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The Poor Man's Ewe Lamb (2 Sam 12:1–4) in Intersectional, Interspecies Perspective

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Abstract

Nathan tells David a story about a rich man who takes and kills a poor man's lamb (2 Sam 12:1–4). This, it turns out, is figurative for David's own deeds of killing Uriah the Hittite and taking his wife. The story and its application suggest the intersecting power dynamics between groups: rich and poor, male and female, native and foreigner—and, crucially, human and nonhuman. This article argues that intersectional analysis should include an interspecies dimension, and explores these dynamics at work through various mechanisms of relation. Low status human groups are connected with nonhumans through animalisation, and are thereby delegitimised. Nonhuman animals and animalised humans are positioned as objects within mechanisms of domination, such as exploitation, exchange, and semiosis. The relationship between the poor man and lamb, though, offers another possibility: alliance. Care can be extended across species lines, with implications for intergroup relations throughout the intersectional web.

Keywords

2 Samuel – intersectionality – interspecies – animals – power dynamics

After David's infamous affair with Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam 11), the prophet Nathan tells him a story: a rich man takes a ewe lamb from a poor man, and feeds her to a traveller (12:1–4). The story, of course, is a parable for David's own deeds—he himself is “the man” (שׂוֹאֵף; 12:7a) who has taken unjustly.

This text has been studied extensively for its genre,¹ compositional history,² psychological intent,³ narrative art,⁴ and relationship to its literary context.⁵ Less frequently examined are the socio-political dynamics of the parable and the place of the nonhuman character: the lamb.⁶ This article will interrogate this issue, asking: What societal forces determine the position of the lamb in Nathan's parable?

This question is important for several reasons. Literarily, it will help us to better understand the function and rhetorical power of Nathan's parable within 2 Samuel. Historically, it will enrich our understanding of Israelite/Judahite society, scholarship on which too often ignores the participation of nonhumans. Ethically, it raises essential questions of justice for all involved.⁷ I will contend that the lamb is positioned within the intersecting power dynamics of society: the hierarchy of species is entangled with hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, and wealth. She is implicated, furthermore, in several mechanisms which structure social relations, to the harm or benefit of the various players.

Analytic Frameworks

In this article, I will use two analytic frameworks, drawing on cross-disciplinary research. The first is intersectionality. Intersectionality is widely accepted in social and cultural theory as a helpful tool for analysing societies.⁸ It recog-

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- 1 Coats, "Parable"; Copenhagen, "He Spoke"; Gunkel, *Folktale*, 54–55; Gunn, *King David*, 40–42; Lasine, "Melodrama"; Simon, "Ewe-Lamb."
 - 2 Bailey, *Love and War*, 101–113; Dietrich, *Prophetic*, 127–132; Kalimi, "Reexamining"; Schwally, "Quellenkritik," 153–155.
 - 3 Copenhagen, "He Spoke"; Derby, "Freudian Slip"; Klitsner, "Therapeutic Parable."
 - 4 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 71–82; de Vulpillières, "David et Bethsabée."
 - 5 Berman, "Double Meaning"; Daube, "Nathan's Parable"; Lyke, *Wise Woman*, 146–157; Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 120–130; Schipper, "Overinterpret."
 - 6 But see the discussions of the lamb in Stone, "Affect"; Viviers, "Psychology."
 - 7 There is no space here to unpack the place of this parable within the broader landscape of biblical animal ethics. Despite the anthropocentrism of many biblical texts, there are also examples of compassion towards nonhumans: legal codes make provision for animal welfare (Exod 23:10–11, 12; Lev 25:2–7; Deut 5:12–15; Olyan, "Legal Texts"; Schafer, "Rest"), God shows concern for the livestock of Nineveh (Jonah 4:11; Shemesh, "Many Beasts"), and divine covenants are established with all flesh (Gen 9:9–17; Hos 2:20–25[18–23]; Hiers, "Reverence").
 - 8 The concept "intersectionality" was seminally introduced by feminist lawyer and critical race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw (e.g., Crenshaw, "Mapping"), and has developed widely (e.g., Carastathis, *Intersectionality*; Davis and Žarkov, *Intersectionality*; Hill Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*). Within biblical studies, see especially Yee, *Hebrew Bible*; idem, "Thinking Intersectionally".

nises that all societies are structured by multiple axes of identity and difference, which interact in complex ways to produce hierarchies of privilege and oppression. In this parable and its context, we find the interplay of rich and poor, male and female, native and foreigner. None of these dynamics can be understood in isolation, but only as intersecting parts of a complex system.

With several recent theorists, I contend that a robust theory of intersectionality must also include species.⁹ The multiple media which ensure human domination over animals¹⁰ are entangled, interdependent, and mutually generative with those ensuring, e.g., male domination over female, rich over poor. Even the facile label “human” may already be circumscribed: non-white, -male, and -able-bodied humans are ascribed degrees of animality. Throughout history, slaves and domestic species have been treated alike,¹¹ women and animals have been co-consumed as “meat,”¹² liberation campaigns for animals and disabled humans have been entangled.¹³

Such dynamics are present in the Hebrew Bible, just as in the contemporary world. The Decalogue treats animals, women, and slaves together (Exod 20:17); the plague narratives differentiate livestock according to ethnicity (Exod 9:6); sacrificial codes prohibit physical blemishes in both human slaughterers and animal victims (Lev 21:16–24; 22:17–25). Ken Stone examines the relationship of sexual difference and species difference in the stories of Jacob¹⁴ and Jephthah’s daughter.¹⁵ Jared Beverly examines tensions between sexual liberation and species exploitation in Song of Songs.¹⁶ David Carr exposes a discourse in Gen 1–11 that constructs the male Hebrew subject in opposition to diverse others (animals, women, foreigners).¹⁷ I will show how the ewe lamb’s position is determined not only by the human-nonhuman power dynamic, but by inter-human dynamics of wealth, gender, and ethnicity.

The second framework is a system of *mechanisms for relating* assumed and utilised by the various players: exploitation, exchange, semiosis, animalisation,

9 Nocella and George, *Intersectionality*.

10 I use the term “animal” to refer specifically to nonhuman animals. This term is, of course, problematic if claimed as a discrete category in opposition to “human” (for humans are also animals), but it is employed for lack of viable English alternatives.

