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Research Article

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On the Road Again: King David as Involuntary Migrant

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Abstract: When David ben Jesse's triumphant return from battle in 1 Sam 18 causes King Saul to despise him, the wheels are set in motion to make David an asylum seeker, refugee, and return migrant. It is burdened with those traumatic experiences that he is announced king in 2 Sam 2. What follows is a narrative of familial conflict and fracture, involuntary migration for David again (2 Sam 15), and a final return (2 Sam 20). From this point, David lives a sedentary life. Although this is an atypical summary of the narrative in 1 Sam 18–2 Kings 2, it foregrounds the important role involuntary migration plays in its plot. This article will explore that story, looking especially at how David's attitude toward mobility as king is implicitly rejected by the narrative.

Keywords: 1-2 Samuel, migration, David, Saul, monarchy

1 Introduction

Set aside for a moment all that you know about King David from 1 and 2 Samuel. Consider, instead, this alternate summary of his life and times.¹

The youngest son in a family of eight boys, David ben Jesse lives as a shepherd in rural Judah. His life changes abruptly, when the prophet Samuel arrives in Bethlehem and anoints him as the successor to King Saul ben Kish from Benjamin (1 Sam 16:1–13). Subsequently, David proves himself a fearless soldier, first in his fight with the Philistine hero Goliath and then in his daring incursion to kill 200 Philistines as a bride price for Saul's daughter Michal. He leaves home, still a young man, for a life in the royal court. Soon thereafter, David formally joins the royal family as Saul's son-in-law by marrying Michal (1 Sam 18:17–27), where he continues to serve as mindfulness guru to the emotionally unstable king. Jonathan ben Saul, heir to the throne, develops a deep bond with David after he enters the royal court.

But all is not well. Saul grows paranoid that David aspires for the throne, so he encourages his confidants to kill David (1 Sam 19:1). Saul's aggression is directed against David as an individual but has political undertones, derived from Saul's belief that this Judahite wants to unseat his Benjamite monarchy (1 Sam 20:31). Jonathan confirms for David the seriousness of the threat against his life, enabling David to escape harm by fleeing from the royal court. David does so because he harbors "a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race [...] nationality, membership of a particular social group" – namely, his Judahite identity – and because of the danger posed by the Benjamite Saul's perception of David as a

¹ The following summary follows MT. There are discrepancies in some details when compared to the LXX 1–2 Samuel, but they are not salient for the central argument here, namely, that David ben Jesse can be read fruitfully as an involuntary migrant.

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political threat – that is, as the divinely appointed successor to Saul’s throne.² With these motivations in mind, it is reasonable to frame David, when he takes flight from Saul, as a person seeking asylum.

David first seeks safety within Judah, where he is helped by well-connected associates: Michal, his wife; Jonathan, his brother-in-law; Samuel, his political patron; and Ahimelech, priest at Nob. David survives as an internally displaced involuntary migrant within Judah for some time.³ Nevertheless, he remains under imminent threat, so departs Judah in search of refuge outside Saul’s jurisdiction.

David initially selects Gath as his destination (1 Sam 21:11), perceiving this city in the Philistine heartland, located on the major travel route along the Mediterranean coast, as a place where a migrant might settle and integrate successfully. However, it is also the city of Goliath, whom David famously defeated. The boy from Bethlehem cannot possibly remain anonymous here – and quickly he retreats into the wilderness for safety. Nevertheless, this brief visit to Gath paves the way for his later return. On his second visit, King Achish of Gath grants David’s formal request for asylum (1 Sam 27:5–6). Achish settles David in Ziklag, establishing him with a status similar to a modern legal refugee. David faithfully supports Achish in return, even agreeing to fight alongside the Philistines against Saul. Lingering suspicions among the Philistine military leaders persist, however, and they will not allow Achish to bring David along (1 Sam 28:6–11). The ensuing battle, which David does not join, results in Saul’s death.

The asylum seeker and refugee then voluntarily repatriates:⁴ David returns to Judah, the threat to his life from Saul over. He receives a warm welcome from his fellow Judahites, who anoint him king over them. Nothing now stands between David and the throne but the Benjaminites. From Hebron, David successfully attacks the Benjaminites and gains their allegiance, then conquers Jebus and makes it into his new capital: Jerusalem. By this stage in the narrative, David is a migrant who has lived in various cultures, but now finds himself at the pinnacle of his own. He chooses to establish his capital as a new city, without ancestral connotations, and reframe the identity of his community around a new narrative of divine election and permanent presence.

Despite early success and concord, trouble lurks. David instigates a crisis among his royal court and military leaders when he constructs a ruse to obtain Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Notably, David first encounters Bathsheba when he should be away from Jerusalem campaigning with his army. His decision not to journey from Jerusalem when he should be mobile lies at the heart of all his subsequent troubles.

