successes in 2 Samuel. Beginning with 2 Sam 2:8, we see Abner's grow in influence, power, and prestige from leading troops in battle to establishing a formal treaty with a rival kingdom. He may not conquer other nations or even win on the battlefield, but Abner is clearly a *political* not *martial* force who reshapes the makeup of the Israelite kingdom within the story world.

Fourth, Abner's character, while generally written positively (powerful, intelligent, slow to violence, etc.), does possess some character flaws, three of which are noteworthy: his relationship with Rizpah, his defection to David, and his willingness to follow Joab. By going into Rizpah, Abner's character shows great disrespect towards both Ishbosheth, the current king, and Saul, the previous king, and because these two kings are close relatives of Abner, Abner's disrespect is also familial not just political. Abner's relationship with Rizpah also shows him to

be arrogant and presumptuous; he assumes he can do whatever he wants within Ishbosheth's kingdom simply because he has been faithful to Saul's house thus far. In addition, Abner breaks both political and familial ties when he defects to David, thereby again dishonoring both his country and his family. Although the text makes it clear that Yhwh prefers David over Saul's house and thus Saul's house should submit to David as king, the decision to realign the kingdom arguably should rest with Ishbosheth not Abner. Thus, while Abner's character moves Saul's kingdom in the direction that the narrator ultimately wants it to go — that is, under David's control — the manner in which Abner carries out the narrator's goal is not honorable, for he disrespects and rejects both his king and family. A final character flaw is his gullibility in trusting Joab enough to turn aside with him, a mistake that leads to his death. Clearly from what he says to Asahel in 2:22, Abner knows better than to trust Joab, yet he still follows Joab into a trap.

Mimetically, therefore, Abner's character in 2 Samuel 3 is rather complex, especially in light of the paucity of space he receives within the text. He is powerful in some areas but weak in others; he is generally positive but possesses some flaws; he is shrewd and intelligent but he commits several mistakes that ultimately to many deaths, including his own. In addition, his character surprises us when he decides to abandon his own kingdom and family to defect to David's side. Based upon his self-proclaimed faithfulness to the house of Saul, a faithfulness that is evident prior to 3:8, we do not expect him to sever all ties with his tribe and family and unite with David. Finally, he is also a generally positive character. His character is intelligent, not prone to violence, and is instrumental in ensuring that David rules over a united kingdom. While he has a few flaws, the final words about Abner in the text are laudatory and leave us with

a sense that Abner is truly a great character and that his death a tragedy. Thus, Abner's character is rounded, and he is generally characterized positively but complexly.

Abner as a Literary Device

While some scholars have noted the important literary role played by Abner's character in 2 Samuel 2, especially in relation to Joab (see the discussion in chapter 3), few have discussed his literary role at length in 2 Samuel 3. What we see when we examine Abner's literary role in this text, however, is that Abner's character space continues to be a replacement for Saul's; his character continues to be the symbol for Saul's kingdom; his character's appearance in the text continues signaling important transitions for Saul's kingdom; and his character continues to provide us with a point of departure for understanding Joab's character. Abner's character, however, can no longer be considered an extension of Saul's character, for by severing ties with Ishbosheth, Abner moves in directions that go against Saul's desires in 1 Samuel. Most importantly for the plot of the story, however, Abner's character exonerates David's of any wrongdoing in usurping Saul's throne. Abner's role in the text, therefore, while brief, is important for the structure of the plot and the development of other characters.

Abner as the Symbol for Saul's Kingdom

As we showed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, Abner's character space always intersects with Saul's in 1 Samuel. Although they do not always interact or converse with each other in the text (cf. 1 Sam 20:25; 26:1-25), not once do Abner's character appear in a scene without Saul's character also being present. As such, we concluded that Abner's character space is an extension of Saul's. In our discussion of Abner in 2 Samuel 2, we began to see Abner as the replacement of Saul's character after Saul's death: Abner is still referenced as Saul's **שֶׁר־צָבָא** (2:8) not Ishbosheth's, and he is the real source of power in the kingdom. In 2 Samuel 3, we see Abner's

character space continue to function as the replacement for Saul's, serving as the symbol of Saul's kingdom, but he ceases to be an extension or reflection of Saul's character. Abner commands the respect of his people (2 Sam 2:25; 3:17-19) as Saul does for a time (e.g., 1 Sam 11:11-15); and David's character laments (יָקַד) Abner's (3:33-34) as he does the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17-27). Furthermore, Abner's character acts as the king by threatening to make an alliance with David (3:9-11) and then carrying out that threat (3:12-21); Abner, not Ishbosheth makes decisions for the kingdom and rallies the people. Although Ishbosheth has become the actual king in place of Saul, his character does not have the power or respect of the people, is not lamented by the people, and plays no role in the transition of power from the house of Saul to the house of David. Other than confronting Abner's character over his relationship with Rizpah (3:8-11), Ishbosheth's character does nothing and is the subject of only one other verb (פָּחַד = "to be afraid" in 3:11) in 2 Samuel. Abner, by contrast, establishes a new king (2:8), leads his men into battle (2:12-32), kills an enemy foe (2:23), and makes an alliance with David on behalf of his people (3:17). Moreover, Abner is the only character from Saul's court and family to span both 1 and 2 Samuel. Ishbosheth is not mentioned in 1 Samuel, and everyone else in Saul's court dies at the end of 1 Samuel.⁹⁹ Only Abner remains to lead in place of Saul. In short, Abner's character parallels Saul's in a way that Ishbosheth's does not, and thus, Abner's character stands in for Saul and is the replacement for Saul's character space in 2 Samuel.

Abner also stands in for Saul's kingdom as he does in 2 Samuel 2. When Abner arrives in Gibeon to fight Joab's men, we know that it is the forces of Saul fighting the forces of David for full control of the united monarchy. When Abner leaves Ishbosheth's kingdom to unite with

⁹⁹ Michal, of course, spans both 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel, but she is not technically a part of Saul's court; she is only his daughter and David's wife.

David, he takes all Israel (vv. 12, 21), that is Saul's house, with him. While such a universal claim is hyperbolic — Ishbosheth does not follow Abner to David's court, for example — Abner's decision to join David results in a large portion of Saul's kingdom joining David with him, and he, not Ishbosheth, leads the elders of Israel in the direction they desire (3:17). Saul's people follow Abner, not Ishbosheth, and thus, Abner acts like a king and symbolizes the kingdom. When Abner dies, therefore, we know that Saul's kingdom is coming to its final end as well. Because Abner has become the real power in Saul's kingdom, it is not surprising that shortly after Abner's death we read in 4:1 that Ishbosheth's strength is weakened and in 4:5 that Ishbosheth dies (also 4:7). In short, while they may be separated by narrative time and space, Ishbosheth's death is tied to Abner's. When the latter falls, it is inevitable that the former will too, and with no king and no general, Saul's kingdom must also inevitably fall.¹⁰⁰ As Cephas Tushima states, "Abner's death portended doom for Saul's tottering kingdom because Ishbosheth showed no ability to hold on to the throne..."¹⁰¹ Because Abner's character space has replaced Saul's in 2 Samuel, Abner's successes, failures, and death are really the successes, failures, and death of Saul's kingdom.

Abner's character, however, is no longer the extension of Saul's character that he is in 1 Samuel or even in 2 Samuel 2; he has now become a strong character in his own right, who no longer acts solely to fulfill Saul's wishes. By breaking with Ishbosheth in 3:8-11, Abner severs all ties with Saul and Saul's house. As a result, he can no longer be considered an extension of Saul's character, reflecting Saul's desires. Whereas Abner is said to be at peace with David three times (3:21-23) and he peacefully brings Saul's people under David's control, Saul's character

¹⁰⁰ Van Seters ("Love and Death," 121) suggests that the first domino was Abner's act of passion with Rizpah that led to his defection and death and then Ishbosheth's death.

¹⁰¹ Tushima, *Fate of Saul's Progeny*, 146-7; cf. Van Seters, *David Saga*, 276-7.

never exhibits any characteristics that would suggest he ever intended to make peace with David. Rather than pursuing David and trying to kill him like Saul does in 1 Samuel, Abner in 2 Samuel 3 befriends David, thereby acting in ways that contrast with Saul. Moreover, the text leaves open the possibility that had Joab not killed him, Abner would have fought with David against Ishbosheth. In his dealings with David, therefore, Abner's character ceases paralleling Saul's and can no longer be seen to be an extension of Saul's.

Abner's Character Initiates Negative Transitions

As the literary symbol of Saul's kingdom, Abner's character continues signaling forthcoming negative transitions for Saul's kingdom just as he does in 1 Samuel.¹⁰² By the time Abner's character reappears in 2 Samuel, David has already become king of the southern portion of Saul's kingdom, but he has not yet fully claimed dominion over all of Saul's territory. Ishbosheth still has nominal control over the northern portion of the kingdom, but he does not maintain control for long. When Abner's character makes his entrance in 2 Samuel, therefore, he does so in the midst of narrative suspense about if, when, and how David will become king over the entire territory, and both his presence and his actions signal the final fall of Saul's house and rise of David's. After losing the only narrated battle between the two houses, Abner quickly defects to David's side, bringing many of Ishbosheth's follower with him. He is then killed. It is only after Abner's death that David receives final support of the entire northern half of the kingdom (5:1-5).¹⁰³ Therefore, Abner's character appears in the crucial transitional period wherein the final remnants of Saul's supporters transfer their allegiance over to David, and

¹⁰² Polzin (*David and the Deuteronomist*, 40) sees Abner's character functioning almost entirely as a device to move the plot forward.

¹⁰³ Note the use of the term, זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, in both 2 Sam 3:17 and 5:3.

Abner's character acts as that catalyst for that transition. Abner's presence again signals the shift of power from Saul to David, and by being the lone powerful figure within Saul's kingdom who defects to David, Abner's character not only signifies the transition of power but also initiates that transition.

Joab's Character Illuminated by Abner's

In addition, Abner's character also provides us with a point of departure for better understanding Joab's character, leading us to anticipate how Joab's character will act and function later in the text. In discussing David's lament over Abner's death, David Gunn says, "Far from being polar opposites, as David's speech might suggest, Joab and Abner share much in common for both belong, *par excellence*, to the grey world of power politics, expediency, and the ruthless initiative... they are the party managers."¹⁰⁴ Because Abner and Joab belong to the same world of power politics and hold the same position under their respective kings, we are drawn to compare and contrast these two characters. Some of the conclusions we came to in our discussion of Abner and Joab in 2 Samuel are also seen in 2 Samuel 3, such as Abner's continued reliance on rhetoric contrasts with Joab's tendency to resort to violence (3:22-27).

By continuing to compare and contrast Abner and Joab, however, we see new ways that Abner's character helps illuminate Joab's character. We first discuss the ways in which they are different, for these are more obvious than their similarities. First, Stoebe notes that even at the verbal level, Abner's character is contrasted with Joab's in vv. 20-25. While Joab is gone (cf. 3:22), Abner comes to David (בוא, v. 20), and when Abner leaves (הלך, v. 21), Joab returns

¹⁰⁴ Gunn, "David and the Gift of the Kingdom," 18.

(בוא, v. 22).¹⁰⁵ Second, Abner's immediate reliance upon his wit, rhetoric, and questions contrasts significantly with Joab's propensity to engage in violence. Whereas Abner has only engaged in violence once and that only as a last resort (2:18-23), Joab's introduction within the text occurs during a battle, and in his second appearance, Joab murders Abner. Shimon Bar-Efrat may slightly overstate things when he says that in the eyes of Joab (and his brothers), human life is insignificant (*unbedeutend*), but thus far Joab has had no qualms killing in order to advance his purposes.¹⁰⁶ By juxtaposing Abner and Joab and by having Joab murder Abner, the text underscores Joab's propensity for violence and prepares us to see Joab as a violent character later in the story (e.g., 2 Sam 11:1, 16-17; 12:26-28; 18:5; 20:10; etc.). Third, because Joab defeats Abner in battle and then later kills him, we expect Joab to be victorious in most (all?) of his later escapades unlike Abner who loses every physical confrontation he enters. Abner had been the clear power in Ishbosheth's kingdom, posing the greatest threat to Joab and his kingdom at the beginning of 2 Samuel 2, yet Joab twice defeats Abner with little difficulty.¹⁰⁷ When he is able to dispose of his greatest rival without much exertion, we expect him to win against his future foes, which he regularly does (e.g., 8:16; 12:27-28; 18:15; 20:17-23; etc.). Fourth, Abner can be described as mostly upright in his dealings with others despite not originally siding with the kingdom upon which Yhwh's favor rests and despite having an illicit relationship with Rizpah. He is faithful to Saul throughout 1 Samuel; he attempts to spare Asahel's life in 2 Samuel 2; he never kills in cold blood; and rather than covertly overthrowing Ishbosheth, he sincerely tells the king his plan. Thus, he is rightly exonerated and praised by David for being a

¹⁰⁵ Stoebe, *Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 136.

¹⁰⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Vanderkam, "David Complicity," 531; Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 47.

great and noble “person.” Joab, however, earns the title of a son of injustice (בן-עולה in 3:34) by murdering Abner, and he continues to carry such a reputation when he murders Amasa, sets up Uriah to die in battle, and kills the defenseless Absalom.¹⁰⁸ While Abner does not resort to trickery or murder, Joab shows himself untrustworthy and bloodthirsty.

These two characters are not complete opposites, however; they share at least one aspect in common: influence over others. Just as Abner silences Ishbosheth when he threatens to join David’s house (3:11), so too does Joab silence David when confronting the king about peacefully accepting Abner into his kingdom (3:24).¹⁰⁹ Moreover, both characters use rhetoric and questions to get what they want. We have seen Abner’s use of rhetoric and questions extensively, but we notice Joab incorporate rhetorical questions in 3:24-25 when he confronts David for receiving Abner peacefully.¹¹⁰ While Joab does not rely solely or even primarily on rhetoric like Abner does — Joab is far more likely to use violence than Abner — he does occasionally engage in rhetoric and persuasion later in the text. For instance, Joab convincingly rebukes David for publicly mourning the death of Absalom (2 Sam 19:5-7), persuades a woman to give him the head of Sheba (20:16-22), and questions David’s motives in taking the census (24:1-4). Thus, by juxtaposing Joab and Abner, the prepares us to see Joab at least on occasion engage in argumentation rather than violence by how he resembles Abner in using questions and persuasion in his interaction with David in 2 Sam 3:24.

¹⁰⁸ For a discussion of how Joab utilizes Machiavellian tactics, see Henry, “Joab,” 327-43.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Bar Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 37.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 43.

Abner and David's "Innocence"

Finally, and perhaps most significantly for the plot and message of the story, Abner's character functions to show that David peacefully gains the throne rather than taking it by force.¹¹¹ Although David is chosen by God to be king and has been anointed by Samuel, David does not immediately rise to power even after Saul's death. With Saul's death at the end of 1 Samuel, the only obstacles to David's rise over the entire kingdom are Ishbosheth, Saul's successor, and Abner, the character wielding the real power in Saul's kingdom. Thus, because Abner is the greatest threat to David's rise to the throne — Ishbosheth is, as we have seen, a mere puppet king at best — Steven McKenzie has suggested that the historical David was responsible for Abner's demise.¹¹² The text, however, is emphatic that David plays no part in Abner's death and does not encourage Joab to kill him. For instance, the three-fold repetition that Abner leaves David in peace (3:21-23), David's own words and actions in response to Abner's death (vv. 28-29, 31-34), the statement that the people know David played no part in Abner's death, and the text's emphasis that Abner dies for killing Asahel (vv. 27, 30), all suggest David is innocent of Abner's death.¹¹³ Moreover, and more important for our discussion here, Shimon Bar-Efrat notes that Abner's initiative in transferring the kingdom to David underscores

¹¹¹ Ishida (*Royal Dynasties*, 71-2, 102) calls Abner's initiation here an "abortive treaty" that ends the war between the houses of Saul and David.

¹¹² McKenzie, *David*, 33, 118-22; Cf. Gunn, "David and the Gift of the Kingdom," 16-7; Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, 76, 82-4; Noll, *Faces of David*, 57; Vanderkam, "Davidic Complicity," 530-1; and the more-or-less comprehensive discussion in Eschelbach, *Has Joab Foiled David*, 23-5. Marti Steussy (*David*, 57-8) argues that whether or not David was complicit in Abner's death, he should have known that Joab would have sought Abner's life, and thus, we cannot fully declare David's innocence here.

¹¹³ Of course, McKenzie (*David*, 120) sees the lengths taken by the text which proclaim David's innocence to state, "The very fervency with which David's innocence is in this matter [i.e., Abner's death] is asserted can lead a historian to suspect his complicity."

David's lack of involvement in Abner's death.¹¹⁴ David receives the kingdom peacefully by accepting Abner's offer; he does not take it for himself. By having Abner be the character to initiate negotiations between himself and David, therefore, the text reinforces that David neither tries to persuade Abner or Ishbosheth to give him the kingdom nor kills those in his way.

Grønbaek even suggests that Abner's character is functioning as the tool (*Werkzeug*) of Yhwh in bringing about a united kingdom under David.¹¹⁵ Without 3:8-21, one would be justified in suspecting that David's character desires Abner's death so that he can usurp the throne, but with 3:8-21, such an interpretation of the text is dubious at best. The narrative, therefore, exonerates David by having Abner's character bring the people of Israel under David's control before Joab kills Abner. Abner's character, therefore, is used to show David's peaceful reception of the kingdom.

¹¹⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Das Zweite Buch Samuel*, 36.

¹¹⁵ Grønbaek, *Geschichte*, 240; cf. Stoebe, *Das Zweite Buch Samuelis*, 130.

