

The Tekoite Narrative and Retributive Justice: A Case Study on the Poliphony of Legal Discussions in the Hebrew Bible¹

The Tekoite narrative (2 Samuel 14) is remarkable for its rhetorical skill and ideological complexity; as such, it is well suited to illuminate the rich tapestry of legal and ethical discussions preserved in Israel's self-reflexive library we call the Hebrew Bible. With the overall aim of elucidating the Hebrew Bible's dialectical polyphony on issues of rule enforcement and accountability – the theme of our conference section –, this paper attempts to map the legal concepts that are either embedded in the Tekoite narrative as integral elements of the worldview of the eighth to sixth-century Judahite community in which the narrative was created, or are reflected in the text as points to be evaluated or communicated. The paper arrives at two conclusions: first, it introduces the idea that the narrative served to reinforce the theme of retributive punishment by presenting an out-of-key, false iteration of the counter-theme of mercy, as relevant in the Hebrew Bible as the theme itself, and best embodied by Abraham's plea for the undeserving in Genesis 18. And second, the paper suggests that a common lesson of the discussions of this theme and counter-theme, as they recur throughout the Hebrew Bible and also in the Tekoite narrative, is that it takes a prophet to judge properly when retributive justice can be set aside.

Keywords: Biblical law, retributive justice, royal pardon, themes and motifs in the Bible, wisdom traditions, juridical parables

1. The Tekoite narrative in its contexts

The narrative presents an adviser's manipulation of the king's strategic decisions by casting an otherwise anonymous "wise woman" from Tekoa and partially scripting her plea, which employs a constructed juridical parable (a *mashal*).² It begins with *Joab*, *David's* military commander and political operator, perceiving the king's longing for *Absalom* and then devising a plan to persuade him to recall his estranged son. To this end, a Tekoite woman is to stage a legal petition to the king, asking that the blood feud be set aside in her particular case. She claims to be a widow whose two sons quarrelled, resulting in one killing the other; and now her lineage and inheritance face extinction if the then-normative punitive measures are taken against her murderous son. The woman's plea for mercy mirrors the situation between *David* and *Absalom*, with the conspicuous

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1 The author, who participated in the conference "*Parallels between the Jewish-Christian and Roman Legal Roots of our Legal Culture IV*" in Pécs on 13 June 2025, would like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to publish in the conference proceedings.

2 For definitions of theme, motif, and *mashal*, see below, at the end of ch. 2. For the most concentrated analysis of the Tekoite narrative, see: LYKE, King David.

difference that *David's* livelihood and lineage do not depend in the least on the reinstatement of his murderous son, in contrast to the staged widow's precarious situation: *David* would not be left childless and destitute if *Absalom's* exile continued.³ However, this is precisely what makes the *marsh* well constructed and effective: the parallel must not be so obvious as to betray the connection between the two cases; instead, it must "*strike a careful balance between getting too close to the parable's application and being too remote from it.*"⁴ And the widow's *marsh* does just that: it exhibits the ploy of "*distancing and of reinvolvement,*" which is "*necessary for a person blinded by proximity to a problem to achieve a new perspective on it.*"⁵ *David* first attempts to defer ("*Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you,*" v. 9), but ultimately grants a verdict of mercy that *Joab's* rhetorical device was intended to elicit. And once the king has pronounced the acquittal of the fictitious son and granted protection in case anyone should insist on enforcing talionic justice, the woman can move from parabolic pleading to direct confrontation. She reveals the analogy and its purpose: "*Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God?*" (v. 13, echoing *Nathan's* "*You are that man*" device of two chapters earlier).⁶ Her rebuke hinges on *David's* inconsistency: he has just shown mercy in the present case, but withholds it from his own son. Remarkably, she employs a number of rhetorical fallacies by equating *Absalom* with the people of *God* (false equivalence); by implying that *David's* refusal to reconcile with *Absalom* is a threat to the whole nation (appeal to the collective / *argumentum ad populum*); and by inverting a responsible exercise of law – withholding pardon from *Absalom* – into an example of injustice (moral reframing). She also invokes theological language, suggesting that "*God will not take away a life; he will devise plans so as not to keep an outcast banished forever from his presence*" (v. 14), thus framing mercy as standard divine practice, implicitly urging the king to imitate this model. She also adds reflections on her earlier state of mind – motivation, anxiety, and reasoning – in vv. 15–17, which can be seen as part of the *ethopoeia* dimensions of rhetorical strategy, using *pathos* to draw *David* into her moral frame.⁷