David’s rape, and subsequent marriage by capture, of Bathsheba creates a fractious atmosphere among his family.⁵ This dysfunction produces conflict within the royal family, quickly crystallized in Absalom’s killing of Amnon (2 Sam 13:1–33). The assassination plot is motivated by Amnon’s rape of Tamar; and yet, David’s unwillingness to mete out justice more generally is the stated reason that Absalom instigates a palace coup against his father after Amnon’s death (2 Sam 15:1–5). Absalom’s explicit motivation for overthrowing his father, in other words, is that the king has failed in his political responsibility to maintain legal legitimacy in Israel. The likelihood that Absalom’s assault on his kingship will succeed compels David to leave Jerusalem with his royal court (2 Sam 15:13–16). For the second time in his life, David is the target of politically motivated violence that compels him “to flee his [...] country.”⁶

David escapes eastward, eventually settling in Mahanaim. Apparently possessing enough supplies to sustain his migrant caravan for some time, David elects to settle in a rural, perhaps remote, area of the

² <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/what-is-a-refugee.html>, accessed on 14 January 2020.

³ See Kälin, “Internal Displacement,” 163–75, for an overview of the dimensions of internal displacement and references to further, detailed studies on it.

⁴ See Hammond, “‘Voluntary’ Repatriation and Reintegration,” 499–511, especially 502–5, for discussion of issues relevant to the depiction of David’s return migration.

⁵ On the interpretation of 2 Sam 11 as a rape, see Andruska, “‘Rape’ in the Syntax of 2 Samuel 11:4” 10–9; cf. Graybill, “Fuzzy, Messy, Icky,” 1–28. On the broader phenomenon of marriage by capture, see Southwood, *Marriage by Capture in the Book of Judges*.

⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/what-is-a-refugee.html>, accessed on 14 January 2020.

Gilead. The analogy is imperfect, but David here resembles a deposed leader who self-settles in exile, in order to survive an imminent threat against his life.

Absalom pursues David to the Gilead and presses his father into a battle at Mahanaim. David wins. His victory enables David to make a second return migration, this time to his home in Jerusalem. David will never leave the city again and is ceremoniously buried there upon his death.

As hinted at several points in this narrative of David's life, David's life experiences can be readily described in terms employed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in order to highlight just how deeply those experiences are shaped by involuntary migration. First, David is a conflict-induced involuntary migrant,⁷ who flees because of well-founded fear for his life from Saul. His ability to do this relies upon his elite status and the network of supporters he has as a result. Initially, David lives as an internally displaced,⁸ self-settled person in Judah; eventually, however, his search for safety causes him to migrate externally, to Gath, and formally appeal for asylum from a foreign authority. A foreign government grants David legal status as a refugee – in part, one may conjecture, as a result of his elite social standing. This foreign government settles him contingently, in one of its towns.⁹ The death of a political leader subsequently permits David to repatriate – a return migration that creates opportunities for a meteoric social and political ascent, as David becomes King over Judah and Benjamin. After many years, fresh political unrest once again makes David into an externally displaced involuntary migrant. David's adversaries pursue him, but he defeats them and is free to repatriate once more. Twice an involuntary migrant, twice a return migrant, David never leaves his chosen home of Jerusalem again.

Without any desire to imply that commentators should disregard other well-established approaches to interpreting 1 and 2 Samuel, this brief summary demonstrates the extent to which involuntary migration shapes the narrative about David. Indeed, one could argue that his two involuntary migrations are the pillars around which the entire story of his life is built – but that is another argument for another time. Here, our aim is simpler: to follow through on these observations and employ the social scientific study of involuntary migration in order to interpret these texts, analyzing their features to see what new insights emerge and which interpretative dilemmas might be resolved as a result. The rest of this article is an attempt to do just that. It reflects an intentional effort to highlight why work employing a hermeneutic rooted in the study of migration deserves a place among approaches on 1 and 2 Samuel, where to this point such efforts have remained notably absent.

Reading the David narrative in this way lends itself to a two-fold division of material. Section 1 correlates with David's first involuntary migration, in which he flees from Saul. Section 2 focuses on David's second involuntary migration, when he takes flight from Absalom. David's first migration foregrounds David's reliance upon his social capital and his comfort with telling lies as a means of navigating his situation successfully. David's second journey foregrounds varying attitudes toward migration, exploring how David's own resistance to migration, born out of his first involuntary migration, contrasts with other key figures in the narrative, who show greater openness to mobility. The analysis reveals that David's personal hostility to migration, at the end of his life, serves as a negative example concerning the appropriate attitude toward those obliged to migrate involuntarily.

⁷ The term involuntary migrant is drawn from Van Hear, *New Diasporas*, 42, where he discusses some of the strengths and weaknesses of both the terms and their usage.

