

Israelite Sheepshearing and David's Rise to Power (*)

“Wherever sheepshearing is mentioned it marks an important epoch”⁽¹⁾. So state the *midrashim*⁽²⁾. Yet, more than marking important epochs, biblical sheepshearings share a number of peculiar characteristics that require explanation. For example, in each of its four appearances, sheepshearing provides the setting for avenging a wrong: (1) Jacob takes what rightfully belongs to him for tending Laban's flocks (Genesis 31); (2) Tamar lures Judah into a sexual encounter to secure her rightful progeny (Genesis 38); (3) David seeks compensation for protecting Nabal's flocks (1 Samuel 25); and (4) Absalom kills Amnon for raping his sister, Tamar (2 Samuel 13). In addition, three of these narratives relate to David: Genesis 38 explains how the royal clan came into existence; 1 Samuel 25 describes how David obtained property and wealth near Hebron; and 2 Samuel 13 reports how Absalom killed the heir to his father's throne. What is more, the one narrative not directly connected to David (Genesis 31) reads a lot like one that is (1 Samuel 25). Rarely, if ever, are such narrative connections meaningless. Yet, what is their significance?

A close analysis of the biblical text reveals that sheepshearing in ancient Israel was much more than a pastoral duty; it was a significant celebration, characterized by feasting, drunkenness and the settling of old scores. As a result of these associations of revelry and revenge, sheepshearing became an ideal backdrop — both literary and actual — for events in Israel's past involving the repayment of debts or the righting of wrongs. Because both David and Absalom took advantage of sheepshearing for this purpose — and, in the process, aided their own ascents to power — sheepshearing became intimately associated with the establishment of the Davidic dynasty, even providing the narrative backdrop for the emergence of the royal clan.

1. Textual Analysis

Because the narratives in Samuel contribute the most to our understanding of sheepshearing in ancient Israel, we begin there.

a) David and Nabal (1 Samuel 25)

In 1 Samuel 25 we encounter Nabal, an extremely wealthy man who owns three thousand sheep, one thousand goats, and has the means to employ professional shearers (vv. 2.7). During the time of shearing, David sends

(*) I want to thank Catherine Muldoon of Boston College for providing research assistance during the final stages of writing. Any errors that remain are strictly my own.

⁽¹⁾ GenR 74,5. The text is *בכל מקום שנאמר נוזיה עושה רושם* is, literally, “In every place that sheepshearing is mentioned, it makes a mark”. While *עושה רושם* can also mean “has a bad result” (cf. GenR 43,6), the intention of GenR 74,5 is to describe the event's significance, not its negative effects. Cf. M. JASTROW, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York 1950) I, 230.

⁽²⁾ Cf. GenR 85,6; MSem 23,9.

messengers to Nabal to request meat as compensation for his protection of Nabal's flock (vv. 5-8). Nabal refuses, asking why he should give to David and his men food intended for his shearers (v. 11). David's subsequent militaristic response (v. 13), Abigail's intervention (vv. 18-31) and God's vindication of David (vv. 37-38) are well known and not central to our investigation. What is central, however, are the several clues in the text that indicate sheepshearing was a significant event in ancient Israel.

Our initial clue is found in the words of David's messengers when explaining the timing of their request: "for we come on a good day", (sic) כי על-יום טוב בנו (v. 8). The exact meaning of this statement is unclear. Rashi held that the יום טוב of this passage was Israel's spring New Year's festival⁽³⁾, and the biblical text provides some justification for this interpretation. The only other occurrences of this phrase in the Bible are in Esther (8,17; 9,19.22), where its connections to an actual festival are explicit⁽⁴⁾. Rosenthal, however, has argued that the use of יום טוב to designate a festival is postbiblical (probably Maccabean), and that during the biblical period it merely denotes "a merry day of plenty"⁽⁵⁾. Whatever the precise meaning of יום טוב, the size and significance of Nabal's sheepshearing is further indicated by its comparison to "the feast of the king" (כמשה המלך; v. 36)⁽⁶⁾. Part of what makes Nabal's sheepshearing on par with royalty is the abundance of both food and alcohol. Thus, when Abigail sets out to intercept David, she finds at her disposal "two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs of roasted grain, one hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred fig cakes" (v. 18). Then, upon her return, she forbears telling Nabal about her rendezvous with David, since he was "extremely drunk" שכר עד-מאד (v. 36).

