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**GEORGE SAVRAN,
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MULTIVOCALITY IN GROUP SPEECH IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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The conventions of group speech in biblical narrative are such that the group usually speaks with a single voice, as if one individual comes to speak on behalf of the entire group. This is the normal state of affairs when the people speak to Moses, or when the Gibeonites address Joshua in Joshua 9, but it is true of smaller groups as well. Thus the midwives in Exodus speak as one to Pharaoh, and the daughters of Zelophehad speak to Moses in unison, even though we are told their individual names. This norm is in keeping with the rule of two to a scene, a basic folkloric rule attributed to Axel Olrik, which maintains that the basic unit of interaction in early narrative is dialogue and interaction between two figures at a time.¹ For example, in Genesis 34 the dialogue alternates primarily between Jacob/his sons and Shechem/Hamor. At times the brothers or the father speak, but not to each other.² Only in the last scene does Jacob speak directly with Simeon and Levi in order to confront them (but only after Shechem and Hamor have ceased to exist). In order to minimize the possibility of more than two characters to a scene, the narrator tends to assign all group speech to a simple *וַיֹּאמְרוּ* or to *וַיֹּאמֶר אִישׁ אֶל אַחֵיו* / *וַיֹּאמֶר אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ*, and the group is treated as a single character.

On occasion, however, we do find explicit mention of distinct subgroups, as in Nehemiah 5, where each voice of protest is introduced by the phrase *וַיֹּשֶׁר אֲשֶׁר אָמְרִים*.³

¹ Cf. "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative" in A. Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 134–135. See also R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1981), 72; S. Talmon, *The Ways of Biblical Narrative* (Jerusalem: Academion, 1965), 23–25 (Hebrew).

² The single exception is Gen 34:4, where Shechem speaks directly to Hamor. See the discussion of the chapter in M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), 445–475.

³ It was suggested by an anonymous reader that the use of this phrase reflects the breakdown of earlier biblical style in Late Biblical Hebrew, and may thus explain the formulaic introduction of each clause.

1 וְתָהִי צַעֲקַת הָעָם וְנִשְׁיָהֶם גְּדוֹלָה אֶל־אֲחֵיהֶם הַיְהוּדִים:
 2 וַיֵּשׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמְרִים בְּנֵינוּ וּבָנֹתֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ רַבִּים וְנִקְחָה דָגָן
 וְנֹאכְלָה וְנִחְיָה:
 3 וַיֵּשׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמְרִים שְׂדֵתֵינוּ וּכְרָמֵינוּ וּבְתֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ עֲרֵבִים
 וְנִקְחָה דָגָן בְּרָעֵב:
 4 וַיֵּשׁ אֲשֶׁר אָמְרִים לוֹיְנוּ כֶסֶף לְמִדַּת הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׂדֵתֵינוּ וּכְרָמֵינוּ:

There was a great outcry by the common folk and their wives against their brother Jews.

Some said: “Our sons and daughters are numerous; we must get grain to eat in order that we may live.”

Some said: “Our fields, our vineyards and our homes we must pawn to get grain to stave off hunger.”

Some said: “We have borrowed money against our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax.”

Here the narrator keeps the speakers anonymous while preserving the multivocality of the people’s complaints.⁴

Similarly infrequent are situations in which the different groups are all present in the same scene but take turns speaking in order to create a complex set of interactions, as in Jeremiah’s trial in Jeremiah 26. We first encounter two main speakers: Jeremiah and everyone else. Only in v 11 does “everyone” begin to subdivide: the priests and the prophets address the **שרים**, who seem to act as judges in the trial. Here each speaker uses the **שרים** as a foil. They are addressed first by the priests and the prophets in 26:11, then by Jeremiah in 26:12–15. The complex dynamic of the trial scene is developed further as the priests and the prophets are addressed by the **שרים** and “by all the people” in v 16, followed by a group of elders who address the entire people in vv 17–19. The effect achieved is of an intricate situation whereby Jeremiah is at

⁴ Talmon, *Biblical Narrative*, 46; H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 237. Talmon further notes how the separate voices in vv 2–4 contrast with v 5, where the different groups seem to coalesce into a jumble of voices protesting at the same time:

(A) Now our flesh is as good as the flesh of our brothers, and our children as good as theirs.

(B) Yet here we are subjecting our sons and daughters to slavery.

(C) Some of our daughters are already subjected and we are powerless.

(D) Our fields and vineyards belong to others.

Notice how much longer the speech in v 5 is relative to the voices in vv 2–4, and how clearly it divides into separate voices. We can hear the repetition of some of the complaints from vv 1–4, but the separation of the voices has been lost in the mix of voices from the crowd. We will note a similar strategy in our treatment of Jonah 1:8 below.

first attacked by all sides but eventually garners enough support from certain groups to survive the trial.⁵

Another type of multivocality may be found in Exod 17:2–4, where the medieval commentator Ibn Ezra suggested that two discrete complaints, attributed in two separate verses to “the people,” reflect the speech of two distinct groups.⁶ The first group complains that they have no water, while the second cries that they have been brought out to the desert to die. Ibn Ezra’s suggestion is certainly possible, since, as he notes, both 17:2 and 17:3 cite the people as the source of the complaint, but the text does not specify *all* the people. At the same time it is equally possible (even preferable) that the two separate speeches reflect a strategy of intensification. The people offer a legitimate complaint in 17:2, “Give us water to drink,” as verified by the narrator in 17:1. Moses’ angry response, “Why do you try the Lord?,” leads to more general dissatisfaction which the people express in 17:4 “Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”⁷

The exegetical principle of assigning sections of a speech to different voices is not new, and can be seen already in the midrash, albeit with a different focus than we are proposing here.⁸ Thus the *Mekhilta* on Exod 14:11–13 divides a long complaint speech by the Israelites into separate speeches by four distinct groups.⁹ In this case the biblical text does not quite match up with the four groups. The Israelites may be afraid of dying, but no one mentions the alternatives suggested in the midrash, either diving into the sea or turning to fight the Egyptians. The midrash is derived from Moses’ response in v 13, reading different parts of it as if they were spoken to different groups. The people’s speech in vv 11–12 gives the

⁵ See the thorough discussion of the chapter in J. Lundbom, *Jeremiah* 21–36, (AB, 21A; New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004), 283–301; G. Brin, *The Prophet in his Struggles* (Israel: University Press of Israel, 1983), 33–82 (Hebrew). On the place of Jer 26:20–24 within the chapter see Lundbom, 285.

⁶ Ibn Ezra at Exod 17:2. My thanks to David Frankel for bringing this interpretation to my attention.

⁷ William Propp [*Exodus 1–18* (AB, 2; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 604–5] describes a similar sense of intensification, where the people crave water in anticipation in 17:2, but their thirst is not mentioned until v 3: “The people’s renewed complaint arises from actual discomfort.” See also the discussion of this dynamic in N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem: WZO, 1981), 273–277.

⁸ On the principle and the techniques involved see Y. Heinemann, *Darkhei Ha’Aggadab* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1970), 131–136 (Hebrew).

