

Disability in Ancient Israel: The “Lame” (נכה/פסח) in 2 Samuel

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The treatment of disabled people in the Old Testament is largely concentrated on two accounts. The first account in the holiness code of the book of Leviticus (ch. 21,17-23) deals with the prescriptions given by YHWH about the purity and impurity of priests serving at the temple of Jerusalem, especially concerning their physical integrity. In the endeavour to re-establish ritual order among the priesthood recently returning from Babylonian exile, it was presumed that YHWH would only accept physically healthy priests as equal counterpart to serve at the temple. This brings us to the second account: The story about David's capture of Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 5, 5-8, states that disabled people are being barred from the temple. The main question whether these religious restrictions concerning disabilities like lameness or blindness were already in place before the exilic period and the presumed redaction of the Priestly source have already been examined elsewhere.²

This article tries to shed a light onto another plot in the same book of 2 Samuel, David's delicate relationship to Jonathan's disabled son Meribaal, to whom he is tied by oath, but who may also present a potential challenge to his throne. Overall, the archaeological evidence regarding disabled people in Ancient Israel remains sketchy. It appears that during this pre-Israelite time period, some disabled people with a certain social status, may not have been considered as outcasts as it appears in the writings of the Old Testament, especially Lev 21 and 2 Sam 5, 5-8. The following biblical text in which King David is shown giving a sign of respect and dignity to a disabled person with a somewhat high profile status, may illustrate this differing status.

1. The Story of Meribaal and Mephiboshet: 2 Samuel 4,4; 9,1-13; 16,1-4; 19,18bf.25-31; 21,7-9a

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² See the author's forthcoming article "The 'Lame' in Lev 21, 5-8 and 2 Sam 5, 6-8" in *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute*.

Apart from the above mentioned texts in Lev 21 and 2 Sam 5, this is probably the most detailed text that may give some indication about the status of disabled people in Ancient Israel. But, as with the previous texts, this one is just as ambiguous concerning the literary and textual criticism. The main questions that arise are whether there are one or two people named Meribaal, whether his name should be understood as theophoric and whether, due to his disability, Meribaal was indeed a serious threat to David's throne.

Due to the length of this text and its wide spread throughout 2 Sam, the analysis will be divided into each section before discussing the story in its entirety.

1.1. Introduction of Meribaal as Jonathan's son (2 Sam 4,4 par 1 Chr 8,34a; 9,40a)

2 Sam 4

Jonathan, son of Saul, had a son whose feet were lame (נכה).

He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. So his nurse picked him up and fled, but in her panic to flee, he fell and was crippled (יפסח).

His name was Meribaal.³

1 Chr 8||9

The son of Jonathan was Meribaal...

There is unanimous consensus among scholars that this verse is a later addition into the surrounding text of chapter 4. This chapter deals mainly with the death of Saul's son Ishboshet and it appears that this verse was inserted to indicate from the beginning that Meribaal is no serious threat to the throne due to his disability. Yet, it is not clear whether this disqualification is based on his physical inabilities or on purity laws that may be attached to a future king and highest cult officer of Israel at the time. Therefore, most scholars situate this episode in connection with chapter 9.⁴ The question why this

³ Translation according to Arnold A. Andersen, *2 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary 11, Dallas: Word Books, 1989, 65.

⁴ See Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary, New English Bible, Cambridge: University Press, ²1979, 50f.; Hans Joachim Stoebe, *Das zweite Buch Samuelis*, Kommentar zum Alten Testament 8/2, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994, 150; Jakob H. Grønbaek,

verse was inserted exactly at this place remains largely unanswered. It will be discussed further below.

The second question surrounds the exact identity of Meribaal who in some translations is referred to as Mephiboshet. The reason for this confusion is that besides Jonathan's son Meribaal there is another of Saul's sons with the same name. Which part of the story relates to which person? Are there two personalities at play and does the text always speak of the same person but, due to different traditions, with different names? These are some of the questions being addressed in this paragraph.

As mentioned above, there are two different names attributed to Jonathan's son. One tradition, supported by the genealogy in 1 Chr 8, 34, mentions his name as Meribaal, another one calls him Mephiboshet, based on an editorial tradition of changing theophoric names ending on *-בעל* to a *-בשה* ("shame of") ending, therefore ridiculing the first one, similar to the names of Ishbaal – Ishboshet and Jerubbaal – Jerubbeshet. Both commentaries by Peter Ackroyd and Arnold Anderson use the second form, yet acknowledge that the original version is the one appearing in 1 Chr.⁵ Hans Joachim Stoebe uses the unusual form Mephibaal in reference to a reading by G^L as *Μεμφιβααλ*.⁶ This argument is largely a reversal of Matathiahu Tsevat's claim that it would be logical to expect the form 'Meriboshet' if the *-בשה* ending would refer to a mocking of the *-בעל* element.⁷

Two studies about this subject have discussed this issue at length. Timo Veijola proposes that Meribaal is indeed the correct name, but the story refers primarily to the son of Saul who at the end of the episode is executed by the Gibeonites. Any reference to Meribaal as son of Jonathan would be secondary in order to highlight David's loyalty to Jonathan.⁸

Die Geschichte vom Aufstieg Davids (1. Sam. 15 – 2. Sam. 5). Tradition und Komposition, Acta theologica Danica 10, Copenhagen: Munkegaard, 1971, 244. By contrast, Arnold A. Andersen (*2 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary 11, Dallas: Word Books, 1989, 67) and Timo Veijola ("David und Meribaal", *Revue biblique* 85, 1978, 338-361, here 345) place the story after Ishboshet's death.