CHAPTER 5

ABNER'S CHARACTER IN THE SEPTUAGINT

In this chapter, we investigate the character of Abner as presented in LXX. From this investigation, we make conclusions about how Abner's character mimics a real human being and how he functions as a literary device within the text, and throughout this chapter, we compare these conclusions with those formed about Abner's character in MT. Where LXX closely follows MT, few comments are needed, but as we will see from this investigation, minor differences in the presentation of Abner's character often lead to more than minor differences in our understanding of Abner's character that merit significant discussion.¹ While the two versions' depictions of Abner differ in only a handful of places in 1 Samuel, LXX of 2 Samuel characterizes Abner quite differently than MT by changing the vocabulary and style of his speeches, making him the subject of stronger verbs in Greek than in Hebrew, and by having him rebel against a lesser ranking figure rather than the king in 2 Samuel 3. Moreover, even in some of the places where Abner's character is presented similarly in both MT and LXX, because his Greek title is not a literal translation of his Hebrew title, his presumed role within the kingdom may be different from that in MT as well. Therefore, the bulk of this chapter highlights those places in which LXX presents Abner's character differently than that in MT, as well as places where Abner's characterization is similar in both versions but where the historical, cultural, or literary contexts surrounding those places merit further discussion. As we have previously, we discuss the appearances of Abner's character in the order in which they occur in the LXX text,

¹ For discussions on translations as literature, see Barnstone, *Poetics of Translation*, 6-14; Beck, *Translators as Storytellers*, 1-5. For a thorough, although slightly outdated, overview of modern translation theories in biblical studies, see Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation*, 85-118.

and we focus most of our attention on how Abner's character mimics an actual human being, saving discussion of his role as a literary device for the conclusion of the chapter.

Abner in 1 Samuel

This chapter is broken into three main sections. In the first we discuss Abner's character in 1 Samuel of LXX, in the second, we discuss Abner's character in 2 Samuel 2 of LXX, and in the third, we discuss Abner's character in 2 Samuel 3 of LXX. In this way, the current chapter mirrors those that have come before, and we are able to draw preliminary conclusions about Abner's character as we progress through the Samuel text. We begin here with a discussion of Abner's character in 1 Samuel of LXX.

Abner in 1 Samuel 14

In this section, we discuss Abner's Greek title and his familial relationship to Saul as presented in 1 Sam 14:50-51 and how these aspects of his character shape our understanding of his character in LXX. As in MT, the LXX story mentions neither Abner's character nor his title in 1 Samuel until chapter 14 where he appears in a short list of Saul's family (vv. 50-51). Prior to 14:50, we are unaware that Abner's character exists within the story world. The structure of his introduction in LXX is identical to that found in MT: his title, followed by his name, followed by his relation to Saul (ονομα τω αρχιστρατηγω Αβεννηρ υιος Νηρ υιου οικειου Σαουλ).² Thus, we are presented with questions and problems identical to those we faced when discussing Abner's character in MT, such as what does Abner's title (αρχιστρατηγος) imply about his duties and characterization? who is Νηρ? and how is Abner related to Saul? The Septuagint presents us with an additional problem unique to the Greek version in v. 51, for it

² "The head general was Abner son of Ner, son of Saul's family member."

mentions a character named *Ιαμιν* (Jamin) who has no counterpart in MT and who does not otherwise appear in LXX of Samuel.

Abner as Αρχιστρατηγος

In LXX, Abner is given the title, *αρχιστρατηγος*, which is a close but not literal translation of his Hebrew title **שֶׁרֶץ צַבָּא** (= ο *αρχων της δυναμειως*). Because the terms are not identical and because the historical and cultural contexts that gave rise to the terms are different, we cannot simply assume congruence between the *αρχιστρατηγος* and **שֶׁרֶץ צַבָּא**. We need to examine the LXX uses and meaning of *αρχιστρατηγος* in the same ways we examined **שֶׁרֶץ צַבָּא** in MT by turning to other texts in order to fill in the gaps left by the text of 1 Sam 14:50-51. In particular, we examine other uses of *αρχιστρατηγος* in LXX, and the non-biblical example of Antipater in Diodorus.³

Biblical Uses of Αρχιστρατηγος

Outside of references to Abner (1 Sam 14:50; 26:5; 2 Sam 2:8; 1 Kgs 2:22, 32), the term *αρχιστρατηγος* appears in seventeen verses in LXX (Gen 21:22, 32; 26:26; Jos 5:14-15; 1 Sam 12:9; 1 Kgs 2:46; 1 Chr 19:16, 18; 27:34; Jdt 2:4; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 10:13; 13:15; and Dan 8:11).⁴

Unfortunately, with the lone exception of Holofernes in the book of Judith, the characters described as *αρχιστρατηγοι* in LXX are very minor characters who perform little, if any, action

³ It is inappropriate to examine Joab's role in LXX as we did in MT because Joab is not David's *αρχιστρατηγος* in 2 Samuel of LXX and thus does not share Abner's title as his MT counterpart does. Instead, he is David's *αρχων δυναμειως* (2 Sam 19:14; 1 Kgs 1:19).

⁴ Interestingly, LXX uses the more literal translation ο *αρχων της δυναμειως* to translate **שֶׁרֶץ צַבָּא** in Judges 2:2, 7, where the Hebrew term is used of Sisera (vv. 2, 7) and in 2 Sam 19:14, where the term is used of Joab and Amasa. The difference between the two terms may suggest that an *αρχιστρατηγος* and an *αρχων της δυναμειως* were two different offices, or it may indicate that the translators of the two stories had freedom in how to translate the term. Nevertheless, that two different terms are used in LXX to translate MT's **שֶׁרֶץ צַבָּא** means that we cannot assume the two titles are identical.

within the text just like their MT counterparts. For instance, in Gen 21:22, Phikol is mentioned alongside Abimelech as αρχιστρατηγος της δυναμεως αυτου (“the head general of his [Abimelech’s] army”), but the only actions attributed to Phikol — speaking (λεγω), getting up (ανιστημι), and returning (επιστρεφω) — also take Abimelech as their subject and are clearly not martial or political in nature. Even when his character reappears in Genesis 26, he does nothing specifically related to the military or the state (e.g., πορευομαι, v. 26; λεγω, vv. 28-29; ανιστημι, v. 31; and αποιχομαι, v. 31). Because of the lack of narrative space devoted to Phikol, all we can conclude is that as αρχιστρατηγος Phikol is always closely associated with Abimelech, has direct access to the king, and is potentially part of the king’s security detail.

Most other texts in LXX (Jos 5:13-15; 1 Sam 12:9; 1 Chr 19:16, 18; 27:34; and Dan 8:11) tell us even less about the role of an αρχιστρατηγος. For instance, although 1 Sam 12:9 tells us that Sisera is the αρχιστρατηγος of Jabin, the text does not devote enough narrative space for us to deduce much about his function under Jabin. Likewise, the few mentions of the term in 1 Chronicles (19:16, 18; 27:34) are ambiguous, for although Shophach, Hadadezer’s αρχιστρατηγος, stands out in front and dies in battle (v. 18), he leads a group of messengers, not soldiers (v. 16). In 1 Chronicles 27, we learn that Joab holds this position within David’s court, and based upon 11:6, 18:15, and chapter 20, it would appear that Joab possesses significant military and advisory duties, yet 1 Chronicles does not devote enough narrative to Joab for us to come to firm conclusions.⁵ In Joshua 5:13-15, we read of Joshua’s encounter with the

⁵ The Samuel text, however, does not attribute to Joab the title of αρχιστρατηγος in LXX although he is called αρχων της δυναμεως. Nevertheless, despite the different title, Joab in LXX well parallels his MT counterpart in how he functions under David. In both versions, he fights battles on behalf of his king (e.g., 2 Sam 2:12-32; 10:7-13; 11:16-17; etc.), and he advises David on a handful of occasions (e.g., 3:24-25; 11:26-28; 19:5-7; 20:2-4). He is also one of David’s close relatives according to 1 Chr 2:15-16 like he is in MT. He does not appear to perform the administrative duties that Antipater does both before and after Alexander (see discussion below), but such is not surprising because David’s administration is hardly as well defined as Alexander’s.

αρχιστρατηγος δυναμειως κυριου (“chief general of the army of the Lord”), but this being is clearly angelic and does not shed light on the role of an αρχιστρατηγος. Finally, from Dan 8:11, we only learn that an αρχιστρατηγος could be the official who could deliver his own people from the hand of the enemy. In short, these texts tell us almost nothing about the role and duties of αρχιστρατηγοι.

By including the book of Judith, however, LXX provides us with an extended narrative of an αρχιστρατηγος not extant in MT. The title is used no less than six times (2:4; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 10:13; and 13:15) in the book, and each use is in reference to Holofernes (Ολοφερνης), a major character in the book of Judith. This book, therefore, gives us one of the greatest opportunities in the biblical text to witness and study the role and duties of an αρχιστρατηγος. In particular, the entirety of the book of Judith suggests that this particular αρχιστρατηγος is a high-ranking military commander who may not hold any exclusively political duties. At the beginning of the book of Judith, Nebuchadnezzar (Ναβουχοδοноσορ) easily defeats his enemy, Arphaxad. Because his allies fail to heed his requests for help, he begins plotting revenge against them (1:7-2:3). He first calls together his ministers (θεραπωντες) and nobles (μεγιστανες) to inform them of his plan, and after they agree to help him, Nebuchadnezzar summons Holofernes, his second in command (δευτερον οντα μετ’ αυτον), to execute the plan (2:4-13).⁶ The king tells Holofernes to muster one hundred thousand infantry men and twelve thousand horses and their riders (2:5) and to seize the territories of those who did not heed Nebuchadnezzar’s orders, killing all those who resist (2:11-12).

⁶ Gera (*Judith*, 135) lists other war conferences from other non-Jewish cultures including Egypt and Greece.

In 2:14, Holofernes begins executing the king's commands. After leaving the king's presence, in vv. 15-16, he summons (καλεω) all the rulers (δυναστης), generals (στρατηγος), and officers (επιστατης) of Assyria to himself, and then he numbers (αριθμεω) the chosen men (εκλεκτους ανδρας) into battle lines (παραταξις) and commands (διατασσω) them to be marshalled (συντασσω) for war (πολεμος). Verses 17 and 18 show Holofernes gathering up necessary supplies, and in vv. 19-27, Holofernes wreaks havoc on the land west of Nineveh. The verbs used of Holofernes in these verses include camping (επιστρατοπεδευω), breaking through (διακοπτω), plundering (προνομευω), destroying (κατασκαπτω), overtaking (καταλαμβανω), cutting down (κατακοπτω), surrounding (κυκλω), burning (εμπιρημι), despoiling (σκυλευω), and smiting (πατασσω), all of which are clearly related to war activity.

From just this second chapter of the Book of Judith, therefore, we see two significant roles that Holofernes performs as an αρχιστρατηγος that continue throughout the remainder of the book. First, as an αρχιστρατηγος, Holofernes is a very high ranking official who takes orders directly and only from the king (2:4). Because he is the explicitly stated second in command (2:4), we know that *only* the king outranks him.⁷ Such is confirmed in that he gives orders to other high-ranking officials including the στρατηγοι and δυνασται (2:14), but he receives orders from no one except Nebuchadnezzar.⁸ Moreover, later in chapter 6, he commands that Achior, one of his own men, be taken prisoner for speaking against the power of Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 10-13), and his servants obey, proving that Holofernes has the authority to have his own men imprisoned. In chapter 7, he takes full command of the entire army (παση τη στρατια) and

⁷ Cf. Christiansen, "Judith: Defender of Israel," 74.

⁸ Gera (*Judith*, 146) recognizes each of these ranks as military positions, but she does not attempt to outline their respective roles.

continues to lead them in battle and to devise tactics. Even his bed and canopy, which are adorned with purple, gold, emeralds, and other precious stones, betray his great significance, power, and wealth (10:21).

Second, as αρχιστρατηγος, Holofernes acts as a strong *military* commander, leading troops, conquering territories, and fighting on behalf of the king. The vocabulary surrounding Holofernes listed above is frequently found in military contexts (e.g., Jos 11:12; 2 Sam 5:20; 2 Kgs 3:26; 1 Chr 10:8; 2 Chr 14:12-13; 1 Mac 15:41; 2 Mac 9:4; 10:30; etc.), and collectively they portray Holofernes as a violent and terrifyingly powerful figure capable of destroying his enemies almost effortlessly.⁹ While the text likely employs hyperbole, the result strikes awe not only in the characters of the story but also in us, the readers.¹⁰ Even Judith, utilizing hyperbole in order to flatter Holofernes, recognizes the great martial abilities of Holofernes when she says: συ μονος αγαθος εν παση βασιλεια και δυνατος εν επιστημη και θαυμαστος εν στρατευμασιν πολεμου (“You alone are skilled in all the kingdom and powerful in knowledge and marvelous in the strategies of war;” 11:8).¹¹

Holofernes, therefore, appears to be only a military figure. Because Holofernes is not present in 2:1-3 when Nebuchadnezzar deliberates with his servants and “great men” we cannot

⁹ Christiansen (“Judith: Defender of Israel,” 74, 82-3) notes that the violent threats against Israel are serious and “real” within the context of the story that the text utilizes the characters of Nebuchadnezzar and Holofernes to demonstrate the seriousness of said threats.

¹⁰ Cf. Gera, *Judith*, 146-7.

¹¹ Wolfe (*Ruth, etc.*, 208) suggests that the character of Holofernes maybe be rooted in either the historical Holofernes, commander under Artaxerxes III, or Nicanor who served under Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Cf. Gera, *Judith*, 139. Esler (*Sex, Wives, and Warriors*, 268) does not list direct parallels, but his description of Holofernes and how he would have been received by the ancient audience closely resembles those discussed by Wolfe and Gera, and he makes a case that Judith and Holofernes also parallel David and Goliath, respectively (see pp. 274-85). Corley (“Imitation of Septuagintal Narrative,” 24-5, 27-45) argues that Holofernes’ character resembles the biblical villains of Sisera, Pharaoh, Goliath, Nabal, and Nicanor as well the Persian kings Xerxes, Cyrus, and Darius, the Cappadocian general Orophernes and other literary and historical figures. Interestingly, none of these authors make a connection between Holofernes and Abner despite them sharing the same military title.

count Holofernes among the king's close political advisors or counselors. Instead of portraying Holofernes offering Nebuchadnezzar any advice or helping the king devise plans, the text shows him only engaged in martial activities. It is possible that given the plot of the story, any advisory duties implied by the term *αρχιστρατηγος* may not have been deemed important enough for the plot to merit being recorded in the story, but that Holofernes is explicitly omitted from the council in 2:1-3 leads us to ponder whether we can infer that an *αρχιστρατηγος* functions in that manner at all. Likewise, we see no hints of Holofernes governing a city, serving in any administrative capacity, or performing any religious duties. He does not negotiate treaties, oversee the civil aspects of the realm, or make any sacrifices. Thus, while we can clearly conclude that an *αρχιστρατηγος* is one of the greatest highest-ranking military officials in the kingdom — perhaps always the second-in-command to the king — we cannot make any inferences about the political or religious duties associated with an *αρχιστρατηγος*.

Extra-biblical Uses of *Αρχιστρατηγος*

We now examine how the term *αρχιστρατηγος* was used in Greek contexts outside the Bible. Because the LXX version of the books of Samuel was likely “composed” during the reign of Alexander or shortly after his death, we must investigate how the word would have been understood within Alexander's military structure.¹² Unfortunately, however, the word *αρχιστρατηγος* does not seem to have been common outside of religious use until after the fourth century C.E.).¹³ Prior to that, Josephus seems to have used the word the most, but he mostly

¹² For discussions on the origins, history, and date of the Septuagint, see Barnstone, *Poetics of Translation*, 166-74; Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context*, 53-66; Jobes and Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 29-68.

¹³ A word search on *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (stephanus.tlg.uci.edu) for *αρχιστρατηγος* only returned these authors/texts from the fourth century CE and prior: LXX, Josephus, *The Testament of Abraham*, *The Apocalypse of Esdra*, Justin Martyr, Origen, *The Apocalypse of Baruch*, Methodius, Gregory of Nyssa, Eusebius, Epiphanius, Basil, Didymus the Blind, Asterius, and Julian. The only non-religious text from this time period is *Historia Alexandri Magni* (XIV.1.7).

borrowed the word from its LXX contexts and uses it to refer to Abner (*Ant.* 6.235, 7.9, 11, 22, 31), Joab (*Ant.* 7.109, 122, 129, 134 [?], 181), and Shobach (*Ant.* 7.127). Yet, if we take the word at its literal meaning of “head general,” or “supreme general,” we can justifiably compare the term to the more common στρατηγος; the αρχιστρατηγος is the greatest or most authoritative στρατηγος under the king. If this is correct, then one way to deepen our understanding of the role of αρχιστρατηγοι in Alexandrian and post-Alexandrian Greece — and hence in LXX — is to study the role of στρατηγοι at this time and extrapolate what we find there to the role of αρχιστρατηγοι. In the interest of space and scope, however, the example of Antipater, son of Iolaus, will have to suffice as our lone στρατηγος subject.

According to Diodorus, Alexander made Antipater the στρατηγος over Europe (*Diod.* 17.118.1), and he held ηγεμονια (command) over at least twelve thousand troops and fifteen hundred horsemen (*Diod.* 17.17.5). Likewise, according to Arrian (1.11.3), Antipater is said to have been entrusted by Alexander with the affairs of Greece and Macedonia, and Arrian states that Antipater commanded even more men than Diodorus does.¹⁴ Diodorus also provides for us an interesting account of Antipater after the death of Alexander. Antipater assumed (παραλαμβάνω) command (στρατηγία) of the Macedonian army after its defeat to the Greeks who were commanded by Menon the Thessalian (*Diod.* 18:15.1-5).¹⁵ Afterwards, he began making tactical decisions by deciding to avoid further confrontation with the Greeks and their general (στρατηγος), and he made the decision to retreat through the country rather than the plain (*Diod.* 18.15.5-7). Shortly thereafter, Craterus came to Macedonia from Cilicia with about ten thousand

¹⁴ Cf. discussions in Worthington, “Alexander, Philip, and the Macedonian Background,” 89; Faraguna, “Alexander and the Greeks,” 111; Strauss, “Alexander: The Military Campaign,” 149; and Carney, “Women in Alexander’s Court,” 239.