⁹ *Mek.* Beshalah 2; see also *y. Ta’an.* 65d; *Tg. Neophyti* to Exod 14:13–14; Philo, *Vita Moses* 2:249; Pseudo-Philo 10:3–5. See the discussion of the *Mekhilta* text in Y. Frankel, *Midrash and Aggadab* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1996) vol. 1, 150–52 (Hebrew).

impression of a single speaker. There are no conflicting viewpoints, no surplus of information, and the parts of the speech connect up together very clearly.¹⁰ But the midrash prefers to discern multiple voices in the text, conveying a sense of conflicting responses to their situation.

ארבע כתות נעשו ישראל על הים
 אחת אומרת ליפול אל הים.
 ואחת אומרת לשוב למצרים.
 ואחת אומרת לעשות מלחמה כנגדן.
 ואחת אומרת נצווה כנגדן.
 זאת שאמרה ליפול אל הים נאמר להם "התיצבו וראו את
 ישועת ה'!"
 זו שאמרה לשוב למצרים נאמר להם "כי אשר ראיתם את
 מצרים."
 זו שאמרה נעשה מלחמה כנגדן נאמר להם "ה' ילחם לכם"
 זו שאמרה נצווה כנגדן נאמר להם "ואתם תחרישון."

The Israelites at the Red Sea were divided into four groups.

One group said: Let us throw ourselves into the sea.

One said: Let us return to Egypt

One said: Let us fight them.

One said: Let us cry out against them.

The one that said 'Let us throw ourselves into the sea' was told:

"Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord" (Exod 14:13).

The one that said 'Let us return to Egypt' was told:

"For whereas you have seen the Egyptians today..." (Exod 14:13).

The one that said: 'Let us fight them' was told:

"The Lord will fight for you" (Exod 14:14).

The one that said: 'Let us cry out against them' was told:

"And you shall hold your peace" (Exod 14:14).

Where the biblical text has the Israelites address Moses in a single long speech— itself a dramatic set piece—the midrash uses multiple voices to convey the chaotic situation of Israel about to be recaptured by the Egyptians. The midrash clearly rewrites the biblical text in a way that reflects 2nd temple responses to attack by an enemy; nowhere in the Bible would we find the Israelites throwing themselves into the sea, while martyrdom was an acceptable alter-

⁷ David Frankel has pointed out that the speech of the Israelites here divides clearly into separable segments, and is thus a good candidate for multivocal speech (private communication). While this is clearly the case, the entire speech makes a single, unified argument: "Would that you had let us remain slaves in Egypt." The speech lacks the sense of diverse voices representing different viewpoints which is common to the examples which follow.

native to capture by the enemy in 2nd temple times.¹¹ In the eyes of the midrash, the divisive reactions of the various groups are countered by words of Torah, which provide the correct response to every objection. The division into voices functions less as a dramatic device to illuminate the distress of the Israelites and more as a foil for Moses' words about faith in God. Most often, when the midrash engages in this sort of creative rereading, the results diverge from the plain sense of the text, which is our primary concern in the following examples.¹²

I

Occasionally, there are places where, despite the absence of any textual marker to indicate overt divisions, it is desirable to divide the group speech into multiple voices. The most famous case is 1 Sam 9:11–13, where Saul, looking for a seer to help him locate his father's lost asses, asks a group of women at a local well: "Is there a seer here?" Surprisingly, this simple question (a 'yes' or a 'no' is all that is required) is answered at great length by the whole group.

12–13 וַתַּעֲנִינָה אֹתוֹם וַתֹּאמְרָנָה
 יֵשׁ הִנֵּה לְפָנֶיךָ מֵהָרֵן עֵתָה כִּי הַיּוֹם בָּא
 לְעִיר כִּי יָבֹחַ הַיּוֹם לְעַם בְּבִמְתָּה:
 כִּבְאֲכֶם הָעִיר כִּן תִּמְצְאוּן אֹתוֹ בְּטָרִם יַעֲלֶה הַבְּמִתָּה
 לֶאֱכֹל כִּי לֹא יֵאֱכַל הָעַם עַד־בָּאוּ בִי־הוּא יְבָרֵךְ הַיָּבֹחַ
 אַחֲרֵי־כֵן יֵאֱכְלוּ הַקְּרָאִים וְעַתָּה עֲלוּ כִּי־אֵתֶן כֶּהַיּוֹם
 תִּמְצְאוּן אֹתוֹ:

(12) Yes, he is up there ahead of you. Hurry, for he has just come to the town because the people have a sacrifice at the shrine today. (13) As soon as you enter the town you will find him before he goes up to the shrine to eat. The people will not eat until he comes. He must first bless the sacrifice and only then will the guests eat. Go up at once, for you will find him right away.

The contrast between Saul's laconic question and the girls' verbosity virtually begs for attention.¹³ The content of their speech is indeed relevant to Saul's situation. There will be a sacrifice this

¹¹ W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967, but see the response of D. Boyarin, *Dying For God* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), 90–130.

¹² We can see a similar dynamic at work in other midrashim of this type. In t. Sotah chapter 9 we are presented with a number of cases (e.g., Gen 38:25–26; Judg 5:28–31) in which the division into human voices culminates in the emergence of a divine voice which resolves the situation. By contrast, the example drawn from 1 Sam 4:8–9 seems to accurately represent the multiple voices present in the biblical text.

¹³ R. Alter (*Biblical Narrative*, 72–75) labels this phenomenon "contrastive dialogue" and notes its importance in describing nuances of character.

day, and Saul will be invited to take part in the meal. But Aharon Mirsky and others have noticed that this speech best makes sense if we divide it up into multiple voices.¹⁴

- Yes, he is up there ahead of you.
- Hurry, for he has just come to the town
- Because the people have a sacrifice at the shrine today.
- As soon as you enter the town you will find him, before
he goes up to the shrine to eat.
- The people will not eat until he comes.
- He must first bless the sacrifice and only then will the
guests eat.
- Go up at once, for you will find him right away.

It is not simply the length of their reply which is surprising, but also the quantity of information conveyed, its limited relevance to the situation, and the loose connections between the various sentences. Despite its overall concern with the seer and the sacrifice, the many disparate parts of the speech do not blend into a harmonious whole.¹⁵ The information about the sacrifice may be relevant to Saul's future status and to the events later in the chapter, but it has little immediate significance here, for Saul's interest in Samuel is in his role as seer, not as priest. The speech highlights the adolescent girls' fascination with the great Saul, who literally stands head and shoulders above everyone else. Given that the well is the standard location for courtship in the Bible, a romantic subtext suggests that each girl wants to add her few words in order to speak to their collective heartthrob. The idea is not new, and is present already in the midrash:¹⁶

מלמד שהיו מביטות בנויו של שאול ולא היו שבעות ממנו

“They could not get enough of staring at Saul's beauty.”

Dividing the speech up into voices is, however, a modern interpretation which emphasizes the dramatic potential of the situation.¹⁷

¹⁴ A. Mirsky, “Colloquial Language in the Bible,” *Sefer Zeidel*, ed. A. Elinar et. al., (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1962), 290–293 (Hebrew). Mirsky himself attributes this interpretation to F. Meltzer. Cf. also Talmon, *Biblical Narrative*, 47; S. Bar Efrat, *I Samuel* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), 139 (Hebrew); Y. Keel, *I Samuel*, (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1981), 82 (Hebrew).