Of course, if this was our only evidence for the activities surrounding sheepshearing, then we might ascribe Nabal's excesses to the debauchery of "a fool"⁽⁷⁾. However, as the next narrative makes plain, such excesses were an integral part of Israelite sheepshearings.

b) David and Absalom (2 Sam 13,23-29)

We encounter sheepshearing again during the reign of David, when Absalom holds his own feast. As before, the size and significance of the event are betrayed by the narrative details. Absalom, like Nabal, hires professional

⁽³⁾ Rashi remarks, "It was the New Year and [David's servants] said, 'and we require the festival meal'", ראש השנה היה וצריכין אנו לסעודת יום טוב, where ראש השנה refers to the first of Nisan (see Rashi's comments on 1 Kgs 6,1). See also, *Roš. Haš.* 1,1.

⁽⁴⁾ A. CAQUOT – P. DE ROBERT, *Les Livres de Samuel* (CAT 6; Genève 1994) 308. Cf. מעדים טובים, "good festivals" (Zech 8,19).

⁽⁵⁾ F. ROSENTHAL, "yôm tōb", *HUCA* 18 (1944) 157-176.

⁽⁶⁾ Although most translations render the phrase כמשה המלך adjectively (i.e., "a royal feast"), the author may have intended it literally (i.e., "like the feast of the king"). The syntax of the phrase (construct with the definite article), as well as the use of המלך ... elsewhere (see, for example, 1 Kgs 10,13; Esth 1,7; 2,18; Dan 11,36; 2 Chr 29,15; 30,6; 35,10, 16), favors the latter understanding. As we will see in a moment, the royal house did celebrate such a feast.

⁽⁷⁾ So G. ROBINSON, *Let Us Be Like the Nations. A Commentary on the Books of 1 and 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids 1993) 136: "[Nabal's] folly was coupled with addiction to alcohol".

shearers (v. 24a)⁽⁸⁾. In addition, just as Nabal's sheepshearing is likened to "the feast of the king", so Absalom's sheepshearing is an event worthy of the king and all the male members of the royal house (v. 24b). What's more, Absalom's feast, like Nabal's, involves heavy drinking. In fact, Absalom's plot to avenge his sister's rape assumes the drunkenness of its participants⁽⁹⁾. As Absalom says to his servants, "See now, when Amnon's heart is good with wine (ראו נא כטוב לב אמנון ביינ) and I say to you, 'Strike Amnon', then you shall put him to death" (v. 28).

As a final observation: both sheepshearings in Samuel involve the demise of drunken participants whose deaths aid the protagonists in their ascent to the throne: David gains land and livestock in Hebron, his future capital, and Absalom eliminates the heir to his father's throne, placing himself next in line. We will consider the significance of these events after evaluating sheepshearing in Genesis.

c) Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38)

Following the death of his wife, Bathshua, and the requisite period of mourning, Judah departs for Timnah, where, like Nabal and Absalom, he has hired professional shearers (v. 12b)⁽¹⁰⁾. On his way, Judah is attracted to and has a sexual encounter with a woman whom he believes to be a prostitute, but who, in fact, is his daughter-in-law, Tamar. As security for future payment, the disguised Tamar demands Judah's seal, cord and staff (vv. 17-18) — all symbols of clan authority and, in the case of Judah, royal authority. Tamar becomes pregnant with twins, thereby securing the progeny wrongfully denied her by her father-in-law. As Judah admits: "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to Selah" (v. 26).

While Judah's escapade with a harlot might strike the modern reader as peculiar, perhaps an Israelite audience, aware of the licentiousness surrounding sheepshearing, viewed his behavior as more in keeping with the season. If this is so, then the notice that Judah was on his way to shear his sheep is just as important to Tamar's plan as the direction of his travel (to Timnah). Such a hypothesis makes sense of Tamar's promiscuous stratagem, as well as Judah's uninhibited response: הבה נא אבוא אליך ("Come now! Let me enter you").