David soon recognises *Joab's* hand in the affair (v. 19), and although the woman's appeal is rhetorically successful, the king's subsequent actions are marked by ambivalence. First, he ignores the incomparability of the two situations, as already noted above. The woman does the same, quite conveniently for her purpose, but the reader cannot escape the nagging thought that her unmasking does indeed give the king the opportunity to retract his promise. *David* could claim that it was a ploy – if he wanted to. Apparently, he does not. His willingness "*to participate in the abuse of manipulation is in stark contrast to his admission of responsibility for his moral failure*

3 This is pointed out, among others, by MCKENZIE, King David 166. *Absalom* was actually the third-born son of *David*. The second-born, *Chileab*, disappears from the text after the report of his birth – "*so inconsequential was the second son of David that the biblical authors were even confused about his name; he is sometimes called Chileab (2 Samuel 3:3), sometimes Daniel (1 Chron. 3:1).*" See: KIRSCH, King David ch12n10.

4 DAVIES, Narrative Ethics 98.

5 CAMP, The Wise Women 21.

6 When quoting the Bible, I will be using the NRSV.

7 Textual critics contend that these verses may have left their original place somewhere around v. 5 as they would best function as a proem or *exordium* setting the context for her plea; see: JONES, 1 and 2 Samuel 223. Indeed, by v. 15, she has already 'blown her cover,' so it seems out of place to try to reinforce the persuasive arc of her *persona*. Cf. HOFTIJZER (David and the Tekoite Woman 443–444), who argues that "*David's conversation with the Tekoite is not – as is often thought – in its present form extremely corrupted,*" rather, these statements of hers serve "*to smooth down the effect of [her] confession by extreme flattery.*"

in the parallel Bathsheba story,⁸ and “by allowing himself to be manipulated in this way, David becomes more of a tool in the hands of Joab, a progression that is gaining momentum within the larger narrative.” Even though he is generally relatable for the reader by way of appearing “as a reassuringly fallible character who, like all hearers and readers of the story, was subject to human passions and temptations, and beset by human infirmities,”¹⁰ there is a discernible deterioration in his moral standing, identity, and self-relatability. To the extent that – in Mills’ apt description – David provides an image of the “pitiable state of fallible human nature.”¹¹

Second, David allows Absalom to return to Jerusalem but forbids him to see his face (v. 24), thus maintaining a distance and merely partial reconciliation. This is the right moment for the narrative to turn to a characterisation of Absalom’s physical beauty and charisma (vv. 25–27), foreshadowing his future political ambitions, staging the plot by describing “the situation existing at the beginning of the action,”¹² a typical technique of biblical narrative (*prolepsis* with a ‘thickening’ of a character who will soon become relevant). And indeed, Absalom, frustrated by the fact that he is still an outcast, forcibly attracts Joab’s attention by setting fire to his fields (v. 30), which leads to a meeting with the king. The chapter concludes with Absalom being received by David and bowing before him, followed by the king’s kiss (v. 33), a gesture of restored favour (in resolution to the gesture of bowing face to the ground, seen three times in the chapter).

The chapter’s function in its immediate context is clear: it occupies a pivotal place within the so-called Succession Narrative (or Court History, see below), serving as a crucial transitional episode that reintroduces Absalom to the royal court. In its wider context, though, the Former Prophets or Deuteronomistic History (DtH), in which Israel’s narrative arc runs from the conquest of the Promised Land to its forfeiture, and in which David is crowned over all Israel exactly halfway through – in what appears to be a chiasm artfully crafted at the final redaction –, this episode and the whole Absalom pericope is but a brief blip in the story of God’s anointed whose sons are promised to occupy the throne forever. Zooming out to an even wider context, that of the whole Hebrew Bible, the Absalom fiasco does not create any ripple: his coup is not mentioned elsewhere, even though similar motifs recur in all three sections of the Hebrew Bible (e.g. fratricide and wise women). The larger Absalom pericope, however, serves as a reiteration of the exile theme that runs through the entire story narrated in the Hebrew Bible: David suffered a mini-exile near the height of the monarchy, similar to that of the people at the time of the final redaction of the DtH. Thus the king’s story (like that of the ark earlier, when it went into ‘exile’ in Philistia) foreshadowed that of his people, and the Absalom pericope may have offered comfort to exilic and post-exilic audiences.

8 CAMPBELL, 2 Samuel 136. WESTBROOK, And he will Take 180n40. I am indebted to Westbrook for these observations on scholarly judgements about the relational dynamics between David and Joab.