11 Spiegel, *Dreaded Comparison*.

12 Adams, *Sexual Politics*.

13 Taylor, *Beasts*.

14 Stone, “Animating.”

15 Stone, “Animal Difference.”

16 Beverly, “Pasture.”

17 Carr, “Competing Construals.”

and alliance. Domestic animals may be *exploited* by a powerful human group,¹⁸ for their physical labour (ploughing and haulage), their lifetime products (milk, wool/hair, and dung), and the products of their death (flesh, skin, and bones). This basic utility value makes them valuable items to be *exchanged* between human groups. They dominate both trade relationships and the hospitality codes of the gift economy.

This economic potential undergirds a third mechanism: *semiosis*.¹⁹ Here, nonhuman animals function as signifiers within interhuman communication. Their functional value means that their acquisition can index wealth, power, and prestige. Their role as exchange items can negotiate complex social relationships. Their consumption as meat, with its attendant regulations and rituals, can signify social status,²⁰ ethnic/cultural identity,²¹ and religious affiliation.²² Their sacrifice brings a complex symbolic nexus of religious and social meanings.²³ In exploitation, exchange, and semiosis, animals are removed of their agency, reduced to objects or symbols. They are wholly differentiated from the powerful human subject, without notions of reciprocity.

These mechanisms are facilitated by animal difference from humans; animal similarity to humans facilitates others. Powerless groups may be connected with domestic animals in their livelihoods and by their shared lowly status. In a fourth mechanism, this close connection slips into a blurring of categories, with human groups *animalised* and treated like domestic beasts, repulsive vermin, or fearsome beasts in need of taming.²⁴ Animalised humans may then be treated according to the socially-sanctioned customs and practices usually reserved for nonhuman animals.²⁵ They can be positioned as objects within mechanisms of exploitation, exchange, and semiosis. Relations are not inevitably antagonistic, though. A final mechanism consists of *alliance* between parties.²⁶ Alliance does not necessitate that both parties have equal power,

18 For animal exploitation in Israel/Judah, see Borowski, *Every Living Thing*; Welton, *Glutton*, 29–91.

19 See the thorough investigation of the symbolic and social meanings of nonhuman animals in Russell, *Social Zooarchaeology*.

20 Magness, "Conspicuous Consumption"; Meyers, "Menu."

21 Price, "Food and Israelite Identity."

22 Cf. the food laws of Lev 11, which end "I am Yahweh your God ... be holy for I am holy" (Lev 11:44a).

23 Eberhart, *Ritual and Metaphor*; Janzen, *Social Meanings*.

24 The psychological literature on dehumanisation is vast. For helpful overviews, see Haslam and Loughnan, "Dehumanization"; Vaes et al., "We Are Human." For an example from the Hebrew Bible, see Millar, "Dehumanisation."

25 Spiegel, *Dreaded Comparison*.

26 Best, "Rethinking Revolution"; Calarco, "Alliance Politics"; Motilal, "An Alliance."

yet it gives both agency. It does not dissolve differences between parties, but reaches out across them, to the mutual benefit of both.

In this article, I bring together these two frameworks: intersectionality and mechanisms for relating. The two complement each other as the first analyses *who* wields power, and the second considers *how* they wield it. Together, they serve as a helpful guide to navigate the complexity of interspecies social relations. I will show how the lamb in Nathan's parable is caught within a complex power network, her fate determined by the mechanisms acting upon her. I will read the story first "literally," examining its internal dynamics, and then "figuratively," as a parable about wider dynamics in Samuel. These sections will consider harmful situations; in a final section, I will discern a model of ethical relating in face of such intersectional interspecies harm.

1 A Literal Reading: Animals, Paupers, Women, Strangers

1.1 *A Literal Reading*

Most commentators focus on the parable's figurative meaning; how it applies to David's personal life. This, however, is myopic, for a "literal" reading is also fruitful. We might be warranted in this by the text's genre. Many scholars class it as a "juridical parable":²⁷ it is a realistic story, which the listener initially takes as a real legal case, until it is revealed as a parable for his own circumstances. Nothing suggests that David finds the story fanciful. He understands the lamb as a real lamb, and in his response to Nathan, he proposes restitution of real, literal sheep (2 Sam 12:5–6). We can, therefore, first hear the story with David; that is to say, literally. Indeed, this is borne out by investigation into Israelite/Judahite society, for the parable's social dynamics and relations are plausible approximations of the historical context.²⁸

27 Seminally, Simon, "Ewe-Lamb," who also finds juridical parables in 2 Sam 14:1–20; 1 Kgs 20:35–43; Isa 5:1–7; Jer 3:1–5. Simon has been followed by, e.g., Gordon, *Samuel*, 256; Janzen, "Taking," 209; Koenig, *Bathsheba*, 63. For critiques, see Coats, "Parable," 370–371; Gunn, *King David*, 40–42; Pypers, *Reader*, 103–104; Schipper, "Overinterpret," 384–385.

28 I take 2 Sam 12:1–7a as originating in a pre-exilic context, likely from a complex of prophetic traditions which was critical of the monarchy, but accepted its inevitability. Cf. Bailey, *Love and War*, esp. 108; Hutton, *Palimpsest*, 196–201, 221, 224; Jones, *Nathan Narratives*, 96–101; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 7–8, 304–309. Dietrich (*Prophetie*, 127–132) and Veijola (*Das Königum*, 112) argued that the parable belongs to the late-exilic prophetic redaction of the Deuteronomistic History (DtrP). However, Dietrich ("Layer Model," 50–51) has more recently amended his views, such that, of 12:1–15a, only 12:7b, 8, 9b, 10b, 13 belong to this late layer. Even if the passage is exilic in origin, it likely contains

There is also an ethical reason to avoid jumping straight to figuration. In literary studies (including biblical studies), the semiotic function of nonhuman animals is often held as paramount. Considered to be mere symbols of the human condition, they are rushed over as lacking significance in themselves. Such an approach is critiqued by the vegetarian ecofeminist Carol Adams²⁹ and posthumanist Rosi Braidotti. Braidotti pushes back against the “empire of the sign,” in which animals are merely a “signifying system that props up humans’ self-projections and moral aspirations.”³⁰ She rejects “the metaphoric habit of composing a sort of moral and cognitive bestiary in which animals refer to values, norms, and morals,”³¹ arguing instead for a “neoliteral” approach, which takes animals seriously as animals. For Braidotti, this political hermeneutical move is indispensable for creating “a deep bioegalitarianism, a recognition that we humans and animals are in this together.”³² This reading of 2 Sam 12:1–4 embraces this ethic, taking the lamb seriously as a lamb. I focus on how she figures in relationships between rich and poor, male and female, and host and stranger.

