

Violence in the Hebrew Bible

Between Text and Reception

Edited by

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God Appeased by Homicide? 2 Samuel 21:1–14 in View of Some Hittite and Assyrian Parallels

Paul Sanders

1 Introduction

2 Samuel 21:1–14 is one of the most horrific narratives in the entire Hebrew Bible. Rizpah, a former concubine of the late king Saul, is described as guarding the decomposing corpses of her two sons and of five of Saul's other descendants, his daughter's sons. According to the text, the seven men had been killed on account of Saul's illegitimate attempt to exterminate the Gibeonites. All of this happens against the background of a three-year famine.

While Rizpah's role is regarded as laudable,¹ other aspects of the text are quite controversial. The story reports that the idea of executing seven of Saul's descendants came from those Gibeonites who had survived the massacre. Saul's successor, King David, consented to their suggestion and selected Rizpah's two sons and five of Saul's grandsons. He handed them over to the Gibeonites, knowing that the Gibeonites would kill them.

Traditionally, the story is presumed to be an attempt to legitimise David's actions. At the very beginning, God designates Saul's family as a "house of bloodguilt" (21:1b).² The three-year famine, which began during David's reign, is said to be due to Saul's misconduct against the Gibeonites. This means that action is required. David asks the Gibeonites what he can do for them. According to the classical interpretation, David has no other option but to agree with the Gibeonites' proposal to kill seven of Saul's descendants. In this way, he makes amends (כפר Piel; 21:3) for Saul's misconduct and motivates God to end the famine.

¹ See section 4, p. 235–40 below.

² MT: אל שאול ואל בית הדמים ("due to Saul and the house of bloodguilt"). An alternative word division would be: אל שאול ואל ביתה דמים ("on Saul and on his house [there is] bloodguilt"; cf. 21:4, ועם שאול ועם ביתו); see, among others, Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica* (revised and expanded by A. A. Fischer; transl. E. F. Rhodes; 3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 175. For the expression, see Deuteronomy 19:10; 2 Samuel 16:8.

However, more recent interpretations regard David's behaviour with much more suspicion. Was the execution of Saul's seven relatives really useful, or does the story – implicitly – criticise David for allowing the Gibeonites to kill them? According to many present-day scholars, it is doubtful whether their deaths served any purpose.

This chapter addresses the controversy in an unusual way, namely by comparing 2 Samuel 21:1–14 with certain ancient Near Eastern texts that evince close parallels with the biblical story. In addition to one of the fourteenth-century prayers of the Hittite king Mursili II, which has previously been correlated with 2 Samuel 21:1–14,³ the discussion includes a second prayer commissioned by the same king, as well as a much later neo-Assyrian text addressing one of King Sargon II's sins. An analysis of the similarities will permit a more balanced answer to the question of whether 2 Samuel 21:1–14 legitimises or criticises David's actions.

In the present context, it is impossible to address all the questions the text raises. Here, the focus lies on David's role and the relevance of the three ancient Near Eastern texts to the interpretation of his behaviour towards Saul's family. However, before I can discuss this aspect, I must first address the relationship between this passage and preceding stories about the Gibeonites, Saul, and David (section 2) as well as the gruesome nature of the execution of Saul's descendants (section 3). Furthermore, I will outline selected critical assessments of David's conduct as it is described in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 (section 4). After a thorough analysis of the three extra-biblical texts (section 5), I will portray their conceptual parallels with the biblical episode (section 6). A brief description of the biblical idea that homicide may appease God's anger (section 7) is followed by a reassessment of David's role in the biblical story (section 8). The final section discloses the positive role of religion in both Mursili's plague prayers and the biblical episode.

2 Links with Preceding Narratives

2 Samuel 21:1–14 is a self-contained unit. The pericope is seen as the first in a series of loosely related appendices inserted after the preceding "Succession

3 Abraham Malamat, "Doctrines of Causality in Hittite and Biblical Historiography: A Parallel," *Vetus Testamentum* 5 (1955): 1–12.

Narrative” (2 Samuel 9–20), which is much more coherent. The appendices cover the whole of 2 Samuel 21–24.⁴

2 Samuel 21:1–14 begins with a reference to a prolonged famine, which was not mentioned in the earlier stories. The remarkably vague dating of this famine “in the days of David” confirms the impression that the passage is a secondary appendix to 2 Samuel. The story relates actions taken by Saul and David that are not mentioned in any of the preceding narratives about these kings. Furthermore, the relationship between this story and several earlier passages in 1 and 2 Samuel is equivocal. How does David’s permission to kill Saul’s progeny relate to his promise not to exterminate Saul’s offspring (1 Samuel 24:22–23)? Also, 2 Samuel 9 suggests that only one of Saul’s descendants is still alive – namely, Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth. Does 2 Samuel 21:1–14 relate to an earlier time, when more of Saul’s relatives were still alive? Whatever the case, the story gives the impression of being a flashback, interrupting the chronological order of events.⁵

On the other hand, the pericope indicates knowledge of several traditions that appear earlier in 1 and 2 Samuel. It is not only familiar with information about Saul’s daughters;⁶ it also refers to David’s oath to Jonathan (21:7; cf. 1 Samuel 18:3; 20:15–17, 42; 23:18) and to the safekeeping of Saul’s and Jonathan’s bones by the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead (21:12; cf. 1 Samuel 31:8–13).

4 1 Kings 1–2 is often seen as part of the “Succession Narrative.” For the development of the theory concerning the “Succession Narrative,” interrupted by secondary appendices in 2 Samuel 21–24, see P. Kyle McCarter Jr, *II Samuel* (Anchor Bible Commentary; Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1984), 9–19; Arnold A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (Word Bible Commentary; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), xxvi–xxxvi, 248; Jin-Soo Kim, *Bloodguilt, Atonement, and Mercy: An Exegetical and Theological Study of 2 Samuel 21:1–14* (European University Studies 845; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 180–82, 185–87; David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary; Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 26–30.

5 Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 251; Jan P. Fokkeman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 3: *Throne and City (II Sam. 2–8 & 21–24)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990), 275; Kim, *Bloodguilt*, 3–4, 19, 179; Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 503.

6 However, in the MT of 21:8, the name מִיכָל (“Michal”) seems to be inappropriate (cf. 2 Samuel 6:23), while a reference to מֵרַב (“Merab”), another of Saul’s daughters, suits the context much better (cf. 1 Samuel 18:19). While most Septuagint manuscripts read Μιχαλ or Μελαχλ, the Antiochene text reads Μεραβ; see Natalio Fernández Marcos and José Ramón Busto Saiz, *El texto antioqueno de la Biblia griega*, vol. 1: *1–2 Samuel* (Textos y Estudios Cardenal Cisneros 50; Madrid: Instituto de Filología, C.S.I.C., 1989), 154. For the creative solution in Targum Jonathan, see Eveline van Staalduijn-Sulman, *The Targum of Samuel* (Studies in the Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture 1; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 618.

Furthermore, the pericope refers back to another biblical text outside the books of Samuel. In 2 Samuel 21:2, it includes a parenthetical clarification reminding the reader of an oath the Israelites swore to the Gibeonites prior to Saul's offence:

Now the Gibeonites were not from the children of Israel, but from the remnant of the Amorites. And the children of Israel had sworn an oath to them (נשבועו להם), but Saul attempted to slay them in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah.

The background information concerning this oath is too brief to be sufficient in itself. Therefore, it must refer to a more extensive tradition.⁷ This tradition surfaces in the narrative of Joshua 9. This chapter recounts that after the Israelite conquest of Jericho and Ai, the Gibeonites feared that the Israelites would slaughter them. Pretending to be from a distant land, they asked the Israelites to make a covenant (ברית) with them (9:6).⁸ Since the Israelites failed to consult Yhwh (9:14), they did not discover that the Gibeonites were deceiving them. Joshua made a covenant with the Gibeonites and promised to let them live (לחיותם; 9:15) while Israel's leaders swore an oath to them (וישבועו להם; 9:15). The Israelites got angry when they discovered that the Gibeonites had deceived them, but the leaders pointed out that their oath was binding, since it had been sworn "by Yhwh" (ביהוה; 9:18–19). For fear of "wrath" (קצף; 9:20), they decided to spare the Gibeonites. The threatening anger was apparently that of Yhwh, the patron deity of the treaty.⁹ According to the narrative, the Gibeonites received the low status of hewers of wood and drawers of water (9:21–27). Henceforth, they enjoyed Israelite protection in exchange for their submission (10:6–7). This situation seems to have continued for a long time (עד היום הזה, "until this day"; 9:27).

When seen against the background of the book of Joshua, Saul's decision to exterminate the Gibeonites implies a rupture with a long-established arrangement, which was sanctioned by an indisputable oath. Saul's "zeal for the children of Israel and Judah" (2 Samuel 21:2) is misplaced, and the fact that he may have considered the Gibeonite territory – which was close to his own

⁷ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 3:276.

⁸ For the meaning of the expression ל ברית ברת in this passage (9:6, 7, 11, 15, 16), see Koert van Bekkum, *From Conquest to Coexistence: Ideology and Antiquarian Intent in the Historiography of Israel's Settlement in Canaan* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 45; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 245.

⁹ Van Bekkum, *From Conquest to Coexistence*, 258–59.

city, Gibeah – strategically important, does not mitigate the reprehensibility of his conduct.¹⁰

3 A Gruesome Fate

However 2 Samuel 21:1–14 is interpreted, the text obviously does not leave readers unaffected. The description of Rizpah ensuring that the decaying corpses of her two sons and Saul's five grandsons are kept intact (21:10) is quite shocking to present-day readers, but the same episode was certainly gruesome for the ancient Israelites as well. Rizpah keeps away the birds during the day and the animals at night to prevent the dead bodies of her relatives from being eaten.

Biblical as well as extra-biblical evidence illustrates how horrifying the fate of the seven men was considered. Deuteronomy says that even people who have committed a grave sin and received the death penalty must be buried on the day of their execution (21:22–23). In the same book, a list of curses incurred for breaching the covenant includes the following punishment (28:26): “And your corpse shall be food to all the birds of heaven, and to the animals of the earth; and no one shall frighten them away.”¹¹ This curse is a precise description of the gruesome fate Rizpah tries to prevent.

Similar curses also occur in other ancient Near Eastern texts, for instance in the Succession Treaty of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE):¹² “may he (Ninurta or Palil) let eagle and vulture (?) eat your flesh” (§41, §59);¹³ “may dogs and swine eat your flesh” (§47); “may the earth not receive your corpses; may your burial place be in the belly of dog and pigs” (§56).

Such curses explain Rizpah's tenacity, as described in the biblical story. Apparently, she wanted the corpses to be buried. According to the text, she guarded the corpses from the time of the barley harvest, which normally took place in April, “until water gushed forth on them from heaven” (עַד נִתַּךְ מִים עֲלֵיהֶם מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם; 21:10). If the latter expression relates to the time

10 Malamat, “Doctrines of Causality,” 10–12; cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 3:275; Firth, 1 & 2 *Samuel*, 505.