⁸ The distinction between internally displaced persons – those who migrate, but do not cross a national border – and externally displaced persons – those who migrate across a national border – relies upon a modern understanding of the nation-state. It does not, therefore, translate directly onto the ideas of the ancient Near East. Yet, the distinction is not meaningless and entirely anachronistic, especially in the narrative about David that expresses the difference between his time seeking safety within Judah and in foreign, Philistine territory.

⁹ Contingent settlement is a broad term that refers to a process whereby an involuntary migrant person or persons have the location of their home selected for them (i.e., 1 Sam 1 Sam 27:6). The most well-known form of contingent settlement is governments placing people seeking asylum into refugee camps, but that is not its only form. The United Kingdom, for instance, contingently places those waiting for an asylum decision in housing without any input on the migrant's part about its location. See Bakewell, "Encampment and Self-settlement," 127–38.

2 David's first involuntary migration

David appears in 1 Samuel under the pretense of obscurity and insignificance – to whatever extent that might characterize his early youth, it erodes immediately when Samuel, the most prominent religious figure in all of Judah and Benjamin, anoints him a future king. David quickly emerges as military hero, son-in-law to the king, and close confidant of the anticipated heir to the throne. David accrues a set of relationships that provide him an international knowledge network and imbue him with substantial social capital. Soon enough David's survival will require him to leverage every aspect of this network.

2.1 David the asylum seeker

Saul first displays overt hostility against David in 1 Sam 19:1, when the fact that David's military renown exceeds Saul's arouses the king's animosity. Saul's anger is so great that he calls to his courtiers for attempts on David's life. Jonathan alerts David. After guiding his friend to safety, Jonathan employs his influence with Saul to fashion a truce. It is momentary. Saul's second attempt to murder David (1 Sam 19:9–10) compels Michal to protect David and facilitate his escape from danger. Michal provides David with precious intelligence about Saul's plans, demonstrating the way that his knowledge network facilitates his survival. A less well-connected, less well-informed person might not have succeeded in avoiding the king's attempts to kill them. However, since David is cognizant of the situation, he plans a rendezvous with Jonathan in which they craft a plan to obtain yet more information about Saul's intentions (1 Sam 20:1–21:1). When David discovers through the investigation contrived with Jonathan that his relationship with Saul is beyond repair, because of the King's fear about David's potential ascent to the throne, he begins his involuntary migration.

Within the study of migration, none of this appears accidental. Caution is necessary to avoid anachronism, but research shows that asylum seekers and refugees – like all marginalized people – are successful in escaping persecution and finding refuge far more often when a qualified, knowledgeable person supports them.¹⁰ Nowadays, this usually involves legal counsel, political officials, or non-governmental agency support. In antiquity, influential people played similar roles, though they did not have a professional qualification or institutional affiliation *per se*. Such people possessed the social status that allowed them access to or influence with other powerful persons – such as Saul's children Michal and Jonathan do. Of course, many people seeking asylum have neither the network of relationships nor the funds needed to obtain such representation, and they often suffer as a result. But David's situation is far from that scenario, and must be assessed accordingly.

David is hardly unique as an elite person of means experiencing a threat of persecution that compels an involuntary migration. One recent, well-known example is the 14th Dalai Lama. His Holiness does not live voluntarily in India, nor has he done so since he fled there in 1959. He lives in exile because he has a well-founded fear of what might happen to him if he returned to Tibet. The Dalai Lama knew to seek asylum in India because his religious position afforded him a network of highly placed, strategic connections. His Holiness' ability to remain protected for the last 60 years, avoiding further persecution despite his continued movement around the world, is also a result of his network of relationships, access to legal advocates, and governmental sponsorship.¹¹

Roger Zetter and James Morrissey explain that one cannot separate migration decisions from the wider context of “social, economic, and political factors that induce or constrain people's decision to migrate.”¹² Various “socio-political processes and the distribution of social and political power,” they note, “shape and

¹⁰ See Acer, “Making a Difference,” 347–66; and Bianchini, “Legal Aid for Asylum Seekers,” 390–410, for discussion and further references.

¹¹ For His Holiness' authorized account of his involuntary migration, see the brief article <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/birth-to-exile> (accessed 13 July 2021).

¹² Zetter and Morrissey, “The Environment-Mobility Nexus,” 343–44; cf. Morrissey, “Rethinking the ‘Debate on Environmental Refugees,’” 26–49.

mediate household access to resources, and thus their propensity/capacity to migrate.”¹³ Though Zetter and Morrissey note this while discussing the role of environmental factors that promote migration – exploring how those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are not able to escape real threats to their wellbeing – the point remains salient at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy, where political leaders such as David reside. Such wealth and power facilitate mobility – though they do not eliminate the fear, anxiety, and trauma that arise from the lived experience of becoming an involuntary migrant.

