

On the meaning of 2Sam 9,1

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"Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul; that I may show him loyal love for Jonathan's sake?" This is a traditional translation of David's words opening a short chapter in which his relations with Meribaal, Saul's grandson, are described at the stage preceding the Abessalom's uprising. Such a translation normally leads to the following conclusions:

(i) 2Sam 9,1 implies that all Saulids, except one, have been destroyed. Therefore, 2Sam 21,1-14 must precede this episode chronologically and both passages form an integral narrative¹.

(ii) Before the conversation with Ziba in 2Sam 9,2-4 David did not know where Mephibosheth was located and even could not be sure whether he existed at all. Hence, 2Sam 21,7 is a gloss that appeared only when a relatively late redactor (allegedly, the Deuteronomist) separated 2Sam 9 from 2Sam 21,1-14².

However, it is hard to believe that David, still maintaining close relations with Jonathan even after the break with Saul (1Sam 23,16-18), did not hear of the Jonathan's son who, at the time of the catastrophe in Gilboa, was five years old (2Sam 4,4). Similarly, it is quite improbable that during the Abessalom's uprising the king would be strongly supported by Barzillay (2Sam 17,27-29) if five of his grandchildren had been executed on a David's personal order (cf. 2Sam 21,8)³. On the other hand, the vocabulary and the syntactic structure of the Saulids' story do not provide definite proofs that 2Sam 21,7 is a gloss. This assumption may only be corroborated by the above general statements⁴.

2Sam 9,1 needs a more attentive reading. David's speech is rendered in this verse by a syntactic complex consisting of two phrases, one in *hky* and the other in *w-*. The habitual translation treats the first phrase as a general question related to the predicate (*Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul?*) while the second one is understood as an objective clause (so that I may show him loyal love for Jonathan's sake). As a whole, the sentence is seen as an alternative question that can be answered with "yes" or "no".

¹Some objections see in H. P. SMITH, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*. Edinburgh, 1899, pp. 311-312; D. M. GUNN, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 6, Sheffield, 1978, pp. 68-69.

²Cf. P.K. McCARTER, *II Samuel*, New York, 1984, p. 442.

³H.W. HERTZBERG, *I and II Samuel*. London, 1964, p. 384 claims that Barzillay of 2Sam 21,8 is not identical with Barzillay in 2Sam 17 and 19. However, this view is not corroborated by any evidence at all.

⁴Page T. VEIJOLA, *Die ewige Dynastie. David und die Entstehung seiner Dynastie nach der deuteronomistischen Darstellung*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae B* 193, Helsinki, 1975, p. 108.

In the Bible the same construction (*hky A w-B*) is registered two more times, in Gen 27,36:

hky qr' šmw y'qb
w-y'qbn y zh p'mym

and in Gen 29,15:

hky 'hy 'th
w-^cbdtny hnm

If we try to interpret these passages according to the pattern applied to 2Sam 9,1, the resulting translations will be quite nonsensical: in Gen 27,36 Esau inquires whether his brother is called Jacob while in Gen 29,15 Laban is eager to know if Jacob is his relative. Apparently, *hky* introduces questions aimed at the subordinate clause, i.e. at the purpose of action, not the action itself: "Was he called Jacob so that he would supplant me these two times?" and "Are you my brother so that you would serve me for nothing?" Both questions are rhetoric and imply a negative response.

2Sam 9,1 should get a similar interpretation. David was certainly aware of the fact that the former dynasty had not been destroyed completely. His future relations with Saulids were of great importance for him. His oaths sworn to Jonathan (1Sam 20,14-16) and Saul (1Sam 24,21-22) prevented David from any aggression against the house of Saul. On the other hand, its influence had to be limited. 2Sam 9,1 registers a stage at which David starts to look for a solution: "Does [one] of the Saul's house remain so that I will show it [sc. house of Saul] loyal love for Jonathan's sake?" If *'mw* in this sentence refers to *byt š'wl*, this sentence may be understood as a description of the starting conditions for a future political manoeuvre, a kind of exposé based on a contrast between the house of Saul and "one more" Saulid well-known to David⁵, a man whose very existence allowed the king not to "show loyal love" to the men of the former dynasty.

This Saulid is, obviously, Meribaal. It is generally believed that his physical defect prevented him from pretending to the throne⁶ but, as it becomes clear from 2Sam 16,3-4, David was of a different opinion. In any case, it is quite probable that Meribaal followed his father's course (see 1Sam 23,17) and supported David's claim for power. This is also corroborated by Mephiboshet's behavior during the Abessalom's revolt, behavior that seems to be a political demonstration in support of the monarch (cf. 2Sam 19,25), and also by his admittance of his family's guilt before the king in 2Sam 19,29. In any case, Meribaal the only Jonathan's son and the single Saul's patrilinear heir, presented no danger to David and thus allowed him to carry out the manoeuvre first sketched in 2Sam 9,1. Without confiscating Saul's lands, the pledge of success, David passed them to Mephibosheth, i.e. under control of his protégé Ziba⁷. Thus, David spared the letter of the law as it was established in his covenants with Jonathan and Saul but, on the other hand, he left Saulids helpless and powerless. Even at the time of the Abessalom's revolt they limited themselves to a war of words (see 2Sam 16,5-13). Therefore, the Massoretic text preserves the only correct sequence of episodes: 2Sam 9 must be followed by 2Sam 21,1-14.

⁵As his question to Ziba implies a positive answer.

⁶See P.K.McCARTER, *Op. cit.*, p. 265.

⁷Z. BEN-BARAK, *Meribaal and the System of Land Grants in Ancient Israel*, *Biblical* 62, 1968, p. 78 stresses that "the story begins with the fact that Saul's lands are in the hands of David". But the text does not corroborate this statement. If David promises "to return" lands to Meribaal it does not mean that they belong to the king.