11 For more relevant biblical evidence, see Genesis 40:19; 1 Samuel 17:44, 46; 1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:23–24; 2 Kings 9:10; Jeremiah 7:33; 16:4, 6; 25:33; 34:20; Ezekiel 29:5; Psalm 79:2. Cf. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia/Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 198, 383n62.

12 Simo Parpola and Kazuko Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (State Archives of Assyria 2; Helsinki: Helsinki University, 1988), 28–58 (text 6).

13 *UZU-kunu* ^{AMUSEN} *zibu lišākil*, in §41 with Ninurta as subject; in §59 with Palil as subject. The meaning of *zibu* is uncertain. According to CAD (Z, 106), the word denotes either a vulture or a jackal.

of the first rains after the long hot summer, Rizpah must have guarded the corpses for at least five tough months. However, this expression could also relate to unseasonable rainfall earlier in the year.¹⁴

The way in which the seven men were executed is not entirely clear. The meaning of the rare verb יקע, which occurs twice in a Hiphil form (21:6, 9) and once in a Hophal form (21:13), is disputed. According to some scholars, the verb denotes the breaking of arms and legs or dismemberment, while others assume that the verb implies hanging, crucifixion, impaling, or hurling down.¹⁵ No other Hophal form of the verb occurs in the Hebrew Bible. The only other Hiphil form occurs in Numbers 25:4, where it designates the divinely sanctioned execution of Israelite chiefs who had worshipped the Moabite deity Baal-peor. Numbers 25:4 and 2 Samuel 21:6 say that the execution must be carried out “for Yhwh” (לִיהוָה), while 2 Samuel 21:9 recounts that it took place “before Yhwh” (לִפְנֵי יְהוָה). Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that יקע Hiphil has ritual overtones. Furthermore, Numbers 25:4 expresses the purpose of the homicide quite clearly – more explicitly than 2 Samuel 21:1–14. The chiefs must be executed for Yhwh so “that the fierce anger of Yhwh may turn away from Israel” (וַיִּשָׁב חֲרוֹן אַף יְהוָה מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל; 25:4b, WEBB).

In 2 Samuel 21:1–14, it is beyond doubt that the dead bodies remained exposed after the execution. Leaving the corpses unburied may have been inherent in the procedure denoted by יקע Hiphil. One could ask why Rizpah did not bury the corpses on her own initiative, but apparently she was not allowed to do this. Leaving the corpses unburied seems to have been part of the curse.¹⁶ All Rizpah could do is to keep the birds and animals away from the dead bodies of her seven relatives.

The story describes Rizpah’s role with sympathy. When David hears about her dogged determination, he is apparently impressed and takes her tacit plea to heart. He gives orders to bring the bones of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh Gilead to the land of Benjamin in order to rebury them there. Furthermore, the bones of Saul’s seven descendants are gathered and probably buried together with the bones of Saul and Jonathan.¹⁷ It seems that David only became fully aware of the gruesome fate of Saul’s progeny as a result of Rizpah’s resolution.

14 For some contradictory assessments, see McCarter, *II Samuel*, 442; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 3:287–88; Kim, *Bloodguilt*, 147; Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 505–6.

15 For some of the options, see McCarter, *II Samuel*, 442; Kim, *Bloodguilt*, 128, 130, 141–42.

16 See F. Charles Fensham, “The Treaty between Israel and the Gibeonites,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 27 (1964): 99–100, with reference to Assyrian and other ancient Near Eastern curses. Similarly Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 3:286.

17 See McCarter, *II Samuel*, 440, 445; Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 250–51; Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 506. At the beginning of 21:14, the expression אֵת עֲצָמוֹת הַמּוֹקְעִים (21:13) may be implied (cf. the

4 Reading with Suspicion

Was the execution of Saul's seven relatives useful? Was it condemnable? Did the homicides serve a purpose, or were they simply pointless and horrible? Rizpah's role is admirable, but what about David's role? Is it positive or negative? The scholarly literature answers these questions quite differently.

According to the traditional approach, David's role is laudable, and the execution of Saul's seven descendants was necessary – not only to appease the Gibeonites, but also to appease God. This interpretation occurs as early as in Flavius Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*. In his retelling of the story, Josephus omits all the references to Rizpah and describes David's role as entirely positive. According to Josephus, the prophets revealed to David that God would end the prolonged famine if the Gibeonites were allowed to take revenge for Saul's slaughtering of their relatives. In this way, Josephus legitimises David's decision to consent to the Gibeonites' request to hand over Saul's descendants for punishment. Remarkably, Josephus does not specify the character of this chastisement, but he recounts that it immediately induced God to restore fertility to Israel's territory.¹⁸

Nowadays, there are several more critical readings of the biblical text that deserve to be taken seriously. I will illustrate the current debate with some quotations from the scholarly literature. Needless to say, this survey is far from exhaustive,¹⁹ but it covers the most relevant critical readings of the text. It is structured according to the four levels of suspicion that I distinguish among such readings. I describe them roughly in ascending order, from moderate to fundamental criticism of David's behaviour as described in 2 Samuel 21:1–14.

secondary addition in the Septuagint). A similar omission occurs in 1 Samuel 31:10–12, with 31:10 recounting that Saul's body was fastened to the wall of Beth-Shan, while 31:12 presupposes that the bodies of Saul's sons had been fastened there as well. For the possibility of translating the beginning of 21:14 as "And they buried (them) with the bones of Saul and Jonathan, his son," see Dominique Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament*, vol. 1: *Josué, Juges, Ruth, Samuel, Rois, Chroniques, Esdras, Néhémie, Esther* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 50/1; Fribourg/Göttingen: Éditions Universitaires/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 302–3; Kim, *Bloodguilt*, 97. Alternatively, ויקברו at the beginning of 21:14 can be interpreted as a Niphal form: "And they were buried with ..." (cf. Ezekiel 24:10 for the masculine verbal form).

18 Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 7:294–97. For Josephus' adaptation of the biblical passage, see Michael Avioz, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Books of Samuel* (Library of Second Temple Studies 86; London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 148–51.

19 An extensive survey of the research history of the pericope is offered by Kim, *Bloodguilt*, 9–80.

4.1 *The First Level of Suspicion*

The first level of suspicion implies the admission that the narrative does not provide unbiased information, but is a pro-Davidic account. Scholars refer to Shimei's criticism of David's treatment of Saul's family in 2 Samuel 16:7–8. They point out that those Israelites who were loyal to the house of Saul must have been quite suspicious of David's policy as described in 2 Samuel 21:1–14. With regard to 16:8, Kyle McCarter remarks: "Because Shimei is not more specific, we cannot tell whether he is cursing David for his execution of the seven Saulids at Gibeon (21:1–14), which probably took place early in David's reign (...)." ²⁰

Concerning 2 Samuel 21:1–14, McCarter observes that "the near extermination of the male descendants of Saul (...) represented a great political gain for David."²¹ However, the story reveals that the motivation behind the execution of Saul's relatives was different:

Nevertheless, the account shows that the death of the sons of Rizpah and Merob was required by Yahweh in restitution of Saul's violation of a sacred oath. David did not act out of malicious self-interest. On the contrary, his actions were those of a king sincerely concerned for the welfare of the land. His purpose was to alleviate the famine, and in this he succeeded. (...) Thus David actually emerges from this account as a benefactor of the house of Saul.²²

Although McCarter takes the biblical description of the events quite seriously, he is well aware of the partiality of the record. The purpose of the story is apologetic.

4.2 *The Second Level of Suspicion*

Walter Brueggemann goes a step further when he argues that the story covers up David's real intentions. The supposition that Saul had tried to exterminate the Gibeonites even gives the impression of having been fabricated: "we have no evidence of Saul's slaughtering of the Gibeonites."²³ Moreover, Brueggemann asserts,

²⁰ McCarter, *II Samuel*, 373.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 445.

²² *Ibid.*, 445.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, "2 Samuel 21–24: An Appendix of Deconstruction?," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 385.

It is odd that this element is missing in the Samuel narrative which wants to be as dismissive as possible of Saul and which wants to legitimate David in every way possible.²⁴ (...)

The suspicion thus permits the possibility that in fact David killed Saul's family, but provided a rationale by blaming Saul, for which there is no public evidence.²⁵

Brueggemann doubts whether Saul ever committed the misdeed that the text ascribes to him. However, he does not address the question of whether Saul's breaking of the oath – if this actually occurred – would have been a sufficient reason for blood revenge.

4.3 *The Third Level of Suspicion*

The third level is reached in the work of Arnold Anderson and Athalya Brenner, who also cast doubt on David's noble intentions. Like McCarter and Brueggemann, Anderson argues that the story is intended to prevent suspicion against David and absolves him from blame:

Many scholars have seen in the events of our pericope a clever political act whereby David got rid of his political rivals from the house of Saul, and at the same time he appeared as the zealous doer of Yahweh's will. David needed a pretext to eliminate Saul's family, and he found it in the famine.²⁶

A new element in Anderson's reading is that he regards the reference to Saul's oath-breaking as a shaky basis for David's harsh actions: "Also the appeal to the treaty oath (v 2) is not very convincing because such oaths and treaties must have been broken fairly frequently (especially in the sphere of politics), often for quite good reasons."²⁷ Although Anderson makes this remark in passing, without elaborating on its implications, he is obviously critical of the text's suggestion that Saul's transgression of the oath justifies David's harsh measures. However, Anderson does not deny that Saul broke the Israelites' oath to the Gibeonites.

²⁴ Ibid., 386.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 251.

²⁷ Ibid., 252.

Athalya Brenner expresses similar suspicions. In her book *I Am*, she voices her sympathy for Rizpah's role in the story and contrasts her compassion with David's insensitivity. She assumes that Josephus left Rizpah unmentioned because of the questions her conduct raises with regard to David's morals.²⁸ Brenner introduces Rizpah herself as David's accuser:

Now, look how the story is presented in 2 Samuel 21, as if the Gibeonites' demand was a just and moral demand, as if Yhwh's anger was raised by Saul's past action. When? How? Why so long after the events? No answer to that, I'm afraid. A short and fragmented verse (2 Sam. 21:1b) declares divine authority for defining the famine's reason as Saul's bloody extinction of the Gibeonites, but it does *not* condone their demand for revenge. And there's no word as for a possibility that David could sidestep the Gibeonites' demand to kill seven of Saul's sons, none whatever. David was a shrewd and manipulative man: he could have found a less bloody solution if he were so inclined. But he wasn't. He did spare Jonathan's son, this is true, but not mine. And not his sister-in-law Merab's. This option to effect an elimination of Saul's descendants seems to have served him well.²⁹

Like Anderson, Brenner does not explicitly deny that Saul broke the Israelites' oath to the Gibeonites, but she does challenge the text's suggestion that this transgression justified the execution of Saul's seven relatives. David could have looked for an alternative solution and prevented the bloodshed.

4.4 *The Fourth Level of Suspicion*

In his monograph *Das Alte Testament und die Gewalt*, Johannes Schnocks devotes a chapter to the question of whether the Hebrew Bible legitimises blood revenge.³⁰ Schnocks not only argues that the rationale behind the execution of the seven members of Saul's family in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 is shaky; he also suggests that even the text itself is quite critical of the execution. He writes:

28 Athalya Brenner, *I Am ... Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 124–28. Similarly Brenner, "Rizpah [Re]membered: 2 Samuel 1–14 and Beyond," in *Performing Memory in Biblical Narrative and Beyond* (ed. A. Brenner and F. H. Polak; Bible in the Modern World 25; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 209.