⁵ See Ackroyd, *Samuel*, 51; Anderson (*Samuel*, 69f.) argues furthermore that *it does not seem likely that Jonathan had no son, and that also the genealogy in 1 Chr 8,33-34 is wrong. Hence it is easier to assume that Jonathan's son had the same name as one of Saul's sons.*

⁶ See Stoebe, *Buch*, 144-146.

⁷ See Veijola, *David*, 338, Note 1.

⁸ See Veijola, *David*, 352: *Alle diejenigen Stellen, die von Meribaal als Jonathans Sohn sprechen (2 Sam 4,4; 9,3.6.7; 21,7), sind literarisch unecht, Produkte einer Redaktion, die Davids bleibende Treue zu Jonathan zu betonen versucht. Die historische Priorität gebührt also den Stellen, an denen Meribaal als*

Based on Tsevat's theory that the *בשח*- ending does not represent a negative connotation of the theophoric *בעל*- element, but rather a reference to the Akkadian form *baštu* and should therefore be translated as "protective spirit" instead of "shame"⁹, Stefan Schorch makes a convincing argument to confirm this reading with the LXX, which translates this ending with $\beta\sigma\sigma\theta\epsilon$ and $\beta\sigma\sigma\theta\alpha$ respectively. In his opinion, this indicates a vowel ending in the original Hebrew text, such as a *chireq compaginis*.¹⁰ Furthermore, Schorch points out that not only the suffix is problematic, but in contrast to the other parallels Ishbaal/Ishboshet and Jerubbaal/Jerubbeshet, also its non-theophoric portion (*מרי-* or *מפי-*) is unclear. The Lucian based Samuel manuscripts use *מפי-* and *בעל-* while the other Samuel copies prefer *בשח*-. The Chronicler's manuscripts though use *בעל-* and *מרי-* or *מריב-* throughout the text. To this day, no scholar has been able to come up with a satisfying identification of who is who in this story. The only fairly undisputed reading is that of Saul's son Mephiboshet in 2 Sam 21,8.¹¹

From all these different possibilities the most likely one is that there were probably indeed two different personalities, one called Meribaal, who was Jonathan's son, the other one Saul's son Mephiboshet. Due to the similarity of their names and probably other political or religious reasons, both personalities have merged at one point in the tradition. Only the first and last episodes (2 Sam 4 and 21) have an indication to the "historic" "Meribaal" as the son of Jonathan and "Mephiboshet" as the son of Saul.

Yet, my interest is not so much the identification of whose son Meribaal really was, but in his designation as lame (*נכה*) and crippled (*יפסח*). The change in the vocabulary within the verse from *נכה* to *פסח*, both indicating a state of lameness, but each with a different meaning is the most striking element in this short verse 4,4. In the following paragraph, we will examine this discrepancy which may shed some light on the identity of Meribaal and his subsequent fate.

The word *פסח* (*pisseah*) has two contrasting meanings. First and foremost it is used to describe a condition of lameness in a person or an animal that cannot walk normally. In the *niphal* form which we find in 2 Sam 4,4, the word means "to become lame", while the use of the intensive form *qittel* designates a permanent condition.

Sohn Sauls auftritt (2 Sam 9,7.9.10; 16,3; 19,25, 21,8).

⁹ See Matathiahu Tsevat, "Ishboshet and the Congeners", HUCA 46, 1975, 71-87.

¹⁰ See Stefan Schorch, "Baal oder Boschet? Ein umstrittenes theophores Element zwischen Religions- und Textgeschichte" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 112, 2000, 598-611, here 600.

¹¹ See *ibid.* 601f.

But the difficulty in assessing the meaning of פסח lies in its second meaning “to jump around”, as it is used in 1 Kgs 18 in the episode of the ecstatic prophets of Ba'al. פסח often appears in conjunction with עורר (*'iwwer*), the “Blind”, as a synonym for a very serious disability that not only renders one physically handicapped, but also ritually impure, as can be seen in Lev 21 and 2 Sam 5,8 as well as in Dt 15,21. Etymologically, the word can be linked to the akk. *pissû* (to be lame, to limp) and arab. فسح “to dislocate”.¹²

The same form as in 2 Sam 4,4 appears six more times in the Old Testament: twice in 1 Kgs, three times in Ex and once in Is. Besides 2 Sam 4,4, 1 Kgs 18,21 has also the meaning “to limp”, while verse 26 it is generally translated with “limping around”. The three appearances in Exodus (12,13.23.27) and Is 31,5 all have the meaning of “to pass over, to spare”.¹³

Out of 62 other uses of the root פסח, only fourteen have the meaning of “lame”, all the others are in the context of Passover. Those fourteen include five mentions in 2 Sam alone (5,6.8 (2); 9,13 and 19,27), two each in Is (33,23; 35,6) and Mal (1,8.13) and once in Lv 21,18; Dt 15,21; Hi 29,15; Prv 26,7 and Jer 31,8. Therefore, six out of 20 occasions of the meaning “lame, limp” are concentrated in the book of 2 Sam which is even more surprising when one considers that the priestly Chronicler has all but omitted all references to lameness in his account, yet has the largest reference to the meaning “Passover” of the root פסח: 17 out of 48.¹⁴

