

Deadly Traits: A Narratological Analysis of Character in 2 Samuel 11

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ABSTRACT

This narratological study takes a closer look at the characters of the ambiguous story of David, Uriah and Bathsheba. First, different theories of character are discussed to highlight the nature of narrative character. Special attention is given to the nature of biblical characters. A combination of these theories is then used to analyse the characters of 2 Samuel 11.

A INTRODUCTION

Stories have been a part of human interaction and culture since time immemorial. There seems to be universal aspects to stories of any kind, and all types of stories seem to intrigue the human being. Granted, story-telling has developed and grown together with culture, and sometimes it is difficult to understand some elements in ancient narratives. However, an analysis of ancient stories might surprise today's reader with unexpected depth (Cobley 2001:2). In these studies of narrative, an analysis of the element of character is both 'underdeveloped and underutilized', especially in biblical narratological studies (Fowler 1993:97; Donaldson 1993:81). Indeed, even though Hebrew poetry has received much attention thus far, not so many enquiries have been made into the narratives contained in the Old Testament in general up to 1991 (Schulz 1991:119), although this percentage is on the rise.

In this paper, a narratological investigation of the characters contained in 2 Samuel 11:2-27a, which Schulz (1991:170) has described as 'unsurpassable in its exciting scenes and features', will be made. Although Gressmann (1991:26) has already noted the depth of the characters contained in this narrative,¹ no complete analysis of character has thus far been done on this text. This is no easy task, since as Herzberg (1964:311) has pointed out, only the facts are

¹ Reinhartz (1993:117) has also pointed out the ease with which the reader can identify with all the major characters in the books of Samuel, mainly due to their mimetic nature. The mimetic nature of characters is discussed *infra* under 'The nature of narrative character.'

given and we are not presented with feelings or motivations of these characters. The analysis will be done by first taking a quick glance at theories concerning the nature of characters in narrative and especially biblical narrative. Thereafter, a synthesis of these theories will be employed in order to analyse the characters of 2 Samuel 11.

It is hoped that this paper will further the study of ancient narrative, and also contribute to the understanding of the highly ambiguous story of David, Bathsheba and Uriah.

B INTRODUCTORY REMARKS CONCERNING CHARACTER

1 Characters and the reader

Before a discussion of the nature and classification of narrative characters can proceed, a few remarks concerning the reader should be made. This concerns reading, as reading is *per se* an act of the reader. It is therefore important to note the reader's role in construing meaning out of a given text (Fowler 1993:97). Reading cannot possibly be an objective exercise – any text being read is always being interpreted by a *reader*. This has important consequences for the analysis of character. Who is the reader? Is he/she simply an ideal? Or should we give attention to how the ancient reader² would have interpreted the text (Rashkow 1993:107-109)? Certainly all of these possibilities are valid. However, trying to define a character by using all these categories would be folly, since each time a text is read, some new character trait will subjectively be read into it (Rashkow 1993:109), seeing that a reader's own experiences are quite often read into the text (Bach 1993:69). Perhaps the best way to deal with this problem is to only make readers aware of the subjectivity of such an enterprise as defining character traits, without explicitly choosing any given category of reader. Bach (1993:69) also points out that characters take shape in readers' consciousness to such an extent that they often transcend the story in which they are found, and thus almost become independent of the story. This is mainly due to the mimetic nature of characters,³ but it decidedly shows that it would be unfair to the readers to reduce characters to a mere set of traits.

² Should one be interested in how the ancient reader would have accepted the texts, it would be advisable to consult anthropological studies, *e.g.* the work of Bruce Malin, and certainly also the works on literacy and orality by Walter Ong (Fowler 1993:99).

³ The mimetic nature of characters is discussed *infra* under 'The nature of narrative character.'