⁽⁸⁾ The hiring of professional shearers by the royal house is understandable in light of the importance of wool to ancient economies. In this regard, "shearers" are found on provision lists from Ugarit (*UT*, 1084,30; 1099,4.26), and a comparison of their wages indicates they were quite valuable to the royal court. In Mesopotamia, "shearers" are also listed on the royal payroll (*GCCI* 1 93,3), and mention is even made of a shearing sponsored by the royal house (*Babylonian Inscriptions in the Collection of James B. Nies* [New Haven 1917] I, 14, 17). Cf. the present-day *Royal Command Shearing Performance* in Napier.

⁽⁹⁾ On the similarities between Nabal's and Absalom's shearings, see, e.g., CAQUOT – DE ROBERT, *Les Livres de Samuel*, 500.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The information regarding the time interval between Bathshua's death and Judah's sheepshearing, besides making Tamar's ruse possible (Judah is now "available") assures the reader that Judah's mourning is complete, allowing him to participate in the festivities of sheepshearing. By contrast, that Nabal would still celebrate sheepshearing (1 Sam 25,2), when the rest of Israel was presumably mourning the death of Samuel (1 Sam 25,1), was viewed by later commentators as further evidence of Nabal's base character (see, for example, MShem 23,8).

Also noteworthy are the several connections between Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar, and the Judahite king's (David's) daughter, Tamar. First of all, recompense for the violations against both Tamars is obtained during the time of sheepshearing: Tamar deceitfully lures Judah into a sexual encounter in order to secure her rightful offspring, while Absalom deceitfully lures Amnon to his sheepshearing to avenge his sister's rape (Gen 38,12; 2 Sam 13,23). In addition, both Tamars are involved in incestuous relationships: the former with her father-in-law, the latter with her half-brother⁽¹¹⁾. Indeed, even David's sheepshearing exploits may have resulted in an incestuous union, if, as some have suggested, Abigail is David's sister (cf. 1 Chr 2,16)⁽¹²⁾. As a final observation, the firstborn of Judah's sheepshearing encounter with Tamar is Perez, David's (and the latter Tamar's) progenitor, connecting three of the four sheepshearing narratives to David and the royal house⁽¹³⁾.

d) Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31)

While many are familiar with the story of Jacob's escape from his father-in-law, Laban, few take note of the time of Jacob's departure: sheepshearing (vv. 19-20). Jacob's choice of sheepshearing is understandable if our earlier observations regarding the festive nature of this event and the resulting incapacity of its participants are accurate⁽¹⁴⁾. Laban is eventually informed of Jacob's escape, and he pursues and overtakes Jacob at Gilead (vv. 22-23). Following Laban's unsuccessful search for his stolen *teraphim*, Jacob becomes angry and protests his unfair compensation for tending Laban's flocks (vv. 36-42). After making a covenant with Laban, Jacob leaves with his two wives, his children, and the many goods he acquired in Paddan-Aram.

As noted earlier, this story shares a number of features with one of the Davidic sheepshearings: the story of Nabal. First, both Nabal and Laban are presented as wealthy, but tightfisted flock owners (Gen 31,6-7.14-16.41-42; 1 Sam 25,3.14-17.21)⁽¹⁵⁾. Corresponding to this, both Jacob and David have a gripe about being unfairly compensated for care of another's flock (Gen

⁽¹¹⁾ For similar observations, see B. JACOB, *Genesis*. Das erste Buch der Tora (Berlin 1934) esp. 1048-1049; J. BLENKINSOPP, "Theme and Motif in the Succession History (2 Sam XI:2ff) and the Yahwist Corpus", *Volume du Congrès. Genève, 1965*. (VTSup 15; Leiden 1966) 44-57; G.A. RENDSBURG, "David and His Circle in Genesis XXXVIII", *VT* 36/4 (1986) 438-446, esp. 444; Craig Y.S. Ho, "The Stories of the Family Troubles of Judah and David: A Study of Their Literary Links", *VT* 49 (1999) 514-531.