¹⁵ J.P. Fokkelmann, *Vow and Desire: Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), 391, finds an interesting chiasmic pattern in these verses, but this type of artistry is effective only on the level of discourse. On the level of the story itself the separate speeches simply do not fit together well. On the distinction between discourse and story see G. Savran, *Telling and Retelling* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988), 12–17.

¹⁶ *Midrash Shmuel* 13

¹⁷ An alternative opinion offered by the same midrashic source sees

Here we can specify a number of criteria for identifying multi-vocal group speech: First, the contrast between the question and its response draws attention to the longer speech and raises the possibility of multiple speakers. This phenomenon of contrastive dialogue is not uncommon in biblical narrative, and it functions here to highlight the opposition between the individual to the group in an unusual way.¹⁸ Second, the disjointed style of the speech further encourages the sense that multiple speakers are active here.¹⁹ Frank Polak has noted the stylistic preference for short independent sentences in direct speech in biblical narrative.²⁰ This style is particularly conducive to speeches with multiple voices, where the individual speech units can be recognized quite easily. Finally, the speech is contextualized in a situation in which multivocality is desirable, for it adds a significant dramatic element to the story; for the first time we are aware of other characters observing Saul, and are aware of the powerful effect his presence has upon them. Up to this point Saul has been observed only by the reader, and the contrast with his servant does not speak well for the future leader of Israel.²¹ But what we see here in the eyes of these women is admiration, respect, and desire. Saul is gazed upon with approval, even veneration.²² From this point on, the phenomenon of Saul observed by others will be repeated a number of times in this pericope, the most famous of which describes Saul acting the prophet, followed by the amazed response of the people, “Is Saul too among the prophets?”

II

In the Joseph story the brothers are usually portrayed as speaking with a single voice, but in a number of places it seems quite reasonable to divide their words into multiple voices.

the extended speech of the girls as divinely intended; Saul’s arrival had to be delayed in keeping with 9:16: “At this time tomorrow I will send you a man.”

¹⁸ Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 72–75; Talmon, *Biblical Narrative*, 49; Mirsky, “Colloquial Speech,” 291.

¹⁹ A. Hurvitz, “Ruth 2:7 – A Midrashic Gloss?,” *ZAW* 95 (1983), 122; G. Rendsburg, “Confused Language as a Deliberate Literary Device in Biblical Narrative,” *JHS* 2 (1999), 3.

²⁰ F.H. Polak, “The Style of the Dialogue in Biblical Prose Narrative,” *JANES* 28 (2002), 53–95.

²¹ Saul is prepared to give up the chase and return home, but it is his armor bearer who demonstrates the necessary initiative, first by suggesting a visit to the seer, and then by discovering money for payment in his cloak. Cf. Fokkeman, *Vow and Desire*, 378; R. Alter, *The David Story* (New York: NY: W.W. Norton, 1999), 47–48.

²² Rendsburg, “Confused Language,” 3; R. Gilmour, “Suspense and Anticipation in 1 Sam 9:1–14,” *JHS* 9, 13; M. Buber, “The Narrative of Saul’s Rise to Kingship,” *Darkeho Shel Miqra* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1978), 190 (Hebrew).

Genesis 37:19–20

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו

19 They said to one another

הֲנֵה בֹעַל הַחֲלֻמוֹת הַלְזָה בָּא (A)

(A) Here comes that dreamer!

וַעֲתָה לָכֹוּ וְנַהַרְגֶהוּ (B)

20 (B) Let us kill him!

וְנִשְׁלַכְהוּ²³ בְּאַחַד הַבְּרוֹת (C)

(C) Or let's throw him into one of the pits.

וַאֲמַרְנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלְתָהּ (D)

(D) We can say 'A savage beast devoured him'.

וְנִרְאָה מַה-יְהִי חֲלֻמֹתָיו: (A)

(A) We shall see what becomes of his dreams.

The key to understanding the speech are the introductory words of v 18, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו, an expression which is used consistently to describe a process of discussion, often focused around a question. In most cases the actual argumentation is not preserved, but the parameters of the discussion are indicated by the context.²⁴ In this case it seems that the brothers are uncertain as to how to deal with Joseph. The brothers clearly detest Joseph for his dreams and his presumptuousness, but it is a big step from hatred to murder. For all the brotherly conflict in Genesis, nothing exactly like this has taken place earlier in the book, at least since the story

²³ The *waw* at the beginning of the word can be understood as ditto-graphy from the previous word, or as “or” – cf. *HALOT* s.v. ן #6

²⁴ Wherever this phrase occurs there is evidence of actual deliberation or argumentation. In Gen 11:3 the phrase precedes the statement about what the generation of the tower wishes to do to anchor itself in one place, clearly an issue which required deliberation before coming to the conclusion reflected in the present text. In Gen 42:21 (to be discussed below) the brothers deliberate on the cause of their present plight. In Gen 42:28 further ruminations are reflected in a question, “What’s this?” (referring to the appearance of their money in their bags), and an answer, “God has done this to us!” (cf. Tg. Onkelos; n. 35 below). Exod 16:15 indicates a melding of question and answer with the words מִן הוּא, meaning both “what is it?” as well as “it is manna” (U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 135; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 536). The call to return to Egypt in Num 14:4 marks the conclusion reached by the people after much lamenting and complaining in 14:1–3. Judg 6:29 describes the confusion and questioning created by Gideon’s actions, and Judg 10:18 conveys the question raised by the ascendancy of the Ammonites over Gilead. Likewise, Jonah 1:7 (see below) presents the conclusion of the sailors’ deliberations about the cause of the storm which has suddenly enveloped them. Most exceptional is the occurrence of the phrase three times in 2 Kgs 7:3, 6, 9, describing the conclusions of the lepers (vv 3, 9) and the Arameans (v. 6) regarding their various plights. Cf. also the following situations: Gen 43:33 (surprise); 1 Sam 10:11 (question); Jer 22:8 (question); 23:35 (question); 36:16 (question).

of Cain and Abel. The process whereby they move from uncertainty to a decision to do him serious bodily harm is described in the group speech of vv 19–20. The idea to kill Joseph is first raised by one of the brothers, then is countered by the idea of throwing him into a pit, and gradually takes shape in the continuation of their dialogue. When we read this speech as an amalgam of separate voices, we can discern the outlines of the group dynamic which takes hold of the brothers. We may be accustomed to reading the speech as a single thought, but the various parts of the speech do not necessarily flow directly from one another, but require a number of unspoken assumptions to create a continuous speech. Here we see another indication of multiple voices, as each one responds to the previous voice and speaks in its own interest.