2 Character versus action

Another important point to clarify is whether characters or action should receive more attention in a narrative analysis. As Abbott (2002:123) states, these two – characters and action – constitute the primary components of narrative. The recent debate⁴ in these respects centres on which one of these two components outweighs the other (Abbott 2002:123-124; Tolmie 1999:40). Toolan (1988:90) is of the opinion that action does indeed count for more than characters. His arguments are appealing, but considering Bach's (1993:69) statement that 'character can exist in our consciousness as an element independent of the story in which the character was originally discovered', it is not quite convincing. However, a story would not be a story without a plot. In this paper, it will thus be held that character and action should deserve the same merit in a narrative. This balance between the two components agrees with the view held by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (Tolmie 1999:40-41). It is, however, noteworthy that characters are more difficult to pinpoint than actions (Abbott 2002:125). Whereas actions can be clearly investigated and defined, an analysis of character is notoriously vague and elusive.⁵ Nevertheless, this should not deter scholars to investigate character. We will now turn to a discussion of the nature of narrative character.

3 The nature of narrative character

Characters in narrative are both synthetic and mimetic⁶ (Phelan 1989:2-3). They are synthetic in as much as they are artificial, but they do represent a certain 'realism' – with the same problems as 'real' people⁷ (Rashkow 1993:106). In this sense they are indeed mimetic, since they reflect human aspects. The mere fact that they are (sometimes) named confirms this mimetic nature, as the name in a narrative fulfils mostly the same function as in 'real life' (Reinhart 1993:119). Characters fulfil different roles in narrative, and it is useful to distinguish between characters in terms of these functions (Prince 1982:72). To a greater or lesser extent, characters resemble real people. The degree in which

⁴ Abbott (2002:123-124) provides a good summary of this debate.

⁵ Bar-Efrat's statement that 'a character in a work of literature is merely the sum of the means used in the description' (1989:48) can thus not entirely be accepted. This fails to recognize the highly mimetic nature of character. An analysis going forth from this premise would certainly be easier to validate, but such a cold analysis would fail to do justice to the human aspects of character – the exact reason why a character intrigues the reader.

⁶ Phelan (1989:2-3) also adds 'thematic' as a component of character. By means of this description, Phelan clearly shows that characters also represent a certain social class.

⁷ This 'human' element is probably why there are to date no theory of character that is completely satisfactory (Bal 1997:115).

they do so normally distinguish them from each other. This variability of perceived realism in characters in accordance with the frequency of appearance in a text helps to distinguish between main and secondary characters (Prince 1982:72).

4 Models of narrative character

Together with these observations, one should also look at models for classification of narrative character such as Tolmie (1999:54-57) discusses. Of these, three seems to be useful, namely those of Forster, Ewen and Greimas.⁸ Fokkelman's (1981:78) model for character analysis is also of value, and will also be discussed. In this paper, no choice has been made for a specific model, as each has its own merits and flaws. Rather, a combination of models will serve for the analysis of character in 2 Samuel 11.

4.1 Forster

The classic model developed by E. M. Forster is still in use today. Forster categorizes character into either 'flat' or 'round' characters. Round characters have the ability to surprise the reader. Flat characters, on the other hand, remain static (Bar-Efrat 1989:90), therefore flat characters 'are limited to a narrow range of predictable behaviors' (Abbott 2002:126). Also, round characters tend to be complex and to develop, whereas flat characters are defined by a singular trait (Bar-Efrat 1989:90). Round characters thus resemble real people to a higher degree (Abbott 2002:127).

4.2 Ewen

Ewen makes use of three axes: complexity, development and penetration into inner life. This method is useful since character depth can vary. However, this model is also very subjective, as guidelines are determined by the interpreter.

4.3 Greimas

Greimas' actantial model has also gained great support. Greimas divides characters into 6 actants: Sender, Object, Receiver, Helper, Subject and Opponent. The greatest advantage of this model is that each situation is evaluated in a different way, as a character can be a Helper in one scenario and a Subject in the next. However, the actantial model 'would not enable us to define the specific vision of each character which the reader receives' (Bal 1997:118).

⁸ A fourth one is that of W. J. Harvey. Harvey proposes a simple division into two categories: protagonists and background characters. In-between there are also 'cards' and 'ficelles', each more developed than the simple background character.

4.4 Fokkelman

Fokkelman's (1981:78) model for character analysis is also useful. He divides characters into heroes, opponents and helpers.⁹ Fokkelman identifies the hero by textual prominence, whether he/she is the subject of a quest,¹⁰ and whether he/she shows initiative. Opponents and helpers are identified by whether they help or hinder the hero's quest.

