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Interpretative Essay# 1

The role of monarch in the ancient near east is discussed in chapter 12 of Victor Matthew's book, **Social World of Ancient Israel 1250- 587 BCE**. Matthews gives us an in depth look into the expectations and protocols that a scholar in modernity should understand as one tries to understand the context into which these ancient sovereigns ruled. David, a king operating in Israel in the context of ancient near east protocols, must be analyzed in the background and foreground of his time. Matthew's brings into focus, the king's interactions with Meribaal (Mephibosheth) and gives us the behind the scenes look into why this ancient King would make the decisions that he made and how he reacted. Secondly, Matthews deeply affects the common pulpit angle of interpretation concerning Mephibosheth which has deeply influenced my own personal take on the matter.

To begin with, Matthews lays out the background for the story of Meribaal and David. Matthew states that the argument that arises from this story is whether or not the household of Solomon or the household of Absalom should take over. The complexity of the problem arises because Meribaal is technically the father of the household of Saul to which David once belonged and supported the household of Absalom rather than Solomon.¹ David reevaluates the situation between him and the house of Saul since Meribaal is still alive. The word that is used is that David wanted to show kindness to the house of Saul. However, Matthew states that David was intentional as an ancient near east monarch that he was looking renegotiate his relationship with the house of Saul.² Matthews also states that this was a time where David was tightening his

¹ Victor H. Matthews, *Social World of Ancient Israel.: 1250-587 BCE* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 169.

² Ibid.

grip on making sure that all the lands of Israel was able to be productive in providing goods for the people to operate as a society.

Furthermore, Matthews states that David technically had control over Saul's house since Jonathan transferred it over to him.³ However, he had no need to tend to it or profit by it. After Saul and Jonathan had died, David simply froze the assets. By meeting with Meribaal, David wanted to secure his safety from his opposition and to make productive the land that Saul's family had claim to.

Another important part of the story is the physical condition of Meribaal. Meribaal's situation and description as written in the bible also holds several cultural interpretations. Meribaal is said to be lame, crippled in his feet, and a dead dog. Matthews goes to the extent of stating that this may be an ancient Israelite way of saying he may not just be lame, he may also not be able to bear children.⁴ The physical state of Meribaal is important to understand when Ziba, Saul's servant, is introduced to the story.

David finally meets with Meribaal and his response to the king of Israel is to say "I am your servant". There is no initial rebellion or antagonism towards David nor any support to his son Absalom. David doesn't immediately give Meribaal authority to retake Saul's land and make it productive again. Instead, David invites him to always sit at his table to eat. Matthews encourages us to look at this in a way that a strategic ancient near east king would. By eating at this table, David is not just exhibiting grace, but a strategic way of indoctrinating, influencing, and building relationship with a person who can have an excuse to destroy you. Matthews says that this was a common way of ancient near east sovereigns would gain influence over ambiguous or oppressed people. One could see an example of this in the stories of Daniel, and

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

the Jewish young men who were also invited to eat with the people who captured them. This was all done to influence and indoctrinate them.

Furthermore, we are introduced to Ziba, Saul's servant who is still attending to Meribaal. David gave Meribaal to have the house of Saul back. However, he allows Ziba to work the land and bring back the produce back to David. According to Matthews, Meribaal is not given full authority over the land as of yet; he is not fully the father of the land until he proves his loyalty at David's table.⁵ Matthews breaks down the strategy of David renegotiating with the house of Saul and warns readers to not mix up philanthropy and monarchial strategy. On the outside, it may seem gracious, but in reality, David has a responsibility to make sure the goods are produced at all times for the nation. Saul's land is promising enough for the king to make this covenant with Meribaal.