9 WESTBROOK, And he will Take 180. Indeed, after the Bathsheba episode, Joab increasingly emerges as the real power behind the throne. As David retreats into passivity, Joab assumes roles traditionally reserved for the king – commanding battles, securing victories –, while David’s claim to glory grows increasingly hollow (also noted by WESTBROOK, op. cit. 180n40).

10 DAVIES, Narrative Ethics 107.

11 MILLS, Biblical Morality 52 (referred to by DAVIES, loc. cit.). For analyses of the presentation of David’s tragic fate, see: EXUM, Tragedy and Biblical Narrative 120–149 (“David: The Judgment of God”); MILLS, Biblical Morality 52–54 („David and Dimensions of Tragedy”); and BRUEGGEMANN, David’s Truth 33–61 (“The Painful Truth of the Man”). See also: ROSENBERG, 1 and 2 Samuel 141. Rosenberg concludes that Samuel is “a work of national self-criticism.”

12 BAR-ÉFRAT, Narrative Art 111.

2. The historical period reflected in the narrative

Which historical period is under scrutiny when we analyse the legal and ethical concepts embedded in the narrative? Modern scholarship has largely rejected Noth's single-redactor model of the DtH in favour of a multi-layered compositional process, most commonly articulated as a two-redaction theory.¹³ According to the current consensus, the first major edition may have been composed in the late seventh century BCE, during the reign of King *Josiah* (c. 640–609 BCE), with the aim of legitimising *Josiah* as a Davidic ideal and a royal mirror image of *Moses*; whereas the second is typically dated to the Babylonian exile (after 586 BCE), as a response to the destruction of Jerusalem and the apparent failure of the Davidic promise. Within this compositional framework, the *Absalom* pericope¹⁴ is identified as part of the above mentioned Succession Narrative, a coherent literary unit characterised by psychological realism, courtly intrigue, and the problem of dynastic legitimacy.¹⁵ The core of this narrative is believed to predate the DtH, having been composed during the monarchical period, perhaps in the eighth or early seventh century BCE, as a royal chronicle or pro-*David* political document. Nevertheless, the extant form of the *Absalom* story may also reveal Deuteronomistic redaction, particularly in the way *David's* earlier sin against *Uriah* appears to be framed as the theological seed of *Absalom's* rebellion.¹⁶ In sum, while the narrative core may be early, its final literary form reflects the ideological concerns of the Josianic and Exilic redactors with the aim of telling their cohesive story, combining earlier narrative material with then-current theological reflection.

Therefore, recognising that the narrative is a product of several hands of authorship and redaction, it is justified to read this narrative as a reflection eighth- to sixth-century Judahite culture. For such a reading of legal concepts in a literary work, it is not necessary to assign them to a specific layer. Nor does such an analysis depend on the historical accuracy of the episode: it is not for me now to assess where the historically authentic core of the narrative lies (if there is one), and to what extent it must be seen as a programmatic literary construct serving an ideological programme. Notably, *McKenzie* sees the Tekoite narrative as “an apologetic invention” serving the agenda that “*David was compelled to accept Absalom back*;¹⁷ a judgement that *Baden* elaborates further: “the typical biblical program of elevating David while covering his tracks is evident. [...] *David did not want to see Absalom again, the story tells us, but he was such a deeply good person that he allowed the wise woman to force his hand.*”¹⁸ If this is a fair judgement, and linguistic data supports that it may well be,¹⁹ the narrative still opens a window on the legal and ethical ideas of

13 CROSS, Canaanite Myth, esp. 274–278; NELSON, The Double Redaction, esp. 13–28. For present-day reflections, see: DIETRICH, Die Vorderen Propheten 178–192.

14 2 Samuel 13–19.

15 2 Samuel 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2. For a more nuanced account of the hypothetical sources, see: DIETRICH, Die Vorderen Propheten 251–259.

16 Cf. 2 Samuel 12:10–12; an interpretive framing that would have aligned the earlier narratives with the overarching theodicean structure of the DtH, in which royal failures lead to national calamity.

17 MCKENZIE, King David 166.

18 BADEN, The Historical David 197. For a bibliography of the scholarly discussion on how the text seeks to distance from *David* from blood guilt of those standing between him and the throne, see: BOSWORTH, The Story within a Story 103n76.

