THE LEFT BANK OF THE JORDAN AND THE RITES OF PASSAGE: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF 2 SAMUEL XIX*

by

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Introduction

2 Sam. xix 12-44 [Eng. xix 11-43] describes David’s return to Jerusalem from the eastern side of the Jordan River. Having fled to Mahanaim to escape his son Absalom’s coup in 2 Samuel xv-xvi, and having subsequently won the battle with Absalom and his army of “all Israel” in 2 Samuel xviii, David has once again secured the kingdom, and is prepared to return to his capital Jerusalem. Before he can return, however, he must make arrangements for the journey with the members of his court who have remained behind in Jerusalem. These arrangements consist not only in reestablishing political connections with his former subjects who have been the very ones forming the basis of Absalom’s rebellion, but in placating the surviving political structure of the rebellion, particularly Absalom’s general Amasa (vv. 12-15). Only after David has reclaimed his position atop the hierarchical structure of the kingdom does he make his way toward the river (vv. 16-19a).

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Three episodes characterize the larger pericope of David’s crossing of the Jordan. From the historical critic’s point of view, in which the proper narrative structure should follow a natural progression from east to west, the order of these conversations seems to be jumbled. One expects the following order of David’s meetings: First, David converses with Barzillai on the eastern bank. Barzillai turns down the king’s invitation to reside in Jerusalem, but escorts the king into the river, and after exchanging pleasantries turns back. When the king has crossed the river, the reformed Shimei meets him on the western bank. Later, upon his return to Jerusalem, David’s exchange with Mephibosheth solidifies the king’s confidence in his subject’s loyalty sufficiently so that the monarch returns to Mephibosheth half of his family’s ancestral land. Yet, the text has not been presented in this order. Rather, once David has been met by a contingent of Benjaminites and Judahites at the river, an odd ordering of episodes occurs. In the first position is the conversation with Shimei (2 Sam. xix 19b-24). Next, the structure of the narrative places the chronologically later conversation between David and Mephibosheth (vv. 25-31) before David’s conversation with Barzillai (vv. 32-40). Therefore, David’s encounters with Shimei and Barzillai now form an inclusio surrounding the Mephibosheth episode. From this perspective, the two characters who have appeared the most disloyal to David during the course of Absalom’s revolt—other than Absalom himself, of course—seem to meet David in the middle of the river, before he sets foot back in Cisjordan. The conversation with Mephibosheth concludes in a compromise designed to stem any further hopes of revolt by the House of Saul. Likewise, the

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1 Upon David’s triumphant return from Transjordan, Shimei has apparently thought better of his past behavior (i.e., 2 Sam. xvi 5-8, 13). At the news of David’s imminent return, Shimei hurries down with the people of Judah who are going to Gilgal to “meet the king to bring the king across the Jordan” (2 Sam. xix 16-17).

2 For a discussion of the chronology of the exchanges, particularly the exchange between David and Mephibosheth, see P. K. McCarter, 2 Samuel (AB, 9; Garden City, 1964), p. 424. With the testimony from Mephibosheth it then seems as though Ziba’s presence at the river in 2 Samuel xix is designed more as damage-control to maintain his newfound property than as a sincere outpouring of loyalty to David (e.g., H.-W. Hertzberg, I & II Samuel [OTL; London, 1964], p. 365), but cf. Schipper (“Polyphony,” p. 351).

3 The pericope of the river crossing concludes in vv. 41-44. When the entirety of David’s army has crossed the Jordan, the king finally crosses over in v. 41a. Verses 41-44 detail the confrontation between Israel and Judah on the west bank that leads directly into the revolt of Sheba ben-Bikri in 2 Samuel xx.