When voice (A) spies Joseph approaching, his very presence is sufficient to excite their hatred. They begin to talk about him, recalling his presumptuous dreams and resenting his intrusion into their group.²⁵ They may fear that he has come to assert his authority over them (as in his dreams) or to inform upon them to their father.²⁶ What follows in voice (B) is hardly a direct conclusion from (A) but likely one of a number of suggestions about how to deal with him. Joseph's dreams are about control; if the brothers want to annul his dreams, then we would expect some action which would be a measure-for-measure reversal of his dreams. But murder? Voice (B) puts forth a truly radical suggestion, but it cannot be the only one suggested. Nonetheless, the idea of solving their problem by doing away with Joseph is, for all its violence, attractive because it offers a quick solution and an immediate release of their anger. The suggestion "Let us kill him" is voiced in the jussive, serving as an invitation to the rest to join in. I take this to mean "let us kill him with our bare hands," not just cause his death indirectly. Voice (C) is taken by the idea, but offers an "improvement" on it, "We'll throw him into a pit."²⁷ The idea of foiling Joseph's dreams of control by rendering him powerless is more in keeping with the measure-for-measure principle which governs much of biblical retribution. Rather than kill him with their bare hands, (C) suggests a less conclusive option: either punishment, abandonment, or indirect causation of his death. This position is taken up by Reuben in

²⁵ Throughout Genesis 37 Joseph is continuously set apart from the rest of his brothers.

²⁶ Sforno, *ad loc*, builds upon the brothers' resentment of an assumed alliance between Jacob and Joseph; note in particular 37:14; "Go and see how your brothers are...and bring back word to me."

²⁷ Cf. above n. 19. Throwing Joseph into a pit is usually seen as a continuation of the plan to kill Joseph; thus Ishmael, the son of Netaniah, disposes of his victims in Jer 41:9. But the pit is multivalent: elsewhere in Jeremiah we see that the pit (בֹּר) functions as a place of detention from which one can be rescued—Jer 38:13, as well as Joseph's own experience in 41:14. Cf. further Exod 12:29; Zech 9:11.

his argument in v 22, where he opposes the brothers' plan with the phrase *לֹא נִכְנוּ נֶפֶשׁ*, "let's not kill him" but rather cast him into a pit.²⁸ This can only mean that while some of the brothers *did* intend to kill Joseph then and there, others were less certain.

Regardless of which means of dealing with Joseph they would decide on, voice (D) broaches a new issue, namely how will they explain this to Jacob. One can imagine an entire range of objections in the face of this new dilemma. The solution implied by "We will say 'A wild animal killed him,'" indicates a further stage in the development of their plan, to the point of finding a way to cover their tracks. This assumes further discussion of the issue, for voice (D) requires that all the brothers agree to say the same thing to their father, a plan that demands consultation and agreement.²⁹ (In this sense (C) and (D) may go together, even though I have marked them as separate voices.) At the end of the speech, voice (A) speaks again, rounding out the process which he began by mentioning Joseph's dreams.³⁰ Reuben's interjection in vv 22–23 takes advantage of this division in the brothers' plans, as he lobbies for throwing Joseph into a pit instead of killing him outright. When Joseph finally arrives in v 24 we see the brothers adopting a compromise position, violently attacking Joseph and stripping off his cloak, but heaving him into a pit instead of killing him outright. Thus they do not go along with voice (B), but instead follow voice (C). We should not mistake this action for tenderness—the absence of water in the pit can only mean that Joseph would not have held out for very long.

The speech here reveals the process by which the group moves toward a decision. The idea of killing Joseph may be outrageous when first suggested, but once the brothers settle upon a way to cover themselves before their father, the plan takes shape and becomes real. The advantage of this reading is in its emphasis upon

²⁸ The relationship between the brothers' speech in 37:19–20 and Reuben's speech in vv 21–22 is a classic crux; see, for example, A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 118–119; G. Coats, *From Canaan to Egypt*, (CBQMS, 4; Washington D.C., 1976), 16. Ed Greenstein suggests that the ostensible contradiction between the brothers' plan in v 21 and Reuben's suggestion in v 22 can be resolved by seeing v 21 as ambiguous about the brothers' intentions ("An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph – A Revised Reading" (forthcoming). Our suggestion solves the problem by embracing ambiguity from another direction. The presence of multiple voices in v 21 indicates that the brothers are indeed of (at least) two minds about how to deal with Joseph.

²⁹ Cf. Bekhor Shor on 37:20.

³⁰ The separate quality of this line was recognized by the midrash; according to Gen. Rab. 84:13, it is recited by a voice from heaven. Cf. Y. Frankel, *Darkei Ha'Aggadah VeHamidrash* (Givatayim: Yad LeTalmud, 1991), 150 (Hebrew).

the dramatic element of the story. The traditional reading of the story allows for only a few paradigmatic figures—Reuben and Judah—who speak for the group. By highlighting the presence of different opinions among the brothers, we can see them as a dynamic group, angry, murderous, yet capable of reasoning and disagreeing with one another. This is made more explicit later on in the chapter as first Reuben, then Judah, take positions which build upon the disagreements voiced in vv 19–20. Moreover, the fact that the brothers are of at least two minds about killing Joseph leaves open the possibility for their repentance in the continuation of the story.

Genesis 42:10–11

A second instance is found in the brothers' speech to Joseph in Gen 42:10–11. In contrast to their univocal speech in 42:7, where they present themselves clearly, (“[We have come] from the land of Canaan, to procure food”), here the brothers are caught off guard by Joseph's hostility, and offer a number of different explanations for their presence in Egypt.

		וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו	
10	They said to him		
	(A) No my lord!	לֹא אֲדֹנָי	(A)
	(B) Your servants have come to procure food.	וְעַבְדֶּיךָ בָּאוּ לְשִׁבְר־אֶכָּל	(B)
	(C) We are all of sons of the same man.	כָּלֵנוּ בְּנֵי אִישׁ־אֶחָד נָחֵנוּ	(C)
11	(D) We are honest men.	כְּנִים אֲנַחְנוּ	(D)
	(E) Your servants have never been spies.	לֹא־הָיוּ עַבְדֶּיךָ מְרַגְלִים	(E)

One can sense the anxiety of their response in the disorder of the sentences, and in the overabundance of information which they present. The speech is composed of five short, discrete sentences, not unlike what we saw in 1 Sam 9:11–12. Voice (A) begins forcefully with a simple denial, and voice (B) offers the explanation that, like everyone else waiting in line, they've come to Egypt to get food.³¹ But voice (C) adds the superfluous detail that they are all members of the same family, as if this would convince Joseph that they're not spies. This is a classic case of saying too much, a revelation which will only get the brothers in deeper trouble as the story progresses.³² The urgency of voice (D), saying “Really, we're not

31 Radak on 42:10 understands the *waw* in *וְעַבְדֶּיךָ* as “but,” emphasizing the urgency of the reply to Joseph's accusation

32 Jacob himself raises this point in 43:6: “Why did you create more

lying,” is a purely emotional response, unconnected to the rational aspects of some of the other voices. While (A) and (B) connect together logically, each of the other responses has little direct connection with the previous voice. The statement that they are not spies (E) comes to counter Joseph’s accusation in v 9. But why should this come at the end of the brothers’ speech, when in fact it is Joseph’s initial (and most damaging) accusation? The answer may well be that we have here five independent responses all spoken at once, a cacophony of voices reflecting the brothers’ confusion and distress.