19 The author makes literary use of dialect to portray character: “Through the use of dialect, the speaking character, the wise woman of Tekoa, can emphasize her own unimportance to protect herself, to avoid being

those two centuries of Judahite culture.²⁰ Even more so if it incorporates folkloric elements, as it appears to do. “*The Tekoite narrative represents, in highly condensed and idiomatic form, a complex accumulation of overlapping biblical topoi,*”²¹ to such an extent that it “*functions as a synecdoche for the topos of sibling rivalry and brings with it an accumulation of related traditions that comprise an ongoing process of rumination on the notion of chosenness and its consequences.*”²² This, in fact, underlines the social embeddedness of the ethical and legal concepts seen the narrative. “*Narratives like the Tekoite’s are a question ‘not of the artistry of a single, consciously creative artist, [...] but for the very reason that many hands have moulded them, these narratives have acquired the imprint of the whole group and have become the common property of the people.*”²³ In fact, as Gunkel explained, one difference between present-day and earlier cultures lies “*in the fact that we have stories nowadays which are recognised as being the product of particular authors, whereas the poetical stories of more primitive times came into existence as the tradition of the people or of a certain group of people. Wherever a people comes into the light of history, it already possesses an abundance of traditions of this kind. We never see these coming into being; rather they are always already there, transmitted from mouth to mouth like the folk song, popular law, morals, religion and language.*”²⁴

Motifs or type-scenes in this narrative that Gunkel identifies as folkloric in origin include “*the sympathetic portrayal of women,*” “*fratricide,*”²⁵ “*the sending of servants,*” and being “*snared by one’s own snare*” (as well as what appears to be a variation thereof, “*being judged by one’s own judgement*”).²⁶ To all this, we must add that this *marshal* fits an item in the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, “*Wisdom (knowledge) taught by parable;*”²⁷ and we also ought to specify that the widow’s wisdom “*in pre-deuteronomic historical traditions [...] signifies native shrewdness [...], persuasive speech (2 Sam. 14:2), artistic skill and craftsmanship [...] and general knowledge (2 Sam. 14:20).*”²⁸

There are many biblical parallels to various aspects of this narrative. Without claiming to be exhaustive, the Hebrew Bible contains four narratives in which women of remarkable wisdom play a central role as mediators in conflict resolution. In two of these narratives they are explicitly referred to as wise women, one of which is the subject of this paper, the other being the account of the siege of Abel Beth-Maakah.²⁹ *Abigail* also functions³⁰ as a wise mediator in the dispute between two conflicting parties, without being explicitly referred to as a wise woman (only

perceived as a threat by the king.” See: ZAHAVI-ELY, Turn Right or Left 43. The possible depiction of spoken non-standard dialect also suggests that the narrative is a carefully crafted work of literature.

- 20 MOORE, Wise Women 149. As Moore notes, “*questions about origins are for many today at least subsidiary, and at most irrelevant, to questions of literary structure and semiotic function. Thus the Wisdom Woman is a personification or, more technically, a metaphorical symbol for the wisdom tradition itself.*”
- 21 LYKE, King David 12.
- 22 LYKE, King David 84; emphasis added.
- 23 LYKE, King David 15n9, quoting GUNKEL, The Folktale 23.
- 24 GUNKEL, The Folktale 23.
- 25 Later scholars have also noted the similarities of this *marshal* with the *Cain* and *Abel* story and other Genesis narratives (see, e.g. LYKE, King David 25–85; cited by KLINE, Narrative Analogy 221n57).
- 26 GUNKEL, The Folktale 142–45.
- 27 THOMPSON, Motif-Index J80, J99; cited by LYKE, King David 15n9 in a second-hand note.
- 28 WEINFELD, Deuteronomy 254. The incident, however, “*does not provide sufficient evidence for contending that Tekoa had a distinctive wisdom tradition*” (JONES, 1 and 2 Samuel 214).
- 29 2 Samuel 20.
- 30 1 Samuel 25.

implicitly, as a dissenting wife of Mr “Fool”). Similarly,³¹ a necromancer from Endor “*attempts to resolve a dispute between Saul and Samuel – a difficult task inasmuch as one of the parties to this dispute is already dead.*”³² (That said, some scholars doubt that the Tekoite narrative adopts the wise woman motif.³³) And of all the *mesalim*, perhaps the one that most resembles the widow’s is³⁴ that, where a prophet in disguise weaves a story for the king, with the same ploy for the king to pronounce a judgement that can in turn be used for his own circumstances. “*Like David in the mashal woven by the prophet Nathan concerning the poor man’s lamb, the king condemns the miscreant who is, of course, a symbol of himself.*”³⁵ In addition, we must not forget that “*biblical authors relied on a much larger referential framework than the literary tradition preserved in the various manuscript editions of the Hebrew Bible.*”³⁶