The second expression in 2 Sam 4,4 for “lame”, נכה, appears a total of 480 times in the Old Testament as its meaning ranges much wider. נכה and its derivatives מכה and נכח are mainly used in language of warfare which explains its wide spread throughout the Old Testament. To date, there are only few parallels in Akkadian and Egyptian vocabulary and those are still being debated. In its base definition, נכה means “to strike with the intention to hurt or to kill” and in the vast majority of cases נכה is used to express exactly this purpose, either in active or the passive form “to be

¹² See R. E. Clements, “פסח *pisseah*“, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 6, Stuttgart – Berlin – Cologne – Mainz: Kohlhammer, 1989, 683-688, here 683f.; Yael Shemesh, “Isaiah 31,5: The Lord’s Protecting Lameness”, *ZAW* 115, 2003, 256-260, here 258. There is an ongoing debate about the relationship to the same root designating “Passover”. For this question, see among others Othmar Keel, “Erwägungen zum Sitz im Leben des vormosaischen Pascha und zur Etymologie von פסח“, *ZAW* 84, 1972, 414-434.

¹³ In a recent study, Yael Shemesh is reinterpreting Is 31,5: *It is suggested that psh be understood in the sense of limping. This is comparable with the behavior of nesting birds...: birds pretend to be lame in order to divert the attention of a predator from the nest to themselves (Isaiah, 260).*

¹⁴ See Gerhard Lisowsky, *Konkordanz zum hebräischen Alten Testament*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, ²1981, 1175.

smitten”.¹⁵ J. Conrad defines נכה hiph. as the use of physical force against another person’s existence, signifying a fatal hit or an injury caused by a person, leading to instant or soon to be expected death of the so injured victim.¹⁶

In 2 Sam, there are 46 occasions of נכה in the above mentioned sense, and 51 more in the First Book of Samuel, which means that about a quarter of all נכה appearances are in the entire Samuel account only. The other text coming somewhere near this number are the two books of Kings with 69 mentions. Besides this general definition, there are three instances in which the passive meaning of “smitten” is understood as “lame”. One is Is 66,2 and the other two are in 2 Sam (4,4a; 9,3). While in the Isaiah text the word could be understood as “contrite” or “lowly in spirit”, the two other instances are clearly referring to Jonathan’s son, who is in v. 4,4b introduced as הַפֶּסֶם. Considering the general context of the meaning of נכה, I believe we can understand the first description as “being lame as a consequence of a deliberate act of violence or even an attempted murder” which, given the status of Jonathan’s son as a potential heir to Saul’s throne, is not inconceivable, considering that everybody else in Saul’s family suffered the same fate of being killed by his successor.

The following questions arise: Why this double designation of lameness and especially the expression נכה for someone whose injury stemmed apparently from an accident? Furthermore, why is it necessary at all to elaborate on how the injury was obtained?¹⁷ The answer is that already at this stage, the text is dealing with the integration of Meribaal/Mephiboshet’s two identities. The text begins with Jonathan’s son who became lame through an act of נכה (v.4,4a) and v. 4,4c identifies him as Meribaal. In my opinion, this is the original information (in **bold**) and forms the base for its recital in 2 Chr, minus the information of the condition of lameness which the Chronicler deemed unnecessary. In modifying Veijola’s position, I think that v. 4,4b does not speak of Jonathan’s son, but already gives an indication of Saul’s son Mephiboshet. Not only did they have similar names as it is stipulated by Andersen, but they both may also have been lame. Mephiboshet’s injury resulted from the accident that is being described in v. 4 rendering him פֶּסֶם in the sense of “becoming lame as

¹⁵ See Lisowsky, *Konkordanz*, 926-930; J. Conrad, “נכה *nkh*”, *ThWAT* 5, Stuttgart – Berlin – Cologne – Mainz: Kohlhammer, 1986, 445-454, here 446f.

¹⁶ See *ibid.*, 447.

¹⁷ Stoebe explains this with a more sentimental interest in the fate of Saul’s family: *Es erklärt nicht das starke Gewicht, das auf die Schilderung dessen gelegt wird, wie es dazu gekommen ist – also der Gestalt der treuen, aber kopflos flüchtenden Frau. Das geht bei jeder Erklärung über das hinaus, was zu wissen notwendig wäre. Die Art des Stils läßt mit einer über das rein erzählende Moment hinausgehenden, volkstümlich sentimental Anteilnahme am Schicksal der Familie Sauls rechnen...*(Buch, 151).

consequence of a dislocation following a fall” and not נכה (in *italics*). Questions remain about the historical accuracy of this episode, especially whether five year old boys falling out of an adult’s arm would necessarily become disabled, but healing complications from a dislocation in its Arabic meaning فسخ of one of the feet are not unthinkable in the Ancient Near East. Of course, this event would have had to take place about twenty years earlier to match the ages of Mephiboshet with Meribaal, but according to Veijola this not impossible.¹⁸ In the eyes of the redactor, it lets David appear generous and reliable, pointing simultaneously towards chapter 9 and back in history to the oath between David and Jonathan.

This brings us to the question why this verse was inserted at this place, as it is unanimously agreed upon. For the answer we must look back at 2 Sam 5,8 and David’s supposed “hate for the lame and blind” who are not to come into the house (= temple). If the goal was to portray David as a trustworthy and reliable king who keeps his word to his best friend after his death, a story based on David’s generosity does not fit well with the background that he dislikes the same people he is said to be beneficial to. By introducing Meribaal/Mephiboshet before chapter 5, it softens some of the discrepancy surrounding David’s antagonism concerning the “lame” in the latter chapter.