29 Brenner, *I Am*, 124.

30 Johannes Schnocks, *Das Alte Testament und die Gewalt: Studien zu göttlicher und menschlicher Gewalt in alttestamentlichen Texten und ihren Rezeptionen* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 136; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 2014), 48–72.

The Gibeonites veil their revenge religiously as an act of sacrifice. They want to execute the Saulids “for YHWH” (v. 6). Here, by way of a small change in the formulation of the note on the execution in v. 9, the text signals that the killing takes place *de facto* in the presence of God (“before the face of YHWH”), but not for him as the addressee. If one looks at the end of the story, according to which YHWH is only entreated on behalf of the land after Saul and his descendants have been buried – not after the execution! – it becomes very clear that, according to the narrative logic of the text, such a sacrifice is a cruel human construction, but not a requirement of God.³¹

According to Schnocks, details in the text indicate that the execution of Saul’s progeny was repulsive to God. It is significant that God did not end the famine after the gruesome homicides, but only after Rizpah entreated David and the bones of Saul and his relatives had been buried. Other scholars may object that God remains aloof in the narrative and does not prevent the execution of Saul’s descendants. According to Schnocks, however, this does not indicate that God agreed with the execution, but only shows that God was regarded as a weak deity.³²

Ekaterina Kozlova shares the idea that the execution of Saul’s descendants is reprehensible according to the text itself, but her reason is different from those Schnocks gives. She argues that David’s permission to hand the men over to the Gibeonites implied a violation of his promise to prevent the extermination of Saul’s offspring (1 Samuel 24:22–23). Through her admirable perseverance, Rizpah exposed David’s dubious ethics. She reminded David of his oath to Saul and persuaded him to provide a proper burial for Saul and his descendants. Only thanks to Rizpah was Israel saved from the famine.³³

31 Ibid., 71. The original German reads: “Ihre Rache wird von den Gibeonitern als Opferhandlung religiös verbrämt. Sie wollen die Sauliden “für JHWH” hinrichten (v.6). Hier signalisiert der Text durch einen kleinen Formulierungsverwechsel bei der Ausführungsnotiz in v.9, dass die Tötung aber *de facto* in der Präsenz Gottes (“vor dem Angesicht JHWHs”), aber nicht für ihn als Adressaten stattfindet. Blickt man auf das Ende der Erzählung, nach dem JHWH sich erst nach der Bestattung Sauls und seiner Nachkommen für das Land erbitten lässt – und eben nicht nach der Hinrichtung! – so wird sehr deutlich, dass ein solches Opfer nach der Erzähllogik des Textes eine grausame menschliche Konstruktion, nicht aber eine Forderung Gottes ist.” The translation here is my own.

32 Ibid., 72.

33 Ekaterina E. Kozlova, *Maternal Grief in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University, 2017), 87–120.

According to Flavius Josephus, it was David who entreated God, and David behaved correctly when he consented to the Gibeonites' wish to punish Saul's seven descendants. Schnocks and Kozlova interpret the episode quite differently. They claim that the text condemns the execution of Saul's family members. Israel was not saved by David; rather, it was saved from the negative consequences of David's short-sighted policy through Rizpah's laudable tenacity.

5 The Ancient Near Eastern Background

This section calls attention to three non-biblical texts from the ancient Near East – namely, two of the so-called plague prayers commissioned by the Hittite king Mursili II (ca. 1321–1295 BCE) and an Assyrian text known as “The Sin of Sargon,” which was composed during the last years of the eighth or the first decades of the seventh century BCE. More than sixty years ago, Abraham Malamat demonstrated that one of Mursili's plague prayers sheds light on the plot of 2 Samuel 21:1–14.³⁴ However, another plague prayer commissioned by the same king is certainly no less relevant, while the Assyrian text shows that similar ideas about causality were also circulating much later, closer to the time when 2 Samuel 21:1–14 was composed.

The biblical story has raised the question of whether a prolonged famine could have been seen as the consequence of a former king breaking an oath. Additionally, scholars have asked whether the biblical story presupposes that the execution of Saul's seven relatives served a purpose. Could the transgression of an oath and the resulting famine justify such gruesome bloodshed? Furthermore, does the episode deliberately try to salvage David's reputation?

The biblical episode presents some challenges to scholars. We do not know when or by whom the text was composed. What we do know is that the famine had already come to an end, but the story may have been written many centuries after the time in which David is supposed to have lived. Of course, the degree to which the interests of the circle in which the text originated have influenced the way in which the characters are described is also unclear.

Fortunately, the Hittite and Assyrian texts provide external evidence that could be crucial for our interpretation. There is no doubt that the plague prayers were written for King Mursili while Hatti, the Hittite kingdom, was in the grip of a disaster. While 2 Samuel 21:1–14 looks back on the famine in the

³⁴ Malamat, “Doctrines of Causality,” 1–12.

time of David, Mursili's plague prayers demonstrate that the end of Hatti's misery was not yet in sight. In this situation, the king himself commissioned the prayers, which obviously express deliberations that were considered appropriate in the royal court.

The Assyrian composition "The Sin of Sargon" introduces King Sennacherib speaking about the harmful consequences of his father's sin. Some scholars believe that the text was composed during the reign of Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon. Whether or not this is correct, we may presume that the text expresses considerations that were deemed suitable for a king who was confronted with a severe threat.

5.1 *Two Plague Prayers of King Mursili II*

The two Hittite prayers I will discuss in this section are part of a much larger collection of Hittite prayers, some of which predate the reign of Mursili II, while others were composed in the century after his reign. A good English translation of these prayers as well as an excellent introduction has been provided by the Hittitologist Itamar Singer in his book *Hittite Prayers*.³⁵ At least six of Mursili's prayers were composed on the occasion of a prolonged plague.

Part of the scholarly literature on 2 Samuel 21:1–14 refers to the text's parallels with Mursili's "second" plague prayer, but these references are usually quite brief, lacking any independent analysis of the relevance of Mursili's prayers. Most of these references are based on Abraham Malamat's article rather than on any further analysis of the Hittite evidence.³⁶

Although his study is innovative and well founded, bringing to light Hittite evidence which has implications for the exegesis of 2 Samuel 21:1–14, Malamat discusses only one of the two most relevant Hittite prayers, the one that he knew from the first edition of *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (*ANET*).³⁷ The text in *ANET* was translated into English by the Hittitologist Albrecht Götze, who had rendered the same prayer in German in

35 Itamar Singer, *Hittite Prayers* (Writings from the Ancient World 11; Atlanta: SBL, 2002). Gary Beckman's translation of four of Mursili's plague prayers was included in COS 1, 156–59. A recent German translation of most of Mursili's prayers can be found in Alexandra Daues and Elisabeth Rieken, *Das persönliche Gebet bei den Hethitern: Eine textlinguistische Untersuchung* (Studien zu den Boğazköy-Texten 63; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018), 352–403.

36 See McCarter, *II Samuel*, 444–45; Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 248; Kim, *Bloodguilt*, 431n109, 73, 129.

37 James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1950), 394–96.

an earlier article, under the subtitle “Zweites Pestgebet des Muršiliš” (Mursili’s Second Plague Prayer).³⁸

Apparently, Malamet was not aware of the existence of the other, related prayer, although it was also translated and analysed in Götze’s German article, titled “Erstes Pestgebet des Muršiliš” (Mursili’s First Plague Prayer).³⁹ As a result of Malamet disregarding the “first” plague prayer, this text has also been overlooked in the more recent literature about 2 Samuel 21:1–14. Because of their importance, I have included both prayers in my analysis, in which they will be designated as PP2 and PP1, respectively.

- PP2, Mursili’s “second” plague prayer, is directed to the Storm-god of Hatti as well as the other gods.⁴⁰ Malamet has already demonstrated the prayer’s relevance for the interpretation of 2 Samuel 21:1–14. Thanks to the partial preservation of three duplicates, virtually the entire text is available to scholars.
- PP1, Mursili’s “first” plague prayer, is directed to all the male and female gods.⁴¹ The prayer’s relevance for the interpretation of 2 Samuel 21:1–14 has been overlooked by Malamet and other scholars, although Yitzhaq Feder pointed to some conceptual correspondences.⁴² Extensive sections of a tablet with this prayer recorded on it have been preserved fairly well, but other sections are missing. Some of the damaged lines cannot be reconstructed with certainty. Only tiny fragments of another tablet displaying the text of this prayer have survived.

In the following analysis, most of the quotations from these prayers are taken from Singer’s translation.⁴³ I denote paragraphs with the numbers used in Singer’s study. Since PP2 is better preserved and better known among biblical scholars, I will describe it first.

The two prayers have a lot in common. Both texts were written on behalf of King Mursili II and reflect his desperation in response to a devastating plague

38 Albrecht Götze, “Die Pestgebete des Muršiliš,” *Kleinasiatische Forschungen* 1/2 (1929): 204–35.

39 Götze, “Die Pestgebete,” 164–204.

40 *CTH* 378.2. For the Hittite text, see René Lebrun, *Hymnes et prières hittites* (Homo Religiosus 4; Louvain-la-Neuve: Centre d’histoire des religions, 1980), 203–16; José Virgilio García Trabazo, *Textos religiosos hittitas: Mitos, plegarias y rituales; edición bilingüe* (Biblioteca de Ciencias Bíblicas y Orientales 6; Madrid: Trotta, 2002), 305–29; Daues and Rieken, *Das persönliche Gebet*, 378–88.

41 *CTH* 378.1. For the Hittite text, see Daues and Rieken, *Das persönliche Gebet*, 368–77. Owing to the discovery of additional fragments, part of the text’s transcription in Lebrun, *Hymnes et prières hittites*, 193–203, has become obsolete.

42 Yitzhaq Feder, “The Mechanics of Retribution in Hittite, Mesopotamian and Ancient Israelite Sources,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 10 (2010): 136–38, 142–44.

43 Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 57–61 (PP2); 61–64 (PP1).

(Hittite: *henkan*), which is mentioned frequently in each prayer. The king's worries are understandable. Among the numerous victims of the plague were probably several of his relatives: Mursili's father, Suppiluliuma I, and his oldest brother, Arnuwanda II, who became king after Suppiluliuma's death and died soon thereafter.⁴⁴ Both prayers suppose that the misery in Hatti is the result of one or more demonstrable sins. Each prayer describes Mursili's attempts to discover such sins and demonstrates his determination to make restitution.

Apparently, the prayers were composed more or less simultaneously, since each indicates that the devastating disease had already lasted twenty years. The plague is said to have begun during the reign of Suppiluliuma I and to have continued during the brief reign of Arnuwanda II and into Mursili's reign.⁴⁵ There is no indication that the "first" plague prayer was composed before the "second" plague prayer, or vice versa. The main divergences between them concern the different gods they address and their references to diverse causes of the plague.