At this point, I still owe my readers with definitions for several terms I have used: theme, motif, and *mashal*. I now honour that debt. “*The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*” defines a theme as “*a salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work’s treatment of its subject-matter;*” whereas a motif is “*a situation, incident, idea, image, or character-type that is found in many different literary works, folktales, or myths; or any element of a work that is elaborated into a more general theme.*”³⁷ Or, drawn with broader brushstrokes, “*a theme is [...] an abstract concept that describes what the work is about, while a motif is a more concrete element that recurs in a work.*”³⁸ (To give two examples from my terminology: retribution and mercy appear on the thematic level, while the wise woman is a motif – and both are *topoi*.) *Mashal*, translated parable, is defined by Niditch as “*rooted in the drawing of comparisons, of ‘being like.’ The weaver of a mashal creates a metaphor, a comparison among a story, characters, a description, or a more telegraphic piece of content, and a current situation.*”³⁹ The narrower category of juridical parables is, in Moore’s to-the-point definition, “*in substance, [an] imaginary homeopathic image crafted by professional mediators in order to resolve real conflict in the real world.*”⁴⁰

31 1 Samuel 28.

32 MOORE, *Wise Women* 152. On the use of the wise woman motif in the HB, esp. for an analysis of whether this symbol suggests a related social reality, see also: FORTI, *The Feminine Personification of Wisdom*.

33 WHYBRAY, *The Succession Narrative* 59. Whybray argues that “*Joab’s use of the woman of Tekoa is really the story of Joab’s wisdom rather than that of the woman.*” (Cf. FORTI, *The Feminine Personification of Wisdom* 206. Forti thinks that the wording “*suggests that Joab may simply have conveyed a general idea to her, the woman working out her ‘scheme’ in response to the real-life scenario.*”) HOFTIJZER, *David and the Tekoite Woman* 444. Hoftijzer sees her as a “*capable woman, who is able to carry out a very delicate task.*” CAMP, *The Wise Women* 14–15. Camp discusses the two wise women in 2 Samuel from the perspective of political roles in pre-Monarchical and Monarchical Israelite communities. For some of these references see: MOORE, *Wise Women*, 153n35.

34 1 Kings 20:39–43.

35 NIDITCH, *War in the Hebrew Bible* 36.

36 JOHNSON, *The Woman from Tekoa* 59 (this analysis of the language of petitions also includes the epigraphic record).

37 BALDICK, *The Oxford Dictionary* 333–34 (“Theme”) and 215–16 (“Motif”). KLINE, *Narrative Analogy* 40n155. I am indebted to Kline for these references and for her reflections on the use of these terms.

38 KLINE, *Narrative Analogy* 40n155.

39 NIDITCH, *Ethics in the Hebrew Bible* 88. For a full discussion of the *mashal* as an Israelite genre, see: NIDITCH, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible* 67–87.

40 MOORE, *Wise Women* 153. A thorough analysis of a juridical parable – or more broadly, of petition narratives – must address the differences and the complex relationship between legal and wisdom

3. Legal concepts reflected in the narrative's themes and motifs

Let me begin with an overview of what I consider to be underlying legal concepts, i.e. those which, due to cultural habituation, appear to be self-evident, almost or completely commonplace in the culture of the time, and thus belong to the deep conceptual structures reflected in the narrative. I believe these can be identified by paying attention to what appears to operate below the level of conscious evaluation. In fact, these elements, in the author's judgement, do not need to be explained or discussed because they are pre-reflexive or pre-conscious.

- (1) The theme of retributive punishment is common to virtually all of the Hebrew Bible: sin is followed by retribution, which is to be inflicted either by the community or by the Godhead – depending on whether the offender is identified or not, cf. Deuteronomy's distinction between what is “revealed” or stays “hidden” (29:29). This concept is not unique to Deuteronomist schools, however; rather, it is a framework that shapes the entire community's worldview, permeating the Priestly texts (e.g. as the concept behind the atonement rites in Leviticus) as well as the Yahwist narratives (e.g. the expulsion from Eden,⁴¹ to name the most blatant one). The concept of retribution for sin is most often addressed collectively, within the framework of the covenantal status between *God* and his people, as one of the governing principles of their covenantal relationship. In a minority of cases, this concept appears at the level of the individual, as with *David's* sin against *Uriah*, but even in such cases the individual missteps of a ruler – his unethical choices or his unfaithfulness to *God* – have repercussions for the collective (see below, in point iv).
- (2) The institution of the blood feud is governed by the above concept; and, similarly, no author in this polyphonic library seems to give any thought to revising it. Indeed, the injunctions concerning the cities of refuge⁴² merely mitigate one aspect of misapplication (accidental manslaughter should not be equated with murder), but do not question the *raison d'être* of the institution itself. (The Tekoite's plea is also based on the notion that blood feuds have damaging consequences for the parents of victims and perpetrator brothers. It is reasonable to assume that the widow's plea would have resonated with the original audience of the *Absalom* pericope, since blood feuds have undoubtedly produced such circumstances in every generation.) The participants in this conference could certainly cite many reasons (social, institutional, etc.) for the failure to revisit such a blatantly barbaric institution, so let me limit myself to highlighting one theological reason that may not occur to a modern audience: the conviction that metaphysical compensation is required for the blood “*crying out of the ground*.”⁴³
- (3) The source of law is the king, a view that was almost ubiquitous until modern civil societies. This implies, of course, that the king must be persuaded if one wishes to obtain a favourable law or judgement.