1.2 *The Lamb between Rich and Poor*

A literal reading of this pericope reveals how the lamb, along with other domestic animals, is implicated in human economics. The power dynamics of species and wealth are interconnected as the lamb is positioned within mechanisms of exploitation, exchange, and semiosis. Indeed, Israelite/Judahite economic affairs were determined not primarily by luxury products but by livestock and agricultural produce.³³ The parable casts its economic portrait in terms of rich (עשיר) and poor (רש/ראש). The starkness of the polarity, though easily brushed aside as storyteller’s hyperbole, has lamentable correspondences in the realities of wealth distribution—a wealth measured by domestic animals. The poor man is deficient, with sheep minimal in number (“one” אחד) and size (“little” קטנה; 12:3). By contrast, the rich man—like the self-projecting king of Qoh 2:7

reminiscences of pre-exilic lifestyles. Van Seters (*Biblical Saga*, 287–301) is atypical in arguing for a post-exilic origin.

- 29 For Adams (*Sexual Politics*, 53), metaphor enables the functioning of the “absent referent”: when a nonhuman animal is subsumed into symbolism, he/she ceases to be present as an animal; his/her own subjective reality is absented. The metaphor *is* violence, for it facilitates the “moral abandonment of a being” (Adams and Calarco, “Derrida,” 35).
- 30 Braidotti, “Anomalies,” 528.
- 31 Braidotti, “Anomalies,” 527.
- 32 Braidotti, “Anomalies,” 528.
- 33 Lev-Tov, “A Plebeian Perspective,” 90; Sapir-Hen, “Late Bronze,” 227–228.

or the fabulously rewarded God-fearer of Job 1:2—has “very abundant flocks and herds” (בְּעִיר אֶחָד; 12:2) (צֹאן וּבָקָר הֵרֵבָה מְאֹד).

Despite these disparities, the men live together “in one city” (בְּעִיר אֶחָד; 2 Sam 12:1).³⁴ The rich man’s livestock are probably assumed to reside in the surrounding land reserved for agro-pastoral activities,³⁵ or perhaps in a palatine estate.³⁶ Indeed, this may resonate with David’s own circumstances: in his rise to power, he acquired livestock (1 Sam 30:20) and landed estates (1 Sam 25), and the prince Absalom boasts of sheep-shearers (2 Sam 13:23–24). Such estates caused tension, providing for the elites by exploiting the labour of the powerless,³⁷ that is, of peasants and domestic animals. The high frequency of cattle (בָּקָר) here might suggest agricultural intensification,³⁸ as they are exploited alongside human labourers for ploughing and haulage. The flocks (צֹאן) would comprise sheep and goats.³⁹ Sheep were the more economically productive, providing wool for cloth production and milk with higher nutritional yields.⁴⁰ The poor man’s ewe lamb—though she cannot work the land and being probably too young to lactate—has economic value in potential.

Like human workers, domestic animals were primarily exploited for what they could give while living (through physical and reproductive labour and so-called “secondary” products).⁴¹ Sometimes, though, they were killed for meat, shifting their identity from exploited subjects to edible objects—thus our lamb is “prepared” by the rich man (12:4). Meat products were unequally distributed along economic lines. In Iron Age IIb–c Jerusalem, for example, high-status neighbourhoods differentiated themselves by the high quality and quantity of their meat resources⁴²—a story which repeats itself across the

34 On unequal wealth distribution within a single city, see Sapir-Hen et al., “Animal Economy.”

35 Pioske (*David’s Jerusalem*, 198) discusses this arrangement in 10th century Jerusalem, where King David’s story is set. Cf. Shafer-Elliott, *Food*, 36.

36 Sapir-Hen et al. (“Animal Economy,” 104) discuss such estates near Jerusalem.

37 Boer (“Economic Politics”) sees vestiges of such tensions across the Hebrew Bible.

38 Cattle are generally less frequent than caprids; Sasson, *Animal Husbandry*, 48–60.

39 For statistics on the sheep:goat ratio, see Sasson, *Animal Husbandry*, 35–39.

40 Sasson, “Animal Husbandry,” 37 table 1.

41 Welton, *Glutton*, 29–30. Surveying Bronze and Iron Age sites from the Southern Levant, Sasson (*Animal Husbandry*, 42) notes that “in 45 of 54 sites (83%) caprines were utilized for a whole range of products rather than a specific product (e.g., meat).”

42 Sapir-Hen et al. (“Animal Economy”) report that at the high-status Western Wall Plaza sheep were more frequent than goats (being of higher calorific value); animals were culled at a young age (suggesting they were used for meat); they were relatively larger; and their meat-rich upper limbs are over-represented. At the low-status Tel Moza, by contrast, there were relatively fewer sheep; animals were generally older (suggesting their use

region.⁴³ The archaeological record resonates with the presentation of this parable: hierarchical social structure is built and expressed by “division of labour related to animal exploitation and unequal access to meat sources.”⁴⁴ Such animal usage is semiotic, demonstrating power in private and public domains.⁴⁵

The productive and symbolic value of domestic animals made them into important exchange items, circulating through the economy (along with those humans connected to them). Though the Iron Age Levant had nothing like a modern capitalist market,⁴⁶ acquisition through bartering and trade was possible. Thus the poor man “buys” (קנה) his lamb (2 Sam 12:3), just as David “buys” cattle (24:24), and Israelites “buy” slaves (e.g., Lev 25:44–45; Qoh 2:7; Amos 8:6). Sometimes, though, animals were taken without reciprocity: through plunder, theft, tribute, or taxation. Elites did not themselves engage in agro-pastoral activities, instead extracting meat from low status neighbourhoods.⁴⁷ They exploited animals indirectly via exploitation of the poor; the poor exploited animals directly, yet were connected with them as objects of exploitation. Thus, Samuel warns of kings who would “take” (לקח) both livestock from the poor and the poor themselves (1 Sam 8:13–17). In our parable, via an unspecified mechanism, the rich man “takes” (לקח) the poor man’s lamb. David interprets this economically and orders fourfold restitution⁴⁸—a convention occurring elsewhere alongside rules about buying, selling, and stealing human slaves (Exod 21:37[22:1]; cf. 21:1–11, 16).

The lamb, then, is representative of domestical animals’ integral place within Israelite/Judahite economics, positioned within mechanisms of exploitation (for labour and produce), exchange (trading and taking), and semiosis (signalling social status). As both workers and commodities, animals’ fates are entangled with those of humans (subjigator and subjugated).