¹⁵ Cf. Stewart, “Alexander in Greek and Roman Art,” 45.

foot soldiers plus horsemen and archers and yielded chief command (πρωτειον) of his men to Antipater (*Diod.* 18.16.5). Antipater then drew up his forces against the Greeks and led his own phalanx in a slaughter of his enemies (*Diod.* 18.17.3-4), and when the Greeks began to negotiate a peace treaty, Antipater made demands on behalf of his people. When the Greeks refused to agree to his terms, Antipater and Craterus laid siege to the Thessalians and forced them into peaceful negotiations (*Diod.* 18.17.6-8). Afterwards Antipater led his forces against the Athenians, established peaceful relations with them as well, and instituted for them a new government wherein they would be governed by the wealthy (*Diod.* 18.18.1-6). Upon returning to Macedonia, he gave Craterus suitable gifts for his contributions to Antipater's victories, and even gave his daughter in marriage to Craterus (*Diod.* 18:7).

In all this we see that Antipater held both military and political command over those whom he ruled. Based upon his role, Waldemar Heckel claims that Antipater was "by far the most important official of the Macedonian state, after the king himself."¹⁶ Whereas Holofernes seems to act purely within martial spheres, Antipater clearly acted both martially by leading troops, fighting in battles, and making tactical decisions, and politically by negotiating treaties, establishing governmental control, and establishing political marriages.¹⁷ In addition to what we have seen in Diodorus, A. Brian Bosworth discusses Antipater's roles as advisor, stand-in for Alexander, and regent, thereby confirming that Antipater held political authority.¹⁸ Elizabeth Carney believes that Antipater's administrative duties were likely secondary to his military ones

¹⁶ Heckel, "King and 'Companions'," 198.

¹⁷ Chaniotis (*War in the Hellenistic World*, 30-1 also notices the civic importance of *stratego*i in the Hellenistic Age.

¹⁸ A. B. Bosworth, *Conquest and Empire*, 43, 174-6, 191, 202-3; A. B. Bosworth, *Historical Commentary*, 77.

and that they are exaggerated by both Diodorus and Arrian, but even if she is correct, it is clear that Antipater held sway in both political and martial arenas.¹⁹

Although Antipater held the title στρατηγος instead of αρχιστρατηγος, from his roles as seen in Diodorus, we are led to expect Abner as, αρχιστρατηγος, to hold both military and political power and to be one of the most important officials under the king as (see Heckel's claim above). We also expect Abner to be a very capable and shrewd commander and fighter because we know Antipater, a στρατηγος, was able to fight, defeat, and force his enemies into peace treaties. Thus, it seems likely that στρατηγοι were chosen in part because of their martial prowess. If so, then we can reasonably assume that αρχιστρατηγοι also possessed great martial abilities.²⁰

Conclusions about Αρχιστρατηγοι

From this survey of the roles of αρχιστρατηγοι in LXX and in post-Alexandrian Greek texts, we can arrive at two important conclusions. First, αρχιστρατηγοι should be understood as being capable, successful, and potentially fierce fighters. Holofernes is a particularly brutal and ruthless warrior who destroys his enemies until succumbing to a trap set by Judith, and Antipater is also successful in war. Second, our expectations about the political role of an αρχιστρατηγος are somewhat ambiguous. While we do not see Holofernes perform any purely political functions, Antipater certainly had numerous political duties, and Joab, though not called an αρχιστρατηγος in LXX version of Samuel, advises David on several political matters (e.g., 3:24-

¹⁹ Carney, "Women in Alexander's Court," 239.

²⁰ For more discussions on Antipater, see Faraguna, "Alexander and the Greeks," 106, 119; Fox, *Alexander the Great*, 36-40, 89-90; G. Martin, "Antipater after the Lamian War," 303-4; Strauss, "Alexander: The Military Campaign," 149; Tarn, *Alexander the Great II*, 171, 229, 231, 315; Wauquelin, *Medieval Romance of Alexander*, 290; Westlake, "The Aftermath of the Lamian War," 87-90.

25; 11:26-28; 19:5-7; 20:2-4). Antipater's example suggests that Abner is more likely to hold political influence, but until Abner's character displays such influence, we cannot be certain from just his title alone. In short, his title of *αρχιστρατηγος* in LXX leads us to conclusions similar to those we arrived at in our discussion of Abner as *שֶׁר־צַבָּא* in MT.

Abner's Relation to Saul

In addition to his title, we also learn from 1 Samuel 14:50 about Abner's familial relation to Saul. Here the text states that Abner is the son of Ner, who is the son of a family member of Saul (*Αβεννηρ υιος Νηρ υιου οικειου Σαουλ*). Interestingly, Ner, who is called Saul's uncle (*דוד*) in MT, is instead called the more general term *υιου οικειου Σαουλ* ("son of a family member of Saul") in LXX. The term *οικειος* (cf. Lev 18:6, 12, 13, 17; 21:2; 25:49; Num 25:5; 27:11; Amos 6:10; Isa 3:6; 31:9; 58:7) is more general than *πατραδελφος*, the Greek equivalent of *דוד* ("uncle"), and such terminology makes Ner's relationship to Saul both more ambiguous and more distant than his MT counterpart. As a result, Abner's relation to Saul poses more questions in LXX than that in MT, for it is not clear who the *οικειος* is or how Abner, as the son of a son of Saul's *οικειος*, is thereby related to Saul. All we know is that Ner and Abner are part of Saul's household, but the specifics of these relationships are unclear from v. 50.²¹

Fortunately, v. 51, while differing from MT, provides clarity to Abner's relation to Saul. Here we read: *Κις πατηρ Σαουλ και Νηρ πατηρ Αβεννηρ υιος Ιαμιν υιου Αβιηλ* ("Kish [was] the father of Saul, and Ner, the father of Abner, [was] a son of Jamin son of Abiel"). From 1 Sam 9:1, we know that Abiel is the father of Kish, and thus, Saul is Abiel's grandson. Thus,

²¹ In 1 Sam 10:14-16, LXX also uses *οικειος* in translating *דוד* ("uncle"), and thus, it may continue to specifically mean "uncle" here. If so, then Ner is the son of Saul's uncle, making him Saul's cousin. Abner, then, is Saul's first cousin once removed, which is the conclusion we reach from the following verse.

Jamin, as a son of Abiel, is Kish's brother and Saul's uncle, thereby making Ner, who is Jamin's son, Saul's cousin. Abner, therefore, is Saul's first cousin once removed instead of Saul's cousin (see chapter 2) or uncle (cf. 1 Chr. 8:33; 9:39).²² Hence, the family ties between Abner and Saul, while still close, are one step further removed here than they are in MT, which suggests that the Abner of LXX is closer in age to Ishbosheth, Saul's son, than the Abner of MT. This larger distance between Abner and Saul may also imply that Abner is not *necessarily* benefitting from nepotism, for as a more distant relative of Saul, he is less likely to receive familial favors from the king. We may be right to infer, therefore, that the Abner of LXX possesses higher levels of martial and political competence and skill than the Abner of MT, for if he is not the clear beneficiary of nepotism, he likely earned his way into his position. Clearly, such a reading is outside the text, but because he is a distant relative, we have higher expectations of the Abner of LXX than we do of the Abner of MT.

Implications of Abner's Absence in 1 Samuel 17²³

Perhaps the most significant difference between LXX and MT with respect to Abner in 1 Samuel is that Abner is completely absent from the Goliath episode in most Greek manuscripts (e.g., Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, etc.). While MT includes 1 Sam 17:55–18:5, where Abner's character witnesses Saul elevate David to an important position in his army, LXX, skipping from 17:54 to 18:6, fails to report whether Abner is present for the Goliath episode or his reaction to David's promotion. As a result, we are unable to infer that Abner has witnessed David's

²² The same problem of Ner being presented as Kish's father and thereby suggesting that Abner was Saul's uncle in 1 Chr 8:33 still exists in LXX. As such, the divergence with 1 Samuel 14 is even greater, for 1 Chronicles 8 would then move Abner up two branches on the family tree from being Saul's cousin-nephew to Saul's uncle. Again, we argue that the Samuel text is in disagreement with the Chronicles text, and thus, for our purposes, it is best not to interpret the Samuel text in light of Chronicles.

²³ For a good summary of the differences between MT and LXX of 1 Samuel 17 and the scholarly theories about these differences, see Johnson, *Reading David and Goliath*, 1-12.

shocking victory over the giant or that he approves of David's promotion or see the possibility of a rivalry between Abner and David. There are three important implications about Abner we can make from the omission of 1 Sam 17:55-18:5 from LXX. First, Abner's description up to this point in the narrative is entirely positive; the text does not ascribe to Abner any weaknesses, like cowardice, as MT does. Second, we are likewise unable to sharpen our understanding of Abner's position within Saul's military, for he does not stand beside Saul or run errands in LXX as he does in 17:55-59 in MT. In fact, Abner has still not been the subject of a single verb thus far in the story. We are left, therefore, with a significant gap in our understanding of Abner's character. While the Abner of LXX likely has direct access to the king due to his status as *αρχιστρατηγος*, we have not been given an opportunity to see him function in that way as we had in MT. Hence, we must conclude that Abner is a less significant character in LXX than he is in MT. Third, Abner's character space is more separated from Saul's in LXX than it is in MT. While 1 Samuel 20 and 26 show the two of them connected, Abner's absence in this text suggests that he does not mirror Saul to the same *extent* that he does in MT. In other words, while Abner's character is still bound to Saul's, the bond is not quite as obvious in Greek as it is in Hebrew.

Abner in 1 Samuel 20

After introducing him in 14:50-51, the text does not mention Abner's character again until 20:25, where the text devotes its first verb to Abner in LXX. Here he is seated (*καθιζω*) next to Saul (*εκ πλαγιων Σαουλ*) at dinner just as he is in MT, and because the LXX text does not differ from MT in its depiction of *Abner* — there is a difference in its depiction of Jonathan (see below) — our main conclusion about Abner from our discussion of 1 Samuel 20 in chapter 2 applies here: Abner holds a very high and prestigious position within Saul's court.

There are two interesting differences, however, between the LXX and the MT here. The first is that Jonathan's posture is far more ambiguous in LXX than it had been in MT. In MT, Jonathan is clearly not seated — he is either standing or rising (קם) — but in LXX, the text does not mention whether Jonathan is seated or not. Instead, it oddly states that Saul προεφθασεν τον Ιωιαθαν (“Saul was before [or ‘prevents’ or ‘anticipates’] Jonathan”). It is not at all clear what the meaning of this verb is in context — it may mean that Saul is preventing Jonathan from leaving (cf. 2 Sam 22:6, 19; Job 30:27, etc.) — but whatever the verb προφθανω implies, it tells us nothing about Jonathan's posture in relation to Saul or Abner. If Saul is receiving Jonathan, then Jonathan is clearly upright as he enters the room. If, however, Saul is conversing with Jonathan or reading Jonathan's demeanor, then we cannot make any conclusions about Jonathan's posture. We cannot, therefore, contrast Abner's posture with the other characters in the scene and make inferences about their devotion to Saul, like we are able to do with MT. That Abner is the only one clearly seated beside Saul (εκαθισεν Αβεννηρ εκ πλαγιων Σαουλ) is still significant for our understanding of *Abner*, but we cannot use Abner to better understand other characters.

Second, unlike MT where Abner speaks (17:55) and interacts with David (17:57), the only verb in LXX that has taken Abner as its subject so far has been καθιζω (“to sit”). As a result, the LXX portrays Abner as a more passive and minor character at this point in the story than does MT. Other than holding a place of high honor beside the king, Abner has not appeared in 1 Samuel (LXX) as one who acts or makes decisions on his own, and nothing indicates that he will do so later in the text. His minorness and passivity at this point in LXX, therefore, contrast starkly with his characterization in 2 Samuel, where he is the most mentioned character in 2

Samuel 2 and 3 and makes several important and independent decisions. Thus, the development of Abner's character from 1 Samuel in 2 Samuel is more surprising in MT than in LXX.

Abner in 1 Samuel 26

As in MT, LXX does not mention Abner's character from 1 Sam 20:25 to 1 Samuel 26, and much of the LXX version of 1 Samuel 26 mirrors that of MT. Hence, many of our conclusions about Abner's character from our discussion in chapter 2 of the dissertation apply here. That Abner sleeps beside Saul confirms that his position under Saul is unique; no one else sleeps beside Saul in LXX, and the increased security around Saul in 1 Samuel 26 compared to 1 Samuel 24 and David's exchange with Abner in vv. 14-16 imply that Abner's duties include some security-related duties. Also, that David calls out to Abner, not Saul, in v. 14 shows that Abner acts as Saul's spokesman at least on occasion. Finally, his proximity to Saul contrasts with David's remoteness, thereby underscoring David's relational and emotional separation from Saul just as it had in MT. Abner's character in LXX, therefore, parallels his character in MT quite closely in several respects.

Nevertheless, there are a few significant places where LXX differs with MT in its depiction of Abner here. First, Abner appears more culpable in LXX of allowing David to penetrate Saul's camp and steal Saul's spear and water jug than he does in MT. Unlike MT where divine intervention *clearly* prevents Abner from intercepting David, LXX is more ambiguous about how God's intrusion into the story prevents Abner's men from stopping David. Instead of Abner and his men being afflicted with a God-imposed deep sleep (תרדמה), in LXX, Abner's men have a God-imposed amazement or fear (θαμβος) fall upon them. While the condition still comes from the Lord (κυριος), it is unclear why the θαμβος prevents Abner and his men from stopping David's infiltration. Amazement does not necessarily imply paralysis in the

same way that a deep sleep does (cf. Cant 3:8; Ezek 7:18). Moreover, by depicting Saul sleeping in a chariot (λαμπηνη) rather than in a more secure setting like a trench (cf. 26:5, 7 in MT), the text further shows the insufficiency of Abner's security. Although the Saul of LXX is still surrounded by his army (v. 5), he is more exposed to range attacks, for Greek chariots, were open all-around instead of being armored.²⁴ Thus, Abner's character in LXX does not provide Saul with the same level of seemingly impenetrable security that his MT counterpart does, but instead, Abner allows Saul to sleep in an exposed and vulnerable position. The Septuagint, therefore, presents us with an Abner who appears to be at least somewhat delinquent in his ability to protect his king.

Second, LXX more explicitly shows that Abner is a military commander than does MT.

In v. 7, the possessive pronoun αυτου in reference to Abner is attached to the people (λαος) within the camp. Thus, they are Abner's people (ο λαος αυτου), not simply the people (cf. MT's

²⁴ Sage (*Warfare in Ancient Greece*, 14-7) describes the purposes of chariots as depicted in Homer and other sources. While they were primarily used for transport, they may have also been used for shooting arrows or thrusting spears which would be impossible if the chariots were enclosures. Also, several reliefs in the British Museum show that Greek chariots were open. Several examples are registration numbers:

- 1972,0817.10
(http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=406138&partId=1&searchText=1972,0817.10&page=1)

- 1816,0610.82
(http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=461701&partId=1&searchText=1816,0610.82&page=1)

- 1816,0610.28
(http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=461726&partId=1&searchText=1816,0610.28&page=1)

- 1816,0610.197
(http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=459397&partId=1&searchText=1816,0610.197&page=1)

- 1816,0610.30.b
(http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=461724&partId=1&searchText=1816,0610.30.b&page=1)

ⲁⲛⲉⲣ) or Saul's people (ο λαος Σαουλ). This minor detail shows that Abner has explicit command over these troops, a detail which is lacking in MT, and from this detail, we are able to confirm Abner's military authority. His duties as αρχιστρατηγος, therefore, include both security detail and military command here.

Abner's conversation with David provides us with a third difference between the two versions of Abner in this section: Abner is not portrayed as rhetorically savvy in LXX as he is in MT. After David confiscates Saul's spear and water jug, he stands at a distance away and calls to Abner just as he does in MT. Abner's response to David in LXX, however, is markedly different than that in MT, for he says, τις ει συ ο καλων ("Who are you that calls?") instead of τις ει συ ο καλων τω βασιλει ("Who are you that calls to the king;" cf. MT).²⁵ Because David directs his question to Abner specifically and because Abner merely responds by asking who is calling, Abner simply answers David's question by requesting David to identify himself. Thus, while David acts as if he assumes that he must first speak to Abner before speaking to Saul, Abner's response in LXX does not suggest that Abner is speaking on Saul's behalf or questioning David's right to talk to Saul. In fact, Abner does not act as if David is attempting to speak to Saul at all. When he is then silenced by David's accusatory and pejorative questioning (vv. 15-16) and Saul's interruption (v. 17), we sense that Abner has simply been bested by David's authority and insults. In short, nothing here suggests that Abner is rhetorically savvy or capable of speaking with veiled intentions.

²⁵ Some Greek MSS (including b, o, c₂, and e₂ as defined in *The Old Testament in Greek*, Vol. II, Part I, p. vi) also include the first person personal pronoun με which reinforces our conclusion that Abner's response is one dimensional.