When considering the figure of David ben Jesse of Bethlehem, one needs to have in mind a particular kind of asylum seeker. This may be an asylum-seeker quite different from the majority of such persons, but this does not preclude the relevance or importance of the comparison. David’s decisions and actions in 1 Sam 19–21 resemble those of other involuntary migrants, even as they are inflected by his social and economic privilege: his strategic knowledge network alerts him that he should feel a well-founded fear of Saul, and so he flees. David’s social capital enables his mobility and opens access to provisions that allow him to make a successful escape. David acts decisively to evade the violence he faces by leveraging his resources – as would any other involuntary migrant in a similar situation.

These aspects of David’s experience come to the foreground in his next move (1 Sam 21:1–10), when he travels to the sanctuary at Nob to see Ahimelech, the priest in charge there. None of this seems accidental. Ahimelech represents another associate with the resources to help David: food, a weapon for self-protection, and, as the audience learns belatedly in 1 Sam 21:8, intelligence about the movements of Doeg, one of Saul’s assassins.

David’s interaction with Ahimelech introduces the role of dishonesty in the story of David’s involuntary migration. Pamela Reis explains that “[t]here is variation in detail and emphasis, but the overall consensus is that David deceived Ahimelech at Nob.”¹⁴ This reading maintains that David intentionally deceived the priest, in order to obtain material provision from him. Perhaps. Keith Bodner and now also Reis herself interpret the scene differently, however, and regard Ahimelech as party to the deception. In this interpretation, it is Doeg, not Ahimelech, who is duped. Bodner cleverly argues that delayed exposition – the narrator’s choice to tell almost the entire story of David’s interaction with Ahimelech in 21:1–7 before revealing Doeg’s presence in v. 8 – puts David and Ahimelech into a deceptive alliance, with the involuntary migrant obtaining material provision from the priest.¹⁵ This alliance gives David the necessary resources and time to continue his search for a safe place to reside. Nob will not be that place – a reality reflected in 1 Sam 22:9–19, when Doeg returns to Nob under Saul’s direction and kills 85 priests.

While Nob cannot provide David safety, his next move has significant risks too. From Nob, David journeys to Gath, the city of his most prominent military victim – Goliath. Why does David risk entering the heartland of his most memorable enemy? Is this mere desperation – or is there a logic at work that the actions of other involuntary migrants might illumine? Gath lies in the Philistine heartland and, crucially, on the major travel route along the Mediterranean coast. It is the city’s connections, strategically located for potential onward migration, that makes Gath a logical destination for David.¹⁶ Urban, adjacent to a major transportation network, and multicultural, Gath could allow a migrant room to settle and the possibility of integrating successfully into the host community without attracting too much attention. The city’s transportation connections also offer several choices if further migration proves necessary, whether to destinations south (e.g., Egypt) or north (e.g., Damascus, or even into Mesopotamia). Gath, in short, gives David options.

Nevertheless, Gath presents challenges. David cannot possibly remain anonymous here – and he is almost immediately recognized and his presence is reported to King Achish, the ruler of Gath. When this occurs, it is hardly surprising David employs dishonesty to navigate the situation. Fear of migrants is not a new phenomenon – and, in this case, King Achish and the residents of Gath appear justified in their fear of

¹³ Zetter and Morrissey, “Environment-Mobility Nexus,” 343–44.

¹⁴ Reis, “Collusion at Nob,” 59–73.

¹⁵ Bodner, “Revisiting the ‘Collusion at Nob’ in 1 Samuel 21–22,” 25–37.

¹⁶ On the role of onward migration in the larger context of migration, see Van Hear, *New Diasporas*, 40–7.

their great champion's slayer. In other cases, the fear of foreigners may be less justified. Whatever the source of the fear, David's choice to employ deception reflects a strategy often deployed in this type of situation: he embraces the anxiety of his host, utilizes it to protect himself in the present, and gives himself a chance to determine who is and is not worthy of his trust in the future. David feigns madness, generating yet more fear among the Philistines. Achish concludes it is better to let David leave than to deal with him.

In an important essay exploring how trust features in involuntary migrants' interactions, Barbara Harrell-Bond and Eftihia Voutira quote an involuntary migrant remarking that "[t]o be a refugee means to learn to lie."¹⁷ Stripped of nearly all means of providing for themselves, and frequently regarded as a threat by the host population, dishonesty affords involuntary migrants a means by which they can test the trustworthiness of others who might support them. Necessity, not deficient morality, drives such dishonesty.¹⁸

Commentators have often categorized David's behavior as part of the so-called "trickster" type known in the ancient Near East. Without wanting to suggest that conclusion is incompatible with the current one, it is noteworthy that almost every figure placed in this category is a migrant – and usually an involuntary migrant. Susan Niditch's landmark study on the topic treats the endangered ancestress stories in Genesis, Jacob and Joseph, and Esther.¹⁹ In all three endangered ancestress stories and in the stories of Jacob and Joseph, the context of the narrative is involuntary migration.²⁰ It is not impossible to view Esther in similar terms. This raises the question of whether the trickster motif is actually an aspect of the involuntary migratory experience, rather than an independent phenomenon, though that goes beyond what can be answered within the confines of the present article. Here the relevant point is that David's decision, risky though it is, strongly resembles the way that involuntary migrants act when faced with an asymmetric power dynamic, in which there are precious few options for establishing whether they can rely upon the hospitality of an unfamiliar host.

