“WHY DO YOU STILL SPEAK OF YOUR AFFAIRS?”:
POLYPHONY IN MEPHIBOSHETH’S EXCHANGES
WITH DAVID IN 2 SAMUEL*

by

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As David flees Jerusalem in 2 Samuel xvi, Ziba informs him that Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, has remained in Jerusalem in hopes that Saul’s kingdom will be restored to Saul’s house. In response to Mephibosheth’s alleged disloyalty, David gives Ziba Saul’s field, which he had previously promised to Mephibosheth (2 Samuel ix). Yet upon David’s return in 2 Samuel xix, Mephibosheth tells David that Ziba has slandered him and lied to the king. Thus, David revises his decision and divides the field between the two of them. K. McCarter correctly notes that, “It is difficult, perhaps impossible . . . to decide whether Ziba was lying in 16:1-4 or Mephibosheth is lying [in 2 Samuel xix].” Nonetheless, scholars have not shied away from giving an opinion

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H. Hagan argues that the Mephibosheth and Ziba debate reveals the complexity of deception in the Succession Narrative “by giving the reader an unsolved mystery to tease the mind” (“Deception as Motif and Theme in 2 Sm 9-20; 1 Kgs 1-2”, Bib 60 [1979], p. 318). C. Conroy suggests that the narrator’s refusal to come to a clear conclusion is “really a subtle way of showing that both Meribbaal and Ziba deserve the reader’s contempt. The narrator wants the whole House of Saul to be seen in an unfavorable light” (Absalom Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam 13-20 [Rome, 1978], p. 106). George Savran argues: “In the final analysis both reveal their opportunism in the calculated way in which each approaches David—Ziba with gifts (16:1), and Mephibosheth unwashed and unchanged (19:25) and praising David to the heavens (19:31)—so that the ambiguity of their claims makes it somehow appropriate that they would end up as partners” (Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Narrative [Bloomington, 1988], p. 107).

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as to who is the truthful party. They have made arguments based on a wide variety of textual evidence.²

Most scholars argue for Mephiboseth’s sincerity based on his disheveled appearance when meeting David in xix 25.³ “Mephiboseth the grandson of Saul came down to greet the king. He had neither attended to his feet nor his moustache and he had not washed his clothes from the day that the king went until the day that he came in peace.”¹ Yet a few claim that his appearance suggests deception.⁵ P. Ackroyd compares Mephiboseth’s appearance to that of the deceptive Gibeonites in Joshua ix and thus questions his honesty.⁶ Concentrating

⁴ All biblical translations are my own.
⁵ H. Grossmann, Die älteste Geschichtsschreibung und Prophetie Israels (Göttingen, 1910), pp. 180, 183. Writing for a popular audience, J. Kirsch notes parallels between Mephiboseth’s appearance when meeting the king in 2 Samuel xix and David’s outlandish appearance as used to fool the king of Gath in 1 Sam. xxi 14 (King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel [New York, 2000], p. 254). While he argues for Mephiboseth’s loyalty, B. Halpern does note: “[Mephiboseth’s] unkempt appearance, the evidence that he hoped for David’s restoration, might formerly have been presented to Absalom as [Mephiboseth’s] self-abasement in hope of Yahweh’s vengeance on the murderer of his family” (David’s Secret Demons: Messiah, Murder, Traitor, King [Grand Rapids, 2001], p. 50). For other scholars who suggest Ziba was telling the truth, see A. Alt, “Der Anteil des Königtums an der sozialen Entwicklung in den Reichen Israel und Juda” in ibid., Alte Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel (München, 1959), III, p. 358; K. Budde, Die Bücher Samuel (Tübingen, 1902), p. 270; R. de Vaux, Histoire ancienne d’Israel (Paris, 1971), I, p. 208.
⁶ P. Ackroyd, The Second Book of Samuel (Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge, 1977), p. 181. This comparison is striking because Mephiboseth’s characterization parallels that of the Gibeonites in his next appearance in 2 Samuel xxi. Both Mephiboseth and the Gibeonites escape death because of an oath. 2 Sam. xxi 2b reports: “The Gibeonites were not from children of Israel, but a remnant of the Amorites.”