Conclusions about Abner from 1 Samuel

To summarize our finding of Abner's character in 1 Samuel, we note that many aspects of Abner's character in LXX are similar to those of the Abner of MT. In both versions, he is a minor character, is a relative of the king, and holds a uniquely prestigious and powerful position within Saul's court. There are some significant differences, however, between the Abner of LXX and the Abner of MT. First, Abner's position within Saul's court, while still not well defined, may lean more towards specifically martial duties than political. We have seen that Holofernes performs exclusively martial actions (e.g., mustering, leading, fighting, destroying, etc.), and although he is Nebuchadnezzar's second in command, he performs no strictly political duties. If Carney is right that Antipater's administrative duties were secondary to his military ones, then it seems even more likely that an ἀρχιστρατηγός is primarily a military figure. Thus, while it is clear from parallels with Holofernes and Antipater that Abner is a powerful military figure, it is less clear how much political authority we should assume he has from his title alone.

Second, Abner's character is more distantly related to Saul in LXX than he is in MT. From the family list briefly described in 1 Sam 14:50-51, we learn that Abner is Saul's first cousin once removed. Therefore, we should assume that the Abner of LXX is younger than the Abner of MT and has benefitted less from nepotism than the Abner of MT. We are thus led to infer that Abner's character in LXX possesses more martial skill than his MT counterpart.

Finally, despite our expectations about Abner's abilities, LXX portrays Abner's character with more flaws in LXX than in the MT version. Although his absence from the Goliath episode does not allow us to conclude he has a tendency towards fear, the scene in 1 Samuel 26 suggests that Abner has botched the security around Saul and is not a witty speaker. Because Saul sleeps in a chariot, not an entrenchment as in MT, Saul's safety is less secure in LXX than in MT, and

because Abner and his men fall asleep after being astounded by God, the text opens up the possibility that Abner's troops are more responsible for David's infiltration in LXX than in MT. From Abner's response to David's call in v. 14, we see him display no semblance of wit; instead of possibly implying that David has no right to speak to the king (cf. MT), Abner's words in LXX can only be interpreted as a sincere attempt to discover who is speaking with him. Abner's character in 1 Samuel 26 of LXX, therefore, is portrayed as less able and less savvy than his counterpart in MT.

Abner in 2 Samuel 2

In this section, we discuss the characterization of Abner in 2 Samuel 2 of LXX. As in MT, Abner is featured far more prominently in 2 Samuel 2–3 than he is in 1 Samuel, and the context is identical in both versions: after Saul's death, David rises to even greater power, which results in tension between the house of Saul and the house of David. Nevertheless, as we saw in our discussion of Abner in 1 Samuel of LXX, there are important similarities and differences between the Abner of LXX and that of MT, and by comparing and contrasting both versions, we better understand Abner's character as he is presented in 2 Samuel 2 of LXX.

Abner in 2 Samuel 2:8-11

The text of 2 Sam 2:8-11 in MT presents Abner's character almost identically to the same text in LXX, for the plot closely mirrors that of MT. Like he does in MT, Abner exerts his power and influence over others, and he establishes Jebosthe (= Ishbosheth of MT) as the king over the northern areas of the kingdom.²⁶ Yet, because such marks the first time that we have read about his character acting in any sort of command capacity at all and because he appears somewhat

²⁶ The Greek word used to translate איש־בשת (Ishbosheth) is Ιεβοσθε (Jebosthe), and in order to maintain a distinction between MT and LXX, we use "Ishbosheth" when referring to the character from MT and "Jebosthe" when referring to the character from LXX.

weak and incompetent in 1 Samuel 26 (LXX), Abner displays significant growth and development in his characterization from 1 Samuel to 2 Samuel in LXX. Also, as he is in MT, Abner is the main acting agent of the pericope, and he is the subject of three significant verbs in vv. 8-9 that parallel those in MT: λαμβανω (“to take”), αναβιβαζω (“to drag”), and βασιλευω (“to reign,” or “to make king [?]”). Jebosthe, despite being the new king, is the object of each of these verbs and the subject of only βασιλευω (“to reign”) in v. 10, and thus, Jebosthe’s passiveness here underscores Abner’s decisiveness, influence, and control just as it does in MT. Moreover, because the decision to make Jebosthe king in LXX appears to be Abner’s alone, Abner’s character appears more powerful than the new king just as he does in MT. Thus, the conclusions of the scholars we discussed in chapter 3 who regard Ishbosheth as a puppet king in MT apply to the LXX version as well.

In addition, as in MT, LXX still links Abner to Saul, the previous king, not Jebosthe, the current king, when it calls Abner the αρχιστρατηγος του Σαουλ (“head general of Saul”) not the αρχιστρατηγος του Ιεβοσθηε (“head general of Jebosthe”). Abner’s character is thus more connected to Saul’s character than to Jebosthe’s in LXX, just as his MT counterpart is more connected to Saul than to Ishbosheth. Yet, as we will see below, because Jebosthe’s character does not appear in the text again after 2 Samuel 2 — Memphibosthe replaces Jebosthe in 2 Samuel 3 — the implied distance between Abner and Jebosthe here in 2:8 becomes even greater in LXX than it is in MT.

Of course, there are several differences in the text that influence our reading of Abner’s character. First, the LXX adds that Abner brought Jebosthe up from the *camp* (εκ της παρεμβολης) to Manaem (=Mahanaim in MT) in v. 8. The word παρεμβολη (camp) is not reflected in MT, and it suggests that Abner and Jebosthe are already engaged in military

maneuvers of some sort.²⁷ Abner is thus the clear aggressor in LXX of 2 Samuel, a conclusion we could not reach with certainty in our discussion of MT. Abner is moving his army and his king from one encampment — a military position — to another. When Abner then takes the men to Gibeon later in the chapter, we sense that he is moving to an even more aggressive position rather than to a strategic, political, or defensive position. Second, the territories over which Jebosthe is said to rule in v. 9 differ from those listed in the MT. Whereas in MT, Ishbosheth ruled over Gilead, the Ashurites, Jezreal, Ephraim, Benjamin and all Israel, here in LXX, Jebosthe rules over Galaad, Thasri, Jezreel, Ephraim, Benjamin, and all Israel. The last four are identical in both lists, but the first two differ. There seems to be a clear connection between הגלעד and Γαλαδδιδις, but האשורִי and Θασιρι are quite different indeed. Unfortunately, Θασιρι is not otherwise mentioned in LXX, so we cannot be certain of its exact size or location. Nevertheless, these different place names do not significantly alter our understanding of Abner’s character; he enthrones Jebosthe as king and makes him the ruler over a significant geographical area roughly equivalent to the later northern nation of Israel.

Abner in 2 Samuel 2:12-32

Once again, this section is the only one in which Abner’s character actually leads troops and fights in battle within the story world, and thus, the LXX text of 2 Samuel 2 presents many of the same aspects of Abner’s character as its MT counterpart (e.g., his influence and control, his use of questions and rhetoric, his weaknesses in making martial decisions, and his physical strength and speed). Of course, the LXX version presents Abner’s character differently in several ways, and because these ways are scattered throughout the chapter, it is best to examine

²⁷ Because the root of Mahanaim (מַחֲנֵה) means “camp” in Hebrew, the addition of παρεμβολη may have resulted from a misreading of the place name.

the text thematically, like we did in our discussion of MT in chapter three of this dissertation, rather than discussing the similarities and differences separately.

Abner Takes Charge and Drives the Plot

In much the same way that Abner does in MT version of 2 Samuel 2:12-32, he controls the scene and drives the plot in 2 Samuel 2:12-32 of LXX. From commanding his own troops to move from Maneim to Gibeon to convincing Joab to both start and stop the battle, Abner's will drives the scene and leads to the pivotal contest with Joab's troops.²⁸ Abner also successfully gets what he wants from other characters, with Asahel being the sole exception. Thus, Abner comes across as a commanding and influential figure and the main active character in this section just as he does in MT.

Abner's Use of Rhetoric and Questions

In LXX version of 1 Samuel, Abner speaks only once (26:14), as opposed to twice in MT (cf. 17:55; 26:14), so his loquaciousness in 2 Samuel 2 is more unexpected here than it is in MT. In 2 Samuel 2, Abner speaks in vv. 14, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 26 for a total of twelve different clauses, which leads us again to see him as a character who relies more on his words than on his sword. The overall content of his speeches in LXX is similar to that in MT; he persuades Joab to start and stop the battle, seeks to learn Asahel's identity, commands Asahel to turn aside, and makes several arguments throughout the story. Nevertheless, much of his language differs from that in MT. In particular, his conversation with Asahel is slightly longer and more threatening in

²⁸ While the Greek Γαβαω(ν) regularly translates the Hebrew גַּבְעוֹן (e.g., Jos 9:3; 10:1; 2 Sam 20:8; Jer 48:16; etc.), the word Μαναιμ is only used here and in v. 8 to translate מַחֲנֵיִם. In other instances, various words are used including Μανναιμ (Jos 13:30; 1 Kgs 4:14; 1 Chr 6:65), Καμιν (Jos 21:38), Μαναιμ (2 Sam 17:24, 27; 2 Sam 19:33), and the more literal translations — rather than transliterations — Παρεμβολαι (Gen 32:3) or παρεμβολη (2 Sam 2:29; 2 Kgs 2:8). All but Καμιν are reflected in the Greek variants of this text, thereby suggesting that neither the location of Mahanaim nor its connection to other biblical texts were evident to the translators. Nevertheless, it appears that by transliterating the Hebrew place name, the translators did not have a different locale in mind.

LXX than in MT, but it is neither as elegant nor as witty as the same conversation in MT. Also, his conversation with Joab is more clumsily constructed in LXX than in MT. These differences suggest that in LXX, Abner is more threatening, patient, and merciful but less rhetorically savvy in LXX than he is in MT.

In his conversation with Asahel, Abner clearly wants to convince his interlocutor to turn aside and end the pursuit, so he employs several questions and various tactics in order to achieve this goal. Both his purpose and the start of his speech, where he asks Asahel to identify himself by asking, *εἰ σὺ εἶ αὐτοῦς Ἀσαήλ* (“Is that you, Asahel?”), are identical in both versions. The main thrust of his argument begins in v. 21 where he tells Asahel to turn either to the right or to the left (*ἐκκλινον σὺ εἰς τὰ δεξιά ἢ εἰς τὰ ἀριστερά*), but this command too perfectly mirrors that found in MT. The differences begin when Abner adds the callous suggestion that Asahel seize (*κατεχῶ*) one of the boys (*παιδαριον*) and take the armor (*πανοπλία*) for himself. While the purpose of Abner’s suggestion is similar to that in MT, the word *πανοπλία* (“full suit of armor”) is more specific and more common (cf. *Jdt 14:3; 1 Ma 13:29; 2 Ma 3:25; 10:30; 11:8; 15:28; Job 39:20; Wis 5:17; Sir 46:6*) than the Hebrew *הַלְיָצוֹת* (“spoils”) which is a broader term for plunder and used only once elsewhere (*Jdg 14:19*). Abner’s vocabulary, therefore, is limited only to the armor and perhaps not as “generous” as his offer in MT; Abner only offers armor not full spoils. Given the rarity of *הַלְיָצוֹת* in HB, however, we cannot be too certain of this conclusion.

When Asahel is not tempted to take the spoils from Abner’s man, Abner commands Asahel to stand aside (*αφισταμαι*). While this command follows the MT, Abner adds the clause *ἵνα μὴ ματαξῶ σε εἰς τὴν γῆν* (“... lest I strike you to the earth;” v. 22) in LXX version, and it is here that the two versions begin diverging. The corresponding clause is a question in MT —

למה אככה ארצה (“Why should I strike you to the earth”) — but here, as a statement, it functions as the apodosis and supporting argument for why Asahel should heed Abner’s command to turn aside. We can thus translate the beginning of Abner’s argument as, “Turn aside or I will kill you,” which is more forceful than the MT’s, “Turn aside. Why should I kill you?” While the latter is taunting, the former is threatening. By making a threatening ultimatum, Abner’s character clearly presents himself as willing and capable of striking Asahel down. If Asahel does not turn aside, Abner threatens homicide, and thus, rather than forcing his pursuer to think of an answer to a question, as in MT, he simply gives Asahel a choice: stop the chase or die. This approach is not a rhetorically savvy argument; it is simply a threat.

Abner’s next words follow MT closely and lessen the threat by having Abner ask Asahel how he will be able to lift up his face to Joab were he to kill Asahel. As in MT, Abner seemingly does not want to dishonor himself by unnecessarily killing Joab’s brother, but why Abner is concerned about experiencing shame before Joab, the text does not say. Nevertheless, because his forceful threat does not deter Asahel, Abner alters his approach by calming his tone, thereby showing his ability to change tactics on the fly. In other words, because Asahel is not intimidated by Abner, and thus, Abner makes an appeal to shame in order to persuade Asahel to turn aside. This new approach is crafty, for it allows Asahel to maintain his honor by ending the pursuit; turning aside to avoid causing shame appears less cowardly than turning aside out of fear. Thus, at this point, Abner appears as rhetorically savvy in LXX as he does in MT.

Abner then adds two clauses which are not present in MT, both of which weaken his overall argument. In the first, he asks, που εστιν ταυτα (“How can these things be?”), and because text is gaped as to what ταυτα refers it is difficult to understand what Abner means here. A possible interpretation is that this question reinforces the previous one regarding the shame he

would feel from Asahel. Abner's questions could then be translated, "Why would I shame myself in front of Joab by killing you? How could I do that?" If this interpretation is correct, then Abner emphatically repeats himself, rather than offering up a new argument, in the hopes that Asahel will understand Abner's distaste for violence and then turn aside. This interpretation is tentative at best, but given the lack of antecedent for ταυτα, it is difficult to arrive at a better one. The confusion regarding ταυτα also makes Abner's question awkward and feel out of place, thereby weakening the thrust of his argument.

The second clause, which is simply a command that Asahel return to Joab (2:22), is similar to how Abner begins his discourse with Asahel. The main difference between the two is that this command is more direct than the one before (2:21). Rather than simply stating that Asahel should turn aside, Abner tells him specifically where to go, namely back to his brother. It is possible to view these comments as forming an *inclusio* around Abner's speech, but it is repetitive. Because it is a return to a previous approach that did not deter Asahel, it too diminishes the thrust of Abner's argument, especially when compared to MT. Therefore, these two clauses, which are not extant in MT, make Abner appear less rhetorically skilled in LXX than in MT.

From this discussion of Abner's conversation with Asahel, we can make three conclusions about Abner's character that differ from his characterization in the corresponding MT version of the story. First, Abner's character speaks more in LXX than in MT by adding two clauses at the end of his speech that are not extant in Hebrew: the question που εστιν ταυτα ("how can these things be") and the command επιστρεφε προς Ιωαβ τον αδελφον σου ("return to Joab your brother"). Abner's extended speech, therefore, gives Asahel slightly more time and opportunity to end his pursuit in order to save his own life. Although the two clauses do not give

Asahel more than a few extra moments to ponder Abner's arguments, they show that Abner is not in a rush to kill Asahel. As a result, Abner appears slightly more merciful and patient in MT than in LXX. Second, these two additional clauses also depict Abner as repetitive and rambling, and thus less skilled rhetorically than his MT counterpart. His question *που εστιν ταυτα* makes little sense in context, and his additional command simply repeats what he said earlier in v. 22. These additional clauses add nothing profitable to Abner's argument and are strange in context, and the LXX version of Abner appears, therefore, less capable of crafting tightly constructed arguments when compared to the Abner of MT. Finally, by giving Asahel an ultimatum — “turn aside lest I kill you” — instead of asking a rhetorical question — “why should I kill you?” — Abner presents himself as a more threatening character in LXX than in MT. Rather than relying heavily on wit and rhetoric as he does in MT, the Abner of LXX relies more on his threat of physical superiority. In our discussion of the MT version of 2 Sam 2:20-23, we rejected Brueggemann's argument that Abner is brave and bold in this scene.²⁹ Instead we concluded that because Abner had cowered in fear in 1 Samuel 17 and because he is the one on the run, he is attempting to use everything at his disposal to save his own life. In LXX, however, Abner does not cower in 1 Samuel, and because of his threat to Asahel, Brueggemann's argument carries more weight here. Although by fleeing Asahel, Abner still appears to be the one in trouble, his words and lack of a history of cowardice allow us to view him as a danger to Asahel, especially when we consider that he does in fact kill Asahel. At the least, Abner in LXX presents himself as a more dangerous threat to Asahel than does Abner of MT.

Turning now to Abner's interaction with Joab in vv. 26-27 — his question in v. 14 is simply a request to begin the contest — we see that Abner's words are just as multifaceted and

²⁹ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 222.

rapid in LXX as they are in MT. Although LXX differs in several places from MT, the overall effect is that LXX depicts Abner's character as rhetorically persuasive as but verbally clumsier than his MT counterpart. Abner begins addressing Joab in v. 26 by asking, μη εις υικος καταφαγεται η ρομφαια ("Will the sword not devour for victory?"). Whereas Abner's question to Joab in MT implied that continued fighting would be long and bloody (הלנצח תאכל חרב; "Will the sword devour forever?"), Abner's question here seems to suggest that continued fighting will lead to victory, but the text does not clarify which party (Abner's or Joab's) might receive such victory. Thus, while Abner's intent here is presumably to end the battle, it is not obvious how this question addresses that goal. Perhaps we are to understand that Abner is referring to his own sword instead of the metaphorical sword in the MT version of this episode. If so, his meaning would be, "Should [my] sword devour [you] in victory?" Abner would then be making a threat against Joab in order to persuade Joab to cease fighting, but such a question would be bizarre in context. Because Abner's forces are losing the battle, it does not appear that Abner's sword is devouring anyone, so his taunting question falls flat. If Abner is instead referring to Joab's sword and victory, then his question would encourage Joab to continue fighting in order to achieve such victory. Either way, Abner's question does not accomplish his goal. The ambiguity regarding Abner's intent and the gaps in the text make Abner's question in LXX appear less rhetorically persuasive than the corresponding question in MT.³⁰

Unfortunately, because 2 Sam 2:26 is the only verse in LXX that combines the nouns ρομφαια

³⁰ Cf. A. Anderson, 2 *Samuel*, 40.