⁽¹²⁾ See J. D. LEVENSON – B. HALPERN, "The Political Import of David's Marriages", *JBL* 99 (1980) 507-518.

⁽¹³⁾ This list does not include the many parallels between Judah and David in general: Judah lives in Adullam (Gen 38,1), just as David lives among the outlaws in Adullam (1 Sam 22,1); Judah has a Canaanite friend named Hirah (Gen 38,1), just as David establishes an alliance with the Canaanite king, Hiram of Tyre (2 Sam 5,11); Judah's wife is referred to as Bathshua (Gen 38,2.12), recalling David's wife Bathsheba, who is elsewhere referred to as Bathshua (see, for example, 1 Chr 3,5). For additional parallels, see G.A. RENDSBURG, "Biblical Literature as Politics: The Case of Genesis", *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Near East* (ed. A. BERLIN) (Bethesda 1996) 47-70. See also HO, "Family Troubles", 514-529.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Cf. the remarks of G. VON RAD, *Das Erste Buch Mose* (ATD; Göttingen 1953) 268.

⁽¹⁵⁾ That their names are the reverse of each other (נבול/לבן) is also likely significant and was observed by early rabbinic commentators. Cf. Yalq, Samuel I,134.

31,38-42; 1 Sam 25,21)⁽¹⁶⁾. What is more, both Jacob and David seek recompense for their services during the time of sheepshearing and leave these encounters with two wives: Jacob with Rachel and Leah, and David with Abigail and, by means of narrative placement, Ahinoam (1 Sam 25,43).

Finally, both narratives contain the motif of servants escaping from their masters. This theme is self-evident in Genesis 31: Jacob, who has served Laban for twenty years, chooses the time of sheepshearing to make his escape. In the David and Nabal narrative this motif does not come from the storyline, but rather from Nabal's mouth when denying David's request for food. After his proverbial retort, "Who is David, and who is the son of Jesse?" (cf. 2 Sam 20,1; 1 Kgs 12,16), Nabal makes the somewhat cryptic statement: "Today the servants who are breaking away — each from the presence of his master — have multiplied", היום רבו עבדים המהפריצים איש מפני אדניו (1 Sam 25,10). That this comment is not simply a slighted remark at David for fleeing from Saul is demonstrated by Nabal's reference to the number of servants and masters affected by this "breaking away". That is, Nabal's description and Jacob's actions could very well represent the state-of-affairs during sheepshearing. After all, the release or escape of slaves in connection with certain festivals (especially springtime festivals) is well attested in other ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean Basin cultures⁽¹⁷⁾, including Israel⁽¹⁸⁾.

2. Sheepshearing and the "Pāraṣ-ing" Nature of the Davidides

David's association with those "breaking away" (המהפריצים) from their masters during sheepshearing highlights a subject requiring attention before concluding our study. McCarter has suggested that Absalom invited the royal family to his sheepshearing to kill not only Amnon but also David⁽¹⁹⁾. That Absalom had his eyes on the throne becomes clear with his subsequent revolt, and that even David is suspicious of Absalom's intentions in inviting him is indicated by David's refusal to attend (2 Sam 13,25), as well as by his questions regarding the need for Amnon to attend (v. 26)⁽²⁰⁾. With these observations in mind, it seems significant that Absalom does not merely "ask" David to attend his sheepshearing, but rather twice "prevailed upon him" (lit. "broke out upon him"), ויפריצו בו (2 Sam 13,25.27). Most commentators

⁽¹⁶⁾ For similar observations, see M. GARSIEL, *The First Book of Samuel. A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies, and Parallels* (Ramat-Gan 1985) 122-133.

⁽¹⁷⁾ For the manumission of slaves during spring festivals, see J.B. SEGAL, *The Hebrew Passover. From the Earliest Times to A.D. 70* (London 1963) 119-120.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Cf. the Passover, a spring festival involving the release of slaves (Israel) from bondage (in Egypt). One might also add the *privilegium paschale* described in the gospel accounts (Matt 27,15; Mark 15,6). The possibility that Israelite sheepshearing is the shepherding festival long hypothesized by scholars (see, e.g. R. DE VAUX, *Ancient Israel. Religious Institutions*, [New York 1965] II, 489) as the precursor to the Passover deserves further attention.