5.1.1 Mursili's "Second" Plague Prayer (PP2)

PP2 immediately begins with a complaint about the plague, which Mursili assumes has been sent by the gods: "What is this that you have done? You have allowed a plague into Hatti, so that Hatti has been very badly oppressed by the plague."⁴⁶ Soon thereafter, Mursili recounts that he found two old tablets, one concerning a ritual involving the Mala River (the upper and middle Euphrates),⁴⁷ which earlier kings still performed (§3), and the second dealing with a treaty between Hatti and Egypt (§4).⁴⁸ Suspecting that the plague was caused by the neglect of this Mala River ritual and his father Suppiluliuma's

44 Trevor Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 188, 191. Mursili reports on Arnuwanda's illness and death at the beginning of his Ten-Year Annals (COS 2, 83–84). For Suppiluliuma's death, see the discussion of PP1 §4 on p. 248–49.

45 PP2 §1, PP1 §2. Cf. Theo van den Hout, "Muršili II's 'First' Plague Prayer," in *The Ancient Near East: Historical Sources in Translation* (ed. M. W. Chavalas; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 260. Mursili's "third" plague prayer (CTH 378.3; Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 56–57), directed to the Sun-goddess of Arinna and the other gods, also indicates twenty years as the duration of the plague (§1). Since only a small part of the tablet with this prayer has been preserved and we lack duplicates, the prayer will not be included in the following discussion.

46 Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 57 (PP2 §1).

47 For the religious significance of the Mala River and the suggestion to identify the ancient tablet with KUB 23.79, see Yasemin Arkan, "The Mala River and Its Importance According to Hittite Documents," in *VI Congresso Internazionale di Ittologia, Roma, 5–9 settembre 2005*, vol. 1 (ed. A. Archi and R. Francia; Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici 49; Rome: CNR – Istituto di Studi sulle Civiltà dell'Egeo e del Vicino Oriente, 2007), 39–48.

48 For this "treaty" (Hittite: *išhiul*), see Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites*, 119.

violation of the treaty with Egypt, Mursili questioned the Storm-god of Hatti about the tablets.⁴⁹ Through an oracle, the deity confirmed that Mursili's assumption was correct:⁵⁰ the neglect of the Mala River ritual constituted one of the causes of the plague, as did Suppiluliuma's breaking the treaty with Egypt, which had enraged the Storm-god.⁵¹

In view of the close parallelism between this text and 2 Samuel 21:1–14, Abraham Malamat paid particular attention to the notion that a former king's transgression of an oath was seen as the cause of a prolonged calamity. He concluded: "the transgression was not absolved with the death of the guilty king. In both sources, the Hittite and the biblical, the guilt was laid to a king, who, as the representative of the entire people, seems to have been held responsible for a disaster of national proportions."⁵²

Malamat gave a detailed description of the historical circumstances surrounding Suppiluliuma's violation of the treaty, which he based on Mursili's own description of the historical background in PP2 (§4–5) and other contemporary sources. In more recent studies, information about these events has been improved and refined.⁵³ Apparently, the ancient treaty involved stipulations with regard to the transfer of the inhabitants of the city of Kurustamma, in northern Anatolia, to a territory ruled by Egypt. Furthermore, Mursili regarded Suppiluliuma's two attacks on the Egyptian borderland of Amqa, in the Beqaa Valley, as a violation of the treaty, so the agreement must have included a non-aggression pact between Hatti and Egypt.

Mursili describes not only his father's illegitimate attacks on Egyptian territory, but also the injustice Egypt perpetrated upon Hatti:

Since the men of Hatti and the men of Egypt were bound by the oath of the Storm-god of Hatti, and the men of Hatti proceeded to get the upper hand, the men of Hatti thereby suddenly transgressed the oath of the gods. My father sent infantry and chariotry, and they attacked the borderland of Egypt, the land of Amqa. And again he sent, and again they attacked. When the men of Egypt became afraid, they came and asked

49 *ariyanun*, "I inquired through an oracle" (§5 with regard to the treaty with Egypt; §6 with regard to the ritual of the Mala River).

50 PP2 §6: *handāittat*, "it was established" (twice, with regard to both presumed causes; also three times in §7).

51 PP2 §6: *ANA dIM/dU URUḪatti BELI=YA kartimmiyaz kišat*, "for the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord, it became (a cause of) anger."

52 Malamat, "Doctrines of Causality," 12.

53 See, for example, Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites*, 172–83.

my father outright for his son for kingship. But when my father gave them his son, as they led him off, they murdered him. My father was appalled and he went to Egyptian territory, attacked the Egyptians, and destroyed the Egyptian infantry and chariotry.⁵⁴

The end of this passage is significant. While the prayer portrays Suppiluliuma's breaking the treaty oath as one of the causes of the plague, these lines point to a shocking betrayal by the Egyptians, which is also known from other contemporary sources. After the death of the Egyptian pharaoh, whom most historians identify as Tutankhamun, the widowed queen saw no other option but to ask Suppiluliuma for permission to marry one of his sons. After some initial doubts, Suppiluliuma decided to send his son Zannanza, apparently expecting that having a relative on the Egyptian throne would serve Hatti's interests.⁵⁵ When the Egyptians killed Zannanza, Suppiluliuma decided to carry out a punitive raid on Egyptian territory. In his prayer, Mursili relates that the plague came to Hatti in the wake of this raid:

At that time too the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord, by his verdict caused my father to prevail, and he defeated the infantry and the chariotry of Egypt and beat them. But when the prisoners of war who had been captured were led back to Hatti, a plague broke out among the prisoners of war, and [they began] to die. When the prisoners of war were carried off to Hatti, the prisoners of war brought the plague into Hatti. From that day on people have been dying in Hatti.⁵⁶

It stands to reason that Suppiluliuma regarded his punitive attack on Egyptian territory as entirely justifiable. However, the prayer shows that the plague induced his son Mursili to see things differently and to adopt a critical attitude towards his father's actions.

Despite the factual record of how prisoners of war brought the plague to Hatti, Mursili does not doubt that the plague has been brought about by the anger of the gods, particularly the fury of the Storm-god, the main addressee of the prayer. The prayer regards the Storm-god as the subject in the making of

54 Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 58 (PP2 §4), with "transgressed the oath of the gods" as the translation of *nu=kan NĪŠ DINGIR^{LM} (...) šarrīyēr*.

55 Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites*, 181–82.

56 Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 58 (PP2 §5).

the treaty between Hatti and Egypt,⁵⁷ describing the Egyptians and the Hittites as “put under oath *by* the Storm-god of Hatti.”⁵⁸ On the one hand, it was the Storm-god who enabled Suppiluliuma to defeat the Egyptian army, but on the other hand, it was the same deity who was infuriated by Suppiluliuma’s breaking the treaty with Egypt.

In this prayer, Mursili, as “priest of the gods” (§1), sees it as his personal responsibility to prompt the Storm-god to end the plague. He stresses his innocence, but also shows his willingness to make up for his father’s sins, knowing that his own fate is also at stake:⁵⁹

So it happens that people always sin. My father sinned as well and he transgressed the word of the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord. But I did not sin in any way. Nevertheless, it so happens that the father’s sin comes upon his son, and so the sin of my father came upon me too. I have just confessed it to the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord, and the gods, my lords. It is so. We have done it. But because I have confessed the sin of my father, may the soul of the Storm-god of Hatti, my lord, and of the gods, my lords, be appeased again. May you again have pity on me, and send away the plague from Hatti.⁶⁰

Mursili’s goal is clear: the souls of the Storm-god and the other gods must be appeased⁶¹ so that the gods will put an end to the plague. Mursili not only tries to persuade the Storm-god to end Hatti’s misery by taking responsibility for his father’s sin; he also promises that he will remove the causes of the plague, as established by the oracles. He refers to his continuous attempts to make restitution,⁶² indicates that he has already performed the “ritual of the divine

57 PP2 §4: *išhiul* (...) *iyat*, “he (the Storm-god) made a treaty.” Similarly, with regard to the same treaty, CTH 40 (Deeds of Suppiluliuma): *nu=kan* ^d*U-aš* [ANA] KUR ^{URU}*Mizri U ANA* KUR ^{URU}*Hatti maḥḥan* [*išh*] *iul ištarni=šummi išhīyat*, “how the Storm-god imposed a treaty between the land of Egypt and the land of Hatti”; see Hans Gustav Güterbock, “The Deeds of Suppiluliuma as Told by His Son, Mursili II,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 10 (1956): 98.

58 *išTU* ^d*U*/^d*IM* ^{URU}*Hatti liganuwanteš* (twice in §4, once in §5).

59 See the repeated expression *nu=mu huišnut*, “keep me alive!” (PP2 §9–11).

60 Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 59–60 (PP2 §8). The text uses the noun *waštul* for “sin” and the verb *wašta-* for “to sin.”

61 PP2 §8: *ZI-anz(a) namma waršiyaddu*, “may the soul (of the gods) again be quiet.”

62 PP2 §7: *šarninkeškemi*, “I will keep making restitution.” For the verb *šarni(n)k-*, see Yitzhaq Feder, *Blood Expiation in Hittite and Biblical Ritual: Origins, Context, and Meaning* (Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series 2; Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 216–22.

oath” for the Storm-god of Hatti, and promises that he will perform the “ritual of the Mala River” in the near future.⁶³ This should induce the gods to have mercy on him.⁶⁴

Despite his assumption that Hatti’s capital Hattusa has already made restitution twenty times over through its suffering under the plague,⁶⁵ Mursili asks the gods to specify whether additional restitution is necessary – by dreams, oracles, or other means. He also asks them whether there are additional, unknown causes of the plague (§9, §11). In the prayer itself, the outcome of Mursili’s efforts remains unclear. We do not know whether the plague came speedily to an end.

5.1.2 Mursili’s “First” Plague Prayer (PP1)

PP1 is directed to all the male and female gods. Although only part of the text has been preserved, the surviving sections clearly indicate that the prayer perceives a distinctive misstep on the part of Suppiluliuma I as the cause of the twenty-year plague. Rather than neglect of the Mala River ritual and Suppiluliuma’s breaking the treaty with Egypt, which PP2 sees as the causes of the plague, this prayer ascribes Hatti’s prolonged misery to Suppiluliuma’s breaking his oath to Tudhaliya the Younger and shedding Tudhaliya’s blood.

The prayer itself is the main source for reconstructing the historical circumstances.⁶⁶ Tudhaliya the Younger was one of the sons of the Hittite king, who is designated in the scholarly literature as Tudhaliya II or Tudhaliya III. Apparently, Tudhaliya the Younger was the legitimate heir to his father’s throne. Tudhaliya the Younger had possibly already been installed as the new king when Suppiluliuma had him killed.

63 PP2 §7: *SISKUR NĪŠ DINGIR^{LIM}*, “ritual of the divine oath”; *SISKUR ŠA^{1D} Māla*, “ritual of the Mala River.” For Mursili’s report on the actual performance of the Mala River ritual, see Arkan, “The Mala River,” 47.