1.2. David meets Meribaal (2 Sam 9,1-13 par 1 Chr 8,34b; 9,40b)

2 Sam 9

1 *David asked, “Is there anyone left of Saul’s house to whom I may show consideration for Jonathan’s sake?”*

2 **Now the house of Saul had a servant named Ziba, and he was summoned to David.**

The king asked him, “Are you Ziba?” “Your servant”, he replied.

3 **Then the king inquired, “Is there none left of Saul’s house**

to whom I may show my utmost consideration?”

“There is still Jonathan’s son, lame (נכה) in both feet,” Ziba answered the king.

4 *“Where is he?” the king said to him, and Ziba answered the king, “He is in the house of Machir, son of Ammiel, in Lo-debar.”*

5 **So the king sent and brought him from Lo-debar, from the house of Machir, son of Ammiel.**

6 **When Meribaal, son of Jonathan, son of Saul, came to David, he fell on his face and did homage.**

¹⁸ See Veijola, *David*, 343f.

Then, David asked, "Mephiboshet?" And he replied, "Yes, sir; your servant."

7 **"Do not fear," David said to him,**

"for I will truly show you consideration for the sake of Jonathan, your father:

I will restore to you all the land of Saul, your grandfather

but you yourself shall continually eat food at my table."

8 *Bowing down, he replied, "What is your servant that you should graciously upon a dead dog such as I?"*

9 **Then the king called Ziba, Saul's steward, and said to him, "I have given your master's grandson all that belonged to Saul and to his family.**

10 **You shall work the land for him – you and your sons and your servants – and you shall bring in the produce that it may provide food for your master's household and that they may eat.**

However, Mephiboshet, your master's (grand)son, shall continually eat food at my table."

Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.

11 *Then Ziba said to the king, "Your servant will do whatever my lord the king commands his servant." So Mephiboshet ate at the king's table like one of the king's sons.*

12 **Moreover, Meribaal had a young son named Micah. All who dwelt in Ziba's house were servants of Meribaal.**

13 *However, Mephiboshet himself resided in Jerusalem because he always ate at the king's table. He was lame (πῶς) in both feet¹⁹.*

1 Chr 8||9:

...and Meribaal was the father of Micah.

2 Sam 9 is the central text in the Meribaal story and the one that is likely responsible for the confusion of the two different characters. The opinion of most scholars on the identity of Meribaal in this chapter is quite divided. Ackroyd remains very close to the actual text and considers Mephibosheth to be Jonathan's son and the main benefactor of David's loyalty to him.²⁰ Similarly Anderson, who points to the institution of royal land grants to ensure someone's loyalty. As well as manifesting his loyalty to Jonathan, the restoration of Saul's land serves reciprocally as a tool to

¹⁹ Translation according to Anderson, *Samuel*, 139.

²⁰ See Ackroyd, *Samuel*, 91-94.

guarantee Meribaal's and subsequently Ziba's loyalty to David.²¹ Veijola continues to argue that the primary reference is not to Jonathan's son Meribaal who is pardoned and to whom Saul's land is returned, but to Saul's son, who is in his opinion pre-emptively placed under house arrest in Jerusalem in order to keep an eye on a potential rival.²² Stoebe proposes the possibility that the traits of two separate people having been merged in the story might explain for the alternating mentions of Meribaal as Saul's and Jonathan's son.²³

I agree with Stoebe's suggestion and will continue to elaborate how these two personalities may have been merged. For that, I will proceed with a verse-by-verse analysis of the text. To that end, I have divided the text into two redactional entities, one representing the original story (in **bold**) around Meribaal, Jonathan's son who is נכה in both feet, as seen in 2 Sam 4, the other one a later addition that is responsible for the dialogue form of the text, as well as the insertion of Mephiboshet, Saul's son and presumably פסח in both feet (in *italic*). The dialogue form may have been the responsibility of another final redactor, but for simplicity reasons, we will just consider those two.

V.1: According to most interpreters, this verse appears out of nowhere and seems to be addressed to no one. It was probably written by the same editor who is responsible for the repeated statement of the intended consideration in vv. 3 and 7, this verse serves as a headline to the forthcoming story by pre-empting its intention and highlighting David's generosity.²⁴ The author definitely knew the ending and wanted David to appear generous towards Saul's house, which had just been decimated. Yet, if the oath was to Jonathan, why ask for "anyone of Saul's house"? Obviously, he only had Meribaal in mind and did evidently not show the same generosity to the rest of Saul's family.

V.2: 2a is the real beginning of the story with the introduction of Ziba, the administrator of Saul's properties in the absence of a heir and presumably his ally who would be knowledgeable about the location of any possible remaining family members.

²¹ See Anderson, *Samuel*, 142f., based on Zafira Ben-Barak, "Meribaal and the System of Land Grants in Ancient Israel", *Biblica* 62, 1981, 73-91, here 76-84, who herself proposes that this episode took place after the incident described in 2 Sam 21, the death of Saul's son Mephiboshet. Subsequently, Meribaal was "discovered" as the last remaining family member to inherit Saul's estate: *Saul's land which had passed into David's hands as bona vacantia, returned to Meribaal after his discovery as a member of the former's family* (84).

²² See Veijola, *David*, 350.

²³ See Stoebe, *Buch*, 264.