This becomes clearer when we compare this speech with the more ordered response of the brothers in 42:13. By this time the brothers have collected themselves and made a more consistent speech focused entirely upon their blood relations:

They said	וַיֹּאמְרוּ
We your servants were twelve brothers	שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר עֲבָדֶיךָ אֲחִים אֲנַחְנוּ
sons of a certain man in Canaan.	בְּנֵי אִישׁ־אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן
The youngest, however, is now with our father	וְהַיָּהוּדָה הַקָּטָן אֶת־אָבִינוּ הַיּוֹם
and one is no more	וְהָאֶחָד אֵינְנוּ

The sentences are longer and more interconnected, as they give a complete picture of their family situation—ten are present in Egypt, one is at home with his father, and one has gone missing. There are no anxious protestations of innocence, only a clear portrait of their family history, yet their anxiety is still noticeable in presenting more information than is necessary. Nonetheless we can see here a single voice projected in the speech.³³

Both of these speeches have been reworked and combined in retelling the events to Jacob in 42:31–32. Here the brothers are in complete control of the narrative voice. They first recount their denial, and then, to support their claim of honesty, relate the family history. Here we see an even more composed univocal voice.³⁴

42:31 וַנֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו כְּנִים אֲנַחְנוּ לֹא הָיִינוּ מְרֻגְלִים:

We are honest men; we have never been spies.

42:32 שְׁנַיִם־עָשָׂר אֲנַחְנוּ אֲחִים בְּנֵי אָבִינוּ הָאֶחָד אֵינְנוּ

There were twelve of us brothers, sons by the same father, but one is no more,

וְהַקָּטָן הַיּוֹם אֶת־אָבִינוּ בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

trouble for me by telling the man that you have yet another brother?” See, for example, the attempts by Ramban to explain the brothers’ reasoning here.

³³ At most one might argue for a distinction between 42:13a and 13b, where 13a describes the family structure, and 13b supplements it with an explanation as to why there only ten brothers are present.

³⁴ See my discussion of this last speech in *Telling and Retelling*, 43–44.

And the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.

The contrast between these last two speeches and the brothers' responses in 42:10–11 heightens the sense of disorder in the first speech, and shows how the narrator's portrayal of the brothers moves from showing their distress to displaying their attempt to regain control when speaking to their father.

Genesis 42:21

A third example of the brothers in dialogue can be seen in 42:21, which is also introduced by **וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו**. The brothers have been thrown in jail by Joseph, and we are allowed to witness a rare moment of regret and self-evaluation, something which has been absent from the portrayal of the brothers up to now. The narrator has withheld this inner portrait of the brothers' state of mind until this moment, for only now does he begins to develop the change in attitude which overtakes the brothers in chapters 42–44. This speech is the beginning of his attempt to direct the reader's sympathies toward the brothers in order to show that they were not entirely without feelings or conscience.

Their confessional speech begins (42:21) with an admission of guilt prompted by the brothers' attempts to understand how they ended up in jail in the face of Joseph's false accusations about them being spies.³⁵

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו

They said to one another:

- אָבֵל אֲשֶׁמִּים אָנַחְנוּ עַל־אָחִינוּ** (A)
 (A) Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother
אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ עֶרְתַּת נַפְשׁוֹ (B)
 (B) Because we looked upon his anguish
בְּהִתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ (C)
 (C) We paid no heed when he pleaded with us
עַל־כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת (A)
 (D) That's why this distress has come upon us.

In the face of their incarceration they would, of course, protest their treatment, “We’re not spies, we’re innocent Canaanites who’ve come to buy food;” “How dare he accuse us of being spies!” At some point, however, voice (A) responds and says, “In fact³⁶ we are being punished on account of our brother.” To the reader the sense of retribution is clear, but to the brothers it is less

³⁵ Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 164 points out how the accusation of spying can be read as a psychological trope for Joseph's own anxiety about being discovered. Equally striking in the scene before us is the fact that Joseph is actually spying on them in 42:23 as they begin to admit their guilt.

³⁶ Cf. Tg. Onkelos. A. Ehrlich [*Miqra Kipshuto* (New York, NY: Ktav, 1969), vol. 1, 115 (Hebrew)] notes that **אבל** in the Bible generally serves to reverse a previous statement – in this case the brothers' earlier claim that they are honest – “We may not be spies, but we’re certainly not innocent.”

than self-evident. Yet despite the fact that it took place many years before, the connection between their present situation and their earlier cruelty to Joseph is not dismissed out of hand. It would seem that this association is not far from their minds. It is, however, likely met with cries of innocence, “We were justified in doing what we did to him,” “He planned to turn us in to our father,” “He tried to control us.” Voice (B) may have agreed with their motives for punishing Joseph, but he focuses instead upon Joseph’s misery, a detail the reader might deduce from the story despite the fact that Joseph’s reactions are never described in Genesis 37. Voice (C) may be a continuation of this same voice, or an additional voice which adds the previously unknown idea of Joseph actually pleading with his brothers, showing us a side of Joseph we never saw in Genesis 37.³⁷

At this point voice (A) breaks in again to proclaim their guilt once more, this time making a stronger connection between past and present by arguing that this is a case of measure for measure. As they were insensitive to **צרת נפשו** so we are now suffering from this present **צרה**. As we threw Joseph into the pit, now we’ve been thrown in jail.³⁸ The emergence of Reuben’s voice in 42:22 adds to this sense of guilt, but gives it a different face. Where some of the brothers are feeling remorse, Reuben says “I told you so but you would not listen to me.” Reuben’s claim to be the voice of conscience is undercut by his attempt at self-vindication. The brothers may have a shared sense of anguish in v 21, but Reuben’s comment places him outside this circle of remorse and shows that the brothers have not achieved consensus amongst themselves, that their group speeches are often indications of discord. Here Reuben’s separate voice serves much the same purpose as we saw in Genesis 37. His voice reveals the lack of agreement among the brothers, while at the same time attempting to place himself on a more righteous level.

The speech restores a human face to the brothers, showing them capable of remorse and reasoning about their own fate, as well as revealing an aspect of Joseph which we had not seen before. The division into voices adds to the sense that the brothers are actually experiencing remorse, that they are involved in discussing their fate, and that they connect their present situation with the events of Genesis 37. When read as a single voice, this speech displays their regret but shows neither their interaction nor the fact that they are calling one another to task. As a demonstration of what Joseph may have hoped to achieve by throwing them in jail, multivocal speech works here to convey depth of emotion, an ac-

³⁷ Sforino *ad loc* sees this as an example of measure for measure— as we were cruel to Joseph, so “the man” was cruel to us.