5 Defining a character

Readers get to know characters in a great variety of ways. In order to analyse a character, one must be able to discern these different ways and to further define a character. Toolan (1988:93) points out that character analysis always requires, in some way or another, an analysis of character traits.¹¹ Reducing characters to a mere set of traits is not desirable. Such an act 'has the apparent effect of reducing the resonance and indeed the mimetic potency of any given character' (Leitch 1986:157). Still, the best way to describe a character is by means of a 'set of dominant qualities' (Rashkow 1993:105). These qualities can be discerned by the way a character is presented to the reader. This can happen in two ways: direct characterisation or indirect characterisation. The former is done by the narrator or other characters, whereas the latter is deduced by the character's actions (Bal 1997:129).¹² Direct characterisation given by the narrator is trustworthy, but characterisation given by characters cannot always be trusted (Bar-Efrat 1989:59; Tolmie 1999:42). Direct characterisation is either explicitly mentioned by the narrator or characters, or by presenting the inner thoughts and feelings of a character (Bar-Efrat 1989:63). Indirect characterisation needs to be interpreted by the reader in order to deduce the character's qualities thereby elucidated (Tolmie 1999:44). Mainly, this is done by looking at either speech or actions. What characters say can illuminate qualities of both the speaker and the addressee (Bar-Efrat 1989:70). Furthermore, the *way* in which something is said can also shed light on some of the character's qualities (Bar-Efrat 1989:68; Tolmie 1999:44). It is also worthwhile to note a character's response to speech directed at them (Bar-Efrat 1989:73), and to compare a character's account of an event depicted by the narrator (or another character)

⁹ Fokkelman also uses the term *quest*. It is noteworthy that Fokkelman's *hero* is not necessarily the hero in a moral sense (1981:82). In the story of David, Bathsheba and Uriah, David would certainly be defined as the hero, although his conduct is not at all admirable.

¹⁰ In a single story there can be more than one quest, and therefore also more than one hero.

¹¹ Toolan (1988:99-102) proposes an analysis of traits by means of a table. Traits are then either given as positive or negative. However, this oversimplifies the matter.

¹² Also see Prince (1982:72).

(Bar-Efrat 1989:76).¹³ Actions are as important an aspect of indirect characterisation as any (Bal 1997:116; Bar-Efrat 1989:7), if indeed not of greater significance. Although interpretations of certain acts may vary, the deed itself can be objectively stated. By analysing a given act, characters' decisions also come to the fore, thus giving us insight into their scale of values (Bar-Efrat 1989:81). It is therefore necessary to consider the options available to the character, and also to consider whether a certain act should have been performed or not (Tolmie 1999:44). Yet another means of indirect characterisation is by way of minor characters 'against which the personalities of the main ones stand out' (Bar-Efrat 1989:86). Qualities of the main character are highlighted by means of an indirect comparison with the minor characters (Simon 1969:226-227). Simon (1969:227) even contends that these minor characters '[q]uite often... serve as the key to the unarticulated message of the biblical stories.'

All of these ways of defining a character should be considered together. The qualities (or traits), discerned by either direct characterisation or indirect characterisation, together with the different models of narrative character, will be used in the analysis of narrative character in 2 Samuel 11. However, special note should be taken of the way characters are shaped in biblical narrative. This will be discussed next.

6 Characters in biblical narrative

Character development in biblical narratives mostly transpires by means of indirect characterisation (Bar-Efrat 1989:64). Actions and speech occur more frequently than thoughts and feelings (Schulz 1991:159). However, there appears to be no difference in style between different characters' speech, and thus a character's manner of speaking is mostly defined by (and indistinguishable from) the narrator's style (Bar-Efrat 1989:65). Therefore, in biblical narrative, a character's acts are the principal way in which characters are depicted (Bar-Efrat 1989:77). Special attention should be given to anything a biblical character, or those characters around him/her, does. This becomes even more important when it is considered that, in biblical narrative, a character's qualities are only given to further the plot (Schulz 1991:129; Copley 2001:49). There is generally no mention of a character's physical appearance or any mention of the nature of their attire (Bar-Efrat 1989:51), unless in some way these details serve the plot (Bar-Efrat 1989:49).