1.3 *The Lamb between Men and Women*

Though less evident on the surface of the text, the parable can also be analysed in terms of gender. The culture and practices of animal exploitation are often

for lifetime products); they were relatively smaller; and all body parts are represented, regardless of meat yield. Similar patterns are found elsewhere.

43 Sapir-Hen, “Late Bronze.”

44 Sapir-Hen, “Late Bronze,” 230.

45 Sapir-Hen, “Late Bronze,” 233.

46 See especially Sasson, “Animal Husbandry,” who reiterates that Israel operated with a survival-subsistence economic strategy.

47 Sapir-Hen, “Late Bronze,” 229–230; Sapir-Hen et al., “Animal Economy.”

48 LXX has “sevenfold” (ἑπταπλασίονα) (cf. Prov 6:31). Some postulate that LXX provides the original reading, with MT representing a text edited in line with Exodus (e.g., Driver, *Notes*, 291; McCarter, *II Samuel*, 294; Schipper, “Overinterpret,” 390; Simon, “Ewe-Lamb,” 231).

inflected with gendered norms.⁴⁹ In ancient Israel/Judah, animal slaughter is primarily a male activity,⁵⁰ and may have semiotic function, allowing the performance of hegemonic masculinity.⁵¹ Slaughter is a socially-sanctioned channel for violence and aggression. It can assert dominance and possession of another being. It entails control over and manipulation of other bodies. It emulates the masculine power of the deity, even power over life and death.⁵² Such resonances may be present in our parable when the rich man takes and kills the lamb.⁵³

Conversely, the poor man is feminised by the lamb. Women, inhabitants of the domestic space, are conceptually linked with other domestic beings.⁵⁴ Like a mother in whose breast (חיק) lies her babe (cf. 1 Kgs 3:20; 17:18[19]; Lam 2:12; Ruth 4:6), the pauper cradles the lamb in the breast (חיק), establishing a near-maternal connection, the lamb like a daughter (כבת) amongst the sons (עם בניו; 2 Sam 12:3). In contrast to David's own hypermasculine shepherding style—slaying lions and bears (1 Sam 17:34–37)—the pauper's relation to the sheep is tender. To keep her alive (חיה, *piel*),⁵⁵ the pauper apparently hand-feeds her, sharing morsel and cup.⁵⁶ In many societies (including Israel/Judah), feeding the young and caring for the vulnerable is a female responsibility.⁵⁷ In a society which devalues the feminine, this feminisation through animal practices serves to denigrate the poor.

The sheep too is feminised (כבשה instead of כבש).⁵⁸ Lines of differentiation, such as a gender, can cut across species boundaries. In Israel/Judah, slaughtering young females was relatively rare.⁵⁹ The symbolic and material causes of this

49 Adams and Calarco, "Derrida"; Deckha, "Postcolonial," 539.

50 Ruane, *Sacrifice*, 35–36; Welton, *Glutton*, 62–66. When women do occasionally slaughter animals in the Hebrew Bible, it is generally illegitimate or deviant (e.g., 1 Sam 28:24; 1 Kgs 11:8; Ezek 16:20–21; 23:37–39). One possible exception is 1 Sam 1:25 (MT), in which Hannah might be included in the subject of וישחטו. See Meyers, "Hannah and Her Sacrifice."

51 Ruane, *Sacrifice*, 2.

52 Welton, *Glutton*, 62.

53 Drawing on Jacques Derrida, Stone ("Animating," 451) interprets the parable in terms of the man's hypermasculine "carnivorous virility" (cf. idem, "Animal Difference," 6; "Affect," 19).

54 See Stone's comments on the feminisation of Jacob through his connection with domestic animals. Stone, "Animating," 451.

55 LXX has an additional verb here: περιποιήσατο και ἐξέθρεψεν, "he kept and nourished."

56 Compare the distorted mirror of this parable in the following chapter, in which Amnon's alleged illness provokes a request for hand-feeding by the female caregiver; 2 Sam 13:3–4, 10.

57 Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 126, 136–139.

58 See Ruane, *Sacrifice*, 56–62 on the gendered nature of Israelite/Judahite husbandry.

59 Sasson, *Animal Husbandry*, 39–42 for statistics.

may pull in different directions. Symbolically, female victims may have lacked value in the sacrificial cult, “correlat[ing] with less sacred space, private offerings, and lesser social status.”⁶⁰ Materially, though, they had high value while living for their “feminized protein”:⁶¹ the milk exploited from the female body. Her slaughter while yet “small” (קטנה) stands out as egregious, for she would have several milk-producing years ahead.

1.4 *The Lamb between Host and Stranger*

As well as figuring in dynamics of economics and gender, domestic animals are integral as exchange items between clans, tribes, and nations. In Nathan’s parable, the rich man is visited by an unidentified traveller (הלֵךְ/אֲרַח; 12:4).⁶² Acknowledging the necessity to provide for him, but refusing to damage his own animal-wealth, he instead takes the poor man’s lamb.

Encountering strangers has high stakes, with potential for conflict or alliance, harm or gain. Across Mediterranean cultures, hospitality codes regulate these encounters,⁶³ and they may be central in the projection of Israelite identity.⁶⁴ Within the social script of ideal hospitality, the host must “offer the best of what he has” to the guest,⁶⁵ often entailing the gift of animal products. Thus, Abraham gives his three travellers a “calf, tender and good” (בן בקר רך וטוב) and feminized protein products: curds (חמאה) and milk (חלב; Gen 18:7–8). This would not only provide for travellers materially, but have semiotic function, signifying generosity, social status, honour, and masculinity. In Samuel, such codes are pivotal, forging social connections and demonstrating allegiance (1 Sam 9:13, 19, 24; 16:5; 2 Sam 3:20; 9:7–13; 16:1–4; 17:27–29).⁶⁶ In Nathan’s parable, the traveller has perhaps heard of the rich man’s wealth and correlative social esteem, so comes to him to fulfil the recognised script.