²⁴ See Anderson, *Samuel*, 141; Stoebe, *Buch*, 263; Veijola, *David*, 346f.

2b does not give any new information, but confirms Ziba's identity by way of a direct question by David.

V. 3: In v. 3a we have the previous question about any of Saul's remaining family members with a slight modification from *איש עוד האפס עוד* to *יהכי שׁע וד* giving the impression of a rhetorical question. David did not seem to expect a positive answer. Moreover, after just having eliminated Saul's family, this question presumes that there is no one left of his family and David expecting a confirmation of his assumption. Therefore, knowing the outcome already, the first repetition of v. 1 in v. 3b somewhat corrects this image. V. 3c then presents David with the seemingly unexpected answer that after all, there is still Jonathan's son Meribaal left, yet being lame (*נכה*) in both feet. According to Zafira Ben-Barak, *only in the absence of heirs from the royal house that had been overthrown did its estates, which were considered bona vacantia, pass to the new king as crown lands. When a descendant of the previous ruling family was discovered, however, the lands passed from the ownership of the ruling king back to him.*²⁵ Up to this point, it can be presumed that Saul's property was without heir and had passed under the control of the king, provided that a natural heir is not found to contest this decision. Ziba certainly knew about the existence of Meribaal all along and given the fate of his other family members the motive behind his eager willingness to deliver Meribaal into David's hands are at best questionable. It is not clear whether he expected Meribaal to be reinstated as owner of the estate or if he just wanted to establish his loyalty to David by delivering a presumed enemy of the king.

VV. 4-5: V. 4 is the repetition of v. 5 in dialogue form, restating the same information of the location of Meribaal's hideout, and v. 5 likely being the continuation of the original narrated form.²⁶

V. 6: Meribaal arrives at David's palace, fearing the worst and knowing he has nothing to expect from David (6a). The possibility that *בן-שאול* is inserted at a later time to confuse the genealogy is remote, since this is a fixed expression and always relates to the immediately preceding name, i.e. Jonathan. Yet, in v. 6b we find the same identification dialogue as in v. 2b with almost the same vocabulary.

V. 7 provides the surprise twist of the story: Being aware about Meribaal's seemingly hopeless situation, David calms his fears and then does the unexpected: he names him heir to Saul's estate (v.7aα.β)²⁷, despite his physical handicap or maybe

²⁵ Ben-Barak, *Meribaal*, 81.

²⁶ On the location of Lo-debar and the person Machir see See Anderson, *Samuel*, 141; Ackroyd, *Samuel*, 93.

²⁷ Stoebe points to Gn 28,15 as parallel for the use of *אב* as "grandfather" (*Buch*, 261, Note to v. 7), while Veijola uses the lack of any other parallel as proof that Saul's son Meribaal is the benefactor of the

because of it, since he realizes that Meribaal is hardly a threat to his kingship. Considering that since the cultic and profane functions of the king are still united in one person, ritual impurity restrictions on physically disabled people are likely still in force and therefore would disqualify him from holding any public office. Yet it seems not to affect legal ownership of land, even though a disabled person may not be able to work the land himself, which is why vv. 9-10 were added. Verses 7aβ.bβ are the turning point in the editorial comment on the original story: The third repetition of David's intention to show consideration with an expressive mention of Jonathan as the father that indeed seems a bit exaggerated plus the first of four occurrences of the invitation to the master's son to eat at the king's table. The question is whether this "invitation" is related to the previous land grant or whether both belong to a separate tradition. Given its redactional connection, the latter seems more likely.

V. 8: This verse does not contribute any additional information, but fits very well in the dialogue form of the editor using some of the same vocabulary. Indeed, to this day, the Arabic word *دلب* (dog) is considered a very bad insult. Clearly, by exaggerating Mephiboshet's self-depreciation, the editor is trying to score points in favour of David.

VV. 9-10: The continuation of the land grant specifications: Due to Meribaal's injury, he evidently cannot work the land by himself, therefore Ziba is informed of David's decision and instructed to cultivate the land for him. I would agree with Ackroyd that in the two mentions of the Hebrew designation *בן־אדניך* v. 10, the first one is indeed to be interpreted as "household", since, according to David's decree, Meribaal does become Ziba's new master after whom he would have to look out for.²⁸ V. 10bα inserts a repetition of the initial invitation from v. 7 to eat at the king's table, yet here *בן־אדניך* is directly connected with Mephiboshet's name and can be translated as "your master's son". This would fall in line with the redactor's intention of weaving Saul's son into the story of the land grant. Finally, v. 10bβ presents the reader with the amount of people that Ziba had at his disposition to fulfill his task.

V. 11: This is the termination of the editorial dialogue form with Ziba's statement of loyalty towards David and the third mention of the palace invitation to Mephiboshet.

V. 12: This piece of information should have followed immediately after v. 10: the introduction of Meribaal's son Micah, who is included in Saul's entire former household which Ziba has to provide for. This ends the original story of the generous

land grant (*David*, 340-342).

²⁸ See Ackroyd, *Samuel*, 93.

land grant by David to a disabled heir of Saul, fulfilling his oath to Jonathan. The family connection between Meribaal and Micah is the only information that the Chronicler included in his account of David's legacy (1 Chr 8,34b; 9,40b). Like anything else connected with lame and therefore ritually impure people, this whole episode was considered irrelevant for the larger picture of the Priestly editor.