Another intriguing aspect of biblical narratives is that they focus on the development of the main character by limiting the amount of secondary characters¹⁴ (Simon 1969:226). This effectively means that secondary biblical cha-

¹³ E.g. the messenger's account of the battle in 2 Samuel 11.

¹⁴ Therefore, the names of secondary characters are in general omitted (Schulz 1991:136) and there appears no hint of their motivations (Simon 1969:226).

racters are rendered in less detail than secondary secular characters (Bar-Efrat 1989:92). Keeping the above in mind, an analysis of character in 2 Samuel 11 can commence.

C ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS OF 2 SAMUEL 11

1 David¹⁵

The natural place to start an analysis of character in 2 Samuel 11 would be David. The first thing one is told about him in this narrative, is the fact that he is king. In the narrative, he exercises the initiative and generally he is the one *doing* things (Brueggemann 2002:50). He is, in this narrative, not necessarily depicted as a wise king¹⁶ (Campbell 2005:114), but certainly he is depicted as a strategist. There is, furthermore, a difference between being wise and being cunning. David is surely depicted as cunning, since he never doubts what to do next (Brueggemann 2002:51). David always remains calm,¹⁷ whether he is faced with a problem or (deep down) overcome with joy (Goslinga 1962:211). One should note, however, that Joab's anticipation of David's anger might indicate otherwise.¹⁸

David's character emerges mainly by contrast with that of Uriah. In this sense, David is shown to have a lack of piety (Ackroyd 1977:101), to disregard his obligations (Vom Orde 2002:149), to be unjust (Stolz 1981:237), not to be able to control his sexual urges and to be unfaithful to the army (Seiler 1998:252), to be dishonest, disloyal, treacherous and generally unprincipled (Bar-Efrat 1989:87). Furthermore, by sending Uriah to his death by letting him carry his own death warrant illuminates David's guile (Seiler 1998:253). Being the king, it is unlikely that David could have been brought before a court of law. Thus it would seem as if the only reason why he aspires to at first deceive and later kill Uriah is the protection of his own honour (Anderson 1989:156).

Joab also serves to elucidate some of David's qualities. Joab disregards David's instructions, and formulates his own plan to send Uriah to his death. In

¹⁵ One should note that one of the pitfalls of narratological analysis is mythological figures, as one tends to read more into the figure than what is present in the text (Bal 1997:121). Although this is not necessarily wrong, an analysis of David's character in 2 Samuel 11:2-27a should proceed from (and be confined as much as possible to) the text.

¹⁶ Campbell (2005:114) is of the opinion that a wise king would not sleep with his soldiers' wives.

¹⁷ *Contra* Brueggemann (2002:53), who describes David as becoming frantic. Rather, David is seen to calmly calculate and orchestrate every move.

¹⁸ Gressmann (1991:27) takes this for granted, but he assumes that the Hebrew text is corrupt and follows the text of the Septuagint.

this way, David's ruthlessness is emphasised, since David does not think the extra cost of life of any importance (Campbell 2005:116).

David may generally not have been malicious, as Brueggemann (2002:52) points out, but in 2 Samuel 11 he is certainly not depicted in a favourable way (Seiler 1998:252). Though David's character is surely unsavoury, he is definitely the main character in this narrative. In Fokkelman's terms, David would be the hero, as he receives the most prominence in the text and since he is the character on a quest. In 2 Samuel 11, David's character is the most rounded, since he shows the greatest initiative and also the greatest complexity.

2 Bathsheba

Traditionally, Bathsheba would be placed second in an analysis of character in this narrative. Taking her to be one of the main characters would surely be a misapprehension, as she is almost completely passive (Berlin 1982:72; McCarter 1984:288; Ackroyd 1977:105-106). She could almost purely be described as an object (Seiler 1998:256), as 'simply part of the plot' (Berlin 1982:73). However, considering the effect of the character of Bathsheba on the reader, it will be well worth the trouble to analyse her character.