traditions, and the genre in which they best intersect: judicial wisdom. For a comprehensive and up-to-date discussion, my readers are referred to JOHNSON, *The Woman from Tekoa*.

41 Genesis 3.

42 Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 19, Joshua 20.

43 Genesis 4:10.

- (4) The individual mores of the kings determine the fate of the whole people in the Deuteronomistic view, even though collective reward and punishment may occasionally befall the people as a result of the actions of a commoner, for example, if he is foolish enough to misappropriate *God's* booty (*cherem*) during a holy war.⁴⁴
- (5) One is to be judged by one's own words, so even *God's* or the king's supreme authority can be challenged if he himself pronounces a judgement applicable to his own situation. This motif is probably related to the institution of the *neder*, the oath or vow, which was binding even to the point of compelling a hero to sacrifice his own daughter,⁴⁵ and entailed complex arrangements for how its consequences could be transferred or annulled, including the Tekoite's willingness in our narrative to absorb any adverse effects of the sin of pardoning a murderer, a 'lightning rod' gesture that provides apotropaic 'grounding' for the king.⁴⁶

Having observed the concepts that appear to be so deeply embedded in the cultural imaginary at the roots of the narrative that they are taken for granted, let me now focus on the aspect where I theorise that the narrative seeks to prescribe legal-ethical attitudes or behaviours. While the former was taken for granted without the need for justification, the following aspect seems to require elaboration in the author's judgement. As mentioned earlier, it is at this point that the author appears to articulate the primary message he seeks to convey, allowing us to discern issues that were under discussion in eighth to the sixth-century Judah.

4. The widow's plea as an out-of-key iteration to a counter-theme

Retributive punishment is such a prevalent theme that Israel's sacred library even provides ample space for the counter-theme of mercy-overriding-justice, with sophisticated explorations of when and how justice can be set aside (if at all), and what consequences such an act of clemency may lead to. Elaborations on this counter-theme include *Abraham* bargaining for Sodom⁴⁷; *Moses* arguing or pleading to spare Israel⁴⁸; *Samuel* interceding for Israel⁴⁹; as well as *Amos*⁵⁰, *Jeremiah*⁵¹, and *Daniel*⁵² doing the same. These texts, understandably, often recall the motif of repentance (*teshubah*) and the various evaluations of how it can be authentic and effective in averting retribution (to which this paper cannot devote much attention). The emblematic narrative reflection of the counter-theme, I believe, is *Abraham* challenging the certainty of retribution as he bargains with *God* for the wicked cities.⁵³ Indeed, that narrative begins with *God's* revelation of his intention to investigate the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 20–21), which is preceded by an internal

44 Joshua 7.

45 Judges 11.

46 See also the way in which a father can 'defuse' his daughter's hasty oath by a prompt reaction in Numbers 30:3–5.

47 Genesis 18:22–33.

48 Exodus 32:9–14; Numbers 14:11–20; Deuteronomy 9:13–29.

49 1 Samuel 7:5–9; 12:19–25.