64 Among the relevant expressions are: *nu=mu DINGIR^{MEŠ} BELU^{MEŠ}=YA ginzu dāten*, “O gods, my lords, take pity on me” (§7); *nu=mu ginzu namma dāten*, “take pity on me again” (§8).

65 PP2 §9: *^{URU}Hattušaš ħinganaz šarnikta n=at 20-anki [UL k]arū apēniššan kišari*, “Hattusa has made restitution through the plague; is it thus [not] happening twentyfold [al]ready?” For the reconstruction of the damaged section, see Theo van den Hout, review of Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 67/2 (2008): 121–22; Daues and Rieken, *Das persönliche Gebet*, 386–87.

66 See Horst Klengel, *Geschichte des hethitischen Reiches* (Handbuch der Orientalistik 34; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 148; Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites*, 154–55; Boaz Stavi, “The Genealogy of Suppiluliuma I,” *Altorientalische Forschungen* 38 (2011): 226–39.

Suppiluliuma I is commonly presumed to be another son of Tudhaliya II/III, but he may also have been his son-in-law.⁶⁷ In PP1, Mursili II recounts that his father Suppiluliuma and many Hittite dignitaries swore an oath to Tudhaliya the Younger,⁶⁸ but that they transgressed this oath,⁶⁹ which resulted in Tudhaliya's assassination.

As in all the other plague prayers, Mursili describes the severe consequences of the plague. He indicates that Suppiluliuma and his allies were also struck by the plague and that none of them is still alive. Not surprisingly, the murder of Tudhaliya came to Mursili's mind when he reflected on the causes of the plague:

And since for twenty years now in Hatti people have been dying, the affair of Tudhaliya the Younger, son of Tudhaliya, started to weigh on [me]. I inquired about it to the god through an oracle, and the affair of Tudhaliya was confirmed by the deity.⁷⁰

Since the passage describes the procedure of the oracular inquiry in exactly the same terms as PP2, the consultation of the gods must have taken place in a comparable fashion.⁷¹

Interestingly, however, PP1 uses its own vocabulary to describe the presumed cause of the plague – the murder of Tudhaliya the Younger. The distinctive terminology includes the term *ēšhar* (“blood[shed]”), which denotes Tudhaliya's death, and the verb *šanḫ-* (“to seek,” “to demand,” “to avenge”).⁷² The terms occur in the following passage, which portrays the deaths of Suppiluliuma and his followers as the consequence of Tudhaliya's murder:

now you have event[ually] avenged that affair of Tudhaliya the Younger on my father. My father [*died?*] because of the blood of Tudhaliya. And

67 See Stavi, “The Genealogy,” 228–30.

68 PP1 §2: *ABU=YA=a=šši šer linkešta*, “my father also swore an oath to him.”

69 PP1 §3: *nu=kan (...)* *NĪŠ DINGIR^{LIM} šarrēr*, “they transgressed the divine oath” (cf. PP2 §4). Singer's translation of PP1 §3 (*Hittite Prayers*, 61–62) has become obsolete due to the discovery of additional fragments; see Stavi, “The Genealogy,” 230–31.

70 Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 61 (PP1 §2).

71 PP1 §2; cf. PP2 §5–6 (see n. 49 and 50 above). The terms *ariyanun* (“I inquired through an oracle”) and *handäittat* (“it was established”) also occur in PP1 §7.

72 For this terminology, see Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 215–17. The terminology is not found in PP2.

the princes, the noblemen, the commanders of the thousands, and the officers who had joined [*him?*] died because of t[*hat*] affair.⁷³

This distinctive vocabulary recurs in a later passage, which also refers to the deaths of Suppiluliuma and his followers:

Concerning the fact that you, O gods, my lords, avenge the blood of Tudhaliya: Those who killed Tudhaliya have made restitution for the blood. That bloodshed has put an end also to Hatti. Hatti too has already made restitution for it.⁷⁴

The terminology shows that Mursili regards the gods' use of the plague to kill Suppiluliuma and his supporters as the logical consequence of their violation of the oath to Tudhaliya. Taking revenge for Tudhaliya's blood was the responsibility of the gods by whom the oath to Tudhaliya had been sworn and whom Mursili addresses in this prayer.⁷⁵

A fragmentary passage seems to imply that Suppiluliuma himself was already well aware of the threat. It refers to his performance of a "blood ritual."⁷⁶ Indeed, Suppiluliuma may already have seen his murder of Tudhaliya as the cause of the plague. According to the reconstruction, Mursili himself also performed the "blood ritual."

Underscoring his own innocence, Mursili stresses that all who sinned⁷⁷ by transgressing their oath to Tudhaliya have died:

I have [not] done any evil. Of those who sinned and did the evil, no one of that day is still here. They have already died off. But because the affair of my father has come upon me, I am giving you, O gods, my lords, a

73 PP1 §4 (Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 62; translation slightly adapted). Hittite text: [...]=*ya=za apūn AWAT* ^m*Tudhaliya TUR^{RI} ANA ABI=YA kinun appezz[īyaz] anda šanḫatten nu=kan ABU=YA I[šT]U šA* ^m*Tudhaliya išhana[z ...] (...)* *nu a[pēz] memīyanaz eker.*

74 PP1 §8. Hittite text: *DINGIR^{MEŠ} BELU^{MEŠ}=YA šA* ^m*Tudhaliya kuit ešḫar EGIR-an šanḫat[teni] nu=kan* ^m*Tudhaliyan kuiēš kuenner nu ešḫar apūš šarnin[ker] nu KUR^{URU} Ḫatti=ya apāš išhananz(a) arḫa namma zinne[šta] n=at KUR^{URU} Ḫatti=ya karū šarnikta.* My translation differs from Singer's (*Hittite Prayers*, 63).

75 PP1 §1: *[DING]IR^{MEŠ} LÚ^{MEŠ} ḫ[ūmanteš] linkiyaš dingir^{meš} munus^{meš} ḫūma[nteš] I[i[n]kiyaš,* "all you male gods of the oath, all you female gods of the oath."

76 PP1 §6: *išhanāš SISKUR.* For the propitiatory character of this blood ritual, see Feder, "Mechanics of Retribution," 136–37; Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 224–27.

77 PP1 §8: *wašter.*

propitiatory gift on account of the plague of the land, and I am making restitution.⁷⁸

Although Tudhaliya's death has already been avenged in Mursili's view, the enduring plague induces him, as the priest of the gods (§1, §9), to take measures. In addition to his repeated promise to make ample restitution,⁷⁹ Mursili points out that the "ritual of the oath" will be performed.⁸⁰ As in PP2, Mursili's goal is to appease the gods,⁸¹ hoping that they will again have mercy on Hatti in general, and on him personally.⁸² Just like PP2, this prayer ends with a wish rather than the certainty that the plague will be removed from Hatti.

5.1.3 Mursili's Plague Prayers Compared

We are in the fortunate position of knowing quite a lot about Mursili II's reign. We can deduce information not only from his prayers, but also from his annals and other contemporaneous sources.⁸³ The texts provide insight into the most important historical events as well as the conceptual framework within which the plague and other forms of misery were interpreted.

Both PP1 and PP2 suppose that Hatti's misery is due to one or more demonstrable sins committed by Mursili's father, Suppiluliuma I. The idea that the country's suffering is caused by offences against the gods is also evident in Mursili's other plague prayers.⁸⁴ Among the "sins" which the prayers mention is neglecting sacrifices.⁸⁵

78 Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 63 (PP1 §8).

79 *šarninkeškemi*, "I will keep making restitution," which occurs several times in §7–8.

80 PP1 §7: *ša MAMITI SISKUR*.

81 PP1 §8: *nu ANA DINGIR^{MEŠ} EN^{MEŠ}=YA ZI-anz(a) namma waršdu*, "to the gods, my lords, may the soul again be quiet."

82 Among the relevant expressions are: *nu=mu DINGIR^{MEŠ} EN^{MEŠ}/BELU^{MEŠ}=YA ginzu namma dätten*, "O gods, my lords, take pity on me again" (twice in §8); *ANA KUR URUḪatti=ma ginzu dätten*, "but take pity on Hatti" (§9).

83 Klengel, *Geschichte des hethitischen Reiches*, 170–201; Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites*, esp. 210, 220.

84 In his "hymn and prayer" to the Sun-goddess of Arinna (CTH 376.A; Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 49–54), Mursili indicates that he is unaware of any demonstrable cause of the plague, but he does assume that the misery is due to human sinning (§7). A "sin" is also mentioned in Mursili's fragmentary "third" plague prayer (CTH 378.3; Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 56–57, §3). See further Itamar Singer, "Sin and Punishment in Hittite Prayers," in *An Experienced Scribe Who Neglects Nothing* (ed. Y. Sefati et al.; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2005), 557–67.

85 In addition to PP2 §3, §6 (see above), see Mursili's fragmentary "third" plague prayer (CTH 378.3; Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 57, §3) and his "hymn and prayer" to the Sun-goddess of Arinna (CTH 376.A; Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 52, §7). See also his prayer in response to the death of his wife Gassuliyawiya (CTH 70.1.A; Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 73–77, §5). For the important role of sacrifices in Hittite prayers, see Paul Sanders, "Argumenta ad Deum in the Plague Prayers of Mursili II and in the Book of Psalms," in *Psalms and Prayers: Papers*

However, PP1 and PP2 are unique in seeing the violation of an oath as one of the causes of the plague. This is more striking than it may seem at first sight. It implies that oath-breaking was not only described as leading to divine anger in the famous Hittite vassal treaties, where it was a strategic tactic to threaten subordinate vassal kings with collective punishment if they were disloyal to their Hittite overlord.⁸⁶ Apparently, Hittite kings also saw their own violations of oaths as possible causes of divine anger against themselves and their country. PP1 shows that oath-breaking was suspected to be among the causes of the plague even before an oracle established this. According to this prayer, Suppiluliuma had already performed the “blood ritual,” obviously on account of his murder of Tudhaliya, and Mursili had already sensed that this murder might be the cause of the plague before an oracle confirmed this.

Remarkably, Mursili took his father’s oath-breaking quite seriously, despite what might be seen as extenuating circumstances.⁸⁷ As I have shown, PP2 not only recounts that Suppiluliuma transgressed the oath to Egypt – notably thanks to the support of the Storm-god – but also that Egypt’s behaviour towards Hatti was extremely treacherous and aggressive.⁸⁸ In PP1, Mursili could have pointed out that Suppiluliuma had seemed a better candidate for kingship than Tudhaliya the Younger as a mitigating factor in Tudhaliya’s deposition,⁸⁹ but he left this fact unmentioned. Furthermore, PP1 and PP2 do not refer to the disloyalty and oath-breaking perpetrated by Hatti’s vassals, although these could also have been adduced as extenuating circumstances.⁹⁰

All in all, it seems that the dire straits in which Hatti found itself induced Mursili to take the oracles quite seriously and to refrain from adducing excuses. Although he pointed out that his father’s sins had already been avenged

Read at the Joint Meeting of the Society of Old Testament Study and Het Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap in Nederland en België, Apeldoorn August 2006 (ed. B. E. J. H. Becking and H. G. L. Peels; Oudtestamentische Studiën 55; Leiden: Brill, 2007), esp. 184–88.