³⁸ Cf. Rashbam *ad loc*.

tive process of recalling and regretting, which emphasizes that the punishment they receive is in fact having the desired effect.³⁹

This portrayal of multiple voices in the brothers' speeches throughout chapters 37 and 42 demonstrates something of the discord among the brothers and also paves the way for the change that takes place in their behavior with the emergence of Judah as their leader in Gen 43. While prior to Judah's emergence they may speak with various voices, after his appearance they are unified in their speech, and Judah serves as the univocal spokesman for them. This is part of a larger strategy of displaying the brothers in a negative, discordant light through chapter 42 and in a repentant conciliatory tone from chapter 43 onwards.⁴⁰

³⁹ In Gen 42:28 there may be a further case of multivocal speech, reading the verse as question and answer, following the interpretation of R. Yaakov Tzi Mecklenberg [*HaKetav Vebaqqabalah*, Jerusalem, 1985, p. 79]. The verse is introduced with a variation on the discussion phrase **וַיַּחֲרְדוּ אִישׁ אֶל אַחֵיו**, "they turned trembling to one another," in response to finding their money in their saddlebags. Their reaction is actually composed of a question and an answer:

What's this?	מה זאת (A)
God has done this to us!	אלהים עשה לנו (B)

Their initial reaction of fear is expressed in (A) as a simple question, "What's this?," referring to the impossibility of the money being in their saddlebags. The answer is expressed in voice (B) as a realization that a divine hand is at work here, continuing the train of thought of the jail scene described in 42:21.

⁴⁰ It is not out of the question that there is an additional case of multivocal speech in Gen 37:8,

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אֶחָיו הַמְלִיךְ תִּמְלִיךְ עָלֵינוּ אִם־תִּמְשֹׁל תִּמְשֹׁל בָּנוּ

His brothers said to him:

"Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?"

While the form of the double rhetorical question is usually spoken by a single speaker, we note the unusual repetition in the parallel of "rule" and "reign." While this is the standard form of double questions of the type **אם...ה**, one usually finds greater variation in the language of such questions, as in Gen 17:17; Isa 10:15; Job 4:17; 6:5; see Y. Avishur, "Patterns in Double and Triple Rhetorical Questions in the Bible and Ugaritic Literature" in *Zer Ligevurot* ed. B.Z. Luria (Jerusalem: Qiryat Sefer, 1973), 421–427. Ibn Ezra (*ad loc*) attributes a different sense to each verb, "Will we make you king, or will you rule over us by force?" Ramban also sees a difference, following Tg. Onkelos in rejecting both kingship and rule. If there are two separate voices here, this would add a degree of dramatization: (A) "Do you really think we'd willingly make you a king over us?" (B) "Or maybe you think you can rule over us by force!" The idea of the brothers speaking in different voices here lends support to the divisions of vv 19–20, even though the brothers are in agreement with one another at this point.

III

A third example of multivocality is found in the sailors' questions to Jonah in Jonah 1:8–9.

(8) They said to him:	וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו
Tell us, you, who have brought this misfortune upon us:	הַגִּידְהָנָא לָנוּ בְּאִשֶּׁר לְמִי־רָעָה הַזֹּאת לָנוּ
(A) What is your business?	מִהַ־מְלָאכְתָּךְ
(B) Where have you come from?	וּמֵאַיִן תָּבוֹא
(C) What is your country?	מִהַ־אֶרֶץ־ךָ
(D) Of what people are you?	וּמֵאִי־מָזָה עִם אַתָּה
(9) He said to them:	וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם
I am a Hebrew; I worship the God of Heaven who made both sea and land.	עֲבָרִי אֲנִכִּי וְאַתְּהָא אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲנִי יָרָא אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־הַיַּבֵּשָׁה

We find here four separate questions about Jonah's profession and his origins. The answer which he gives in 1:9 is only partial. He never states his business or his precise place of origin, only his ethnic origin and something about his beliefs, which was not even asked about. Instead of a surplus of information in the questions, we find much repetition.⁴¹ Voice (A) is distinct in inquiring after his profession⁴² but voices (B), (C) and (D) all pose variations on the same question: "Where are you from?" It seems most likely that we have here a barrage of questions shouted out simultaneously by different voices in their panic in the face of the storm.⁴³ We have already been told in v 5 that the sailors speak separately; each cries out to his God, and once again we find *וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ* indicating discussion in the midst of this chaotic situation.⁴⁴ There are

⁴¹ A similar situation obtains in Judg 18:3. The Danite spies ask three separate questions, but there is significant overlap between them. In addition, the answer given by Micah in 18:4 responds to only one of their questions. The section lacks the dramatic element of the storm in Jonah, but the multiple voices of the spies seem to reflect their surprise at finding a Judean settled in the North. See Y. Amit, *Judges*, (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1999), 272 (Hebrew); U. Simon, *Jonah* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1999), 11.

⁴² The word *מְלָאכָה* most often has the sense of trade or business, as in Ps 107:23 (related to the sea), Prov 18:9, 22:9. But its relation to the root *לָאךְ*, "to send" and through that to *מְלָאךְ* as messenger, opens the way for seeing the term as "mission," even prophetic task. See J.M. Sasson, *Jonah* (AB, 24B; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990), 114; N. Leiter, "Jonah: Servant of the Lord" in S. Japhet, ed., *The Bible in the Light of its Interpreters* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994), 62–63 (Hebrew).

⁴³ Uriel Simon has remarked on the dramatic impact of the scene, connecting it in style with our initial example of 1 Sam 9:12–13. Amit, *Judges*, 272, notes the similarity in style between Jonah 1:8 and Judg 18:3, but does not mention multivocality. D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco TX: Word Books, 1987), 460, suggests that "the sailors pepper him with urgent questions" of which the four mentioned in v 8 are but a selection.

⁴⁴ Against Sasson, *Jonah*, 111, who sees the sailors acting as a single

many attempts to explain distinctions between the questions in a logical fashion, separating out the idea of “land” from “people,” or “mission” from “purpose.” But basically, the questions repeat two essential things: “Who are you?” and “What’s your business?”⁴⁵

The contrast between the questions and Jonah’s response in 1:9 lends further support to the idea of multiple voices in 1:8. Jonah does not answer all the questions put to him, and he expounds at length on an issue they have not even asked about, namely the nature of Jonah’s God.⁴⁶ According to the MT, Jonah responds to voices (C) and/or (D) by describing himself as a Hebrew, but offers no answer to the question of his occupation or where he has come from. There may be a play on his occupation with the sailors’ question **מה מלאכתך**, indicating “mission” in the sense of prophetic task, but Jonah’s answer in the MT ignores this. The Septuagint is different here, reading “I am a servant of the Lord.” According to this reading, Jonah is replying to the question of voice (A), because the phrase **עבד ה'** can clearly signify prophet. If, however, we accept the LXX as original, we would then be left without an answer to the questions of voices (C) and (D), as Jonah gives no indication of his nation or his ethnic background.⁴⁷ Jonah’s failure to answer all the questions of the sailors may indicate his deliberate avoidance of the issue at hand and may tell us something about his person. But it is also indicative of the chaos on deck during the storm, as the sailors shout out their questions at the same time, in keeping with their “great fear,” and the very real possibility of their boat breaking up. That Jonah would respond to only one or two of the questions is quite in keeping with the situation.⁴⁸ A detailed

group here. The sailors do not come together to speak with a single voice until after Jonah’s confession in v 9. This is indicated most strikingly by the “great fear” which overcomes them in v 11.

⁴⁵ For **מלאכה** as “business” see Ps 107:23. On **מלאכה** as a punning term for **מלאך** = prophet see Y. Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 249. For attempts to explain the uniqueness of each question see Rashi, Radak *ad loc*; Leiter, “Servant of the Lord,” 58–72; Sasson, *Jonah*, 113–115.