But Samuel also recognises perversions of hospitality, including in the chapters surrounding our parable.⁶⁷ Such breaches can have serious socio-political implications. Intergroup warfare is almost provoked, for example, when Nabal refuses to give bread, water, and slaughtered meat (טבחה) to David’s men (25:11). Order is restored only when Abigail correctly performs hospitality,

60 Ruane, *Sacrifice*, 56.

61 This expression comes from Adams, *Sexual Politics*, 21. Cf. Deckha, “Postcolonial,” 532.

62 For אֲרַח, LXX has ξένος, “stranger, foreigner.”

63 See the seminal work of Julian Pitt-Rivers; e.g., in Da Col and Shryock, *From Hospitality*.

64 MacDonald, “Hospitality,” 191.

65 De Hemmer Gudme, “Invitation,” 92 table 1 and *passim*.

66 On the significance of eating and drinking in Samuel, see Dietrich, “Essen.”

67 See MacDonald, “Hospitality,” 192–194 on 2 Sam 9–11, and de Hemmer Gudme, “Invitation,” 95–99 on 2 Sam 13.

offering provisions including five sheep, dead and prepared (חמש צאן עשוות; 25:18). Virginia Miller reads Nathan's parable in light of the Nabal affair, noting this shared theme.⁶⁸ While the rich man does provide for his guest, he does not fulfil the ideal script. The breach occurs through the misuse of animal bodies: he offers meat unjustly gained. He does not "offer the best of what he has," but refuses to take from his own. His actions pervert the semiotics of hospitality, signalling neither generosity, self-sacrifice, nor honour.

This seems a calculated decision—the rich man first considers his own livestock, then seizes the poor man's.⁶⁹ But why should he do this? Does his corruption of hospitality codes not harm his social capital (though protecting his economic capital)? Possibly, the answer lies in the guest's identity. We know little about him, but the text suggests he travels alone. No servants, wives/concubines, or animals are mentioned,⁷⁰ and this lack of entourage may suggest his lower social standing. The nature of the gift can assert the host's perception of social hierarchy; indeed "the more prestigious the guest the more precious the animal."⁷¹ The gift that costs nothing communicates and enacts a power dynamic, both over the traveller (who perceives that the animal is not precious to the giver) and over the poor man (for whom the animal is indeed precious).

A literal reading, then, suggests the lamb's place between rich and poor, male and female, host and stranger, as the species hierarchy entangles with other social hierarchies. Though living subjects, animals are easily commodified within these dynamics, positioned within mechanisms of domination: exploited for labour, products, or flesh; exchanged for economic or social gain; turned into signifiers for wealth, masculinity, or honour. We will see these dynamics develop further as we turn to a figurative reading.

2 A Figurative Reading: Animals, Women, Foreigners

2.1 A Figurative Reading

With Nathan's dramatic pronouncement "you are the man" (אתה האיש; 2 Sam 12:7), he reveals that the story has been figurative. One obvious set of

68 Miller, *A King*, 72–75.

69 The rich man "thought it a pity to take" (ויחמל לקחת) his own livestock. This collocation (חמל with infinitive construct) is unique. חמל usually means "to pity, have compassion," but it is unlikely that deep emotional resonances are present here (cf. Jer 50:14). Rather, it indicates his consideration to spare his flocks, and forms an ironic wordplay with the rich man's alleged lack of compassion (12:6).

70 Cf. the Levite who travels with servants, concubine, and donkeys (Judg 19:3, 10–11).

71 Shafer-Elliott, *Food*, 181.

correspondences emerges: David (the rich man) has taken Bathsheba (the lamb) from Uriah (the poor man). However, there are also notable discrepancies. Some elements from the parable have no parallel in the Bathsheba affair: the affection between poor man and lamb, the “traveller” figure, the rich man’s reluctance to use his own flock. Conversely, some elements from the affair have no parallel in the parable, notably the assignation of Uriah.⁷² And some elements are present in both, but imprecisely matched: in the parable, *the traveller* consumes the lamb; in the affair, David (= *the rich man*) consumes Bathsheba (= the lamb). These discrepancies are often explained by Nathan’s subterfuge: if the parallels were too close, David would notice them, and would not be tricked into condemning himself.⁷³

Nonetheless, these discrepancies provoke reflection on alternative correspondences.⁷⁴ As Robert Polzin notes, terminology in the parable is vague (facilitating application to many situations), or rare (preventing easy verbal linkages with the Bathsheba affair while suggesting connections further afield).⁷⁵ The parable genre is open-ended, never exactly fitting a situation, always open to different applications.⁷⁶ Indeed, this parable proves paradigmatic, refracting throughout the David story.⁷⁷ We will not, therefore, be constrained to a single mapping. We will see how, in the conversation between parable and context, our lamb is implicated in dynamics of gender and ethnicity.

2.2 *The Lamb between Men and Women*

The most obvious mapping connects the lamb with Bathsheba. The common conceptual linkage between women and domestic animals (noted above) may explain why this metaphor was chosen. The lamb is likened to a daughter (בת), playing on Bathsheba’s name.⁷⁸ She is “taken” (לקח) from the poor man (12:4),

72 This glaring omission led Gunkel (*Folktale*, 55) to conclude “with the greatest certainty” that the parable must have originated in a different context. Daube (“Nathan’s Parable,” 276) speculates that in an earlier version of the narrative, Uriah wasn’t killed; or in an earlier version of the parable, the poor man was.

73 Seminally, Simon, “Ewe-Lamb.”

74 Multiple correspondences are suggested by Berman, “Double Meaning”; Boer, “National Allegory,” 102; Lyke, *Wise Woman*, 145–157; Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 120–130.

75 Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 120–121. The rare words he cites are עשיר; ראש; ארר/הלך; כבשה. The vague term is עשה, which depicts “the crucial action ... what is it that he *does* with the ewe lamb?”

76 Lyke, *Wise Woman*, 146.

77 Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 120–130.

78 If the postulated Vorlage of LXX is followed (see above n. 50), there is a further possible pun on her name in the restitution David suggests: seven (שבע) sheep. So Derby, “Freudian Slip,” 110.

just as Bathsheba is “taken” (לקח) from Uriah (11:4; 12:8–9). Several feminist scholars are outraged by this animalisation. Thus Tod Linafelt laments that “women remain as sheep, possessions to be taken,”⁷⁹ and Regina Schwartz that the crime is “a violation of a property right: Bathsheba is compared to an animal.”⁸⁰ These criticisms, though, depend on a prior assumption: that sheep are “possessions”/“property.” As Carmen Dell’Aversano notes, such treatment provides “the performative apparatus (the language, the techniques, the feelings and emotions, the metaphors and justifications) for the oppression of any category of sentient beings.”⁸¹ The category of “animal” can be strategically applied to other humans, bringing with it this assumed apparatus, to delegitimise them as objects of moral concern.⁸²

The lamb is not only an object, but an edible object, exploited for gustatory pleasure. Bathsheba, similarly, is not only an object, but a sexual object, exploited for erotic pleasure, with eating the lamb figurative for sex with the woman. Indeed, Stone notes that “food and sex are impossible to disentangle” in this text,⁸³ just as Adams finds them entangled in contemporary discourse.⁸⁴ In slaughter and rape, animals and women are reduced to their bodies. Both encounters involve the consumer’s pleasure and excess, viscerality, insides and outsides.⁸⁵ The intersecting dynamics of species and gender give the metaphor its potency.