V. 13: The closing comment of this entire episode mentions for the fourth time that Mephiboshet is eating at the king's table. The final note of him being lame (פספס) appears somewhat artificial with no relation to the previous text other than to make sure the reader thinks we are talking about the same person as in the land grant story. Yet, the editor's use of a different vocabulary for lameness points to Priestly circles for its authorship.

This entire episode is about two separate acts, the land grant on one hand and the invitation to eat at the king's table on the other. Both are generally seen as belonging together, yet do not necessarily depend on each other. As we have seen through the redactional analysis, the original story is about the restoration of Saul's property to his only remaining heir, Meribaal, thus ensuring his and Ziba's loyalty. At a later time, a second editor merged the story with Mephiboshet, Saul's son who was indeed kept at David's palace for surveillance reasons, because he was considered to be suspicious to claim his father's throne.²⁹ Moreover, it is quite possible that he was in fact not lame at all and that this attribution was only an editorial construct to fit in with the original story, hence the differing vocabulary concerning lameness.

There are two reasons in favor of this separation of the two stories: First, the original story is coherent all in itself without the addition of the king's palace. Secondly, the ostensible three-time occurrence of "showing consideration" (vv. 1.3.7) is matched four times by the repetition of Mephiboshet eating at the king's table (vv. 7.10.11.13). According to the second redactor whose intention it is to show David's generosity, this is the real "utmost consideration", not the earlier land grant to Meribaal which has a different purpose and was conveniently used for the merger of the two personalities.

1.3. David and Ziba: Meribaal's Loyalty in Question? (2 Sam 16,1-4)

1 When David had passed a little beyond the summit, there came to meet him Ziba, the

²⁹ According to Stoebe, Mephiboshet would as a son of a פלגש probably not have been eligible for the throne anyway (*Buch*, 263), yet a precautionary house arrest is not unthinkable.

steward of Meribaal, with a couple of saddled asses laden with two hundred loaves of bread, one hundred clusters of raisins, one hundred summer fruit, and a skin of wine.

2 So the king said to Ziba, “What do you plan to do with these things?” “The asses are for the king’s family to ride on,” said Ziba, “the bread and the summer fruit are for the soldiers to eat, and the wine is for drinking, meant for those who may become exhausted in the wilderness.”

3 *Then the king asked, “Where is your master’s son?” “Oh, he is staying on in Jerusalem,” Ziba answered the king, “for he said, ‘Today the house of Israel is going to restore to me the kingdom of my father.’”*

4 So the king said to Ziba, “From now on all that Meribaal has belongs to you!” “I pay you my homage,” exclaimed Ziba, “may I find favor in your eyes, my lord, the king!”³⁰

Continuing with our analysis of the Meribaal/Mephiboshet parallel, we arrive in 2 Sam 16 to an interaction between David and Ziba, the appointed administrator of Meribaal’s inherited estate. The story takes place during the height of Absalom’s revolt threatening David’s kingship and causing him to flee Jerusalem. In this episode, Ziba, who might have had his own ambitions about Saul’s estate, shows his loyalty to David while at the same time discrediting his disabled master. The scheme appears to be paying off, since David changes his mind and gives Meribaal’s land now to Ziba alone. This raises some questions about the legitimacy of this ancient real estate deed. Ben-Barak thinks that while David may have acted within his rights as king to grant land to anyone, this is the first time the Bible records an expropriation on grounds of a presumed offence and would therefore be illegitimate:

With a summary order he confiscated a paternal estate from its owner and granted it to another in reward for his services...This practice, already known at an early date outside Israel, was introduced in Israel by David under force of circumstances. However...its execution was harsh in the extreme. David accepts the guilt of Meribaal without further enquiry, on the basis of a false accusation, and in the absence of the accused, and thus confiscates property from one family and transfers it to another without trial...He thus violates the principle of the rule of law (Ex 23,1f; Dt 1,17; 13,14)³¹

Anderson and Ackroyd both focus on the gamble, Meribaal appears to have been taken by siding against David and hoping Saul’s line might be restored. Even if

³⁰ Translation according to Anderson, *Samuel*, 199.

³¹ Ben-Barak, *Meribaal*, 84f. See also Anderson, *Samuel*, 205.

were not restored to him as a lame person with little chance of becoming king, but maybe to his son Micah who might eventually become eligible.³² Stoebe does not consider vv. 1-2 a factual report, but a stylized recognition of loyalty given during a time of civil unrest, when any partisanship for either side may be risky. In the same way, Meribaal's presumed actions may not represent his actual opinion, but rather a symbol of the dissenting part of the population.³³

If we continue to consider the entire story as a combination of the original land grant to Meribaal and Mephiboshet's added invitation to the king's table, we arrive at the following conclusion for this episode:

VV. 1 and 2 are indeed a continuation of the original story in which Ziba shows his gratitude and loyalty to David with v. 1 being in narrated form and v. 2 a repetition in dialogue form between Ziba and David. It is generally considered that David's change of heart and the subsequent attribution of Saul's land to Ziba alone is based on the accusation of Meribaal by Ziba in v. 3. Yet, this is not guaranteed. V. 4 could also be based on v. 2 and represent a reward for services rendered to David during a time of uncertainty, even though it may not be much more legitimate than if it were based on presumed allegations. What is arousing the suspicion in v. 3 of being a later addition is not so much David's question to Ziba "Where is your master's son?"³⁴, but the answer that Ziba is providing. According to 1 Sam 9, 1-2, Saul's estate can be located in Gibeah in the tribe of Benjamin³⁵ and is therefore in some distance to Jerusalem. Provided Ziba had just arrived from the estate to bring the above mentioned goods to David, it is questionable how he would actually know that Meribaal remained in Jerusalem, let alone know the reasons for it. The answer is that the original Meribaal indeed stayed at the estate where he has been all along. Yet, in v. 3, the later editor continues his suggestion that Mephiboshet, Saul's son, stayed behind at the king's palace awaiting the restoration of his family line while David is fleeing the city. The question to Ziba would therefore just be a rhetorical one in order to establish Mephiboshet's guilt in betraying the one person who gave him the "utmost consideration": keeping him alive and "hosting" him at his palace.