In this particular case, David's performance of animalistic scratching and drooling enters the realm of the melodramatic – but the Philistines' response to this behavior also informs David that Gath is not safe for him. The Philistine city cannot be a place of refuge, and so he proceeds to his cave hideout in Adullam. In the meantime, David has learned something important about King Achish, and this will prove helpful when he returns to Gath.

2.2 David the refugee

David's next series of moves all result in close encounters with Saul, such that David concludes "[s]ome day I shall certainly perish at the hands of Saul. The best thing for me is to flee to the land of the Philistines; Saul will then give up hunting me throughout the territory of Israel, and I will escape him" (1 Sam 27:1). On his return to Gath, David appeals formally to Achish for asylum, albeit in a form appropriate to his ancient Near Eastern context. His request that a place "be granted to me in one of the country towns where I can live" (1 Sam 27:5) is analogous to a request for legal, settled status. In making this request, David employs the knowledge he gained from his first encounter with Achish, namely, that the king does not want David nearby (1 Sam 21:16; 1 Sam 27:5). Achish, for his part, grants the request and allocates Ziklag to David. From there, David raids the nearby areas. Not only does this provide the resources David needs to supply himself, his family, and his growing party (now 600 men; 1 Sam 27:2), it also helps him to build trust with Achish. Indeed,

¹⁷ Voutira and Harrell-Bond, "In Search," 216. It should be stressed that necessity, not deficient morality, typically drives such dishonesty. Deceptive actions often constitute one of very few survival mechanisms available to people with a legitimate fear for their life.

¹⁸ See further discussions of this point in Strine, "Sister Save Us," 53–66; and idem, "Migrant Ethics in the Jacob Narrative," 101–16.

¹⁹ Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*.

²⁰ For detailed discussions of how involuntary migration shapes these texts, see Strine, "Sister Save Us;" idem, "Your Name Shall No Longer Be Jacob, but Refugee," 51–69; idem, "The Famine in the Land Was Severe," 55–69.

it seems the King of Gath revels in the stories David brings back of conquest over his rivals in the region. Achish accepts David on the logic that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” (1 Sam 27:12).

David is grateful for the protection he receives. He is even willing to fight with the Philistine ruler against Israel if needed (1 Sam 28:1).²¹ When the time comes, however, the rest of the Philistines are not so sure that this immigrant can be trusted. Their protest to Achish is so vehement that, despite his earlier promise, Achish sends David away from the battle (1 Sam 29:8–11). Such scepticism concerning the allegiance of involuntary migrants to the host society in which they now live is not unusual. The interaction depicted in 1 Sam 29 admits that such attitudes were present in the ancient Near East too: even if this story is a total fiction, it depends upon the audience recognizing as plausible the idea that a host society might retain such suspicion of a “foreigner.” Indeed, this is not the only story of this sort in the Hebrew Bible. Genesis 26 depicts Isaac experiencing similarly divergent treatment: while Abimelech grants Isaac formal status as an environmentally-induced involuntary migrant (Gen 26:11), the people of the land resent him, take over the wells he opens without compensation, and force him to continue migrating until King Abimelech intercedes on Isaac’s behalf (Gen 26:26–33).²²

When migration is foregrounded, one sees that the depiction of David in 1 Samuel contains two features characteristic of involuntary migrants across time and place. First, David survives the immediate threat on his life because he possesses an elaborate knowledge network that provides essential information, facilitates his escape from violence, and provides him access to necessary provisions for his journey. Second, David willingly deploys falsehoods to survive a precarious situation and to test the trustworthiness of an unfamiliar host society. David also faces the trials of a person seeking asylum, especially the animosity often aimed at refugees, and does so while dealing with the traumatic experience of living for years under a declared threat of murder. Not only does this migratory hermeneutic bring new insights to the material in 1 Samuel, it also provides a foundation for understanding how and why David behaves as he does during his second migration, to which attention can now turn.

3 David’s second involuntary migration

The Philistine battle against Saul from which David is precluded ends with Saul’s death. This allows for David’s repatriation to Judah, his enthronement over Judah at Hebron (2 Sam 2), his defeat of the Benjaminites, and his enthronement over Benjamin (2 Sam 3–4). The next relevant event in David’s life is his conquest of Jebus. This military and political achievement radically changes David: after he establishes Jerusalem as his capital city, he transforms into a character antagonistic to migration and predisposed to a sedentary existence.