86 For examples, see the curse sections of the Hittite treaties included in COS 2, 93–106; and Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (2d ed.; Writings from the Ancient World 7; Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 11–124.

87 Cf. Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites*, 206.

88 This may be the reason why PP2 does not refer to any intention to compensate Egypt for the damage. This is against Kim (*Bloodguilt*, 129n59), who suggested that, contrary to Mursili’s policy, David’s behaviour in the biblical Rizpah story was characterised by “a strong consciousness of righteousness and justice.” For a declaration of innocence attributed to Suppiluliuma, together with an accusation of the Egyptians, see Güterbock, “The Deeds of Suppiluliuma,” 108 (*CTH* 40).

89 Cf. Bryce, *Kingdom of the Hittites*, 148–54.

90 Mursili’s “hymn and prayer” to the Sun-goddess of Arinna (*CTH* 376.A) recounts with regard to Hatti’s vassals: *n=ašta nīš DINGIR^{MEŠ} šarreškanzi*, “they keep transgressing the oath of the gods” (cf. Singer, *Hittite Prayers*, 52, §7).

through the twenty-year plague as well as the deaths of his father and his father's followers, Mursili demonstrated his determination to make additional restitution with all the means at his disposal. Appeasing the gods seems to have become his main goal.

In one respect, PP1 corresponds more closely with 2 Samuel 21:1–14 than PP2. In PP1, the violation of the oath included the illegitimate killing of Tudhaliya, while in 2 Samuel 21:1–14, it implied the illegitimate extermination of the Gibeonites. According to both PP1 and the biblical episode, shedding blood brought bloodguilt on the perpetrators. This element is missing in PP2.

5.2 *The Sin of Sargon II (SSar)*

The idea that calamities are due to divine fury over improper human behaviour was also widespread in ancient Mesopotamia.⁹¹ In times of misery, it was deemed important to appease the gods in order to restore order and prosperity.⁹²

In the neo-Assyrian text “The Sin of Sargon” (henceforth SSar), these notions occur together with the motifs of using an oracle to discern the cause of a calamity and – probably – oath-breaking. The single-column tablet, which is designated as K.4730(+), was probably discovered in Nineveh. As far as I know, this text has not yet been mentioned in connection with the interpretation of 2 Samuel 21:1–14. It is useful to discuss it in addition to the Hittite prayers PP1 and PP2, since its composition must have taken place closer to the time when 2 Samuel 21:1–14 was written.

SSar is written in the voice of King Sennacherib (705–681 BCE) and refers to a sin committed by Sennacherib's father, Sargon II. Unfortunately, the tablet is quite damaged, and the interpretation of the text is disputed.⁹³

91 See Andreas Johandi, “The Motif of Divine Abandonment in Some Mesopotamian Texts Featuring the God Marduk,” in *Kings, Gods and People: Establishing Monarchies in the Ancient World* (ed. T. R. Kämmerer et al.; *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 390/4; *Acta Antiqua Mediterranea et Orientalia* 4; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016), 141–58.

92 For examples, see Johandi, “The Motif of Divine Abandonment,” 160–62.

93 A relatively large fragment (K.4730) and a much smaller fragment (Sm.1876) have survived. For the Akkadian text, including reconstruction proposals, and an English translation, see Alasdair Livingstone, ed., *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (State Archives of Assyria 3; Helsinki: Helsinki University, 1989), 77–79; Hayim Tadmor, Benno Landsberger, and Simo Parpola, “The Sin of Sargon and Sennacherib's Last Will,” *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 3 (1989): 9–24. The latter study includes a thorough commentary.

The historical background is as follows:⁹⁴ In 705 BCE, the successful Assyrian warrior-king Sargon II was killed on the battlefield. His body could not be retrieved, which precluded a proper burial in the royal palace, while his wandering spirit constituted a threat to the living.⁹⁵ Sargon's dishonourable death was certainly remembered during Sennacherib's reign, yet all the texts written under Sennacherib's authority are completely silent about his father, and none commemorate him⁹⁶ – with SSar as the only possible exception.

SSar does refer to Sargon and seems to ascribe his death to one or more sins which he had committed. Despite the fragmentary state of the tablet, several elements are clear. At the very beginning, Sennacherib describes his piety and righteousness. Thereafter, he mentions “the death of Sargon”⁹⁷ and indicates that he decided to examine “the sin(s) of Sargon, my father, by means of extispicy,”⁹⁸ specifying that his father “sinned against the god.”⁹⁹ Sennacherib indicates that he asked for divine help to avoid his father's fate, apparently because he feared that his father's sin would cause more misery during his own reign.¹⁰⁰ He explains that he formed different groups of haruspices¹⁰¹ and ordered each separate group to determine the nature of his father's sin. This would enable him to establish with certainty how further damage could be avoided.

Unfortunately, the following section of the text is so damaged that the exact result of the extispicy remains unclear.¹⁰² However, Sennacherib seems to mention the option that his father failed to keep “a treaty oath (*adê*) of the

94 See Josette Elayi, *Sargon II, King of Assyria* (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 22; Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 210–17.

95 Elayi, *Sargon II*, 213.

96 For possible reasons for Sennacherib's silence about his father, see Josette Elayi, *Sennacherib, King of Assyria* (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 24; Atlanta: SBL, 2018), 41–42; cf. Elayi, *Sargon II*, 213.

97 Obv. 8': *mītūtu ša* ^mLUGAL-GIN.

98 Obv. 10': *hītu ša* ^mLUGAL-GIN AD-ia ina bīr[ī]; obv. 16': *hīāti* ^mLUGAL-GIN AD-ia ina bī[ri].

99 Obv. 12': *hītu ana* DINGIR *ihtū*.

100 Obv. 13': *u pagrī itti* DINGIR *lušēši*, “and with the god's help let me save myself.”

101 Obv. 21': [DU]M^{MEŠ} LÚ HAL^{MEŠ}.

102 Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola (“The Sin of Sargon,” 11) propose the following reconstruction of the passage: “Was it because [he honored] the gods of Assyria too much, placing them] above the gods of Babylonia [... and was it because] he did not [keep] the treaty of the king of gods [that Sargon my father] was killed [in the enemy country and] was not b[uried] in his house? [...] The haruspices whom [I had divided] into [several groups] unanimously [gave me a firm positive answer]” (obv. 17'–22').

king of the gods,¹⁰³ with “king of the gods” presumably used as a designation for the god Aššur.¹⁰⁴ In a later damaged section, Sennacherib seems to refer to his intention to construct a statue of Marduk.¹⁰⁵ However, this project may have been left unfinished. Closer to the end of the text, where he appears to be speaking to an unknown addressee, he mentions the actual construction of a statue of Anšar/Aššur, which he commissioned, and possibly the obstruction of his plan to construct a statue of Marduk.¹⁰⁶ The context of these references seems to relate to Sennacherib’s attempts to make restitution for his father’s sin by properly honouring the gods, without favouring the Assyrian gods at the expense of the Babylonian gods or vice versa. Presumably, there is a direct relationship between Sennacherib’s cultic activities and Sargon’s alleged sin. Sargon may well have neglected Marduk, and possibly other Babylonian gods as well.¹⁰⁷

Naturally, the apparent reference to Sargon breaking a treaty oath is relevant for the present discussion, but the exact character of this oath remains unclear. Benno Landsberger presumed that Sargon neglected Aššur and thus broke his oath to this deity.¹⁰⁸ Simo Parpola suggested that the oath concerned a political treaty between Sargon II and Merodach-Baladan II, king of Babylon, which Sargon had sworn by Aššur.¹⁰⁹ If this interpretation is correct, Sargon’s violation of the oath is comparable to Suppiluliuma’s breaking the treaty with Egypt. However, Josette Elayi rejects Parpola’s reading.¹¹⁰

Although in the text it is Sennacherib who speaks, several scholars believe that the text dates from the reign of his son Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE). They assume that the person whom Sennacherib addresses in the final part of the text is King Esarhaddon himself. According to this interpretation, the text was written under Esarhaddon’s authority to demonstrate that the deceased King Sennacherib supported his friendly stance towards Babylonia, including fashioning a new statue for Marduk. Sennacherib could hardly have been the source of the words the text ascribes to him because he was clearly

103 Obv. 19: *adê LUGAL DINGIR^{MEŠ} u lā [iṣṣuru]*.

104 Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, “The Sin of Sargon,” 21, 48.

105 *šalam* ^dAMAR.URU (“statue of Marduk”) has been preserved in obv. 36’.

106 See the reconstruction in Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, “The Sin of Sargon,” 15: “As for me, after I had made the statue of Aššur my lord, Assyrian scribes wrongfully prevented me from working [on the statue of Marduk] and did not let me make [the statue of Marduk, the great lord]” (rev. 21’–23’). The expression *šalam* AN.ŠĀR (“statue of Anšar/Aššur”) occurs in rev. 21’; cf. rev. 13’ (partially preserved).

107 Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, “The Sin of Sargon,” 9; Elayi, *Sargon II*, 216.

108 Benno Landsberger, in Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, “The Sin of Sargon,” 33–34.

109 Simo Parpola, in Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, “The Sin of Sargon,” 48–49.

110 Elayi, *Sargon II*, 215.

anti-Babylonian – a fact which became especially apparent when he ordered the destruction of Babylon in 689 BCE.¹¹¹ Furthermore, according to a reconstruction of one of the lines on the tablet, Sennacherib may refer to his own early death.¹¹²

However, other interpretations of the text are also possible. First, it is doubtful whether the text really refers to Sennacherib's death.¹¹³ Furthermore, the transfer of the royal court from Khorsabad to Nineveh immediately after Sennacherib became king suggests that Sargon's death provoked Sennacherib to adopt a rather critical attitude towards his father's policies. In such a context, Sennacherib may have addressed his father's shortcomings quite explicitly. Also, whether Sennacherib really addresses Esarhaddon at the end of the text remains uncertain. The addressee might be Sennacherib's son Aššur-nadin-šumi, for instance, who ruled Babylon in his father's name from 699 to 694 BCE.¹¹⁴ Recently, Josette Elayi concluded that the text was most likely written during Sennacherib's reign, most probably in the first years after Sargon's death, or at least prior to the brutal destruction of Babylon in 689 BCE.¹¹⁵ Of course, the description of Sennacherib's piety at the beginning of SSar is well suited to the assumption that he himself commissioned the text.

Whatever its historical background may be, and however we interpret the details, SSar displays a cluster of ideas that also occurs in Mursili's prayers. Despite the physical damage to the tablet, scholars seem to be unanimous on several points: the text views Sargon's sin as the cause of his death; it refers to the possibility that this sin included his breaking a treaty with Aššur or one sworn by Aššur; it reflects the fear that this sin may have negative effects on the reign of his successor(s); and it describes Sennacherib's attempts to make restitution and to appease the gods of Assyria and Babylonia.

111 Parpola, in Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, "The Sin of Sargon," 45–46, 50–51; cf. 33–39 (Landsberger); Ann M. Weaver, "The 'Sin of Sargon' and Esarhaddon's Reconception of Sennacherib: A Study in Divine Will, Human Politics and Royal Ideology," *Iraq* 66 (2004): 61–66.