⁴⁶ The contrast between Jonah’s **יראה** and that of the sailors is one of the most powerful points of irony in the chapter. Jonah professes to fear God, yet the sailors’ fear is more impressive. J. Magonet, *Form and Meaning* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1976), 32; P. Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 141; Simon, *Jonah*, 12

⁴⁷ The suggestion of N. Leiter (“Jonah: Servant of the Lord,” 59), that the original text contained both the MT, “I am a Hebrew,” as well as the LXX, “I am a servant of the Lord” reflects yet another attempt to have Jonah answer all the sailors’ question. Her suggested text is much less likely than the idea of two variant readings which is preferred by most commentators. See Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 455; Sasson, *Jonah*, 116.

⁴⁸ Sasson, *Jonah*, 126, sees the questions as “too calmly posed” to reflect the chaotic situation of the storm. This objection falls away when we see the questions as reflecting separate voices, rather than as an “intricate-

account of Jonah's affairs at this point would be inappropriate to the scene.⁴⁹ The presence of multiple voices here adds significantly to the dramatic situation and highlights the change which overtakes the sailors as a result of Jonah's answer. Just as they had first cried out individually, each to his own god, here they call out a jumble of questions in different voices. After v 11, however, they speak with a single voice and a single purpose ("What shall **we** do with you?"). The great fear that overtakes them is followed by their single-mindedness in trying to save Jonah's life as well as preserve their own. They pray to God as a group in v 14, offer sacrifices and make vows to God in response to having been saved. In a fashion not dissimilar to what we saw in the Joseph narrative, speaking in multiple voices serves as a foil for a decisive moment of change, after which a univocal response indicates a new, unified sense of purpose.

IV

Our final example is taken from the account of David's return to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 19 following Absalom's death. Following the description of the shame and embarrassment of David's troops in light of his mourning for Absalom, it is unclear just how (and if) he will be restored to power. Indeed, the extent of the revolt has thrown open the question of David's continuing rule. Will the allegiance of the tribes return to David, or are the same forces which led to the rebellion still noticeable?⁵⁰

ly developed program of inquiry."

⁴⁹ At the same time v 11 includes the curious statement that Jonah had told the sailors that he was fleeing from God. When did he tell them this? Either there was further conversation between Jonah and the sailors, or Jonah's statement about worshipping the Lord who made the sea contains a hint broad enough to suggest to them that Jonah is in flight from his God. See Sasson, *Jonah*, 121, Simon, *Jonah*, 13.

⁵⁰ The causes of Absalom's rebellion are far from clear, but they certainly go beyond the individual efforts and charisma of Absalom himself. While the revolt is described in 2 Sam 15 as emanating entirely from Absalom's personal ambitions, there are also significant political and social issues: David's attempts at unifying Judah with the northern tribes, the animosity of the House of Saul and the Benjaminites toward David, general displeasure with monarchic rule as implemented by David, issues of taxation and military service, etc. See M.A. Cohen, "The Rebellions During the Reign of David," in *Studies in Jewish Bibliography in Honor of Edward I. Kiehl*, Ed. C. Berlin. (New York, NY: Ktav, 1971), 91–112; W. Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2007), 222–226.

10 All the people throughout the tribes of Israel were arguing:	וְהָיָה כָּל־הָעָם נִדּוֹן בְּכָל־שִׁבְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר
(A) The king saved us from all ⁵¹ our enemies, and he delivered us from the hands of the Philistines	(A) הַמֶּלֶךְ הַצִּילָנוּ מִכַּף אֹיְבֵינוּ וְהוּא מִלְטָנוּ מִכַּף פְּלִשְׁתִּים
(B) But now he fled the country because of Absalom	(B) וְעַתָּה בָּרַח מִזֶּה־הָאָרֶץ מֵעַל אֲבִשָׁלוֹם:
11 (C) Absalom, whom we anointed over us, has died in battle	(C) וְאֲבִשָׁלוֹם אֲשֶׁר מָשַׁחְנוּ עָלֵינוּ מֵת בַּמִּלְחָמָה
(D) Why then do you sit idle instead of escorting the king back?	(D) וְעַתָּה לָמָּה אַתֶּם מִתְרַשְׁמִים לְהֵשִׁיב אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ:

The speech is introduced by the unusual verb form *נָדוֹן* in v 10, indicating not simply discussion but actual disagreement.⁵² While most commentators agree that there is debate among the troops about the future of their allegiance to David, they have not recognized the presence of multiple voices in this speech. The speech is nearly always read as a description of the process of rationalization by which the people decide to accept David's authority over them: "David, who defended us in the past, did in fact flee before Absalom. But since Absalom is now dead, we should not hesitate to receive David back as our king."⁵³ This reading is certainly possible, but it overlooks the fact that each of the voices we have identified here speaks in a complete sentence, and that these sentences do not flow one from the next. (A) and (D) reflect wholehearted acceptance of Davidic authority, while (B) and (C) show profound dissatisfaction with David—the first in bemoaning David's flight before Absalom, and the second in describing Absalom as the people's anointed leader. Moreover, both (B) and (D) begin with the term *וְעַתָּה* to indicate a change in subject from what has come before.⁵⁴ When read in this fashion, each sentence is

⁵¹ So LXXM; see K.P. McCarter, *II Samuel* (AB, 9; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 415.

⁵² Rashi, following Tg. Yonatan understands "arguing" here, as do Radak and Ralbag. S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1913), 334, understands the verb as "in a state of mutual strife," which reflects the sense of disagreement in the text. So too *HALOT*, "to quarrel, argue;" McCarter, on the other hand, prefers "complaining," following the LXX. This fits the last part of v 11, but the bulk of the speech is not a complaint.

⁵³ See, for instance, J.P. Fokkelmann, *King David: Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1991), 289–290; H.W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 364.

⁵⁴ The term most commonly occurs in speech situations, often refocusing attention on the issue at hand after a digression or an introduction. Cf. *TDOT*, vol. 11, 445; E. Jenni, "Zur Verwendung von 'atta 'jetzt' im AT," *TZ* 28 (1972), 5–12.

spoken in opposition to the one before it, and not as successive stages in a single argument.

(A) הַמֶּלֶךְ הַצִּילָנוּ מִכַּף אֲיָבֵינוּ וְהוּא מִלְטָנוּ מִכַּף פְּלִשְׁתִּים

Voice (A) speaks with complete allegiance to David on the basis of his past victories. David is not mentioned by name, but the reference to the defeat of the Philistines makes it clear that he is the subject of their words. This voice assigns to David the honorific **הַמֶּלֶךְ** – indicating that David’s prior achievements grant him exceptional status as “The King.” The speech has two parallel halves, the first describing David’s ability to deliver Israel from all her enemies, and the second referring specifically to the Philistines. David’s credit is thus grounded both in his general military ability as well as his historic victories over the Philistines. For this alone David deserves the people’s allegiance: He is a tried and true military leader who has traditionally protected the people.