It is noteworthy that Bathsheba's character is purposefully played down by the narrator (Berlin 1982:73). This can be clearly seen by the fact that Bathsheba is named only once, and always in relation to her husband or father¹⁹ (Seiler 1998:256). As Brueggemann (2002:57) asserts, this is done intentionally by the narrator. It is therefore made clear that Bathsheba has but a small role to play in any of the action depicted in the narrative. In actual fact, Bathsheba's only direct speech in the story nearly summarises her function: 'I am pregnant'²⁰ (Bach 1993:71). Even more intriguing is what is not stated explicitly in the text. Bathsheba's feelings and emotions, as well as her motivations, are of a secondary nature to the biblical narrator (Herzberg 1964:310), and no express statement about these emotions is made²¹ (Seiler 1998:256; Ackroyd 1977:105; Berlin 1982:72). Bathsheba is, nonetheless, attributed the emotion of mourning at the end of the narrative. This is described more as a rite, something to be

¹⁹ Anderson (1989:153), McCarter (1984:285) and Vom Orde (2002:144) each note that it is not customary for a married woman to be identified by her father's name. The significance may, however, be lost. It is possible that Bathsheba was the daughter of Eliam the son of Ahithophel, David's advisor. This would explain the insertion into the text, but would not significantly alter a narratological analysis of Bathsheba's character.

²⁰ In Hebrew, this is but merely two words.

²¹ For feminists like Bach (1993:71) and Exum (1989:20) this fact is extremely unsavoury. According to their point of view, this is yet another way in which women are muted.

done out of respect, than an emotion (Berlin 1982:73). The text remains silent as to whether Bathsheba truly mourned the death of her husband and child. Often, Bathsheba is given part of the blame for the wicked deeds described in the narrative (Campbell 2005:114). This blame ranges from accusations of vanity to the careful planning of a type of *coup d'état* (Vom Orde 2002:143). Accusers often forget that no hint of her motivation is either explicitly given or can be deduced from her actions, as the narrator simply doesn't have anything to say about this matter. To accuse her would not do justice to the biblical narrative (Campbell 2005:114).

Bathsheba's character can only be described as flat. She is almost completely relegated to the background of the story. She can not even be described as an opponent or a helper, as she is simply part of the object of the hero's quest. Almost no psychological depth can be ascribed to her on narratological grounds.

3 Uriah

To place Uriah amongst the main character of this narrative would be a safer bet, even though a lot of his character traits can only be deduced. His origins remain a mystery. He is explicitly called 'The Hittite'. This could imply that he was a foreigner (Ackroyd 1977:101; McCarter 1984:285; Stolz 1981:236), but not necessarily, as his name is clearly Yahwistic²² and implies a full-fledged member of the Israelite community (Vom Orde 2002:144). It may even be that he was not of pure Hittite blood (Goslinga 1962:203), and that 'The Hittite' was merely a nickname (Ackroyd 1977:101).

There are two reasons for believing Uriah to *act* as he did. The first is that he heard in some way or another of the proceedings at the court, or was at least suspicious of David's offer. The second possibility is that Uriah was simply too trusting and loyal (Goslinga 1962:205). It is impossible to tell, given the facts contained in the text (Campbell 2005:116; Vom Orde 2002:147) and the fact that the inner thoughts of Uriah are nowhere recorded (Rosenberg 1988:110). Therefore, one must agree with Anderson (1989:154) that the claims made by Uriah himself should be taken at face value. This is important, as Uriah's motivation can then be deduced from his speech. According to Uriah himself, he is completely at one with the Israelites and the campaigning army (Seiler 1998:255), to such an extent that he disregards the command of the king. Uriah is thus loyal to the utmost and trustworthy indeed. This is confirmed by the most tragic moment in the narrative: Uriah is trustworthy, noble and loyal enough to carry his own death-warrant without reading or enquiring about it, even though David's conduct may have been suspicious (Brueggemann 2002:55; McCarter 1984:287). In fact, David counts on Uriah's valour

²² Although Goslinga (1962:203) does point out that this fact is sometimes doubted. The name probably means 'Yahweh is my light'.

and steadfastness in battle in order for the plan to be brought to completion (Goslinga 1962:208). It is also clear from Uriah's speech, which he seemingly delivers unintimidated, that Uriah is quite fearless (Seiler 1998:255). Indeed, Goslinga (1962:205) is of the opinion that Uriah would certainly not have kept silent before David had he known of the happenings at the court a short while ago. It has already been noted *supra* under the discussion of David's character that Uriah's character is depicted as everything David is not. The most outstanding difference is seen in Uriah's piety, since he steadfastly clings to his religious obligations (Ackroyd 1977:102; Goslinga 1962:205; Herzberg 1964:311). It is indeed this pious quality of Uriah that the biblical narrator wishes to stress the most.