112 Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, "The Sin of Sargon," 14–15: *ba-l[ā²-ti ú-qat-tu-ú]*, "[shortened my life]" (rev. 23'). The authors admit that the reconstruction "remains conjectural" (p. 24).

113 See Paul Garelli, "Réflexions sur 'le péché de Sargon,'" in *Studi sul Vicino Oriente antico dedicati alla memoria di Luigi Cagni*, vol. 1 (ed. S. Graziani; Istituto universitario orientale, Dipartimento di studi asiatici, Series Minor 61; Naples: Istituto universitario orientale, 2000), 341–43, with the suggestion that the line (rev. 23') may refer to exhausting instead of shortening Sennacherib's life.

114 Cf. Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, "The Sin of Sargon," 9, 32, 50.

115 Elayi, *Sargon II*, 215–17. Cf. Tadmor, in Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, "The Sin of Sargon," 30: "the images of Anšar and the great gods were made between 704–700."

For the present discussion, the question of whether SSar was commissioned by Sennacherib himself is irrelevant. Even if his son and successor Esarhaddon was responsible, the text still provides a rationale for taking specific measures to satisfy the gods and to prevent more evil. The postulates remain the same: a king's sin may have negative consequences for the reign of his successor; the former king's sin may concern breaking a divinely sanctioned oath; and this background legitimises the measures taken by the new king to appease the offended gods.

6 Similar Patterns

Virtually the whole text of PP2 has been preserved, while some sections of PP1 have been lost or damaged. SSar is quite fragmentary, but the surviving parts suggest that it shared the conceptual framework that can easily be detected in PP1 and PP2.

These three texts have several traits in common. Against the background of a calamity, each of them describes the deliberations and actions of a king who makes an effort to prevent more misery in his kingdom. Postulating that the misery must be due to at least one specific sin, this king tries to find out what has angered the gods. He consults the gods to discover the sin(s) to which the calamity must be ascribed. Even before the gods have revealed the cause, the king calls to mind several sins that may have aroused the gods' anger. Breaking an oath sworn by the gods is mentioned as one of the options (PP1: Suppiluliuma's oath to Tudhaliya; PP2: Hatti's treaty with Egypt; SSar: a treaty with the god Aššur or one sworn by Aššur).

After an oracle reveals that the misery was indeed caused by a sin of a former king, the ruling king takes responsibility for his predecessor's misstep, describing his own behaviour as exemplary. Fearing that the anger of the gods will cause more damage and may harm him as well, the king tries to appease the gods and asks them to protect him. The king demonstrates his willingness to make restitution, notably by performing rituals (PP1, PP2), giving propitiatory gifts (PP1), and, apparently, making statues representing the gods (SSar).

2 Samuel 21:1–14 is a different kind of text. When McCarter describes the conceptual correspondences between PP2 and the biblical episode, he rightly points out that the genres are quite different: "The Hittite texts are prayers, addressed to the storm god and presumably intended to placate him. The Israelite text is a third-person narrative, and it is intended to sway a human audience."¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ McCarter, *II Samuel*, 445.

Despite these differences, however, 2 Samuel 21:1–14 presents a similar framework. It is the only biblical passage that has so many conceptual parallels in PP1, PP2, and SSar. Confronted with a three-year famine, David wants to prevent more misery. He consults God, who reveals that the famine is the consequence of Saul's violation of the Israelite treaty with the Gibeonites. David takes responsibility for Saul's misconduct and asks the Gibeonites how he can make amends (כפר *Piel*; 21:3).

Like PP1 and PP2, 2 Samuel 21:1–14 avoids referring to mitigating factors as an excuse for the violation of the oath. The fact that the Gibeonites were deceiving the Israelites when the treaty was concluded goes unmentioned. Furthermore, the idea that Saul broke the oath "in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah" (2 Samuel 21:2) is not accepted as an excuse, despite the strategic importance of the Gibeonite territory. In the same vein, Suppiluliuma's attacks on the Egyptian enemy are denounced in PP2.¹¹⁷

At the end of the article in which he compares PP2 and 2 Samuel 21:1–14, Malamat rightly observes that both ancient texts presuppose the possibility of transgenerational retribution.¹¹⁸ His final remark concerns the idea of causality that both texts express: "But the most notable parallel between the two sources lies in the phenomenological structure of cause and effect, as revealed in the sequence: conclusion of treaty, violation of treaty and consequent national catastrophe."¹¹⁹

Exactly the same patterns of causality are present in PP1 and SSar. The texts show that in times of misery, kings took these patterns very seriously. What we observe are similar ideas about the causes of misery, the anger of gods, the relevance of oracles, transgenerational retribution, responsibility for the sins of one's predecessors, and restitution. Apparently, the pattern of causality expressed in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 was far from unique in ancient Near Eastern thinking.

Although the conceptual parallels between 2 Samuel 21:1–14 and the three extra-biblical texts are exceptionally strong, the biblical episode is not an isolated incident within the Hebrew Bible. Several other biblical texts clearly denounce Israel's breaking of oaths, even though the violation seemed to be in Israel's own interest. According to Joshua 9, the narrative to which 2 Samuel 21:2 refers, shortly after the conclusion of the treaty with the

117 Malamat, "Doctrines of Causality," 11–12. Cf. Parpola, in Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola, "The Sin of Sargon," 49, with regard to Sargon 11: "It did not matter if he had acted in the best interests of Assyria; all the same, he had to be punished for his haughtiness."

118 Malamat, "Doctrines of Causality," 12.

119 *Ibid.*

Gibeonites, some Israelites were apparently inclined to strike the Gibeonites despite the treaty:

The children of Israel didn't strike them, because the princes of the congregation had sworn to them by Yhwh, the God of Israel. All the congregation murmured against the princes. But all the princes said to all the congregation, "We have sworn to them by Yhwh, the God of Israel: now therefore we may not touch them. This we will do to them, and let them live; lest wrath (קצף) be on us, because of the oath which we swore to them."

JOSHUA 9:18–20, WEB

Here, as in 2 Samuel 21:1–14, breaking the divinely sanctioned oath to the Gibeonites is seen as unacceptable and dangerous, even though the oath was sworn to a deceptive partner.

Another illuminating example occurs in Ezekiel 17, with reference to the king of Judah breaking an oath to Babylon. Remarkably, Yhwh defines the treaty with Babylon as "my treaty" (בריתי), undoubtedly since it had been sworn in his name (17:19).¹²⁰ Violating the treaty would entail severe consequences for the king and the whole country (17:19–21).

7 Homicide to Appease God?

PP1 and PP2 do not mention the option of bringing both divine anger and the plague to an end by executing the perpetrators. In the Hebrew Bible, the idea that God's anger can only be appeased by killing the sinner(s) occurs more than once. According to Numbers 25, God was angered when Israel joined the Baal-peor cult. A message from God himself explicitly announces that the execution of the perpetrators will put an end to his anger:

Israel joined himself to Baal-peor: and the anger (אף) of Yhwh was kindled against Israel. Yhwh said to Moses: "Take all the chiefs of the people, and hang them up (יקע) Hiphil) to Yhwh before the sun, that the fierce anger (ארון אף) of Yhwh may turn away from Israel."

NUMBERS 25:3–4, WEB¹²¹

¹²⁰ Compare the way in which PP2 refers to the storm god as the subject of the treaty with Egypt (p. 245–46 above).

¹²¹ For these verses, see also p. 234 above.

According to the subsequent verses, God's anger had taken the form of a devastating plague (Numbers 25:8–9). This plague will end only if amends are made. The purposeful killing of the Israelite leaders is described as an essential part of this restitution. It may be significant that Numbers 25:4 is the only biblical verse apart from 2 Samuel 21:1–14 in which the verb יָקַע Hiphil occurs. The verb seems to have ritual overtones and may imply that the execution served to appease God.

Numbers 25:8–15 recounts that the plague came to an end thanks to Phinehas, who executed the Israelite perpetrator Zimri and his accomplice, the Moabite woman Cozbi. Phinehas's saving act is described with the verb "to make amends" (כָּפַר Piel; 25:13). 2 Samuel 21:1–14 uses the same verb to denote David's effort to appease the Gibeonites (21:3).

Biblical legislation includes the rule that murderers must be killed to purge the land and restore welfare. This rule is found in Deuteronomy 19:11–13 and Numbers 35:30–34. The latter passage precludes the custom of paying money in restitution for killings and emphatically states that murderers must be put to death:

So you shall not pollute the land in which you are: for blood, it pollutes the land; and no expiation can be made (כָּפַר Pual) for the land for the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him who shed it. You shall not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell: for I, Yhwh, dwell in the midst of the children of Israel.

NUMBERS 35:33–34, WEB

This legislation corresponds to the notion in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 that the Gibeonites rejected financial compensation and instead demanded the death of Saul's descendants.¹²²

There is one difference, of course. While Numbers 35:33–34 does not concern collective bloodguilt and collective blood vengeance, 2 Samuel 21:1–14 suggests that the whole house of Saul bore bloodguilt (21:1b). This aspect of the text seems to open the door to collective blood vengeance on Saul's seven descendants.¹²³ This is not dissimilar to God ordering Jehu to exterminate the

¹²² Cf. Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 173–76.

¹²³ Cf. Hendrik G. L. Peels (*The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM -texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* [Oudtestamentische Studiën 31; Leiden: Brill, 1995], 79), who defines blood vengeance as follows: "The right and obligation, in the case of the murder of a blood relative, to enact vengeance upon the murderer *and his descendants*" (my italics).

entire house of King Ahab in order to avenge the innocent blood of Yhwh's servants, which was shed at Queen Jezebel's command (2 Kings 9:7–9).

The suggestion in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 that the deliberate execution of Saul's relatives may have appeased God has no direct parallel in PP1 and PP2, or in the preserved parts of SSar. Even PP1, which regards the deaths of Suppiluliuma and his followers as the consequence of their bloodguilt, does not mention the option of making restitution through the calculated killing of human beings. However, many curse sections of ancient Near Eastern treaties do contain the warning that oath-breaking will lead to a severe punishment, not only for the perpetrators, but also for their families and their land.¹²⁴ In a similar vein, PP1 and PP2 interpret the plague that was ruining Hatti as a collective punishment for the former king Suppiluliuma's oath-breaking, while 2 Samuel 21:1–14 sees the three-year famine as the consequence of Saul's oath-breaking.

8 David's Role Reconsidered

The Hittite texts PP1 and PP2 and the Assyrian text SSar have played a crucial role in this chapter. There appear to be many conceptual parallels between 2 Samuel 21:1–14 and these ancient Near Eastern compositions.

In the three non-biblical texts, kings relate their considerations and their deeds in times of distress (see section 5). Each of them is thoughtful; each looks for a way to end the misery that has struck the land; each thinks thoroughly about the past; each is critical of himself and of his father, who had been king before him; each takes oracles seriously; each is prepared to take the situation of outsiders into account; and finally, each is prepared to take drastic measures to restore order by appeasing the gods. In these texts, the kings describe themselves as doing what a responsible king is supposed to do.