Women and animals are further entangled in the mechanisms by which they are differentiated from and dominated by the hegemonic male human. Both are excluded from political life and control of the discourse; both are subject to physical mastery and regulation of reproduction; both are “domesticated” (one for husbandry, the other for her husband). Patriarchs negotiate their socio-political power by trafficking such items between households. Particularly important were marriage alliances, whereby a woman, servants, and livestock were transferred from one household to another.⁸⁶

Throughout Samuel, women are acquired for the house of David.⁸⁷ This functions semiotically, communicating David’s personal and political power,

79 Linafelt, “Taking Women,” 108.

80 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 137.

81 Dell’Aversano, “Love,” 98.

82 See further Millar, “Dehumanisation”; Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, 6–8.

83 Stone, *Safer Texts*, 75.

84 Adams, *Sexual Politics*, 50.

85 Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, 61–62.

86 Stone, “Affect,” 26–29.

87 Linafelt, “Taking Women,” 100–101.

“the political transitions figured in the sexual transitions.”⁸⁸ David takes Abigail (1 Sam 25:39), Ahinoam (25:43); Michal (18:21, 27; 2 Sam 3:26), four women in Hebron (3:2–5), even more in Jerusalem (5:13), and of course Bathsheba (11:4). Other men make claims to power through sex with the king’s concubines (3:7; 16:22; 2 Kgs 2:22). David’s sexual conquests stand alongside his military conquests.⁸⁹ Thus, when he defeats the Amalekites, he takes back the captive women⁹⁰—along with “all the flocks and herds,” driven before him to declare his power (1 Sam 30:18–20).⁹¹

The parable may suggest several instances of taking, as hinted by Nathan’s oracle which follows (2 Sam 12:8–12). As though political history is stuck on loop, the parable reruns in distorted figurations.⁹² The rich man’s part is first played by Yahweh, who (according to the oracle) takes the women of Saul’s house and gives them into the poor man David’s “bosom” (קִיץ; 12:8, cf. 12:3). The women’s identities are not specified, but Michal may be implied.⁹³ Indeed, David is “poor” (רָשׁ; 1 Sam 18:23; 2 Sam 12:1, 3, 4) when he acquires Michal, Saul’s “daughter” (בַּת; 1 Sam 18:20, 27, 28; 2 Sam 12:3).⁹⁴ But now Saul plays the rich man, giving the lamb Michal to another man (1 Sam 25:44; 2 Sam 12:4), and showing himself as one who, like the rich man, “spares” (חָמַל) “flocks and herds” (צֹאן וּבָקָר; 1 Sam 15:9, 15; 2 Sam 12:4).⁹⁵ Years later, of course, David plays the rich man to Uriah’s poor man. And now, Nathan’s oracle declares the consequence: the rich man Yahweh will “take” (לָקַח) David’s wives and give them to another man (12:11; cf. 16:22). Strikingly, in these figurations, Yahweh stands

88 Boer, “National Allegory,” 103.

89 Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, 136.

90 From an intersectional perspective, these women’s statuses are determined as much by regional affiliation as by gender (Rey, “Foreign Female Captive”). As residents of Ziklag, they were formerly ruled by Philistine Gath before being transferred to Judah (1 Sam 27:5–6). The Amalekites try to claim them (30:1–2), before David takes them back.

91 Women and animals co-occur as war booty also in Deut 20:14. Animals are taken in this way in 1 Sam 15:9; 23:5; 27:9.

92 Polzin, *Deuteronomist*, 122–130. None of the scenarios described here exactly map onto the parable’s plot line, but all of them hint to it.

93 Michal is clearly signified in the Syriac text, which reads *bnt mrk* “your master’s daughter” instead of מַט’ אֲדֹנָיךְ בֵּית “your master’s house” (followed by, e.g., McCarter, *II Samuel*, 295). Another possibility is Ahinoam, as both Saul (1 Sam 14:50) and David (1 Sam 25:43; 27:3; 30:5) have a wife by this name.

94 Klitsner (“Therapeutic Parable,” 32) argues that the repetition of רָשׁ is “too curious to be anything but intentional intertextual reference.”

95 Klitsner (“Therapeutic Parable”) suggests that David is meant to recognise this situation in the parable, arousing his indignation before the tables are turned against him. Daube (“Nathan’s Parable”) argues that the rich-poor-lamb triad originally figured Saul-David-Michal, and was later reapplied to David-Uriah-Bathsheba.

alongside David and Saul as “the rich man.” Far from condemning the traffic of women and animals, he is complicit within it, overseeing it as a hegemonic power in the image of the patriarch.⁹⁶ The entanglement of gender and species helps to explain how such traffic can go unchallenged.

2.3 *The Lamb between Native and Foreigner*

While a woman is the most obvious referent for the lamb, there is another possibility: Uriah the Hittite.⁹⁷ David initially offers hospitality to Uriah, the foreign traveller from the battlefield, inviting him to “eat” (אכל) (שטה), “drink” (שתה), and “lie” (שכב) (11:11, 13). Uriah, out of loyalty to the Israelite cause, accepts this only reluctantly and partially, refusing to lie with his wife. There is a double irony here, creating sordid and distorted hospitality relations. First, David’s apparent hospitality to the foreign traveller turns out to be an invitation into the position of the lamb, who also “eats” (אכל), “drinks” (שתה), and “lies” (שכב) (12:3). Second, Uriah’s reluctance to adopt this position ironically forces him to adopt the lamb’s fate: because he does not lie with his wife, he is given to foreigners, for the sword of the Ammonites to “eat” (אכל; 11:25). The death of Uriah/the lamb is punished fourfold (12:5, 9–10)—through the deaths of David’s four sons.⁹⁸