⁽¹⁹⁾ McCarter conjectures: "Seizing the occasion of a sheepshearing feast, Abishalom issues an invitation to the royal family that, if accepted, will put them in his power. We cannot be sure that the king's courteous but negative response is cautionary, but it is probable that David already suspects Abishalom's ambition and fears him on that account", (P.K. MCCARTER, *I-II Samuel* [AB 3; Doubleday 1970] 334).

⁽²⁰⁾ Cf. MCCARTER, *I-II Samuel*, 334 and CAQUOT – DE ROBERT, *Les Livres de Samuel*, 500.

attribute the presence of ויפָרַץ in these verses to scribal error (*metathesis*), arguing that the text originally read ויפָרַץ־בּו, “and he pleaded with him”⁽²¹⁾. That they are not alone in this expectation (cf. LXX, 4QSam^a, Syr. and OL) should not surprise us. Yet, it is the unexpected ויפָרַץ that seems the preferred reading, since, *lectio difficilior* aside, the verbal root פָּרַץ plays an important role in the other Davidic sheepshearings. In 1 Samuel 25, David is accused by Nabal of being among those “*pāraṣ*”-ing from their masters during the time of sheepshearing (v. 10). This is understandable since he is a descendant of a certain *Pereš* who was conceived during the time of sheepshearing and who was himself a “*pāraṣ*”-er (Gen 38,29), an action that secured his right to be the progenitor of the royal clan. Later, David is “*pāraṣ*”-ed upon by his own son, Absalom (after all, he is a *Pereš*-ite, too), in connection with a sheepshearing (2 Sam 13,25.27), and in what seems to be an attempt at securing (perhaps even seizing, had David attended the shearing) his father’s throne.

Yet, the connections do not end here. We will recall a text that is peculiar in isolation, but that takes on new significance in light of the present study. In 2 Samuel 14 we are informed of Absalom’s appealing physical characteristics, among which is his voluminous hair (vv. 25-26). He is said to have had such thick hair that he shaved it the same time each year: the start of spring (מִקֵּץ יָמִים לַיָּמִים) – the same time sheep were shorn in ancient Israel⁽²²⁾. The weight of his hair is even calculated in *šēqālīm*, just like his ovine counterpart⁽²³⁾. Furthermore, he is described as “without defect” (בּוֹ מוֹם), a fitting victim for the ensuing slaughter⁽²⁴⁾. In fact, it is likely Absalom’s unshorn hair that proves his downfall when “his head” gets caught in a tree and he is run through by the blades of Joab and his men⁽²⁵⁾. The mode

⁽²¹⁾ See, e.g. J. WELLHAUSEN, *Der Text der Bücher Samuelis* (Göttingen 1871) 188; MCCARTER, *I-II Samuel*, 330; CAQUOT – DE ROBERT, *Les Livres de Samuel*, 500; Cf. 1 Sam 28,23 and 2 Kgs 5,23 for פָּרַץ in similar contexts.

⁽²²⁾ S. HIRSCH, *Sheep and Goats in Palestine* (Tel Aviv 1933) 29. Spring shearing seems to have arisen from the natural molting of primitive and undomesticated sheep that occurs during this season. Another reason for spring shearing is that the warming weather lessens the likelihood of illness to the bare flocks.

⁽²³⁾ It is noteworthy that the average annual yield of wool from an adult ram in Israel is 2.25 kg. (HIRSCH, *Sheep and Goats*, 18), roughly equivalent to Absalom’s annual yield of two hundred shekels (2 Sam 14,26; although compare the “one hundred” of LXX and OL) or 2.2-2.6 kg. (see M.A. POWELL, “Weights and Measures”, *ABD* VI, 905-907). The comparison of Absalom to a member of the flock would not have been lost on an Israelite audience, making his earlier sheepshearing exploits and the circumstances surrounding his death all the more ironic.