Uriah's character is well defined. He is much more rounded than Bathsheba or Joab, although not quite as fully as David. Uriah is certainly not *the* main character in the story, but rather an antitype of the hero. He is in fact an opponent, an obstruction to the real quest and plot of the narrative. Nevertheless, even though Uriah's main purpose is to be in contrast to David, his character is sketched in with quite a lot of detail.

4 Joab

At first glance, Joab seems to be not very complex at all, since he carries through the king's command without a thought (Stolz 1981:237). Nevertheless, even this fact shows that Joab is a good soldier (Vom Orde 2002:146). One would be wrong to think that Joab is not capable of the same cunning as David himself. He is quite clearly ruthless, and the command of the king, although in essence carried out, is not followed to the letter. Instead, a great deal more of David's soldiers lose their lives. Joab is indeed a very sly character. It is also worth noting that Joab is able to foresee the king's reaction, thereby indicating that he is not a mere puppet, but fully capable of thinking for himself. Since the messenger did not relay the message in quite the same way as Joab intended, it is impossible to tell if his foresight was correct.

Joab is not depicted as a full character. He is, however, more colourful than Bathsheba, and certainly do not deserve to be called a flat character. In any case, Joab must be seen as a helper.

5 Joab's messenger

Joab's messenger is not merely relegated to the background, although his function is perhaps more important than his character. It is quite in his interaction with David that he gains any importance at all (Reinhartz 1993:128). Therefore, Joab's messenger 'contribute[s] not only to the plot development but also to the characterization of the king' (Reinhartz 1993:130). It is noteworthy that Joab put enough trust in this particular messenger to convey a message of this delicate nature. The messenger must have been discreet, as he could certainly have

deduced the hidden meaning of Joab's message to David (Goslinga 1962:210), as he also did: the messenger relays the whole message immediately, and by so doing sidesteps David's angry outburst anticipated by Joab.

This messenger is thus not merely part of the background, but does seem to act on his own. However, it would be better to describe this character as flat, as he doesn't seem to have any depth at all and is certainly not a very complex character. In a narrative sense, he can be classified as a helper.

6 Minor characters

A few other minor characters also appear in the story. Mostly, these characters are flat characters, mainly inserted to aid the flow of the plot. In 2 Samuel 11:2-27a, the army, for instance, plays but a minor role and serves as a function of the storyline (Reinhartz 1993:123). Furthermore, the servants in David's house appear only to be necessary for the action to take place. These characters do not have psychological depth or any initiative of their own. In at least one case, that of Eliam, all that is given in the text of the character is but one name and a relation (namely that he is the father of Bathsheba).

Two interesting characters emerge from the embedded story which Joab instructs the messenger to relate: Abimelech and the woman who killed him. Not much can be deduced about these characters, and they certainly do not seem rounded in any way.

D CONCLUSION

In analysing the characters of 2 Samuel 11:2-27a, it has once again become clear that the reader's influence on characterisation must be kept in mind. No simple technical method of analysis will suffice, as characters in narrative function mimetically, and thus readers are invited to interpret characters on their own terms.

The analysis of 2 Samuel 11:2-27a has shown that there are three characters which can be defined as rounded characters, or in other words, resemble people in real life. These three are David, Uriah and Joab, while Bathsheba is not well defined at all. David is cast in an extremely unfavourable light, whereas Uriah is compared to all that is positive. However, there can be no doubt that this is a story about David, and hence he is the protagonist (or hero, in Fokkelman's terms). Joab's character is also elucidated to some extent.

This study of character has shown that the analysis of characters can indeed be a fruitful exercise. Hopefully this short study of character in 2 Samuel 11:2-27a will be of use in other efforts to understand this highly ambiguous narrative. Still, a lot of work needs to be done not only on this piece of biblical narrative, but on most narrative parts of the Old Testament.

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