How important is Uriah’s ethnicity for this figuration?⁹⁹ Animalising discourse surrounds foreigners as much as women.¹⁰⁰ Thus, in 1 Sam 15, Samuel would “spare” (חמל; 15:3, 9, 15; cf. 2 Sam 12:4) neither livestock nor the foreign king, and he sacrifices the latter in place of an animal (15:33). David likens the Philistine Goliath to a lion or bear ready for slaying (17:36), whose flesh will be thrown to the birds and beasts (17:44). J. W. Wesselius suggests that ethnicity is more significant than gender for establishing the power dynamic of the marriage: as a foreigner, Uriah was “the weaker party,” and thus should play the part of the nonhuman.¹⁰¹ The lamb and foreigner have assimilated into human and Israelite culture respectively, including social structures, practices, and norms. The lamb is classed “with” the sons and partakes in human food (12:3), just as Uriah is “with” the Israelite servants and receives Israelite hospitality

96 Linafelt, “Taking Women,” 105–108; Stone, *Sex*, 104–105; Stone, *Safer Texts*, 73.

97 Berman, “Double Meaning,” 9; Chibaudel, “David et Bethsabée,” 79; Delekat, “Tendenz,” 33; Schipper, “Overinterpret,” 388; Wesselius, “Joab’s Death,” 346–347.

98 Bathsheba’s unborn child (2 Sam 12:18); Amnon (13:29); Absalom (18:15); and Adonijah (1 Kgs 2:25). So Wesselius, “Joab’s Death,” 467 n. 15.

99 See Kim, “Uriah the Hittite” for discussion of Uriah’s ethnicity.

100 Boisseron, *Afro-Dog*; Kim, *Dangerous Crossings*; Jackson, *Becoming Human*.

101 Wesselius, “Joab’s Death,” 346–347 n. 15.

(11:8–13).¹⁰² This assimilation is not complete, though.¹⁰³ The lamb, clearly, does not become human. And despite his fierce loyalty to the Israelite cause (11:11), Uriah is persistently defined by his ethnicity, being called “the Hittite” throughout (11:3, 6, 17, 21, 24; 12:9, 10). This otherness may justify the crimes.

The parable itself, however, does not draw attention to “foreignness.” In this sense, the prime opposition may not be male and female, or Israelite and foreigner, or even human and nonhuman, but the sovereign and everyone else. The non-sovereign parties are easy targets for animalisation, permitting the metaphoric structure of parable, and legitimising crimes against them.

3 An Alliance at the Intersections

Above, I have analysed how the lamb's position is determined by a complex matrix of intersecting power dynamics—species, wealth, gender, ethnicity. Within this matrix, she (along with other powerless groups) is the object of several harmful mechanisms: exploitation, exchange, semiosis, and animalisation. All these mechanisms ignore the agency and individuality of the powerless. In this section, I address a fifth type of relationship—alliance—which can provide a model of ethical relating in face of such oppression.¹⁰⁴ This, I suggest, is evident in the bond between the poor man and the lamb.

The relation described is one of intimacy. The form of the text reflects the partnership's harmony, through the gentle lullaby rock of three concise phrases in syntactic and morphological parallelism: *מפתו תאכל ומכסו תשתה ובחיק תשכב* (“from his morsel she would eat, and from his cup she would drink, and in his bosom she would lie”; 12:3). The language is bodily and intimate, the reader's gaze focalised to the tender details. The relationship has been dismissed as “hyperbolic,”¹⁰⁵ “a little fantastic,”¹⁰⁶ or “unrealistic sentimentality.”¹⁰⁷ However, in light of the evidence of animal ethics elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible,¹⁰⁸ and recent research on animal domestication, it is eminently plausible.

102 For analysis of 2 Sam 11 within the cultural script of Israelite hospitality, see MacDonald, “Hospitality,” 193–194.

103 Kim, “Uriah,” 72–76.

104 On the importance of intersectional alliance in contemporary animal justice movements, see Best, “Rethinking Revolution”; Calarco, “Alliance Politics”; Motilal, “An Alliance.”

105 Morrison, 2 *Samuel*, 151.

106 Alter, *David Story*, 258.

107 Lasine, “Melodrama,” 105.

108 Olyan, “Legal Texts”; Schafer, “Rest”; Shemesh, “Many Beasts.”

The domestication of nonhuman animals has been traditionally read as a story of domination, as solely and inevitably a mechanism for exploitation and exchange.¹⁰⁹ There is another plotline, though, which should be taken seriously: domestication as a practice of care.¹¹⁰ Kristin Armstrong Oma argues that domestication entails an alliance and “social contract” between humans and nonhumans, requiring trust and reciprocity (without negating power imbalances).¹¹¹ The process and practices are profoundly relational, with humans and animals “engaged in mutual decision-making, a co-creation of behaviour, termed a mutual becoming.”¹¹²

Particularly significant was secondary product usage. For Adam Allentuck, this meant that “members of two species came to rely upon each other to the point of inextricable interconnectedness.”¹¹³ Practices like milking require daily intimacy with animals in an atmosphere of care, calm, and trust.¹¹⁴ They entail long-term relationships with individual animals, beyond the age optimal for slaughter. Our parable witnesses the beginning of such a relationship: the ewe has “grown up with” (תגדל עם) the man, and would have several milk-producing years ahead. Equally important was co-habitation. This functioned not only to shelter animals and protect them from external threats, but also “facilitated the notions of trust, care and openness ... constructing space ... where mutual becomings happened.”¹¹⁵ Human-animal interdependency was built into Israelite household architecture, with special space and entryways provided for domestic species.¹¹⁶ Though the locale is not specified, the parable’s intimate language implies co-domesticity.

Animals’ physical space in the house (the בית) suggests their conceptual space in the household (the אב בית), their place within kinship structures. Nerissa Russell sees domestication as “an extension of kinship to other species,” pointing to relationships of intimacy and care.¹¹⁷ Arguably, the conceptualisation of kinship in Israel/Judah included nonhuman life. Thus, after discussing laws co-condemning bestiality and incest, Roland Boer concludes that “the clan went well beyond blood relations,” including “domesticated

109 Ingold, “Trust.”

110 Armstrong Oma, “Making Space.”

111 Armstrong Oma, “Trust.”

112 Armstrong Oma, “Trust,” 179.

113 Allentuck, “Temporalities,” 99.

114 Armstrong Oma, “Trust,” 182.

115 Armstrong Oma, “Trust,” 184; cf. Armstrong Oma, “Making Space.”

116 Pioske, *David’s Jerusalem*, 204–206.

117 Russell, “Domestication,” 35. Russell also highlights other commonalities between domestication and kinship systems: concern for taxonomy and classification; power dynamics controlling the transfer of “property”; regulation of reproduction.

animals of various descriptions.”¹¹⁸ Equally, animals are given rest alongside sons and daughters in the Decalogue’s Sabbath command (Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14). As noted, women and animals were co-circulated between families. The man’s lamb here is given familial status: she grows up “like a daughter” (כבת) “with his sons” (עם בניו; 12:3).