⁽²⁴⁾ Cf. Deut 17,1, “You shall not sacrifice to YHWH your God an ox or a sheep in which there is a defect (יָדִיד בּוֹ מוֹם), anything bad, for that is an abomination to YHWH your God”.

⁽²⁵⁾ So Josephus (*Ant.* 7.239) and the Talmud (Sot 9b). Others have argued that it is not Absalom’s hair, but more generally his head, that is caught in the tree. See, for example, G.R. DRIVER, “Plurima Mortis Imago”, *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman* (eds. M. BEN-HORIN – B. D. WEINRYB – S. ZEITLIN) (Leiden 1962) 131. The question is over the meaning of “his head”, רֹאשׁוֹ. It seems significant that in the earlier description of Absalom’s annual shave that the text says he shaved “his head”, suggesting that שָׁעַר רֹאשׁוֹ and רֹאשׁוֹ (2 Sam 14,26) share a semantic (and, of course, an anatomic) field. If, in fact, Absalom is caught by his hair, then Absalom was coming due (or was past due) for his annual springtime shave. Further suggesting that this event occurred in the spring is that military engagements were usually initiated during this time of year.

of Absalom's death takes on added significance when we consider that it was likely in this same region (Ephraim) and at the same time of year (spring) that Absalom and his men ran Amnon through with their own swords⁽²⁶⁾. Thus, the unshorn Absalom becomes a victim at his own game, and the Davidic sheepshearings come to a fitting end.

3. *Sheepshearing and the Davidic Throne*

When taken together, the biblical evidence presents Israelite sheepshearings as a time of trickery (Jacob surreptitiously escapes from Laban, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute, Absalom deceptively invites Amnon to his shearing), licentiousness (Judah has relations with a prostitute, both Nabal and Amnon drink to excess), and revenge (Jacob, Tamar, David and Absalom all seek recompense during sheepshearing) — giving Israelite sheepshearings an affinity with other ancient (and modern) springtime celebrations. Yet, what gave rise to the peculiar connection between sheepshearing and the Davidic throne?

One possibility is that sheepshearing, because of its associations with revelry and revenge, provided an ideal narrative backdrop for events from Israel's past requiring the vindication of wrongs or the repayment of debts. This model would help to explain why the Jacob and Laban narrative, which seems to have no immediate connection to David (though, see below), shares a number of parallels with the David and Nabal story. That is, the motif had a broader application than David. Yet, this explanation still does not account for all the data, especially why sheepshearing in its other three occurrences would be connected to David, even when one of these narratives appears in Genesis.

This leads to, what is to my mind, the most satisfying explanation of the evidence, the connections between sheepshearing and David arose from actual events (or, at least, well-established traditions) surrounding the establishment of the Davidic dynasty — events that might be reconstructed as follows: David, during his rise to power, acquired considerable territory and livestock from a wealthy landowner in Carmel during the celebrations of sheepshearing, a time of known excess and vulnerability. This acquisition provided David with an important foothold near his eventual capital, Hebron, and, following Levenson, may have even established him as the *rōš bêt 'āb* or *nāšî* of the Calebite clan⁽²⁷⁾. Absalom also tried to benefit from the revelry and vulnerability of sheepshearing (like father, like son) by eliminating the heir to the throne and, had David attended, perhaps even carrying out a coup. Either of these events, and certainly the combination of the two, could have given shape to the traditions concerning Perez, who was conceived during the

⁽²⁶⁾ The locations are “Baal-Hazor near Ephraim”, בבעל הצור אשר עם־אפרים, (2 Sam 13,23) and “the forest of Ephraim”, ביער אפרים, (2 Sam 18,6), respectively. Admittedly, this connection is textually based, as the precise location of the forest of Ephraim — whether it is east or west of the Jordan (or both, as suggested by Josh 17,14-18) — is unknown, as is the question of whether or not the “Ephraim” of 2 Sam 13,23 should be understood as “Ophrah”. For discussion, see Henry Ö. THOMPSON, “Ephraim”, *ABD* II, 556; “Ephraim, Forest of”, *ABD* II, 557.