³² See *ibid.*, Ackroyd, *Samuel*, 150f.

³³ See Stoebe, *Buch*, 373-378.

³⁴ Veijola considers this question a major argument in his claim that Saul's son is at the center of the original story: *Hätte Meribaal wirklich täglich bei Hofe gegessen, dann hätte David wohl keinen Anlass gehabt, Ziba nach dem Aufenthalt Meribaals zu fragen. Als Tischgenosse Meribaals müsste er das selbst besser wissen (David, 359).*

³⁵ See also Ben-Barak, *Meribaal*, 78f., who considers this to be the estate in question for David's land grant.

1.4. Ziba and Meribaal (2 Sam 19,18f. 25-30)

18b ...while Ziba, the steward of Saul's estate, with fifteen sons and twenty servants who were with him, rushed into the Jordan before the king,

19 and crossed the ford again and again, to bring across the king's household and to do whatever seemed good to him.

...

25 Also Meribaal, grandson of Saul, had come down to meet the king. He had neither cared for his feet nor cared for his moustache, nor even washed his clothes, from the day the king departed until the day he came back in peace.

26 *So when he came from Jerusalem to meet the king, the king said to him, "Why did you not go with me, Mephiboshet?"*

27 "My lord, the king," he said, "My servant deceived me, for your servant, being lame (πῶς),

said to him, 'Saddle me an ass that I may ride on it and go with the king.'

28 Instead, he has slandered your servant to my lord, the king. But my lord, the king, is like an angel of God. Do as you think right!

29 *For the entire family of my father were nothing but men worthy of death, as far as my lord, the king, was concerned, yet you set your servant among those who eat at your table. What right do I have left to complain any more to the king?"*

30 Then the king said to him, "Why do you go on talking about your affairs? I have decided: 'You and Ziba shall divide the estate.'" "Let him have it all," said Meribaal, to the king, "now that my lord, the king, has come home in peace."³⁶

This episode which is supposed to answer the remaining questions about the relationship between David, Ziba and Meribaal/Mephiboshet, instead raises more questions than it answers. It is unclear where their meeting took place, why David appeared to change his mind about Saul's property for the second time and whether Ziba really tried to take advantage of Meribaal's situation after all. Most scholars again view this episode as a literary entity with speculations about Meribaal/Mephiboshet's motives as to why he did not join the king earlier. Only Stoebe points to his earlier suspicion of two separate traditions.³⁷ This is the only solution that provides a satisfactory answer to most questions.

³⁶ Translation according to Anderson, *Samuel*, 231.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, 238; Ackroyd, *Samuel*, 181f.; Stoebe, *Buch*, 425f.

V. 18b-19: The story retakes a similar motif known from chapter 16, the always loyal and helpful Ziba, who now descends to the Jordan to greet the returning king and help him to cross the river. The number of his family members and servants corresponds with that in chapter 9 and likely belongs to the same tradition. This insertion in the surrounding text prepares the stage for the concluding meeting between David and Meribaal a few verses further.

V. 25: Despite being lame, Meribaal makes the effort to meet the king. The introductory verses 18-19 suggest the meeting took place at the Jordan river as well, but no location is actually specified, other than יֶרֶךְ.³⁸ His physical appearance is unanimously interpreted as a sign of mourning for the departed and presumably dead king. It can no longer be determined whether the mourning was genuine or not, yet he would have a good reason to show his compassion to David, even if it was only to argue the reversal of his decision concerning Saul's land.

V. 26: There is some discussion on how to interpret יְרוּשָׁלַם without a prefix. Depending on who is coming to meet David, we will have to translate accordingly. Most scholars believe that Meribaal/Mephiboshet spent the rebellion at the palace in Jerusalem and therefore translate with reservations *from Jerusalem* (so Anderson, Ackroyd). Stoebe suggests that the meeting took place in Jerusalem and implies that *Mefibaal* came from somewhere else, but this does not coincide with him *coming towards* the king in the previous verse. Moreover, why would David ask a presumably lame person to come with him in the first place, when he would probably only be a burden for the king fleeing for his life? This question would only make sense, if it were directed at Mephiboshet, Saul's son who was "invited" to the king's palace and not to Meribaal, Jonathan's disabled son who I believe remained at the estate in Gibeah all along.

V. 27-28: If we exclude v. 26 from the original story, then the following dialogue took place between David and Meribaal, who is now not giving a "lame" excuse why he did not go with the king from Jerusalem, but is explaining why he did not join Ziba in meeting David back in chapter 16. If there was a rivalry between Ziba and Meribaal about the ownership of Saul's land, it may indeed have been an attempt to argue David's decision to attribute the land to Ziba and v. 28 is an indication that Meribaal will abide by David's decision nevertheless. Unfortunately, this story became too entangled with the Mephiboshet episode that it is impossible to determine the exact *Sitz* of this dialogue. I do think that the expression פָּסָה belongs to the later redactor, as it has been identified in the previous chapters.