3.1 David puts down roots

Upon his enthronement, David desires Michal’s return. David, however, does not speak to her to express this view – instead he commands that Michal be taken forcibly from her new husband and brought to him at Hebron.²³ When David has captured Michal, forcibly displaced her, and made her a *de jure* sex worker in

²¹ For an alternate reading of David in these stories, see Smith-Christopher, “The Outlaw David ben Jesse,” 759–79. Despite the differences in our interpretations, Smith-Christopher’s use of Hobsbawm’s “social banditry” concept shows the benefits of looking for fresh interpretations of David that engage with social scientific research.

²² For further discussion, see Strine, “Sister Save Us,” 53–66.

²³ Ben-Barak, “The Legal Background to the Restoration of Michal to David,” 74–90. Of particular relevance is the discussion on pp. 81–8, where Ben-Barak explores Mesopotamian precedents for how to deal with the wife of a forcibly displaced man that marries a second time. See also White, “Michal the Misinterpreted,” 454–8; Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 192–8.

David's royal court, the episode foreshadows the lengths to which David will go in pursuit of a settled life enclosed within the walls of his home.

Indeed, David's conquest of Jebus serves this aim to move from his "temporary" palace in Hebron to inhabit his new capital city (2 Sam 5). David conquers the city, brings the ark of the covenant there (2 Sam 6), and establishes his home. Thus draws to a close a phase of life that has seen David living in a precarious situation from a young age (1 Sam 16:11–13), away from his family for most of his life, and as an involuntary migrant with his life under direct threat from his youth until into his thirties (2 Sam 5:4–5). While the text never explicitly describes David's life experience as traumatic, when summarized in this way – and with the details of the prior section in mind – one can see this is a life marked by instability, anxiety, and loss. It is, in short, a period that would have impacted how anyone would approach subsequent decisions.

And so it is with David. He states his attitude toward mobility in 2 Sam 7:1–3:

When the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had granted him safety from all the enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan: "Here I am dwelling in a house of cedar, while the Ark of the LORD abides in a tent!" Nathan said to the king, "Go and do whatever you have in mind, for the LORD is with you."

Commentators understandably attend to issues about royal building projects, the dénouement of military exploits with temple building, and the promise of a Davidic dynasty here. Nevertheless, these readings overlook the vital role of migration in David's expressed aspiration: the construction of a permanent home for YHWH symbolizes David's intense desire to immobilize his life. David can no longer abide YHWH as a mobile, peripatetic deity dwelling in a tent (2 Sam 6:1–19), migrating as a pillar of fire or cloud of smoke, traveling out to war in an ark. Indeed, in the broader narrative, the ark has also migrated, moving from Shiloh to Philistia to Beth-Shemesh to Kiryat Jearim prior to this journey into Jerusalem.²⁴ David's migratory experience has made him desperately desire a stationary, immovable sanctuary for YHWH.

YHWH unceremoniously refuses David's offer – an attitude often obscured by the ensuing promise to build David's royal line. In 2 Sam 7:1–7, YHWH specifically recalls moving about with the people of Israel in the desert and explains that dwelling in a tent/tabernacle was never a problem. This allusion to the exodus tradition suggests that comfort with migration has prevailed to this point, though it appears to be coming to an end. Even so, it presents YHWH and David in tension over the way in which prior experiences of migration should influence attitudes toward the future. The divergent attitudes of David and YHWH reflect underlying tensions on the question of mobility and immobility that will emerge again as the story develops.

The issue next appears in the episode involving David, Bathsheba, and Uriah. That David even observes Bathsheba from the roof of his palace is a result of David's failure to be outside Jerusalem, on campaign with his army. The typical interpretation of this incident – that David fails in his royal duty to lead his army out to war – is certainly true, but should not overshadow the fact that this pivotal episode in David's life occurs *precisely because* the former involuntary migrant now refuses to be mobile.²⁵ Indeed, the additional perspective added by a hermeneutic of migration provides a richer explanation of why David might circumvent such a core responsibility: his prior experience has generated a rationale for apparent dereliction of duty that would make sense to someone with such experience.

When David impregnates Bathsheba in the course of his sexual assault of her, he prefers to deceive Uriah into thinking it will be his child. Uriah's radical commitment to mobility – to the itinerant life of the army – undermines David's plan. Called back from his sojourn with the army in Rabbah, Uriah refuses to enter his home, bathe, and lie with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:7–13). Instead, he insists on sleeping outside the entrance of David's palace, justifying his decision by appeal to the ark – YHWH's mobile dwelling – and the mobile existence of the army of Israel and Judah.²⁶ Uriah, like YHWH before him, rebuffs David's

²⁴ On the theological and social significance of the ark narrative, see Campbell, "Yahweh and the Ark," 31–43; cf. Campbell, *The Ark Narrative* (1 Sam 4–6; 2 Sam 6).