⁽²⁷⁾ J.D. LEVENSON, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History”, *CBQ* 40 (1978) 26-27.

time of sheepshearing and whose actions at birth to secure the right of primogenitor – and, by implication, to sire the royal clan (Gen 49,10; cf. Ruth 4,18-22; 1 Chr 2,4-15) — helped to account for the “*pāraṣ*”-ing nature of the Davidides in their early struggles for the throne (1 Sam 25,10; 2 Sam 13,25.27)⁽²⁸⁾.

Such a reconstruction of events might also explain the several parallels between the Jacob/Laban and David/Nabal sheepshearing narratives. In particular, an event from David’s life has found expression in the ancestral history. After all, a number of episodes from David’s life mirror those of the Patriarchs, especially Jacob⁽²⁹⁾. For instance, both Jacob and David have daughters (Dinah and Tamar, respectively) who are victims of sexual aggression and whose vindication results in the removal of two brothers (Simeon and Levi, in the case of Jacob; Amnon and, eventually, Absalom, in the case of David) from the line of succession⁽³⁰⁾. Additionally, both Jacob and David have sons (Reuben, in the case of Jacob; Absalom and, in a manner, Adonijah, in the case of David) who take their fathers’ concubines, again with consequences for the throne⁽³¹⁾. In the end, it is the “fourth” son of both Jacob and David (Judah and Solomon, respectively) who secures the right to rule over his brothers⁽³²⁾. Whether the allusions to David’s life in the ancestral history were intended as a further apology for his or a later Davidide’s (e.g., Solomon’s) ascent to power, or whether they were intended as a further critique of that ascent, is unclear. My sense, based on both the noble and ignoble actions recorded for the Patriarchs and the early Davidides, is that the biblical authors were content with the ambiguities⁽³³⁾. The establishment of the Davidic dynasty was, in a word, “complicated”, and the account of this period — both in Genesis and Samuel — reflects this reality.

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⁽²⁸⁾ The author’s innovation was not David’s affiliation to the Perešite clan but the wordplay on the clan name to characterize the Davidides’ behavior.

⁽²⁹⁾ For the parallels between David and the Patriarchs in general, see the discussion and bibliography in R. DE HOOP, “The Use of the Past to Address the Present: The Wife-Sister Incidents (Gen 12,10-20; 20,1-18; 26,1-16)”, *Studies in the Book of Genesis. Literature, Redaction, and History* (ed. A. WÉNIN) (BETL 155; Leuven 2001) 359-69. For the parallels between Jacob’s and David’s lives, see, most recently, R.E. FRIEDMAN, *The Hidden Book in the Bible. The Discovery of the First Prose Masterpiece* (San Francisco 1998) 37-44.

⁽³⁰⁾ For the many thematic and linguistic parallels between the Dinah and Tamar stories, see D.N. FREEDMAN, “Dinah and Shechem, Tamar and Amnon”, *God’s Steadfast Love. Essays in Honor of Prescott Harrison Williams, Jr.*, Austin Seminary Bulletin 105.2 (1990) 51-63; also published in *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation* (Grand Rapids 1997) 485-95. Cf. J.A. EMERTON, “Judah and Tamar”, *VT* 29 (1979) 403-415.

⁽³¹⁾ Solomon uses Adonijah’s request for Abishag (1 Kgs 2,13-25) as justification for his execution.

⁽³²⁾ Whatever Solomon’s actual birth order, he is presented in Samuel-Kings as the fourth son in contention for the throne.

⁽³³⁾ Cf. M.E. BIDDLE, “Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25: Intertextuality and Characterization”, *JBL* 121/4 (2002) 617-638.

SUMMARY

An analysis of the relevant texts (Genesis 31; 38; 1 Samuel 25; 2 Samuel 13) reveals that sheepshearing in ancient Israel was a significant celebration characterized by feasting, heavy drinking, and the settling of old scores. As a result of these associations, sheepshearing became an ideal backdrop for events in Israel's past involving the repayment of debts or the righting of wrongs. Because both David and Absalom took advantage of sheepshearing for this purpose — and in the process aided their own ascents to the throne — sheepshearing became intimately associated with the emergence of the royal clan (Genesis 38) and the establishment of the Davidic dynasty.