(“sword”) and νικος/νικη (“victory”) with the verb κατεσθιω (“to devour”) we are unable to venture outside 2 Samuel 2 for help in clarifying Abner’s meaning.³¹

Abner then transitions into his second question, ουκ οιδας οτι πικρα εσται εις τα εσχατα (“Do you not know that it will be bitter until the end?”). This question is a literal translation of MT with the same intent as MT: continued fighting will be bitter, so Joab would be wise to the end the battle immediately. This second question fits the context well and as a direct parallel of the MT version portrays Abner speaking persuasively. His third and final question also closely follows MT: εως ποτε ου μη ειπης τω λαω αναστρεφειν απο οπισθεν των αδελφων ημων (“How long until you tell the people to turn back from [attacking] their brothers?”). Like in MT, Abner lays the blame for continued fighting and fratricide squarely upon Joab; it is Joab’s responsibility to end the battle against his own brothers. Once again, Abner humbles himself and admits defeat while simultaneously placing the guilt of fratricide upon Joab’s shoulders alone.

Therefore, Abner’s character appears to grow in rhetorical skill the longer he converses with Joab. Abner begins with a clumsy question that makes little sense in context, but he quickly shifts to highlighting the bitterness of fighting. He thereby implies that if Joab does not want prolonged pain and suffering, *Joab* needs to end the battle. Abner concludes by placing the onus of initiating peace upon Joab alone. Abner’s approach here is not quite as rhetorically savvy as his corresponding approach in MT because of the first question, but Joab nevertheless ends the battle and admits that if Abner had not spoken thusly, fighting would continue.

From this brief discussion of Abner’s speech to Joab in 2 Samuel 2, we recognize aspects of consistency between Abner’s characterization in MT and that in LXX. In both versions of the

³¹ However, Nah 2:14; 3:15; and Eze 23:25 pair ρομφαια with κατεσθιω in a manner akin to how the Hebrew idiom is used.

story, Abner is portrayed as influential and persuasive, especially in the case of Joab. Despite having the upper hand in the battle, Joab orders his men to end the fighting as soon as Abner asks him to do so, and in both versions, Abner makes arguments instead of resorting to physical violence. Of course, the two versions do not present Abner identically. The Abner of LXX is less rhetorically skilled than the Abner of MT, for at least two of his questions are bizarre in context and he unnecessarily repeats himself in his conversation with Asahel. Such missteps give the impression that Abner of LXX does not possess the same level of wit as displayed by the Abner of MT. Also the Abner of LXX is more threatening than the Abner of MT, for in his speech to Asahel, Abner presents Asahel with an ultimatum (LXX) — turn aside or die (v. 22) — instead of a question (MT). Given that Abner is more threatening but less witty in LXX, we might expect him to rely more heavily upon his sword in LXX than he does in MT, but as we have already seen, such is not the case. Instead, by speaking more and by giving Asahel more chances to turn aside in LXX than in MT, Abner is portrayed as slightly more patient and gracious in LXX than in MT.

Abner as a Commander

Like MT, 2 Sam 2:12-32 in LXX marks the first and only scene in the text in which Abner actively participates in a battle. In this passage we witness Abner command his men, make decisions, and retreat before his army is beaten by Joab's. The plot follows MT closely: Abner suggests that the young men (παιδαριον) engage in a contest (παιζω); the contest ends in a draw; both armies become engaged in a fierce battle (πολεμος σκληρος); and eventually Abner is forced to retreat. The result is also identical to MT: Joab loses only nineteen men (v. 30) whereas Abner loses 360 (v. 31). The battle is a clear routing of Abner's forces like in MT, and thus, because Abner's men almost defeat Joab's in the contest, we can see that the initial the

suggestion is wise, like it is in MT. Nevertheless, we see that his inability to lead his men to victory is a shortcoming in LXX just as it is in MT. In fact, when comparing Abner to Holofernes, his failure to win this battle looks to be a greater flaw in LXX than in MT. Abner is not as commanding and fierce as Holofernes, and since the Book of Judith is not extant in Hebrew, we cannot compare him to Holofernes there.

The problems arising from the vocabulary concerning the twelve-on-twelve contest are also identical to those of MT. The word used to describe the original skirmish is *παίζω* which typically means to play or dance, and it is almost exclusively used in that way (cf. Gen 21:9; 26:8; Exod 32:6; Jdg 16:25; 2 Sam 6:5, 21; 1 Chr 13:8; 15:29; 1 Esdr 5:3; Prov 26:19; Job 40:29; Sir 32:12; 47:3; Zech 8:5; Isa 3:16; Jer 37:19; 38:4), although it can also on occasion mean to mock (Jer 15:17). Like MT, outside of 2 Samuel 2, the word never unambiguously indicates violence or conflict, thereby suggesting that the translators of LXX followed their Hebrew sources closely by keeping the original ambiguity of the word rather than “fix” the text.³² Moreover, just as in MT, there are no other twelve-versus-twelve battles set up as any form of representative combat in the remainder of LXX. Therefore, the complexities of the text and the intentions of Abner here are just as confusing as they are in MT, and we are not able to arrive any conclusions other than what we discussed in relation to MT version of the story. We, therefore, conclude with Sukenik and Eissfeldt that this scene is an instance of representative combat and possibly a battle by ordeal like Fensham argues (see discussion in chapter 3 of this dissertation). Abner, clearly outmatched by Joab’s forces, recommends representative combat in order to avoid a full-scale battle. In doing so, he attempts to avoid mass bloodshed, kin-slaying,

³² At least one ancient version (Athos, Pantocrator, 24), however, reads *πεζετωσαν* (“they fought on foot”), which makes more sense in context than *παίζατωσαν* but it is surely not original.

and defeat, but when the contest results in a draw, he is unable to lead his men to victory. Thus, his initial request is shrewd, and it shows his proclivity towards peace. Yet, as in MT, because he is ultimately routed by Joab, we cannot conclude that he is a great military commander.

Abner's Physical Abilities

In our discussion of MT, we concluded that Abner possessed great strength and speed especially for a “person” of his age. In LXX, however, we must temper our conclusions, for as we saw earlier in this chapter, Abner’s character is one generation younger in LXX than his MT counterpart and is therefore closer in age to Jebosthe than to Saul. Although we cannot deduce his exact age from the text, that Abner in LXX is younger than he is in MT suggests that he is likely in or closer to his physical prime. As a result, his physical accomplishments, especially with regard to his confrontation with Asahel, are not as significant in LXX as they are in MT. While his ability to kill the swift Asahel is still noteworthy, we are less surprised to see the relatively youthful Abner of LXX keep pace with Asahel than the middle-aged Abner of MT.

Although LXX follows MT by placing Abner’s strength and cunning on display when Abner kills Asahel with the butt of his spear (τω οπισω του δορατος), LXX differs from MT by stating that Abner hits Asahel in the loins (ψα) not the stomach (שחן). While it is possible that the Greek translators had the same anatomy in mind, the use of ψου seems to indicate a more precise area which may in turn suggest that Abner hit Asahel with more skill in LXX than in MT. Such a conclusion is not beyond debate, but if true, it indicates that the Abner of LXX is more skillful with a weapon than the Abner of MT.

Conclusions from 2 Samuel 2

As we have seen in our discussion of Abner’s character in 2 Samuel 2, LXX mostly follows its MT counterpart, but when LXX deviates from the MT, it does so in interesting ways.

Abner's character proves once again that he is influential and in control. As he does in MT, his character drives the action and the plot in LXX by convincing Joab's character to both begin and end the contest between the two armies, and his character also commands the respect of his own troops, especially those from Benjamin. Unfortunately, because the nature and purpose of the contest Abner proposes are just as nebulous as they are in MT, we are unable to reach any firmer conclusions from those discussed in chapter 3, so it seems best to conclude that Abner's request is for representative combat here as it is in MT. Abner's character also relies heavily on his speech and ability to be persuasive, and he engages in violence only as a last resort.

Yet there is a striking difference between the rhetorical skill levels of the two versions of Abner. The Abner of MT, as we saw in chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation, is quite rhetorically savvy and is capable of presenting multiple multifaceted arguments in quick succession, but the Abner of LXX is clumsier and more repetitive in his phrasing. Rather than presenting Asahel with multiple options and carefully crafted arguments like the Abner of MT, the Abner of LXX issues Asahel a command to turn aside and threatens to strike Asahel down if he fails to do so, making himself appear to be a genuine threat to Asahel despite being on the run. He also stumbles in his speech to Asahel by including two sentences that his MT counterpart does not speak, the first of which makes little sense in context and the second is unnecessarily repetitive.

Nevertheless, Abner's speech in LXX depicts Abner as more confident and brave yet slightly more merciful and patient than the speech in MT does. Because Abner does not cower with the rest of Israel in 1 Samuel 17, we have no basis upon which to assume Abner will react fearfully in 2 Samuel 2. Plus, Abner's threats in 2 Sam 2:21-23 suggest that he may not actually be afraid of Asahel here, especially when we see him do exactly what he threatens (i.e., kill Asahel). In addition, because Abner is also likely younger in LXX than he is MT, he may be

closer to his physical prime in LXX than in MT, and if so, he is more physically suited to kill Asahel in LXX than in MT. Thus, it is possible that Abner is not running out of fear but out of a true desire not to kill Asahel, and by speaking two additional clauses in LXX, Abner gives Asahel a few extra moments to turn aside. Therefore, while Abner in LXX relies on speech more than violence like his MT counterpart, we see that he is not as rhetorically competent but is both more threatening and slightly more merciful in LXX than in MT.

Abner in 2 Samuel 3

In this section, we finish our analysis of Abner's character in LXX of the books of Samuel by discussing Abner's character as presented in 2 Samuel 3 of LXX. As we did in chapter four of this dissertation, we discuss the text sequentially beginning with 3:6-11, progressing to 3:12-21, and concluding with 3:22-39. In each section, we examine the text's presentation of Abner's character thematically and highlight the ways in which his characterization in LXX differs from that in MT.

Abner in 2 Samuel 3:6-11

As we move into 2 Samuel 3, we note there are numerous similarities with what we saw in our examination of his character in 2 Sam 3:6-11 in MT. Abner again has a heated confrontation with Saul's son that leads to him to change his allegiance to David, and the accusation leveled against Abner by his interlocutor is identical to that in MT. Nevertheless, the LXX text differs from MT in its vocabulary, characters, and syntax, and collectively these differences portray the Abner of LXX as more powerful yet more merciful than the Abner of MT.

Abner's Political Power

In our discussion of 2 Sam 3:6-11 of MT in chapter 4, we noted how MT states that Abner makes himself strong within Saul's house (3:6), and when we compared that verse to 2 Sam 3:1, we concluded that Abner is the lone powerful figure within a failing kingdom. This conclusion also applies to LXX, but the verb used to describe Abner's power is more intense than that used in MT. Whereas MT reads **וַאֲבִנֵּר הָיָה מִתְחַזֵּק בְּבַיִת שְׂאוּל** ("And Abner was making himself strong within the house of Saul"), the Greek text reads **καὶ Ἀβεννηρ ἤν κρατεῖ τοῦ οἴκου Σαουλ** ("And Abner ruled over ['siezed?'] the house of Saul"). The use of **κρατεῖω** to translate **קִיַּץ**, rather than **εὐσιχῶ**, **κραταίωμαι**, or **κραταίω**, suggests that not only has Abner obtained political clout and influence within Saul's kingdom but also a significant amount of authority. When coupled with the genitive as it appears here (**τοῦ οἴκου...**), the verb **κρατεῖω** generally takes on the meaning of "to be master over" or even "to conquer" or "seize" (e.g., Deut 2:34; 3:4; 1 Chr 19:12; Jdt 1:14; 15:7; 1 Mac 1:2; 10:52; 14:6; 15:9, 33; etc.) rather than simply "to become strong." This verb, therefore, indicates that Abner is the person in charge of and ruling over the kingdom, and because **κρατεῖω** is active and takes Abner as its subject, it would seem that he has taken this authority rather than having it handed to him. It is even possible to interpret the verb **κρατεῖω** as implying that Abner has usurped some or all of Jebosthe's power, but such an interpretation may be too strong.

Nevertheless, because Jebosthe's character no longer appears in the text — 2 Sam 2:15 is the last time he is mentioned in LXX — there is a strong implication that Abner has seized authority from the king. The absence of Jebosthe's character in 2 Samuel 3–4 is striking because he is the king (2 Sam 2:8-11), his death has not been recorded, and his MT counterpart is present throughout 2 Samuel 3–4. In MT, King Ishbosheth accuses Abner of inappropriate relations with

Saul's concubine (2 Sam 3:6-11), sends Michal back to David (2 Sam 3:15), and is assassinated (2 Sam 4:1-12). In LXX, however, after 2 Samuel 2, Memphibosthe's character, not Jebosthe's, performs these acts.³³ While the text identifies Memphibosthe as a son of Saul (3:15; 4:1, 2) and while Memphibosthe calls Saul πατρός μου ("my father") in 3:7, the text neither calls him king (βασιλευς), makes him the subject of a "kingly" verb (e.g., βασιλυω, κυριευω, αρχω, etc.), or equates him with Jebosthe. Thus, he appears to be a character distinct from Jebosthe who, although a son of Saul, is of a lower rank than Jebosthe because he is not the king. We are, therefore, left wondering what has happened to the king, and the only clue in the text is the word κρατεω of which Abner is the subject. Thus, Jebosthe's "disappearance" from the text may indicate that Abner has taken the throne from Jebosthe and made himself king. While such a conclusion is tentative at best since Abner is also never called βασιλευς (king), such an interpretation makes more contextual sense than assuming that Memphibosthe is the new king. All we can say for certain, however, is that Abner has become immensely powerful within Saul's house, whereas Jebosthe, the last named king in the north, is no longer influential in either the kingdom or in the story. The text is gapped in that it does not state exactly how much power Abner has accumulated or how he has accumulated it, but despite this gapping, we can be certain that Abner is uniquely powerful within Saul's house.

³³ The Greek for the two characters is quite similar: Ιεβοσθε (אִישׁ־בִּשְׁת) and Μεμφιβοσθε (מִפְּיִבְשֶׁת). Because the endings of the two names are identical (-οσθε and -בִּשְׁת), because Mephibosheth's character is introduced in 4:4 in MT, and because Mephibosheth's character is given more narrative space (see 2 Samuel 9 and 19), the translators of LXX likely committed the error of homoioteleuton here. While this change was likely not intentional, the effect is that Abner appears both more powerful and more merciful in LXX than he does in MT. See discussions that follow.

Abner's Relationship with Respha

The accusation made against Abner regarding Abner's relationship with Saul's concubine is identical in both LXX and MT, yet because the charge is made by Memphibosthe, who is not the king, instead of Jebosthe, who is king (2:8-9), the significance and context of this episode in LXX are different than those in MT.³⁴ As we saw in our discussion of the corresponding text in MT, sleeping with the king's concubine was considered by the people of antiquity a seriously dishonorable affront towards the king, and Ishbosheth, the king in MT, was within his rights to confront the lower-ranking Abner for his impropriety. In LXX, however, Jebosthe, who is king, is not the character who accuses Abner; Memphibosthe does instead. Because the narrative presents Abner wielding significant power within and ruling (κρατεω) the kingdom (see discussion above) and because he maintains his second-in-command status under Jebosthe — he is still the αρχιστρατηγος (2:8) — we are led to infer that he has more authority than Memphibosthe even though the latter is one of Saul's sons. If Abner is the highest ranking official in the kingdom, besides the king, and if Memphibosthe is not the king, then Abner outranks Memphibosthe. Moreover if Abner has usurped the throne, then he has the freedom to take Saul's concubines for himself. Nevertheless, even if he is not the king, his relations with Respha seem less criminal because of his loftier position in LXX than in MT.

In addition, because Memphibosthe is neither king nor αρχιστρατηγος, he does not have the authority to confront Abner about whatever impropriety Abner may have committed. Abner has the greater authority between the two, so he is not at risk of being arrested or executed by his interlocutor in LXX as he is in MT. To the contrary, Abner could arrest or execute

³⁴ The LXX translators seem to have understood the oddity of Memphibosthe's presence here, for they introduce him as Saul's son (υιος Σαουλ) a phrase not extant in MT but similar to Jebosthe's introduction in 2:8.

Memphibosthe for speaking out of line (cf. Jeremiah 32), but by not doing so, Abner displays patience and mercy towards Memphibosthe (cf. his interaction with Asahel in 2 Sam 2:21-23). Instead of detaining Memphibosthe, Abner's character in LXX declares his faithfulness to Saul's house and promises to turn Saul's kingdom over to David.

Abner's Rhetoric and Arguments against Memphibosthe

Abner's angry tirade against Memphibosthe in 2 Sam 3:8-11 of LXX is similar to the corresponding speech in MT, but it is different enough to merit detailed comments. As he does in MT, Abner becomes enraged (εθυμωθη σοφδρα in v. 8) at his accuser's words, and the overall structure of his retort is identical to that in MT: he states that he is not a dog's head, proclaims his positive faithfulness (ελεος) towards Saul's house, states how he had opportunity to benefit David but chose not to do so, and threatens to deliver Saul's kingdom into David's hands. The specific wording of Abner's speech in LXX, however, differs from that in MT in three important respects: Abner does not mention Judah (3:8); he highlights how he has not personally abdicated to David (3:9-10); and he speaks with Memphibosthe not with King Jebosthe.