(B) וַעֲתָה בָּרַח מִדָּהָאָרֶץ מֵעַל אַבְשָׁלוֹם

At this point voice (B) states the obvious objection to the previous statement: David fled Jerusalem and Judah before Absalom, as recorded clearly in his responses to the rebellion in 2 Samuel 15.⁵⁵ David made no attempt to stand and fight Absalom. The narrator of 2 Samuel 15–16 has tried to put a positive spin on this by showing David as penitent for his sins. He is shown trying to minimize the damage to the kingdom and prevent civil war; he leaves the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem, perhaps hoping for his own return but, in any case, guaranteeing its safety by not taking it out as an accompaniment to battle. Most important, David shows great faith in God, viewing Absalom’s revolt not as a personal attack upon him but as a divine trial. But all of these explanations cannot undo the fact, perceived by most of the people and voiced explicitly in (B), that David simply turned tail and ran. Whatever the people may have thought of Absalom, David is portrayed as a weak leader who abdicated leadership at the moment of crisis.⁵⁶ No longer the dependable protector of the people lauded in voice (A), the verb which describes his behavior—**ברח**—is highly pejorative. Whatever his glorious past, how can a king be taken seriously any more after he has fled from the threat of rebellion without even trying to defend his capital and his people?

(C) וְאַבְשָׁלוֹם אֲשֶׁר מִשְׁחָנוּ עָלֵינוּ מֵת בַּמִּלְחָמָה

⁵⁵ The verb can be read as past perfect or past continuous, indicating either David’s initial flight in 2 Samuel 15, or his continued absence from the land even to the present moment. Driver, *Samuel*, 334, understands David’s flight “as from one whom his presence encumbered.”

⁵⁶ McCarter, *II Samuel*, 415, follows some LXX mss. traditions in understanding David’s flight as being “from control of his kingdom” as well as from Absalom.

The voice which speaks this sentence is different from the previous. Absalom is described as an anointed king who has been granted official royal status by the people. We, says the voice, embraced him as king and granted him legitimacy. This is not the voice of a subject of David but of one who accepted the authority of the rebel. As opposed to (A), where David is seen as the traditional protector, and (B), where David is described as false to his traditional role, (C) claims that Absalom was a legitimate king, who perished as loyal kings might—he died in battle. This is a sharp contrast to David who fled from battle.⁵⁷ The voice speaking here has been loyal to the rebellion, but now faces a difficult decision: If the anointed king is dead, and the previous king proved to be unworthy, who will now ascend the throne? This voice offers no answer to the dilemma, only the sound of lament for the dead king.

(D) וְעֵתָהּ לָמָּה אַתֶּם מְחַרְשִׁים לְהָשִׁיב אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ

This voice may be the same as we heard in (A), a strong supporter of the traditional King David, who urges his immediate return to the throne. The absence of David's name is significant here. This voice claims "the king is dead, long live the king," for the people cannot exist without a king. Yet this voice differs from the previous voices in going beyond a description of the past to challenge the present indecision. The silence of the people is actually dangerous to the situation. This can be seen as a response to the description of the troops stealing back into Jerusalem in 2 Sam 19:4, embarrassed by David's lamenting over Absalom's death. This voice takes a clear stand in favor of reinstating the king, but not, I suggest, because he is David (his name goes unmentioned), but because he was the king, and the people must have a king in order to continue.

Thus we find an argument among the survivors of the rebellion representing a number of different sides: According to (A), David was (and therefore is) the traditional king and savior of the people. But to (B) this mighty defender proved false at the moment of crisis and does not deserve to be reinstated. Therefore, says (C), we embraced Absalom and lament his death as a true anointed king; but no mention is made of returning to David. In contrast to these retrospective voices, (D) focuses on the present: We must have a king, and the most likely candidate is David; it is therefore our responsibility to actively embrace him and reinstate him.⁵⁸ The placing of this voice at the end of the debate gives it a climactic

⁵⁷ One recalls the criticism of David implicit in וְדוֹד יוֹשֵׁב בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם when everyone else is out in the field (2 Sam 11:1).

⁵⁸ Note the ironic parallel with the popular demand to bring back Absalom for fear of not having a successor to the throne expressed in לְבַלְתִּי הָשִׁיב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת נַדְחוֹ (2 Sam 14:13). On this verse see J. Hoftijzer, "David and the Tekoite Woman," *V/T* 20 (1970), 429–434.

role, challenging the people to act in David's favor. The speech as a whole gives expression to the conflicting views which must have been present in Judah and Israel at this time: a powerful tension between reinstating David as king and seeing him as totally discredited. This speech offers one of the few moments in the text in which we can clearly hear the range of different voices surrounding the rebellion.

David's victory was viewed with mixed emotions, as he himself does not fail to notice. His actions immediately following this speech bespeak his awareness of the need to take action in order to regain the trust of the people. If the LXX is correct here, and 12c, "The talk of all Israel reached the king in his quarters," belongs at the end of v 11 and not at the end of v 12, then David's actions and words in vv 12–14 are clearly a response to the uncertainty reflected in vv 10–11.⁵⁹ David appeals to the elders of Judah as an authoritative body that can help to legitimize him. His appeal to the Judeans as his own flesh and blood echoes the request of all the tribes in 2 Sam 5:1, when they turned to him as their newly anointed king. And his replacement of Joab with Amasa as commander-in-chief is intended to win over the forces from Judah who were loyal to Absalom but have now lost their leader. The urgent need for all these actions— especially the drastic act of demoting Joab, who saved his life—makes clear just how much David's return to the throne was in jeopardy at this crucial moment.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

There are certainly additional cases of multivocal group speech waiting to be discovered and explicated. The examples we have discussed here demonstrate a few of the literary strategies surrounding the use of multivocal group speech. The dramatization of opposing points of view, as in the case of 2 Sam 19, is employed to underline the seriousness of the debate about David's return to the throne. In other cases, the highlighting of discord between the different voices may serve as a prelude to their subsequent speaking

⁵⁹ Cf. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 415.

⁶⁰ 2 Sam 19:15 emphasizes the importance of these words and actions in winning over the Judeans to support him. This theme of conflicting voices finds expression once again at the end of the chapter in the argument between the Judeans and the Northern tribes as to who is more loyal to the king. We can see here a reversal of the previous section. The disagreement is not about the right of David to ascend the throne, but about his importance to each side. The advice of speaker (D) from v 12 has been heeded and the tribes are falling all over themselves to see who can honor him more. But the revolt of Sheba, the son of Bichri, in 2 Sam 20 shows that the hostilities which were at the root of Absalom's revolt are very much alive. On this revolt see McCarter, *II Samuel*, 431; Dietrich, *Early Monarchy*, 225; S.L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (Oxford/New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 169–172.

with a unified voice, as a way of emphasizing the change in their self-perception in the continuation of the story. (Jonah and the sailors; Joseph's brothers). While the plural verb ויאמרו most often indicates a single voice, these examples show that we should not automatically assume group speech to be univocal. Only by a close examination of both the syntax of the speech and the context in which it is spoken can we determine whether or not a given speech reflects multiple voices or a single point of view.⁶¹

⁶¹ I would like to thank the anonymous readers and my colleague David Frankel for their incisive and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.