The genre of 2 Samuel 21:1–14 is different. King David is not the narrator; the text describes his deeds in the third person. Contrary to PP1, PP2, and SSar, the biblical episode was possibly written a long time after the king's reign.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ See, for example, the Hittite treaties included in COS 2, 93–106; and Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 11–124. Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties*, 28–58, text 6) contains the following curses: "May Zarpanitu, who grants name and seed, destroy your name and your seed from the land" (§45); "May Girra (...) burn up your name and your seed" (§62); "May Nabû (...) erase your name, and destroy your seed from the land" (§105).

¹²⁵ Rather late dates of composition are proposed by Jürg Hutzli, "Elaborated Literary Violence: Genre and Ideology of the Two Stories I Sam 22,6–23 and II Sam 21,1–14," in *Rereading the relecture? The Question of (Post)chronistic Influence in the Latest Redactions*

However, the parallels between the passage in 2 Samuel and these extra-biblical texts convincingly demonstrate that David is portrayed as a responsible king, a king who does what a king has to do in a critical situation. The three ancient Near Eastern texts describe deliberations that the royal court found appropriate. The biblical text ascribes many of these same deliberations to David.

In section 4, I have classified Arnold Anderson's and Athalya Brenner's critical readings as the "third level" of suspicion. Anderson and Brenner cast doubt on the text's assumption of a causal relationship between Saul's violation of an oath, God's anger, and David's radical measures. Is it thinkable that a prolonged famine was seen as the consequence of a former king breaking an oath? And could the famine be a reason to take drastic measures? Anderson and Brenner gave negative answers to these questions.

However, the ancient Near Eastern evidence shows that it was quite normal to see misery as the consequence of divine anger over human sins. PP1, PP2, and SSar add that such sins could include a former king breaking a divinely sanctioned oath. Moreover, PP1 and PP2 in particular demonstrate that in times of misery, a king was prepared to do whatever he could to appease the gods and to provide the most appropriate restitution.

Johannes Schnocks and Ekaterina Kozlova, whose critical readings were classified as the "fourth level" of suspicion (see section 4), went a step further than Anderson and Brenner. They argued that the biblical story, in one way or another, repudiates the permission David granted for the execution of Saul's seven descendants. However, the conceptual parallels with the three extra-biblical texts render it very difficult to maintain this argument.

Certainly, the account of Rizpah's laudable tenacity draws attention to the gruesome nature of the execution of Saul's relatives. However, the conceptual framework in which their killing is described serves to legitimise radical measures. Within the ancient Near Eastern context, including the Bible, a break with the expected pattern would have been more clearly marked. It would have been necessary to indicate where exactly the plot of the narrative contradicts the expected pattern. However, nothing in the text suggests that the execution of these seven men is deemed reprehensible. The fact that Yhwh, in front of whom the men are executed (21:9), keeps silent does not show that he is weak, as Schnocks suggested, but that Yhwh sees no reason to reject the homicide. Further, Kozlova's suggestion that David violated his oath to Saul when he gave the Gibeonites permission to kill these seven men is not based on the narrative

of the Books of Samuel (ed. U. Becker and H. Bezzel; *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* 11 66; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 157–63, and, in the same volume, Cynthia Edenburg, "II Sam 21,1–14 and II Sam 23,1–7 as Post-Chr Additions to the Samuel Scroll," 168–77.

itself. It is based on an interpretation of 1 Samuel 24:22–23, whose relationship to 2 Samuel 21:1–14 is equivocal. Significantly, 2 Samuel 21:1–14 contains no suggestion that David broke an oath. On the contrary, it explicitly indicates that David respected an oath – namely, his oath to Jonathan (21:7) – while the only reference to the violation of an oath concerns Saul’s misconduct against the Gibeonites (21:2).¹²⁶

In addition to contrasting David’s keeping an oath with Saul’s violating an oath, a relatively extensive section emphasises that the idea of executing Saul’s seven relatives came from the Gibeonites, not from David himself (21:3–6). It is beyond doubt that this point is underscored in order to salvage David’s reputation.

Such aspects suggest that the purpose of the text is apologetic, and that there is indeed reason to read the text with suspicion, although the critical readings provided by Anderson, Brenner, Schnocks, and Kozlova are not entirely convincing. Even Kyle McCarter, who did not read the text with much suspicion, pointed out that the perspective of the narrative is largely pro-Davidic. According to Walter Brueggemann, the story covers up what really happened and minimises David’s dubious role. In a clever way, it tries to lay the blame for the execution of the seven men on their (grand)father, Saul.¹²⁷

The parallels between this passage in 2 Samuel and PP1, PP2, and SSar confirm the impression that the text is apologetic. The use of the known conceptual framework suggests that David’s main concern was the famine, which had to be brought to an end. The elimination of members of Saul’s family may have served him quite well, but this is not what the text suggests. According to the plot of the story, David has Saul’s descendants executed because he has his back to the wall. The assumption is that David did not act out of personal enmity or for political reasons. His deeds are seen as necessary to maintain the welfare of the land, not as inspired by self-interest.¹²⁸

Thus it is all the more surprising that the text contains a critical note on David’s negligence. The plot seems to reach its conclusion in 2 Samuel 21:9, after the reference to the execution of Saul’s relatives. Notably, however, God does not immediately respond to this propitiatory rite. Instead, what comes next is the account of Rizpah’s unusual act, which implies a tacit criticism of David’s conduct. As Jan Fokkelman puts it:

126 Cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 3:282; Kim, *Bloodguilt*, 272, 274; Yael Ziegler, *Promises to Keep: The Oath in Biblical Narrative* (Vetus Testamentum Supplementum 120; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 178–80, 254–56.

127 See section 4, p. 236–37, on the “first” and “second” levels of suspicion.

128 See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 3:273.

the plot has come to an end with the final line of v.9. If vv.1–9 was all that had been handed down to us we would have looked upon it as self-contained unit. The surprise Rizpah is to give David and the reader cannot be predicted beforehand.¹²⁹

Comparing this story with PP1, PP2, and SSar confirms Fokkelman's analysis. While the execution of the seven men has its counterpart in the various forms of restitution offered by ancient Near Eastern kings who wanted to appease divine anger, Rizpah's extraordinary conduct does not fit the known conceptual framework and comes as a surprise. However, her incentive is crucial and gives the plot a radical spin. Rizpah's tenacity reminds David of his responsibilities towards the house of Saul. While the rest of the episode describes David as a resolute king, he still needs Rizpah's reminder before he decides to take care of the corpses of Saul's descendants and orders them to be buried, together with the bones of Saul and Jonathan.

All of this renders the story somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, the text assumes that the execution of Saul's sons and grandsons was necessary to appease God; on the other hand, it shows compassion for the victims. This ambivalence is aptly expressed by Athalya Brenner:

Worth noting is that, when all is seemingly done and the Saulides are executed, the famine is still not lifted. Here comes the final set of issues, that concerning Rizpah, her action and its consequences. For, if David as well as the readers wish for closure, this comes not after acceding to the Gibeonites' demand, but only after Saul, Jonathan and the impaled sons of Saul's house are brought to burial in their ancestral area (vv. 13–14). It would therefore seem that the story, cryptic and problematically without a precise event-flow context, undermines its own main message; on the one hand, it seems to be an anti-Saulide, pro-David polemic; on the other hand, it seems to imply criticism of David, who needs a woman identified with Saul's house to remind him of his duty – to give honorable burial to the dead of the preceding royal house. In that framework, then, Rizpah is but a tool for educating David.¹³⁰

Despite this ambivalence, the final judgment of David's acts is favourable. David needed the impetus Rizpah provided before he realised that the bones of Saul and his deceased relatives deserved a proper burial, but the fact that he

129 See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 3:285; similarly 271–72, 289–90.

130 Brenner, "Rizpah [Re]membered," 208.

responded compassionately to her tacit appeal is evaluated in positive terms. After the account of the burial, the story ends with a significant conclusion: “And they performed all that the king commanded. After that God was entreated for the land” (2 Samuel 21:14b, WEB). God approves of David’s acts on the whole and is said to be “entreated” (עִתֵּר Niphal) on behalf of the land, an expression that marks God’s decision to put an end to the misery of the famine (cf. 2 Samuel 24:25). According to the text, God was appeased by the execution of Saul’s seven descendants, which resolved the bloodguilt, but he could be entreated on behalf of the land only after David brought the humiliation of Saul’s family to an end.¹³¹

9 Religion as an Eye-Opener

It has become clear that 2 Samuel 21:1–14 contains many conceptual parallels with certain other ancient Near Eastern texts, in particular with the Hittite prayers PP1 and PP2, which have been preserved quite well, and apparently also with the more fragmentary neo-Assyrian text SSar.

The awareness that ancient Near Eastern thinking permeates the biblical story makes it all the more obvious how alien the text is to Western, twenty-first-century readers. The strangeness of the biblical narrative covers several aspects, most of which are also present in the three extra-biblical compositions. First of all, the causal relationships within these texts appear quite illogical to us. It has become extremely unusual to ascribe a concrete form of misery to a specific sin. Moreover, ancient ideas about collective and transgenerational retribution encounter resistance. And in general, the belief that God speaks through oracles has vanished. Furthermore, we regard treaties that have been concluded with fraudulent partners as invalid.¹³² Finally, God is no longer seen as a deity who wants retribution and can be appeased with rituals and gifts, let alone with violent blood vengeance.

As soon as we become aware of the strangeness of these ancient texts, we start to read them differently. Unexpectedly, the Hittite prayers PP1 and PP2 appear to portray positive aspects of ancient religious thinking, despite the fact that they may not make sense to us. The assumption that the gods by

¹³¹ See also Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 3:289–91; Kim, *Bloodguilt*, 152; Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 506–7.

¹³² Cf. Maurizio Ragazzi, “Fraudulent Treaties: The Covenant with the Gibeonites in the Biblical Book of Joshua,” in *Contemporary Developments in International Law: Essays in Honour of Budislav Vukas* (ed. R. Wolfrum et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 860–78.

whom oaths were sworn guarded those oaths appears to have rendered rulers quite self-critical. Mursili II no longer ascribed catastrophes primarily to his enemies, but began to look for shortcomings within his own circle. He wholeheartedly admitted that the cause of Hatti's misery lay in his father's violation of oaths. This must have prompted him to avoid his father's mistakes, to take oaths more seriously, and to respect treaties.

The ancient Israelites certainly understood the self-critical message of 2 Samuel 21:1–14. First, there is Rizpah, a woman who dares to denounce David's negligence and whose disturbing appeal calls to mind the sorrow of all those who experience different forms of injustice. Second, the story emphasises that zeal for Israel and Judah is not a legitimate reason to break divinely sanctioned treaties. Even if there are extenuating circumstances, God will not tolerate the violation of oaths. The rights and interests of the partners with whom treaties were concluded and those to whom oaths were sworn must be taken into account permanently. This enduring message leads to a more self-critical attitude and to compassion for weaker groups in society that are easily victimised. The killing of Saul's seven sons and grandsons remains a gruesome element in 2 Samuel 21:1–14, but above all, the story encourages readers to fight for justice and peaceful forms of coexistence.

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