Abner begins his tirade by asking μη κεφαλη κυνος εγω ειμι ("Am I a dog's head?") without including a reference to Judah (cf. MT's ליהודה אשר [= στι τω Ιυδα], "that [belongs] to Judah"). The absence of any mention of Judah in LXX may suggest that Graeme Auld's interpretation, whereby he argues that Abner is claiming he cannot be kicked around like a dog's head, applies here better than it does in MT.³⁵ We rejected Auld's interpretation in chapter 4 of this dissertation in part because the reference to Judah suggests that Abner believes he has not stooped to the low level of Judah, but because there is no reference to Judah here and because

³⁵ Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 377-8.

Memphibosthe, not Jebosthe, is the character making the accusation against Abner in LXX, Auld's interpretation makes better sense within the LXX context. In essence, Abner seems to be saying that a person of lower standing in the kingdom than himself cannot manipulate him with a petty accusation about a concubine. To the contrary, Abner is in charge and should not be treated as an inferior and insubordinate character that can be kicked around easily like a dog's head.

Abner continues his rant in v. 8 by stating his positive faithfulness (ελεος) to Saul's house in words that closely follow the MT version of the story. Like he does in MT, Abner mentions Saul by name as well as Saul's house, brothers, and friends (γνωριμων, "well-known [people]"), and omits Memphibosthe. While this omission is significant in MT, it is less so in LXX, for here Abner is not arguing with the king but with a lower-ranking individual. Although Memphibosthe is Saul's son, because he is not the king, Abner is not obligated to show obeisance to Memphibosthe. Thus, we do not expect him to highlight his faithfulness to Memphibosthe. The strength of Abner's argument rests entirely upon his statement that he has shown faithfulness to Saul and his house, and because of this faithfulness, Abner argues he should not be bothered by a petty accusation, especially from a character of lower status than himself. Contrary to what he does in MT, Abner does not hereby insult his interlocutor.

Abner's character then mirrors MT by following up his positive statement about his faithfulness with a negative statement at the end of v.8 wherein he claims that he has not acted to harm Saul's house. Instead of following MT by claiming that he could have delivered Memphibosthe into David's hands, however, here in the LXX, he claims that he himself has refrained from joining David's budding kingdom. He states: και ουκ ηυτομολησα εις τον οικον Δαυιδ ("And I did not desert over to David's house," v. 8d). The text is gapped in that it does not

narrate when Abner has an opportunity desert to David's side, how he could have gone about it, or even that he has previously considered doing so. Thus, perhaps Abner is bluffing.

Regardless, this claim is less hyperbolic than his claim in MT, for it would be easier for Abner to join David's forces (LXX) than to allow David to conquer the kingdom and kill the king (MT). Abner's statement is also less personal and threatening here than in MT, for Abner does not single out Memphibosthe here as he does with Ishbosheth in MT. Instead of saying, "I did not deliver *you* over to David" as he does in MT, the Abner of LXX says, "I have not joined David's house." This wording still highlights Abner's faithfulness to the house of Saul but does not emphasize Abner's displeasure with Memphibosthe as the Abner of MT does with respect to Ishbosheth. This portion of Abner's argument in LXX also foreshadows Abner's coming actions in a way that the corresponding text in MT does not. Immediately after Abner finishes speaking with Memphibosthe, he begins deserting to David's side, but Abner does not deliver Ishbosheth into David's hands in MT.

Abner's speech then ends the same way in LXX as it does in MT, and in this instance (vv. 9-10), Abner's words in LXX parallel the corresponding words in MT almost perfectly. Using a self-imprecating oath, Abner threatens to fulfill what God has promised to David by delivering the kingdom over to David, and because this oath is nearly identical in wording to the one made in MT, there is little that needs to be said here. Like in MT, Abner threatens to take away (περιαιρω) the kingdom from the house of Saul and to raise up (ανιστημι) David's throne over Israel and Judah from Dan to Beersheba. The main difference in the two versions is again related to the context and the identity of Abner's interlocutor. Because Abner is confronted by Memphibosthe instead of Jebosthe, Abner's actions here in LXX are a bit more surprising than they are in MT. Because Memphibosthe is subordinate to Abner, we may have expected Abner

to arrest Memphibosthe rather than make treasonous threats against him. Abner's threatening words in MT seem more appropriate since Abner's frustration is with the king himself, and thus, threatening to deliver the king's realm into the hands of the enemy is fitting. Nevertheless, Abner's point is identical in both versions: because he has been insulted about a trivial matter, he will no longer show loyalty to the house of Saul. Likewise, Memphibosthe's response to Abner's tirade in LXX is identical to Ishbosheth's in MT; he is silenced out of fear of Abner.

Abner in 2 Samuel 3:12-21

The plot of 2 Sam 3:12-21 is identical in both LXX and MT. After leaving Memphibosthe, Abner sends messengers to David requesting a treaty (διαθηκη) in v. 12, and the remainder of this section narrates the establishment of this treaty. Abner fulfills David's only stipulation by having Michal sent back to David, and the chapter ends by showing the elders of Israel and the Benjaminites following Abner over to David's kingdom, and Abner leaving David's presence in peace. As a result of the similarities between both versions, the text's depiction of Abner's character in 2 Sam 3:12-21 in LXX is identical to that in MT. We see that Abner is powerful and persuasive, able both to convince other characters — Phaltiel, David, the elders of Israel, and the Benjaminites — to acquiesce to his wishes and to drive the plot forward. He is also shrewd, as evidenced by the order in which he convinces others to agree to his plan of transferring the kingdom from Saul's house to David's.

The only difference between LXX and MT here comes from Abner's greater authority in LXX. Because he holds more political power in the LXX version than the MT version, Abner's scheme in LXX is perhaps not as dangerous as it is in MT. Although he could still be arrested by David, Abner may not face the same risks of arrest and assassination from his own people in LXX. Because he rules over (κρατεω) the kingdom in LXX, he can do what he wants. He also

displays the same rhetorical skill here as he does in MT by utilizing God's promise to David differently than he does with Memphibosthe (cf. 3:9-10). Finally, the text presents Abner as sincere in his desire to ally himself with David, just as it does in MT by again stating numerous times that Abner left David's presence in peace (cf. vv. 21, 22, 23, 24).

Abner in 2 Samuel 3:22-39

The text of 2 Samuel 3:22-39 in LXX also closely follows the MT version of the story with only a few deviations. Joab rebukes David for trusting Abner, whom he accuses of espionage, and for allowing him to leave in peace. Joab then tricks Abner into returning to Hebron and turning aside into the gate of the city where he kills Abner out of revenge for the death of Asahel.³⁶ David subsequently declares his innocence and laments over Abner's death, calling for the people to tear their clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourn Abner's passing. He also fasts and follows after the bier (κλινη = "couch"). From his reaction, the general populace acknowledges that David is guiltless in Abner's murder, and the people are appeased by David's mourning rituals. The scene ends with David both calling down a curse on Joab and his family for his wickedness (αδικια) in killing Abner which also eulogizes Abner. All of these similarities paint a picture of Abner that is nearly identical to what we saw in our discussion of MT. Abner is innocent but gullible and dies a pitiable death, yet David's final words about Abner in vv. 33-34 and 38 leave us with a positive impression of Abner's character as one who was a great leader (ηγουμενος μεγας).

There are, however, two ways the LXX differs from the Hebrew that add slight nuance to Abner's characterization: the use of the proper name Nabal (Ναβαλ) in vv. 33-34 and the use of

³⁶ Hugo ("Die Morde an Abner und Amasa," 42-6) argues that LXX presents a more dastardly Joab, for rather than killing Abner *in* the gates (i.e., in public), Joab kills Abner *beside* the gate in secret.

the word ηγουομαι as a descriptor of Abner in v. 38. First, in vv. 33-34, David compares Abner's death to Nabal's. In MT, the word נבל is ambiguous — it can mean either the proper name Nabal or a foolish person — and such ambiguity forces the reader to make an interpretative choice as to which (or both) is being referenced. Based on the context, we concluded that the common meaning, not the proper name, is to be preferred. In LXX, by contrast, the word Ναβαλ is unambiguous; David is clearly referencing Nabal specifically. Yet even with such ambiguity removed in LXX, it is difficult to interpret, for the text is gapped in that David's intent in making this comparison is neither explicit nor obvious. Unfortunately, the similarities between the deaths of Nabal and Abner are less obvious than their differences: the text credits the Lord (κυριος) with causing Nabal's death (1 Sam 25:38) but Joab with Abner's (2 Sam 3:27, 30), and Nabal's stubbornness and unwillingness to assist David directly contributed to God's actions against him (1 Sam 25:21-22, 25, 38) whereas Abner is trying to unite with and help David (2 Sam 3:12-21). Moreover, the text describes Nabal in terms that are never associated with Abner such as σκληρος (“harsh”), πονηρος εν επιτηδευμασιν (“evil in his business”), and κυνικος (“dog-like” or “cynical”).

Thus, it is difficult to understand how Abner has died like Nabal, but we note that both deaths are avoidable and both benefit David. Nabal could have spared his life had he assisted David and his men, and Abner could have been preserved his life had he not trusted Joab. David benefits from Nabal's death by gaining a wife and political influence over an important region in Saul's kingdom, and he benefits from Abner's by having the last potential threat from Saul's

house removed.³⁷ In the midst of his dirge over Abner, however, David is likely not highlighting the potential political benefits he receives now that Abner is dead. Such an understanding would not please the populace who are weeping over Abner's death. The reference to Nabal seems to highlight, therefore, the pointlessness of Abner's death; it was avoidable and should never have occurred.

The other noteworthy difference between LXX and MT in this section is that in v. 38 David calls Abner ηγουμενος μεγας (“a great ruler”) instead of a chief and a great man (στρατηγος και μεγας) as MT does (שֵׁר וְגִדּוֹל). Rather than emphasizing that Abner is a great man worthy of his position under both Saul and Ishbosheth, the Greek wording states that Abner is a great ruler, not just a great general (cf. Gen 49:10; Exod 23:23; 1 Sam 15:17; 22:2; 25:30; 2 Sam 2:5; 1 Kgs 1:35; etc.). The choice of ηγεομαι to describe Abner seems to confirm our earlier interpretation of κρατεω (2 Sam 3:6), that Abner is not just a general under the king but a political ruler with significant power and authority. Indeed, the verb is used of David when David becomes king in Hebron (2 Sam 2:5) and when he becomes king of all Israel (2 Sam 5:2). While the text still does not explicitly state that Abner has seized the throne or is involved in Jebosthe's death, it strongly implies that no one outranks Abner in Saul's house, including Saul's son Memphibosthe, and it hints that he may have seized it in 3:6. That David also calls Abner great (μεγας) further characterizes Abner positively. Like his MT counterpart, the David of LXX praises Abner akin to how he praises Saul and Jonathan, and like MT, LXX does not provide similar praise for Jebosthe, Memphibosthe, Samuel, or anyone else. Abner deserves to be

³⁷ Cf. McKenzie, *King David*, 99-101, 108, 119-22; Halpern, *David's Secret Demons*, 31, 76, 77. For David's benefits from the death of Nabal, see Levenson, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History,” 11-28 and Levenson and Halpern, “Political Import of David's Marriages,” 507-18.

honored and lamented like Saul, so David both sings a public lament over Abner and encourages his subjects to lament him as well. David's final words about Abner in LXX, therefore, leave us with the impression that Abner is a great ruler and person who dies at peace with David who should be mourned for dying prematurely.

Conclusions from Abner in LXX

Here we summarize our conclusions about Abner's character as he appears in LXX. We begin by discussing what we have seen of Abner as his character mimics a real person, and we conclude by discussing how Abner functions as a literary device within the narrative. We also clarify the similarities and differences between Abner of LXX and Abner of MT.

Abner's Character as It Mimics a Real Person

We first notice that Abner's character in LXX shares numerous similarities with his MT counterpart. In both versions of the stories, he is related to Saul and is employed as one of Saul's highest ranking officials within the kingdom. He also serves Saul as a spokesman and security guard in both versions, and he is associated with Saul, not Jebosthe, even after Saul's death, just as the Abner of MT is linked with Saul instead of Ishbosheth. In both versions, he initiates a contest between his men and Joab's that could have avoided a full battle but instead leads to the routing of his army, and during this battle, he kills Asahel. Like in MT, Abner has relations with Saul's concubine, and he leaves Saul's house to join David's after being confronted about his improprieties with her. He then commands the respect of enough of his own people that he is able to initiate a peaceful transfer of power to David's kingdom. In both versions, he is also murdered in cold blood by Joab when Joab seeks revenge for his own brother's death, and David laments and praises him post mortem. In short, much of the plot and many of Abner's actions are nearly identical in both versions, and thus, many of our conclusion from chapters 2–4 apply

here as well. In both LXX and MT, Abner is a minor yet complex character, who is martially and especially politically powerful, uniquely devoted to Saul, more dependent upon his speech than his physical abilities, able to persuade others to do what he wants, shrewd in his dealings with David, and desirous of peaceful resolutions. We see his flaws when he is unable to defeat Joab's men in battle, engages in a potentially inappropriate relationship with Respha, deserts his kingdom (and family), and trusts Joab by turning aside at the gates of Hebron.

Despite all these similarities between the Abner of LXX and the Abner of MT, there are important differences between the two versions of Abner's character that merit further discussion. In particular, we note that Abner's character in LXX, wields more power; is more threatening, and slightly more patient and merciful; but he is less rhetorically skilled than his counterpart in MT. First, Abner's character in LXX possesses more power than the Abner of MT. His title (αρχιστρατηγος) implies that he possesses a great deal of authority under Saul, which becomes clear when we compare him to Holofernes, Nebuchadnezzar's αρχιστρατηγος, and to Antipater, one of Alexander's στρατηγοι. The former is second in command to Nebuchadnezzar and is a powerful military commander, and the latter is equally impressive in both martial and political spheres. These two generals give us great examples of what we might expect Abner as αρχιστρατηγος to do throughout the story, and the amount of power possessed by these two characters, who do not have MT equivalents, leads us to infer that Abner possesses great power both politically and militarily, more so than he does in MT.

Moreover, Abner's power and authority only increase after Saul's death. As in MT, Abner installs Saul's successor and sets up the capital in Manaem, but he also it is called a leader (ηγουμενος) by David and is said to rule (κρατεω) over the kingdom, which MT does not say of Abner there. Because neither Jebosthe nor Memphibosthe are associated with these terms, the

text suggests that Abner is one of the most — if not the most — powerful character in the kingdom. Moreover, Jebosthe, whom Abner enthrones as king (2 Sam 2:6), is not mentioned in the text after 2 Sam 2:15, a fact which forces us to wonder both what happened to him and if Abner played any role in his “disappearance.” A possible reading of the LXX text, therefore, is that Abner begins ruling in place of Jebosthe starting in 2 Sam 3:8 where he is said to take (κρατεω) the kingdom. Even if we do not assume that Abner has usurped the throne, we can conclude for certain that the language used of him in LXX emphasizes his power more than the language of MT does. For example, when Abner tries to rally the elders of Israel and the Benjaminites around David, we are not surprised by their instant submission; because Abner is a strong leader, we expect them to obey the commands of such a high-ranking official. In short, after Saul’s death, Abner’s control increases, and other people, including David, tend to yield to his every request.

Second, Abner’s character, while having almost no narrative space devoted to his martial exploits or abilities and while losing the battle against Joab, is a more threatening character in LXX than his MT counterpart. We see this aspect of his character most clearly in his dialog with Asahel where instead of asking למה אככה ארצה (“Why should I strike you to the ground?”) he threatens Asahel with an ultimatum: ... να μη παταξω σε εις την γην (“... lest I strike you to the ground”). His younger age — when compared to MT — also leads us to interpret Abner as a stronger and faster character than his MT counterpart, so his threat in LXX is more persuasive than his taunting question in MT. In addition, because Abner is a more distant relative of Saul’s in LXX than in MT — he is Saul’s first cousin once removed in LXX instead of his first cousin as in MT — we infer that he is a more capable commander in LXX because nepotism seems less applicable in LXX than in MT. Moreover, because of the great power he wields within Saul’s

kingdom, the text hints that he is capable of doing almost whatever he wants to whomever he wants. Thus, when he threatens both Asahel and Memphibosthe, we sense that Abner is both serious and capable of following through on his threat. He does not make idle threats or attempt to deceive his interlocutors.

Third, Abner's positive characteristics are better emphasized in LXX than in MT because the negative aspects we see in MT are either less obvious or non-existent in LXX. In our discussion of the MT, we saw Abner display character flaws by acting afraid, by having semi-treasonous relations with Rizpah, by being unable to lead his men to victory, and by trusting Joab. In the LXX version of the story, only the last two fully apply to Abner. In LXX, Abner is not mentioned at all in the Goliath episode, and thus, the text does not establish him as a fearful character. This lack of a fearful past combined with his threat in 2 Sam 2:22 makes him appear braver in LXX than in MT in his flight from Asahel. Moreover, because Abner rules over the kingdom in 2 Sam 3:6, his relationship with Respha is plausibly not as scandalous in LXX as his relationship with Rizpah is in MT. His greater status combined with the king's absence suggests he may not be infringing on the king's property at all, especially if he is the king. That Abner is not confronted by the king implies that either Jebosthe is no longer able to confront Abner or is not as concerned about Abner's actions as Ishbosheth is in MT. Plus, if we infer that Abner has become king, then there is nothing improper about his relationship with Respha; as king, he is within his rights to take her. Although in LXX, Abner is still routed by Joab and turns aside with Joab in the gate, the other negative aspects of Abner's character extant in MT are not present in LXX. Abner's character, therefore, seems to be a more positive character in LXX than in MT.