²⁵ Bodi, *The Demise of the Warlord*.

²⁶ Note that 2 Sam 11:11 reads בסכות, which one can interpret as "at Succoth" or "in Succoth." The latter opens up the possibility that Uriah emphasizes that the ark – perhaps along with YHWH – and the army are dwelling in tents or temporary shelters in the

exhortation to enjoy a sedentary life, in a way that implicitly but plainly censures David's rejection of mobility. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that David's unwillingness to be mobile after his settlement in Jerusalem lies at the heart of his own downfall.

3.2 On the road again

A pattern of relational entropy spirals out from David's assault on Bathsheba and assassination of Uriah, encapsulated in the self-declared punishment mediated back to David by the prophet Nathan. This deterioration culminates when Absalom – David's third-born son, the killer of Amnon, and the presumed heir to the throne – leads a coup against his father (2 Sam 15).

Although it is true that Absalom's animosity toward his father arises most directly from the way the king handles Amnon's sexual assault of Tamar (2 Sam 13:1–33), the way that Absalom's motivations are described in the immediate build up to his overthrow attempt are striking. The initial sign of Absalom's intention is to obtain "a chariot, horses, and fifty outrunners" (2 Sam 15:1), the trappings of royalty. Equally important, he begins to station himself daily at the city gate of Jerusalem with the express intent of judging legal cases (2 Sam 15:2–4). Absalom maintains that David is derelict in his judicial duty to ensure just judges are available for the people. It is on the basis of this issue of governance, rather than the intra-familial issues, that Absalom makes his public case to replace David as king. David is a father dealing with an aggrieved son, but he is also the leader of a nation whose position is threatened by a political faction criticizing his governance. One must not ignore the first aspect of the situation, but nor should the fact that David once again has a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for [...] political opinion" be overlooked.

When news of Absalom's intention to overthrow David reaches the palace (2 Sam 15:13), one expects the narrative to slow down, for David to contemplate his options, and for this heroic warrior and powerful king now entrenched in Jerusalem to declare his intent to fight valiantly against this upstart, rebellious element of Judahite society. Instead, David announces that he and his courtiers must flee in haste. A sense of *déjà vu* characterizes David, as he once more becomes an involuntary migrant in search of refuge.

An otherwise unprecedented interchange in the midst David's departure underscores the significance of migration to this narrative. David stops at the edge of Jerusalem to review his traveling party (2 Sam 15:17), where he encounters Ittai the Gittite. David is dismayed by his presence and willingness to join the departing group:

[...] Why should you too go with us? Go back and stay with the [new] king, for you are a foreigner (*noḵrî*) and you are also an involuntary migrant (*gōleh*)²⁷ from your country. You came only yesterday; should I make you wander about with us today, when I myself must go wherever I can? Go back, and take your kinsmen with you, [in] true faithfulness." Ittai replied to the king, "As the LORD lives and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, there your servant will be, whether for death or for life!" And David said to Ittai, "Then march by." And Ittai the Gittite and all his men and all the children who were with him marched by.

Ittai's presence provides an interpretative key for the narrative's use of migration. David reluctantly, ashamedly leaves Jerusalem because his life and others are in grave danger. Ittai the Gittite, by contrast, sees no shame in this choice. David does not want to flee again, nor to compel any other person to do so; Ittai, conversely, represents a willing migrant. Ittai will go wherever David, and YHWH, go. His involuntary migration and integration into the host Judahite culture prepare Ittai for the journey. David, who has by now been both personally and politically undone as a result of his obstinate refusal to leave his palace in

open field, emblematic of a mobile existence. See McKane, *I & II Samuel*, 229–30; cf. Firth, "David and Uriah (With Occasional Appearances by Uriah's Wife)," 315.

²⁷ The only other uses of *gōleh* in relation to migration in 1 and 2 Samuel are 1 Sam 4:21–22 (the departure of YHWH's glory in the ark); the term then does not appear with this connotation until 2 Kings 15:29ff, when the Assyrian incursions and forced displacements begin.

Jerusalem, carries a striking animosity toward migration, even embarrassment about it. Research indicates that Ittai resembles the majority of migrants: people who have migrated once are more likely to do so again in the future.²⁸ Indeed, they are more disposed to see migration as a sensible response to their situation than those who have not previously migrated. David exhibits the opposite attitude – which, in the context of the larger narrative, emerges as a response to his earlier ordeals as an involuntary migrant.

Though David goes reluctantly, he benefits again from his network of strategic relationships. On one side, he is able to stay abreast of what is happening in Jerusalem after his departure, because Hushai agrees to remain there (2 Sam 15:32–37), imbed himself within Absalom’s circle of advisors, and work on David’s behalf. On the other side, David and his fellow migrants are provided for by Mephibosheth, through his servant Ziba (2 Sam 16:1–4), and later by Shobi, Machir, and Barzillai, who offer shelter and supplies to the group in Mahanaim. Just as David’s network of connections made his earlier journey to avoid Saul’s aggression possible, so now David is able to find safety from Absalom’s threat against his life because of his vast knowledge network.