50 Amos 7:1–6.

51 Jeremiah 14:7–9, 19–22.

52 Daniel 9:3–19.

53 Genesis 18.

monologue about inviting Abraham into a dialogue about the justice of *God's* proposed action (*"Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do...?"*, vv. 17–19). Indeed, we seem to be dealing here with a *God* who, after some inner hesitation, decides to demonstrate his willingness to be contradicted and argued with. *Abraham*, on the other hand, by accepting the implied invitation, shows that he is able to 'read between the lines' and challenges *God's* destructive mission. Ultimately, he shows himself to be obedient to a subtler level of *God's* message, responding *not only to what He says, but to who He is*. Indeed, if we were to translate this subtly dramatised scene in terms of *J. L. Austin's* theory of speech acts,⁵⁴ on the surface level of the 'locutionary act,' *God* reveals partnership to *Abraham* (v. 17, quoted above) and shares with him his plans for retributive justice. However, the intention behind the utterance; that is, the 'illocutionary act' performed by sharing His plans, is an invitation to *Abraham* to enter into a dialogue to mobilise *God's* mercy in opposition to His sense of justice. And thirdly, the Austinian 'perlocutionary act' seems to be the revelation of the nature of *God* himself: a paradoxical personality who wishes to exact rightful vengeance in the hope that someone is worthy and willing to dissuade *Him* to do so. To put it even more bluntly, the Deity appears to be ambivalent about his own first reactions, looking for good reasons to abandon them in order to be merciful instead.

I had to dwell on that other narrative because if we compare the scene of *Abraham's* plea with that of the Tekoite widow – a comparison offered to us by the canonical whole of the Hebrew Bible –, we can see that the courtroom scene is not an authentic enactment of the counter-theme of mercy triumphing over justice, but merely an out-of-key iteration, a shallow mimicry of what the patriarch-prophet did.⁵⁵ *Joab* sets up an emotionally persuasive figure who borrows the likeness of mercy but uses it in the service of political strategy, undermining justice for the sake of expediency.

It is also noteworthy that the distinctive theological element introduced by the Tekoite woman (mentioned above) is in direct contradiction to that of *Nathan's* prophecy. As *Westbrook* points out, *"While Nathan's words emphasize the essential divine response of the restoration of justice through judgment for one's actions, the woman of Tekoa declares that the deity looks for ways to avoid such unpleasantness, especially if it involves casting away the offender (2 Sam. 14:13–14). While Nathan presses David into admission of personal guilt, the woman of Tekoa manipulates David into condoning personal guilt – both for himself and his son. By taking this approach, the woman also provides David with the appearance of a justified means through which to take control of the destiny*

54 AUSTIN, How to Do Things with Words 98–102 and Lecture IX from p. 108.

55 It is not my intention, however, to suggest that the two stories have influenced each other. (The only thread that seems to connect the Tekoite narrative with the *Torah*, is the apparent familiarity of the episode with some of the precepts of Deuteronomy, although it is unclear, whether there is a textual dependence of the episode on the Law. LYKE, King David 71–79; KLINE, Narrative Analogy 189n116. Their chronological sequence is also unclear, since dating the contents of Genesis is even more difficult than dating the those of the Succession Narrative. It is not possible to draw any conclusions about the diachronic development of legal tradition from these stories; nevertheless, *Whybray's* (Genesis 52) remarks are worth reporting here: *"This passage is [...] a discussion of a theological question of the utmost importance, that the author has himself composed in the form of a dialogue. The question, which is about God's justice (v. 25), was not, for the readers, a purely theoretical one, but one of immense practical importance, especially for those who had suffered, and were still suffering, the effects of the devastation of the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 587 Bce. It is raised in various forms in other OT books of a relatively late period, e.g. in Job, and Ezek 14:12–23. The fate of Sodom is here a paradigm of this much wider question."* (Emphasis by the author.) We must therefore confine ourselves to a vague statement that Genesis 18 may well be an elaboration of patriarchal themes reflecting Exilic sensibilities.

of his son; whereas Nathan, on the other hand, makes clear that the destiny of David and his sons is held in the hand of the deity.⁵⁶

Finally, *Joab*'s successful manipulation of the mercy counter-theme represents the moral ambiguity of the king's judgement and ultimately leads to civil war. This appears to be a warning by means of narrative: suspending the application of justice can destabilise the nation's order. "*Since the presentation of the Tekoite woman ultimately results in David's choice to return Absalom to court and, thus, to begin Absalom's political coup against David, one may reasonably conclude that this narrative, in part, fulfills Nathan's prophecy of ongoing violence in the house of David (2 Sam. 12:10)*."⁵⁷

What, then, can be considered a good reason for mercy to override justice? In other words, what does the canonical whole of the Hebrew Bible appear to indicate as the distinguishing elements between *Abraham*⁵⁸ on the one hand, and *Joab*⁵⁹ on the other? It is time to formulate my concluding remarks.