In addition, we note several aspects of the narrative that present Abner as a positive character in LXX. He is clearly shrewd in both MT and LXX as exemplified in 2 Sam 3:12-21 where he skillfully and safely garners the support of both David and his own people, and, while less pronounced in LXX than in MT (see below), he is rhetorically savvy in both versions. Such characteristics are occasionally praised in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the book of Proverbs (e.g., Prov 1:4; 12:23) but also implicitly within the books of Samuel (e.g. 1 Sam 21:12-15; 23:22-23; 2 Sam 14:1-3; etc.). He also shows a desire for peaceful resolutions in both versions by suggesting representative combat instead of a full-scale battle, by trying to convince Asahel to turn aside instead of attacking him, and by initiating a peaceful transfer of power from Saul's house to David's. In LXX, Abner is more patient and merciful in his interactions with Asahel and Memphibosthe. In his conversation with Asahel, he speaks two sentences in LXX that are not extant in MT, thereby giving Asahel slightly more time and more options to turn aside, end the pursuit, and save his own life than his counterpart does in MT. Likewise, because Abner wields the greater power and authority in his exchange with Memphibosthe, he is able to have Memphibosthe arrested or executed for his rebuke, yet Abner chooses not to do so. Instead of punishing Memphibosthe, he leaves his position of authority within Saul's house, and changes his allegiance to David. While this decision ultimately leads to defeat for Memphibosthe, Abner plays no direct role in Memphibosthe's demise (cf. 2 Sam 4:5-7), and in the midst of a heated argument, he shows patience and mercy towards Memphibosthe by not immediately retaliating. In MT, Abner is outranked by his interlocutor, and thus, he is not in a position to show mercy to Ishbosheth, but in LXX, he outranks Memphibosthe and could have him arrested but chooses not to do so. The Septuagint, therefore, portrays Abner's character more positively than MT does.

Finally, a significant change in Abner's characterization from MT to LXX relates to his lessened ability in the areas of wit and rhetorical questions. Abner still speaks a great deal in the LXX version of the stories, but he neither asks as many questions nor displays the same level of wit as he does in MT. In 1 Sam 26:14 of LXX, Abner's question is not multilayered as the corresponding question in MT is; the lack of τω βασιλει ("to the king") indicates he is only concerned with the identity of the caller. Also, in his first lengthy conversation in 2 Sam 2:20-23, Abner's argument is less savvy and organized in LXX than it is in MT. Instead of approaching Asahel carefully from multiple angles as he does in MT, the Abner of LXX in v. 22 threatens rather than questions Asahel, adds a contextually bizarre question (καὶ ποῦ ἐστίν), and redundantly orders Asahel to turn aside at the end of his speech. Although his emotional response to Memphibosthe's accusation against him is different in LXX from MT, it is still well structured, coherent, and persuasive, and it still invokes fearful silence from his interlocutor. Thus, the scene in 2 Samuel 3 suggests that Abner is still rhetorically skilled, but the other episodes show that he is less so in LXX than in MT.

Abner as a Literary Device

As a literary device that contributes to the plot and meaning of the story, Abner's character in LXX also shares numerous similarities with his MT counterpart, and unlike how they affect his portrayal as a quasi-person, the differences we have seen in the text regarding Abner's character do not seem to change his function within the narrative in significant ways. In both versions of 1 Samuel, Abner's character space always intersects with Saul's, thereby tying Abner's character to Saul's. As such, Abner's character begins to be seen as an extension of Saul's in much the same way as it is in MT, yet this connection is not as strong in LXX as it is in MT. Because LXX does not mention Abner's character in the Goliath episode, we do not see

him share in Saul's ignorance of David's identity and family or accept Saul's initial promotion of David within the army (1 Sam 17:55—18:5). Moreover, because LXX does not make clear contrasts between the sitting Abner, standing Jonathan, and absent David in 1 Sam 20:25, Abner's character is not as clearly used to contrast with the characters less aligned with Saul (e.g. David) or vacillating between David and Saul (e.g. Jonathan) as he is in MT. While we can still view Abner as a symbol of those who are accepted by and close to Saul and who helps the text underscore David's "outsider" status in Saul's kingdom (cf. 1 Sam 20:25; 26:13), Abner's character cannot be used to highlight Jonathan's torn loyalties and vacillations between David and Saul, for Jonathan's posture and proximity to Saul in 1 Sam 20:25 are ambiguous.

Nevertheless, the connection between Abner and Saul is strong enough in LXX for Abner's character both to signal negative transitions for Saul and his kingdom and to be seen as the continuation of Saul's house after Saul's death. In 1 Samuel, Abner's character is introduced just before Saul spares Agag and is rejected by Yhwh. He then appears in the text just before David flees Saul's kingdom and Saul begins his misguided pursuit of David's life. At the end of 1 Samuel, he reemerges just before Saul and David speak for the last time. In each case, the text mentions Abner's character just before a significant negative change for Saul and his kingdom, and as a result, we begin to expect such changes whenever Abner's character is mentioned. His character continues to function in this way in 2 Samuel, for Abner's character is featured in the scene in which Saul's house loses a battle to David's, initiates the transfer of power from Saul's house to David's, and is killed just before Saul's son is assassinated, the event which officially puts an end to Saul's dynasty. The presence of Abner's character in the narrative, therefore, signals the decline and fall of Saul's kingdom — subtly in 1 Samuel and overtly in 2 Samuel —

for every place in which he is mentioned occurs just before or during a significant negative transition for Saul or his house.

Moreover, Abner's character, not Jebosthe's or Memphibosthe's, in 2 Samuel serves also as the symbol of Saul's house after Saul's death. Because of his close connection with Saul in 1 Samuel and his continued presence in 2 Samuel, Abner's character is the one link of Saul's court that spans 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel. Neither Jebosthe, Saul's official successor, nor Memphibosthe, one of Saul's sons, are mentioned in 1 Samuel, and thus, we have no impression or expectations of their characters. Finally, because Jebosthe's character is replaced by Memphibosthe's in 2 Samuel 3–4, the importance of Jebosthe's character is less in LXX than that of his counterpart, Ishbosheth, in MT, which indirectly emphasizes Abner's importance even more in LXX than in MT. Abner, continues to serve in as an extension of Saul in 2 Samuel both by still being called *Saul's* ἀρχιστρατηγός after Saul's death and by immediately placing Jebosthe on the throne, ensuring the continuation of Saul's line in 2 Samuel. Abner then initiates and leads the only recorded battle between Saul's house and David's, and he is the catalyst that begins the transfer of power from Saul's house to David's. In addition, by taking (κρατεω) power within Saul's kingdom and by making key decisions that affect Saul's kingdom, Abner shows himself to be the true source of power in Saul's kingdom after Saul's death. It is Abner's character, therefore, that replaces Saul's both in the kingdom and in the narrative after Saul's death, and this use of Abner's character in the story is even more emphatic in LXX than it is in MT.

Also as it in does in MT, Abner's character functions as a point of departure for better understanding Joab's character. Although, Joab and Abner do not share the same title in LXX as they do in MT — Abner is Saul's ἀρχιστρατηγός whereas Joab is David's ἀρχων δυναμεως (2

Sam 19:14) — we are still justified in comparing the two, especially considering the rivalry that is established in 2 Samuel 2:12-32, where Abner initiates a contest between his men and Joab's, and that concludes in 3:27, where Joab murders Abner at the gates of Hebron. When we compare these two characters in LXX, we note that the similarities and differences between them in LXX are nearly identical to those in MT. Abner again relies heavily on his rhetoric and speech, whereas Joab's tendency towards violence in 2 Samuel 2–3 continues throughout LXX as it does in MT. Likewise, when Abner loses first the battle against Joab and then his life to Joab, the text establishes Joab as a powerful fighter, so we expect Joab to win his battles later in the story which he consistently does (see 2 Sam 10:7-19; 11:14-21; 12:26:-31; etc.). Moreover, the text generally presents Abner positively but Joab negatively. Whereas Abner is loyal towards Saul in 1 Samuel, is quite patient with both Asahel and Memphibosthe in 2 Samuel, generally pursues peace over violence, and never murders anyone, Joab acts wickedly and against David's wishes by killing Abner ruthlessly at the gates of Hebron. The text, therefore, establishes Joab as a ruthless and roguish character from his early appearances in the story. His character then acts consistently with this initial presentation by ensuring the death of Uriah (11:16-17) and by killing Absalom (18:14-15) and Amasa (20:10). Joab, therefore, rightly earns the title of υιου ἀδικίας (3:34), whereas Abner is praised as innocent and a great ruler by David (3:34, 38).

In short, these two characters are just as different in LXX as they are in MT, but also like in MT, they share at least two aspects in common in LXX. First, they are both established as highly influential characters who get what they want from others. Even when Joab acts against David's wishes, he never receives David's anger, except in 3:29 and 19:14, and he consistently convinces others, including David, to do his will (e.g., 12:26-31; 19:1-8; etc.). Only in the case

of the census does Joab not convince another character (i.e., David), to do his will. Thus, Joab is just as influential as Abner although he relies more on his sword than on his words. Second, Joab's character space intersects with David's in a manner quite similar to, but greater than, how Abner's intersects with Saul's in 1 Samuel. In the early chapters of 2 Samuel, Joab's character either appears with David (e.g., 2 Sam 3:22-24) or as acting on behalf of David (e.g., 2 Sam 2:12-32). From there on out he consistently acts with David's best interests in mind (e.g., 12:26-31) or carries out David's orders (e.g., 10:7-19). Even when Joab disobeys David, such as when he kills Absalom, he benefits David and his reign.³⁸ It becomes clear then that whenever Joab fights, he does so on behalf of David, and wherever he appears, he represents David's kingdom. Joab's character space, therefore, is just as intertwined with David's as Abner's is with Saul's.

Finally, we note that Abner's character is a key (*the* key?), element in effecting the transfer of power from Saul's house to David's. The early chapters of 2 Samuel narrate the rise of David's authority first over Judah (2 Sam 2:1-11) and then over Israel (2 Sam 5:1-5). Yet, because David is not kin to Saul, he has no right of primogeniture by which to assume Saul's throne. The tension of the plot in these early chapters, therefore, is how David will gain power over both parts of the kingdom and rule in Saul's place. The text takes great pains to show that David neither usurps the throne from Saul nor violently takes it from Saul's progeny. Had David attacked Jebosthe or initiated the transfer of power himself, he would be guilty of treason and possibly murder. Instead, as the king chosen by Yhwh, David passively receives anointings to be king both by God (1 Sam 13:14; 16:1-13; etc.) and by the people (2 Sam 2:4; 5:1-3). Nevertheless, in order for David to receive this throne, Saul's successor must be removed from both the throne and the story, and it is here that Abner's character plays a key role. By taking

³⁸ Cf. Eschelbach, *Does Joab Foil David*, 67-8, 70-1, 72.

power for himself (2 Sam 3:6) and then divorcing himself from Memphibosthe and Saul's house (2 Sam 3:8-10), and by establishing a covenant with David, Abner initiates the transfer of power from Saul's house over to David. Then when he carefully convinces the elders of Israel and the Benjaminites to align themselves with David and his cause, he peacefully ensures that David will reign over Saul's tribe and people. Rather than taking the throne for himself, David receives it from Abner. Without Abner and his actions in 2 Samuel 2–3, David's character would likely appear guilty of treason and bloodshed, but as it is, he is the worthy, innocent, and approved successor to Saul. Abner's character, therefore, fulfills the purpose of the text — showing David's blamelessness in his rise to power — by in effect setting David up to be king over all Israel, which he officially becomes in 5:1-5.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS REGARDING THE CHARACTER AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF ABNER TO THE TEXTS

Having concluded our investigation into the presentation of Abner's character as he appears in MT and LXX, we are in a position to make general observations about his characterization, how these ancient versions converge and diverge with respect to his character, and how his character develops from 1 Samuel to 2 Samuel in both versions. To accomplish these tasks, we structure our conclusion in a manner similar to what we have done in the preceding chapters; we first discuss how Abner's character resembles a real person followed by how he functions as a literary device within the text. We divide the section on how Abner's character mimics a real person into two subsections: one about how the two versions portray Abner similarly and one about how they differ in their portrayals. Because the ways Abner functions as literary device are more-or-less identical in both versions, such a twofold division is unnecessary there. Finally, after our discussion of Abner's character specifically, we conclude this dissertation with a brief discussion of opportunities for future research regarding Abner and other minor characters in HB.

Abner's Character as It Mimics a Real Person

In this section, we summarize our findings of how Abner's character behaves as and is presented like a real person in the text. We first examine those attributes Abner possesses that are found in both MT and LXX, and then we examine the ways in which these versions differ in their presentations of Abner's character.

Commonalities of Abner's Characterization in MT and LXX

As we have seen in our investigation of Abner, MT and LXX share many commonalities with respect to his character. Rather than merely summarize or list these similarities, however,

we can use them to make further conclusions about him. In particular, we use what is common to Abner in both versions to show how Abner's character develops from 1 Samuel into 2 Samuel and how his character displays aspects of complexity and roundness.

The Development of Abner's Character from 1 Samuel to 2 Samuel

Abner is a minor character but one that develops significantly from 1 Samuel into 2 Samuel in both versions. In both MT and LXX of 1 Samuel, Abner's minorness is obvious in that despite his lofty title as Saul's chief general (שֶׁר־צַבָּא in MT and ἀρχιστρατηγός in LXX), we read almost nothing that suggests he is a powerful military commander. We learn nothing in 1 Samuel about Abner's physical attributes, his skill on the battlefield, his devotion to Yhwh, or his desires and motivations. The text also does not portray Abner sharing in Saul's victories or blunders such as his pursuit David, his slaughter of the priests at Nob, or his visit to the medium at Endor. Despite this lack of narrative space, however, there is enough information in the text for us to see that Abner is a close relative of the king, who holds a uniquely high office within Saul's court. Abner is Saul's cousin (MT) or first cousin once removed (LXX), but because he is the sole official mentioned in the family list of 1 Sam 14:49-51 — all the other characters are family members but without titles — we know that his role is uniquely important.¹ The text further shows his importance in 20:25 and 26:7, 12 where he is the sole character to sit and sleep beside the king, respectively. The 1 Samuel text, however, only shows him act in his capacity as a military commander in 1 Samuel 26 where he speaks on Saul's behalf and establishes Saul's security.² Therefore, while the text gives Abner enough space for us to glean some information

¹ Compare the lists of officials in David's court in 2 Sam 8:15-18; 20:23-26; 23:8-39.

² In MT, he also runs errands for Saul in 1 Sam 17:55–18:5.

about him and his duties, it does not give Abner enough narrative space to flesh out his characterization or show him in action. In short, he is a flat character in 1 Samuel.

Such is not true in 2 Samuel, where Abner's character receives enough narrative space in both versions for us to witness development and increased complexity in his character. We first notice the amount of power and influence Abner's character wields in the two versions of 2 Samuel. After Saul's death, Abner, not the king, becomes the real source of power in the kingdom. He makes Ishbosheth (Jebosthe in LXX) king in 2 Sam 2:8-11, and he leads the newfound king's troops in battle at the pool of Gibeon in 2 Sam 2:12-32. Afterwards, he consolidates more authority for himself (3:8), and after being accused of impropriety with Saul's concubine, he has enough political influence to establish a covenant with David and convince his own people to change their allegiance (3:12-21). In addition to his political might, Abner exhibits a lot of personal power and influence on everyone around him throughout 2 Samuel 2-3, and he consistently gets what he wants from others, both friend (e.g., Ishbosheth, the elders of Israel, the Benjaminites, etc.) and foe (e.g., Joab and David). The only character who does not cater to Abner's wishes is Asahel whom Abner kills (2:19-23). Unlike the Abner of 1 Samuel, therefore, the Abner of 2 Samuel wields power and influence over others and drives the plot forward.

We next notice that Abner's character is wittier and shrewder in 2 Samuel than he is in 1 Samuel. The only place in 1 Samuel where the text hints that Abner has any wit is in chapter 26 of MT (there is no indication in 1 Samuel of LXX that Abner is witty at all). While Abner's rhetorical skill in 2 Samuel is more pronounced in MT than in LXX (see below), in both versions he uses persuasive speech to great effect in 2 Samuel. In his appeals to Asahel (2 Sam 2:18-22), his suggestions and arguments to Joab (2:14, 26-28), his angry rebuke to Ishbosheth or

Memphibosthe (3:8-11), his terse command to Paltiel (3:15), his requests of the elders (3:17-18), and his bargaining with David (3:12-22), we see Abner show his skill in asking pointed questions, making strong arguments, and altering his tactics to get other characters to do what he wants. He approaches each character uniquely, and he even uses the same information in two different ways depending on his interlocutor and purpose (3:9-11, 17-18).

Abner's shrewdness, however, is not limited merely to his speech, and throughout 2 Samuel 2–3, he shows that he is both martially and politically intelligent. His selection of Mahanaim as the new capital (2:8-9) protects the king from being caught up in battle; his request for representative combat between his men and Joab's (2:14) provides his people with a possible path towards victory and spares lives; and the careful way he navigates the negotiations with David and the elders of Israel (3:12-21) accomplishes his goal while preserving his life. We see, therefore, that Abner's character is portrayed as verbally, strategically, and politically smarter in 2 Samuel than he is in 1 Samuel.

Finally, Abner garners respect and admiration from other characters in 2 Samuel, which he does not in 1 Samuel. In 1 Samuel, the only character who speaks about Abner is David in 1 Samuel 26:14-16, where he states that Abner has failed in his duties to protect Saul and that Abner is worthy of death for his dereliction of duty. While David presumes that Abner is uniquely admired in Israel, he insults Abner and treats him disrespectfully. In 2 Samuel, by contrast, Abner's character is respected by many, including David. His persuasiveness suggests that other characters find him charismatic, and the reaction of David and his people to Abner's death betrays their respect for him. David curses Joab for murdering Abner (2 Sam 3:28-29), and he calls for public fasting and mourning over Abner (3:31). The people respond accordingly, and afterwards, David offers only his second (of two) public lament (3:32-35; cf.