³⁸ See *ibid.*, 422.

V. 29: This verse is a secondary elaboration of the previous one, focussing again on the “honour” to eat at the king’s table after some depreciating remarks about Saul and his family who indeed all have perished except for Mephiboshet. The verse ends again on a pleading note. The content of this verse does not correspond with v. 28 and the following verse can also connect after v. 28.

V. 30: The conclusion of the land deal with a surprise ending: David changes his mind again and now divides the land between Ziba and Meribaal. Whether this was due to Meribaal’s last-minute show of loyalty or whether David was simply fed up with the whole squabble and wanted to get back to business after returning to the throne is no longer ascertainable. According to most scholars, David finally chooses the unsatisfactory solution not to choose.³⁹

Ben-Barak divides the land episode into three different stages: In stage I Saul leaves the estate with no apparent heir. It then falls as crown land in the hand of David who bestows the land to Meribaal once a descendant of Saul is discovered. In stage II, Meribaal is *in absentia* convicted of treason, the land falls back to the crown and David remunerates Ziba with the land grant for rendered services. In stage III, David reverses his grant decision and divides the land now between the two. This decision would purely be based on David’s power as king.⁴⁰

If we consider the treason portion as part of the second editor’s work, it would leave stage II as an entirely unilateral grant of the king, based solely on his power “*to take*” *part of the property of one citizen and “to give” it to another of his choice, sometimes for a declared reason and sometimes without any explanation at all.*⁴¹ The division of Saul’s land by David might then have formed the base for this entire episode, into which the Mephiboshet story was weaved subsequently.

1.5. Meribaal and Mephiboshet (2 Sam 21,7-9)

7 **However, the king spared Meribaal, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, because of their mutual oath sworn by Yahweh, that existed between David and Jonathan, the son of Saul.**

8 *But the king took the two sons of Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul,*

³⁹ For further details see *ibid.* 426; Ackroyd, *Samuel*, 182; Anderson, *Samuel*, 238; Ben-Barak, *Meribaal*, 87f.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.* 88.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

namely Armoni and Mephiboshet, as well as the five sons of Merab, the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel, the son of Barzillai, the Meholathite,
9a and handed them over to the Gibeonites who executed them on the mountain before Yahweh.⁴²

This episode represents the only time where the two characters actually appear together in the same context. Some scholars consider this episode to belong before chapter 9 and propose that v. 7 was inserted here to distinguish the two similar sounding names and to remind the readers of David's generosity. Ackroyd sees v. 7 as a harmonizing comment for *two narratives, which are not linked and which cannot be chronologically aligned*.⁴³ Yet, Stoebe points to David's apparent cynicism when the remaining members of Saul's family were just executed and David would then ask whom else he could give his "utmost consideration".⁴⁴ Veijola justifies the execution of the same person that he originally saved with the argument that in chapter 9, David did not give him a definite "survival guarantee", only the redactional comment to eat permanently at the king's table could have been interpreted that way.⁴⁵

However, the remaining discrepancies disappear if we consider v. 7 as the final conclusion of the original story of Meribaal who was נכה in the feet and whose land was (partially) restored by David, fulfilling his oath to Jonathan. V. 7 might have indeed been inserted here by another redactor, because it probably belongs after v. 19,30 which it seems to continue.⁴⁶

By contrast, v. 8f. marks the sad ending of Saul's son Mephiboshet who during Absalom's revolt had indeed stayed behind at the king's palace in Jerusalem, hoping eventually to inherit his throne, confirming David's initial suspicion and becoming a liability. Whether he was actually פסח or not is no longer verifiable and even irrelevant. All the indications point to a redactional insertion with the purpose to merge the stories of the two protagonists.

2. Conclusion

⁴² Translation according to Anderson, *Samuel*, 246f.

⁴³ Ackroyd, *Samuel*, 198. See also Andersen, *Samuel*, 250.

⁴⁴ Stoebe, *Buch*, 460.

⁴⁵ See Veijola, *Meribaal*, 351.

⁴⁶ In agreement with Veijola who argues that vv. 6 and 8 would make a continuous story even without v. 7. (Ibid.).

The information of the biblical texts (Lev 21, 2 Sam 5 and the Meribaal episode 2 Sam 4-21) about the treatment of disabled people in Ancient Israel is ambiguous:

First, there were restrictions concerning their cultic functionality. According to Lev 21, physically disabled people were not allowed to enter the temple let alone serve as priests for fear of polluting the “House of YHWH” with their perceived imperfection. Yet, on a profane level, these restrictions may not have been so rigid. Meribaal was reinstated as landowner, even though he was physically unable to cultivate the land and, in Ziba, was given an aide who was the factual administrator and eventually became its part owner. If we consider that Meribaal may also have been considered ritually impure, it becomes understandable why he might have stayed behind at the estate and did not ride with the king. Only when David returned successfully, did he come out of self-imposed “quarantine” to greet the king. This view is supported by a similar story about king Uzijah who falls ill with “leprosy” and is quarantined without having to give up his throne, even though the impurity provisions in Lev concerning “leprosy” are more severe than those concerning disabilities. Saul’s son Mephiboshet is at this point left out of this equation, since I believe that he was not actually disabled and this attribute was only used as a literary ploy.