5. Concluding remarks

I suggest that a common feature of the counter-theme of mercy over retribution, as it recurs throughout the HB, and as the dire consequences of its out-of-key iteration in the Tekoite narrative underline, is that it takes a prophet to aptly assess when retributive justice can be set aside. All who succeed to do so in this polyphonic library are prophets.⁶⁰ This is why *Joab* imitates the prophetic *mashal*, which is superior to plain language because it leads listeners to decisions. By mimicking *Nathan*'s "*you are that man!*" device, *Joab* also aspires to the role of court prophet, but – sensing the risk of a direct move – casts a wise woman to test how such a move might play out and to pave the way for his own aspirations. Therefore, whereas *Abraham* stood before *God*⁶¹ with an authentic plea, *Joab* hides behind two masks – the desperate widow and the parabolic argumentation of the most prestigious court prophet – in order to perform a counterfeit of intercession for mercy designed to achieve his own political intrigues. (There is even a comic undertone in the figure of the henchman dressed in prophetic garb.⁶²) For he is surely only gambling on *Absalom*, trying to make the heir to the throne beholden to him, just as he made *David* beholden to him by assisting in his marauding campaigns and later in the murder of *Uriah*, and just as he will place his chips with yet another potential heir when *Adonijah* makes a move to occupy the throne. Indeed, the slaughter of *Absalom*, in clear defiance of the king's decree, will express

56 WESTBROOK, *And he will Take* 178–179.

57 WESTBROOK, *And he will Take* 167–168.

58 Genesis 18.

59 2 Samuel 14.

60 NB: so is *Abraham*; see: Genesis 20:7.

61 Genesis 18.

62 And what a henchman he is! – So unrelatable to later readers that the Chronicler, while reworking the DtH for his 'sanitized' version of the Davidic narrative, left out *Joab*'s early companionship with *David* and made him appear out of nowhere and become a general in the conquest of Jebus from the Canaanites (1 Chron. 11:6). He is the authentic Judahite equivalent of Falstaff, not only because of his intrigues and disguises, but also because he is discarded by later writers like a pile of dirty laundry. In fact, as *Japhet* points out, the Chronicler omits *Joab* from the list of *David*'s "*mighty men*," reported at the beginning of *David*'s reign, as well as from later episodes where he appears in the DtH (I – II Chronicles, 240–241 and 247).

the manipulative henchman's frustration at what he presumed was his winning bet to secure his influence for the next generation.⁶³

I further conclude that the out-of-key iteration of the mercy counter-theme – with its consequences – serves as a reminder of the importance of the theme, a warning that mercy is not to be applied without prophetic discernment. The Tekoite narrative serves to draw our attention back to the theme by recounting a false iteration: having heard the distorted echo of mercy, the reader not only wants that counter-theme corrected, but yearns for the theme to be reaffirmed an authentic expression. After a moment like *Absalom's* royal pardon, prompted by a deceptive juridical *mashal*, the ear and heart crave a recapitulation of the true theme. This is the heart of subtle moral storytelling: a false variation creates tension – not the creative kind that propels a piece forward, but the uneasy kind that threatens structural collapse. Justice should have been done, *Absalom* should never have been acquitted – this is what the reader feels. In this narrative cycle, as *Joab's* act unfolds, the truth is lost and then rediscovered, but much to the loss of the king, who once again pays the price for a misstep. And then the *Absalom* pericope ends with the application of a similar gesture: justice versus mercy comes into play once again when all Israel, having supported *Absalom*, come bleating for the king's mercy, competing with each other to carry him back across the Jordan, which in the canonical whole of the Hebrew Bible presents itself as a re-enactment of an emblematic scene of conquest and as a foreshadowing of the homecoming of the exiles from the East.

The HB provides a polyphony of discussions, which could not be further from a unified, dogmatic unison. The dynamics of a theme, a counter-theme, and an iteration of the latter, which we have briefly surveyed above, is only one illustration of the fact that “*Israel's textual testimony is an ongoing interaction between 'core testimony' and 'countertestimony' [...] that critiques 'core testimony'.*”⁶⁴ However, the dynamics of transcending or suspending the law – even if it can be framed as disobedience to the letter for the sake of a higher morality or purpose – must remain exceptions, carefully petitioned for by professionals. In biblical Israel, such petitions are within the realm of prophetic authority. For biblical Jews, “*the fathers of meaning in history*” with their self-reflexive library,⁶⁵ are not a nation of kings or priests, but above all of prophets.

63 MCKENZIE, King David 163. Surprisingly, *McKenzie* sees *Joab* as a generous character who acts “*in the best interests of king and country*”. I rather agree with *McCarter*, who sees in him a “*sinister figure*.” See: *McCarter*, II Samuel 352.

64 BRUEGGEMANN, David's Truth 14 (the concept of core and countertestimony is fleshed out in his 1997 *Theology of the Old Testament*, Parts I–II).

65 “*If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews.*” YERUSHALMI, Zakhōr 8.

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