1:17-27).³ That even David, who mocks Abner in 1 Samuel 26, shows such respect for Abner suggests that Abner's charisma and integrity increase after Saul's death. Therefore, in all these ways — his power, wit, and respectability — we see Abner's character develop from 1 Samuel into 2 Samuel.

The Complexity of Abner's Character

Not only does Abner's character show signs of development in the text, but he also displays aspects of complexity. He is generally positive and rounded according to the definition given by E. M. Forster.⁴ In 1 Samuel, his positive attributes are seen in what he does not do whereas in 2 Samuel, they are obvious from what he does. In 1 Samuel, he does not share in Saul's jealousy and pursuits of David (e.g., 1 Samuel 18:10-11, 17, 25; 19:8-17; 24:1-22; etc.), participate in Saul's illicit sacrifice (13:8-15), help Saul in sparing of Agag (15:1-23), slaughter the priests at Nob (22:11-19), or go with Saul to the séance with the medium at Endor (28:1-25). By not having his character space intersect with Saul's wicked acts and pursuits, the text presents Abner as a more positive character than Saul.

In 2 Samuel, however, Abner's positive traits come through in what he actually does and says. Abner's shrewdness, as outlined above, is a trait implicitly praised in Samuel (e.g., 1 Sam 21:10-15; 24:1-22; 26:1-25; 2 Sam 14:1-17; etc.), more explicitly in 1 Sam 16:18, and also in Proverbs (15:22, 23, 28; 21:5; 24:3-4, etc.).⁵ Furthermore, Abner displays honesty throughout both 1 and 2 Samuel even when he is in rebellion. In MT, he admits that he does not know whose son David is (1 Sam 17:55), and in both versions, he tells Ishbosheth/Memphibosthe his

³ Although David publicly mourns Absalom's death (18:33; 19:4), the text does not say that David lamented (אָנָן) over Absalom's death.

⁴ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 118.

⁵ See discussion of persuasive speech in Clines, *Interested Parties*, 219-21.

plan to give the throne to David (2 Sam 3:8-11) and does not attempt to trick David into making a faux-covenant (2 Sam 3:12-21). Abner's character also consistently tries to avoid bloodshed by suggesting representative combat (2:14), by trying to preserve Asahel's life (2:19-23), by initiating a peaceful transition of power (3:12-21), and by playing no role in Ishbosheth's (MT) or Memphibosthe's (LXX) assassination (2 Samuel 4). In all these ways, we see the text portray Abner positively.

Nevertheless, Abner possesses some character flaws. From his relationship with Saul's former concubine (2 Sam 3:8-11), we learn that Abner can act with lust, impropriety, and presumption, and we see that his sense of loyalty to Saul's house is limited. Abner is also callous towards his own men by placing his own life above those of his subordinates instead of protecting and serving them (c.f., Exod 23:6; Lev 19:15, 18; Deut 10:18; 24:14, 17; 1 Sam 17:31-37; Prov 14:21; 22:22; Ezek 34:1-4; etc.) when he offers to Asahel the spoils (הַלְיָצָה in MT) or armor (πανοπλία in LXX) of one of his own men. Moreover, we see that Abner is ineffectual in battle when he fails to lead his army to victory in 2 Sam 2:12-32, and he is gullible for trusting Joab enough to speak with him alone (3:26-27). Thus, Abner's character displays the positive characteristics of shrewdness, honesty, and peace as well as the negative characteristics of lust, impropriety, presumption, callousness, incompetence, and gullibility. We conclude, therefore, that Abner's character displays aspects of complexity.

Finally, we note how the roundness of Abner's character becomes most evident in 2 Samuel 3 when Abner decides to leave Saul's house and unite with David's. Prior to 2 Samuel 3, Abner does nothing but show loyalty to Saul and his kingdom. The only aspect of the narrative prior to 2 Samuel 3 that indicates Abner may not be fully devoted to his new king occurs in 2 Samuel 2:8 where Abner is still called Saul's general (שָׂר־צָבָא in MT or

αρχιστρατηγος in LXX), not Ishbosheth's. However, even if the phrase שֶׁר־צְבָא אֲשֶׁר לְשָׂאוּל suggests distance between Abner and Ishbosheth, it does not indicate that Abner wishes to sever ties Saul's house. When Abner gives David control over all Israel (2 Sam 3:12-21), however, Abner shows that his devotion to Saul's house has limits, and he is not as loyal to Saul's house after Saul's death as he is before. Such an observation surprises us given his consistent loyalty toward Saul in 1 Samuel, and thus, his character is round according to Forster's definition.⁶

Differences in Abner's Character between Traditions

Although Abner's character is depicted similarly in both the MT and LXX with respect to how he mimics a real person, there are some significant ways MT deviates from LXX, and in this section we present those differences. Collectively, the differences show that the Abner of MT is similar to but distinct from the Abner of LXX. First, we see that Abner is a more powerful figure in LXX than he is in MT. From our studies of Holofernes in the book of Judith, we concluded that Abner's Greek title, αρχιστρατηγος, possibly implies more military power than his Hebrew title שֶׁר־צְבָא does, and in our examination of Antipater, we showed that a στρατηγος possessed great power both militarily and politically. Thus, because Abner outranks Antipater, he must have at least as much authority as Antipater, who wielded more power than any שֶׁר־צְבָא does in MT. We confirm that the Abner of LXX possesses *more* power than the Abner of MT when we see the Abner of LXX of 2 Samuel 3:6 seize (κρατεω) power instead of merely making himself strong (חזק) and when King Jebosthe does not confront him as King Ishbosheth does in MT (3:8-11). In addition, by changing his speech to Asahel from the question, לִמָּוֶה

⁶ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 118.

אֲכַכְהָ אֶרְצָה (“Why should I strike you to the ground?”), to the statement, *ὕα μη παταξω σε εις τη γη* (“lest I strike you to the ground”), Abner presents himself as both more confident and threatening in LXX than in MT. Both the narrative and Abner himself present him as a powerful character.

Second, despite being a stronger, more powerful character in LXX than in MT, we see that Abner’s character in LXX is slightly more patient and merciful when compared to that in MT. By speaking two additional clauses to Asahel in 2 Sam 2:18-23, the Abner of LXX gives Asahel’s character a few extra moments to consider Abner’s pleas, to turn aside, and to avoid a physical confrontation with the superior Abner, and in 2 Sam 3:6-11 of LXX, when Abner is confronted by a subordinate character (not the king as in MT), he neither arrests nor harms Memphibosthe for being presumptuous or for showing disrespect. Thus, Abner wields great power but he does not exert it haphazardly.

Finally, Abner’s character possesses less rhetorical skill in LXX than he does in MT. Abner’s question to David in 1 Sam 26:14 of LXX can only be interpreted as one dimensional not multilayered as text of MT allows, and in LXX, Abner’s attempt to persuade Asahel to stop his pursuit (2 Sam 2:18-23) is not as streamlined or coherent as it is in MT. In LXX, he adds clauses, repeats himself, and even asks a question that makes little sense in context. Abner also directly threatens Asahel in LXX instead of using rhetoric to ask a persuasive question. Abner’s character, therefore, is more powerful, more merciful, but less savvy in LXX than he is in MT.

Abner as a Literary Device

Now that we have discussed how his character mimics a real human being, we examine Abner’s role as a literary device. Fortunately, his literary roles in MT and LXX are similar enough that we have no reason to discuss them separately. In this section, therefore, we present

the ways we have seen Abner's character functions as a symbol of Saul and his kingdom, as the point of departure for viewing other characters and their relationship to Saul, and as an object of reference for understanding of Joab's character. Most importantly, we argue here that Abner's character is essential to the plot and purpose of the narrative in 2 Samuel 2–3 by being the catalyst for David's consolidation of power and by highlighting Saul's guilt and poor decisions in 1 Samuel.

First Abner's character space is closely associated with Saul's. Because MT includes 1 Sam 17:55–18:5 and LXX does not, the link between Saul's character and Abner's is stronger in MT than in LXX, but in both versions, Abner's character only ever appears in scenes that also contain Saul's in 1 Samuel. Even in 2 Samuel, after Saul's death, the connection between Abner and Saul continues because Abner is still called the head of *Saul's* army even after Saul's death (2 Sam 2:8) and because he is the source of power in the kingdom after Saul. Neither Ishbosheth (MT) nor Jebosthe (LXX) appear in 1 Samuel or are as closely connected with Saul in 2 Samuel, and it is Abner, not Saul's successor, who acts on behalf of Saul's kingdom throughout 2 Samuel 2–3. In other words, Abner symbolizes Saul and Saul's kingdom in a way that Saul's successor (Ishbosheth in MT and Jebosthe in LXX) does not.

Second, the presence of Abner's character in a particular passage also inevitably indicates a negative transition for Saul's kingdom. In both versions of 1 Samuel, his character is introduced at the end of Saul's military victories and just before his sparing of Agag (15:1-35), and both versions mention his character just before Saul begins his pursuit of David's life (20:31-33; cf. v. 6), just before Saul speaks to David for the last time (26:17-25), and shortly before Saul visits the Medium at Endor (28:3-25). The Masoretic Text also places him just before Saul becomes jealous of David (1 Sam 18:6-8). In 2 Samuel, both versions depict Abner

leading Saul's house into a losing battle against Joab's army (2 Sam 2:12-32) and handing Saul's kingdom to David (3:8-21). The texts also state that Saul's house is in decline (3:1) in between those scenes. Abner's character, therefore, is an extension of Saul's, represents Saul's kingdom, and signals or initiates negative transitions for Saul's kingdom.

Third, Abner's character provides us a point of departure for understanding other characters. In 1 Samuel, the text utilizes Abner's character to underscore whether David and Jonathan are accepted by Saul, especially in 1 Samuel 20 and 26 but also in 1 Samuel 17 of MT. His character emphasizes that David becomes increasingly ostracized by Saul whereas Jonathan waivers in his loyalty to his father; Jonathan loves David but still serves Saul. In addition, with regard to Joab, Abner's characterization and his interaction with Joab's helps us anticipate that Joab will be similar to Abner in that he is an extension of his own king (David) and is also very persuasive. Joab differs from Abner in that he prefers violence to rhetoric, he is generally victorious in battle, and he is devious, often acting against David's wishes or without David's knowledge.

Fourth, Abner's actions in 2 Samuel 2–3 show that he is the catalyst for the transfer of power from Saul's house to David's, and thus, the text uses his character to prove that David does not violently usurp the throne. The plot of 2 Samuel 1–5 clearly centers on how those united to the house of Saul become united to David, and it seems that the text is at pains to defend David from charges of violent usurpation. The text repeatedly assures us that David does not take Saul's throne through violence or coercion (see 2 Sam 1:15-16; 1:19-28; 2:14; 3:28-39; 4:8-12; and 5:1-3).⁷ Abner, as the character to establish Saul's successor (2 Sam 2:8) and who

⁷ For a brief discussion of the apologetic nature of these and other chapters, see McKenzie, *King David*, 32-4.

wields the greatest power within Saul's house (3:1, 8), is presented as the sole character with the authority and ability to enter into a covenant with David and to convince the elders of Israel to realign themselves under David. Only after Abner has completed his tasks in 2 Sam 3:12-21 does David finally garner the support of "all Israel," but David does so passively and humbly. He does take any initiative in gaining control of the nation. Rather than seizing the throne through violence or coercion, David receives the throne from Abner. It is because of Abner that David becomes king, and thus, Abner's character functions as the catalyst for this transfer of power and as the proof of David's innocence.⁸

Finally, just as his decisive actions in 2 Samuel emphasize David's passivity and innocence in taking the throne, Abner's passivity in 1 Samuel underscores Saul's activity and guilt in his foolish activities. As a minor character, Abner's decisive actions and initiative in 2 Samuel 2–3 contrast starkly with the relative inaction of David, the clear protagonist of the larger story, in a manner akin to how Dickens' minor characters (e.g., Mr. Brownlow) overshadow his protagonists (e.g., Oliver Twist).⁹ In a similar fashion, when we look back on 1 Samuel through the lens of 2 Samuel, we see that Abner's passivity and relative inaction in 1 Samuel contrasts strongly with the relative action of Saul, the protagonist of that portion of the story. Abner does not fight in 1 Samuel nor does he actively pursue David like Saul does (1 Samuel 24; 26). He does not slaughter the priests at Nob (1 Samuel 25), and in LXX, he is not even present for when Saul fears Goliath (1 Samuel 17). Abner also does not accompany Saul to the medium at Endor (1 Samuel 27), and he plays no role in Saul's illicit sacrifice (1 Samuel 13) or in the sparing of King Agag (1 Samuel 15). That Abner's character space always intersects with Saul's in 1

⁸ McKenzie (*King David*, 116-22) argues that the historical David did usurp the throne but that the biblical text takes an apologetic stance towards David and tries to exonerate him of any treasonous or murderous charges.

⁹ See discussion in Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 132.

Samuel and that he is an extension of Saul's character, his Absence from these scenes is telling and proves that the highs and especially the lows of Saul's kingdom are Saul's alone; Abner shares none of the success or blame for Saul's actions. Abner's character space, therefore, both proves that David does not usurp the throne and that Saul alone is responsible for his house being rejected by Yhwh. As such, Abner is, essential to the story despite his minoriness.

Avenues for Future Research

While this dissertation struck new ground by providing the only comprehensive and academic study of the character of Abner and has modeled a new approach to the study of minor characters in HB by utilizing Woloch's study, there is still much more that can and should be done with respect to both. In this final section of the dissertation, we present several areas of study that merit more research in order to better understand the texts and versions of the Samuel stories and the role of minor characters in the books of Samuel.

Perhaps the most obvious area that requires further research is the characterization of Abner in other ancient versions of the story, especially in the Peshitta and in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*. While the Peshitta tends to follow the MT closely, even small differences between the Syriac and Hebrew will alter the way we perceive Abner in the Peshitta, and Josephus's depiction of Abner should prove particularly interesting given his tendency to embellish biblical stories for his own purposes. In addition, some attention should be given to the Hebrew texts found at Qumran and how these differ from and conform to both MT and LXX. Likewise, studies of the discussions about Abner found in Rabbinic and early Christian literature would be helpful in seeing how the character of Abner was received and understood by early religious leaders and communities. By studying Abner's characterization in these different versions,

literatures, and commentaries, we will broaden our understanding not only of Abner's character but also of reception history, narratology, and early Jewish and Christian theology.

This dissertation also paves the way for future studies to apply Woloch's "character system" to the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. This dissertation, while providing a thorough investigation of Abner and his character space within these books, clearly falls short of a comprehensive study of all the minor characters within 1 and 2 Samuel. Thus, we have not fully utilized Woloch's insights, which examine the collective contributions of all minor characters of a particular text, not just the character space of a single minor character. For instance, in discussing *Pride and Prejudice*, Woloch shows that Elizabeth's sisters represent the vices from which Elizabeth needs to move away, and yet they must be a constant presence around her for the narrative's structural logic to remain intact.¹⁰ By constantly placing Elizabeth in a contrasting position against her sisters, the text ultimately elevates her above the others.¹¹ Thus, Woloch concludes his chapter on Jane Austen by saying, "Their minorness is built into her [Elizabeth's] centrality; their functionality is built into her freedom."¹² Moreover, Woloch notices that the minor characters in Dickens' *Great Expectations* get compressed into their mere physical traits like Mr. Wopsle's Roman nose or Uncle Pumblechook's mouth like a fish, and this compression, coupled with the text's tendency to refer to these characters as a group of individuals (e.g., "the company"), places them in a "violent" relationship with the protagonist Pip.¹³ These two brief examples show that Woloch's concern is not simply how a certain minor

¹⁰ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 47, 69.

¹¹ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 69-71.

¹² Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 123.

¹³ Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 186.

character (e.g., Elizabeth's sisters, Uncle Pumblehook, Abner, Hannah, etc.) functions within the narrative but rather with how all the minor characters compete for narrative space and interact in ways that serve to highlight certain characteristics of the protagonist or add dimensions to the plot. There is a need for further scholarship on how all the minor characters of Samuel contribute to the plot, to the characterizations of the protagonists (e.g., Samuel, Saul, and David), and to the overall message of the text. This dissertation, therefore, has opened the door for further studies on the books of Samuel to continue utilizing Woloch's concepts of character spaces and character systems within biblical studies.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . David N. Freedman, et al. (eds.)
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentary
BibOr	Biblica et Orientalia
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BWAT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>The Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CEJL	Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature
<i>DCH</i>	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i>
<i>HABL</i>	Harper, R. F. <i>Assyrian and Babylonian Letters Belonging to the Kouyunjik Collections of the British Museum</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago, 1902.
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
HB	The Hebrew Bible as presented in <i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IDB</i>	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . G. A. Buttrick (ed.)
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal for Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JBQ</i>	<i>Jewish Bible Quarterly</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JPOS</i>	<i>Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society</i>

JPS	Jewish Publication Society
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplementary Series
LXX	The Septuagint as presented in: <i>The Old Testament in Greek: According to the Text of Codex Vaticanus Supplemented from Other Uncial Manuscripts with a Critical Apparatus Containing the Variants of the Chief Ancient Authorities for the Text of the Septuagint</i> . Alan E. Brooke, Norman McLean, Henry Thackeray (eds.). London: Cambridge University, 1927.
MT	The Masoretic Text as presented in <i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
NCB	New Century Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OTL	Old Testament Library
PTMS	Princeton Theology Monograph Series
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLABS	Society of Biblical Literature, Archaeology and Biblical Studies
<i>TCL</i>	<i>Textes cunéiformes</i> , Musées du Louvre, Paris.
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i> Supplementary Series
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>