David’s eventual victory over Absalom at Mahanaim also depends on this knowledge network, particularly the intelligence passed to him by Hushai. David’s eventual return to Jerusalem, and his peaceful death there at a ripe old age, all endorse the wisdom of David’s second involuntary migration. Though the king may have spurned the idea of migration as shameful, David’s hesitation weighed against the attitude of all the other human and divine characters in the story. It seems logical to conclude that the narrative endorses openness to mobility as a way of life – one necessary to preserve the community that YHWH desires.

4 Conclusion

Throughout the David narrative in 1 and 2 Samuel, one sees David depicted as an involuntary migrant by a narrator(s) that exhibits familiarity with the complex human experience of involuntary migration. During his first involuntary journey, David embodies the asylum seeker and refugee who utilizes information and social capital to escape harm. He has far more of both than most people who face involuntary migration, due to his elite status. Nonetheless, David exhibits a willingness to use falsehood in order to survive, something to which involuntary migrants have resorted across time and place. At the culmination of his first involuntary migration, David establishes his home and builds a capital city in Jerusalem. He assumes a sedentary lifestyle there, seeking to create the conditions where YHWH and YHWH’s ark are also housed in permanent dwellings, enabling them, too, to cease from perennial mobility.

Events do not allow for David to remain sedentary. Indeed, David’s misguided decision not to leave Jerusalem with his army begins a series of events that create the conditions that allow his own son Absalom to attempt to usurp the throne. David, as a result, becomes an involuntary migrant once more.

One might read the narrative in this fashion and find in it an argument for the value of a sedentary home and sympathy for those who do not have it.²⁹ It is impossible to rule out this interpretation, and in certain historical circumstances that understanding may have been the most likely way to interpret the narrative. For instance, if some or all of the stories treated above circulated prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, one can see how a Judahite community would arrive at precisely that positive view of settled life.³⁰ One could even now read the stories in such fashion. To do so does not undermine the central contention of the current argument, namely, that David is twice an involuntary migrant, whose experience locates the

²⁸ Cf. Long, “Rethinking ‘Durable’ Solutions,” 475–87.

²⁹ I owe this idea to Jeremy Hutton, who generously read an earlier version of this piece and suggested this approach to me in personal correspondence.

³⁰ Equally, one might see a far more positive disposition to David in later periods. See, *inter alia*, Edelman, “David in Israelite Social Memory,” 141–57, which views David as a “paragon of piety.”

origin of Judah's socio-political structure in lived migrant experience and its resulting impacts. Even if one concludes that the narrative favors a settled existence, there remains a pressing need for further studies of how involuntary migration features in 1 and 2 Samuel.

Nevertheless, there is also strong evidence supporting an interpretation of the story of David's two involuntary migrations as encouraging its audience to embrace an openness to migration. This view would have been salient in Jerusalem and Judah even prior to its direct experience of forced displacement at the hands of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 597 and 586 BCE. Involuntary migration as a result of foreign imperial prerogative was a real and present danger already in the eighth century BCE. This was obvious to any shrewd observer of the Neo-Assyrian policies in the first half of the century,³¹ then a documented possibility in the reign of Ahaz (2 Kings 16; Isaiah 7), an undeniable threat after the defeat of Samaria in 722 BCE, and once again an imminent fear during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18–19; cf. Isa 36–37). A narrative that centered the experience of involuntary migration, maintained that YHWH not only remained with YHWH's people during such experiences but even embraced mobility, and showed how YHWH might use it all to achieve divine objectives including blessing for Judah would have resonated with a wide Judahite audience, both elite and non-elite. Of course, after the fall of Jerusalem this message would have borne even greater significance, both among those forcibly displaced within the Levant and among those contingently resettled in Babylonia.

Reading the stories about David ben Jesse through the lens of migration allows one to see how the events of his first involuntary migration led to the circumstances of and attitude toward his second involuntary journey. The narrative chastises David for eschewing mobility because of his prior experience in implicit but substantial ways, before going on to endorse the need for his second involuntary migration. The overriding impression one gains from reading these texts with the study of migration as a guide, therefore, is that the narrator(s) want their audience to embrace an openness to migration, both in their leaders and in their own lives. For some, this perspective offered a sensible posture toward the imminent threat of the Mesopotamian powers in whose shadow they existed; for others, this outlook provided theological context for and practical hope during the lived experience of involuntary migration.

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³¹ Cf. Radner, "The 'Lost Tribes of Israel' in the Context of the Resettlement Programme of the Assyrian Empire," 101–23.

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