Lastly in Matthew's analysis of the episodes with Meribaal, we see the conflict arise between Ziba and Meribaal. Ziba claims that Meribaal is not loyal to David. David allows Ziba to have the land. David later interrogates Meribaal about Ziba's testimony. Meribaal says that Ziba has been lying the whole time. In true ancient near east wisdom, David makes the solution to divide the land. Matthews says that David formulated this because dividing the land would be a death sentence for the land of Saul's family.⁶ Each side of the land would be forced to produce the same amount of produce as one piece of land. The fertile farming grounds would be leached off all their nutrients and the land would be a barren desert. Meribaal refuses the king's offer for his piece of the property. Matthew says Meribaal did this as to save this once precious land of his ancestors and keep it alive for the good of the nation.

⁵ Ibid. 170.

⁶ Ibid. 174.

Matthews in depth background of an ancient near east king greatly affected my view on the story of Mephibosheth and David. To begin with, I have always heard a different angle being preached on the modern day pulpit. I heard it said many times that David was simply being gracious and philanthropic to Meribaal by reinstating his father's land to him and allowing him to sit at this table. Furthermore, from the same pulpits and popular commentaries, I have heard that it is a foreshadowing to the way Jesus invites us to his table and eat.⁷ Pastors have used the words "dead dog like me" to point out our depraved nature as sinners. Rouse follows this train of thought and even emphasis the way David tried to learn his name as a means of putting value to a worthless man of society.⁸ However, Matthews pushes back against this idea. Matthews points out that it was all strategic and mentions no grace and philanthropy involved. David was being calculating and truly moving the chess pieces in his power and authority in a very political way. David was acting as a king, a protector of his land, a provider for his people, and guardian for his own family.

I would have to say I agree with Matthews for the most part. David is a mighty warrior in the battlefield and cunning and calculating king in his reign. However, even though David is strategic and shrewd, one can't help to realize that there are still nuances of grace, mercy, and kindness in David's reign and in the story of Meribaal. An ancient near east monarch could have just killed Meribaal and handled the fallout later.⁹ Perhaps, there is a lesson to be learned through this story. If a typical ancient near east king is calculating, shrewd, and unmerciful, how should a king who is called out by God to be different and set apart from the world supposed to

⁷ Jon Courson, *Jon Courson's Application Commentary: Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 922.

⁸ Rouse, Christopher D. "Scripture and the Disabled: Redeeming Mephibosheth's Identity." *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 17, no. 2 (2008): 183-99. doi:10.1163/174552508X377484. 190

⁹ Beyer, Bryan. *CSB Study Bible: Christian Standard Bible*. Edited by Edwin Blum and Trevin Wax. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017. 472

be behave? Perhaps David's nuances of grace and mercy are not typical of ancient near east king, but perhaps it is typical for a king operating under YHWH. I wonder if David's leadership can show us that Godly leadership can still be powerful, effective, shrewd and calculating by integrating the equally powerful effects of mercy and grace. Mercy and grace are not outliers in the tool bag of a monarch serving YHWH, perhaps they are crucial tools in the leadership of any king or leader. What if we have been looking at leadership the wrong way and have been led to believe that pure power and full tyrannical grip is the only way to manage any organization? What if the true, holy, right way of leadership used both power and love to fulfill the promises and fruitfulness of any organizational body?

Another alternative view of David in putting into focus the intense amount of pressure he must have been feeling at the time because of the revolt. While Matthews presents a historical context of an ancient near east king who has a reason for each and every decision, Vargon shows us that most of his decision were rash.¹⁰ Vargon states that David's belief in Ziba's testimony was already clouded by his need to fight a rebellion and his exhaustion in fact finding. When David splits the land in half between Ziba and Meribaal, he really should have given all of it back to Meribaal. Vargon believes that David did try to operate as Ancient near east king, but failed when he was faced with intense burdens to make decisions.

In conclusion, David is an ancient near east king who has all the reason to fall into the protocols of his contemporaries. However, he is also the king under YHWH, who as a leader Himself, is both all powerful and loving. Going down to the deepest part of David's character, he is also a man under intense pressure and he folds and fumbles.

¹⁰ Vargon, Shmuel. "The Blind and the Lame." *Vetus Testamentum* 46, no. 4 (October 1996): 498-514. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001017467&site=ehost-live>. 510

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