Living together as kin, humans and livestock may have developed relational bonds. Animals can become psychologically attached to humans and vice versa.¹¹⁹ Sheep, for instance, can show preference for their human attachment figure, are distressed when he/she leaves, and use him/her as a secure base for exploration.¹²⁰ Sometimes, a lamb’s attachment to a human even resembles that to a biological mother (particularly if the lamb has no contact with the latter).¹²¹ If we speculate with William McKane that the ewe “was a motherless lamb which [the poor man] had reared artificially,” something like this might be envisaged.¹²² The attachment is strongest when care is given from the lamb’s infancy,¹²³ and continues through the subsequent period.¹²⁴ This may be the case for the poor man’s lamb, which “grew up with him” (ותגדל עמו). In ovine care, two core behaviours are particularly conducive to developing bonds: feeding and handling.¹²⁵ Thus, with imperfect verbs suggesting habitual action, the poor man feeds the lamb from his morsel and cup, and holds her in his bosom (12:3).

The poor man’s relationship with this lamb, then, presents a plausible alliance, and a model of ethical relating. It represents the inception of an alternative society, where the inter-group bonds are not oppressive but extend practices of care. Alliance allows for the interconnected agency of parties and the possibility of mutual flourishing. No longer is it *a priori* lamentable that certain groups are associated with each other (such as women and animals); in the right circumstances, such associations can be celebrated, even emulated.

This hopeful possibility should not obscure the immense structural power of domineering forces. In the parable, the alliance is destroyed by the rich man’s

118 Boer, *Sacred Economy*, 94.

119 John Bowlby’s seminal theory of attachment has been applied to humans attached to animals by Zilcha-Mano et al., “An Attachment,” and to animals (sheep) attached to humans by Nowak and Boivin, “Filial Attachment.”

120 These are Bowlby’s criteria to demonstrate attachment. Nowak and Boivin, “Filial Attachment,” 17–18.

121 Nowak and Boivin, “Filial Attachment,” 20; cf. Markowitz et al., “Early Handling,” 581.

122 McKane, *Samuel*, 233.

123 Nowak and Boivin, “Filial Attachment,” 20; cf. Markowitz et al., “Early Handling.”

124 Boivin et al., “Hand-Feeding.”

125 Boivin et al., “Hand-Feeding”; Markowitz et al., “Early Handling”; Nowak and Boivin, “Filial Attachment,” 19.

desire to feed his guest at the poor man's expense. Nevertheless, the alliance has residual power, provoking a determinative change in David's story. David responds dramatically, condemning the rich man in extreme terms,¹²⁶ not just for economic misdemeanour, but because he "showed no pity" (לֹא חָמַל, 12:6). As sovereign over the mechanisms of domination, he himself had lacked pity for Uriah; now he finds himself pitying the poor man and lamb, extending compassion across wealth and species boundaries.

And strikingly here, animalisation—usually used to legitimise oppression—becomes a tool for ethical revelation. Compassion for the lamb provokes compassion for those whom she signifies—female and foreign. This human-lamb relationship can serve as a model, for (as Carey Wolfe puts it) nonhuman animals present the "hardest case," the "most reliable index" for our relationship with otherness and difference generally.¹²⁷ While, then, alliance may seem to lack power in face of mechanisms for domination, it nonetheless offers glimpses of hope—the possibility for ethics in particular times and places. The implications of these alliances at the intersections may reverberate through the power dynamics which tangle around them.

4 Conclusion

In this article, I have analysed the ewe lamb within the socio-political dynamics of Nathan's parable and its context. I have focalised the intersecting power dynamics which tangle around her (species, wealth, gender, and ethnicity) and the mechanisms by which these dynamics are negotiated (exploitation, exchange, semiosis, animalisation, and alliance). The investigation has had literary, historical, and ethical implications.

It offers several literary insights. While commentators have argued, often based on the lamb, that the parable is fantastical,¹²⁸ this investigation suggests it is realistic. Attention to nonhuman animals helps us understand the wealth differential between the men (12:1–3a), the relationship between the poor man and lamb (12:3b), and the significance of hospitality codes (12:4). It explains why the crime is considered so egregious (12:5). The investigation also illuminates the parable's connection to its context. The symbolism is potent because

126 David calls the rich man a בֶּן מוֹת "son of death." This expression might characterise the man as one who has caused death (Pyper, "David as Reader," 276); whose character is deadly (McCarter, *II Samuel*, 299); and/or is worthy of death (Deut 25:2–3; many commentators and translators).

127 Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, 5.

128 E.g., Coats, "Parable."

of the conceptual link between women and animals, their shared consumable flesh, and their co-circulation between households. The common animalisation of foreigners permits slippage in the metaphor, making Uriah a further plausible referent. When the crime is condemned, David's whole nexus of power play is condemned with it.

The analysis also offers historical insights into the power dynamics and relational mechanisms structuring Israelite/Judahite society. Animals and animalised humans are caught within mechanisms for domination. Domestic animals are exploited for human benefit, with the wealthy establishing estates of flocks and herds (12:2), benefitting from animal labour, produce, and meat. Animals are both workers (alongside humans) and commodities, in the last instance, reduced to consumable flesh (12:4). Their object status and utility value make them important exchange items. Their bodies are gifts within hospitality codes, negotiating dynamics between native and stranger (12:4). Sometimes they are circulated alongside others: servants, land, and women (thus the lamb may figure Bathsheba, Michal, or David's concubines). Such exploitation and exchange can have semiotic function, communicating power, wealth, and masculinity. Offering animal bodies signals the honoured status of gracious host (12:4).

In face of such harm, another mechanism of relating presents itself: alliance. In particular times and places, relationships of care can extend across group boundaries, even species boundaries, such as in the poor man's relationship with the lamb (12:3). While such alliances might seem insignificant when confronting mechanisms for domination, they nonetheless offer an alternative model and patchy hope for ethical relating. If compassion can extend across species lines, this has implications for the whole entangled web of human and nonhuman lives.

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