

2 SAMUEL 8*

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Summary

2 Samuel 8 may reflect an inscription or text contemporary with the reign of King David. It has a number of features that could be explained if an inscription lay behind the biblical text, the most striking of which is its repetitive naming of the monarch, paralleling Darius' Behistun Inscription.

A.R. Millard has made a good case recently for the possibility that authentic old Israelite records lie behind Old Testament narratives in the books of Kings. He showed that simply changing an early Aramaic royal inscription from first person singular discourse to third person narration produces a text that reminds the reader of narratives in the Deuteronomistic History.¹ Millard's approach gives a refreshing alternative to the dictates of the so-called biblical minimalists, who assign a late date to the composition of the stories about early Israel and allege that most or all of those stories are fiction. My purpose in this article is to suggest that 2 Samuel 8 may reflect an inscription or text contemporary with the reign of King David.² The ancient text could have had as its propagandistic purpose to affirm David's claim to the throne of Israel, conceivably against the putative claims of the rival house of Saul, or possibly in defence of a novel institution. Indeed, 2 Samuel 8 could be described by Millard's own words, as a bombastic public declaration 'designed to ensure continued respect for the kings and veneration of their names by

* Professor John H. Marks at Princeton University introduced me to the ancient Near East and to Old Testament studies. I would like to thank him, particularly for advising my senior thesis on Darius Hystaspes.

¹ A.R. Millard, 'Israelite and Aramaean History in the Light of Inscriptions', *TynB* 41 (1990), 261-75.

² This idea is not original. A. Caquot and P. de Robert have recently entertained a similar idea: *Les Livres de Samuel* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1994), 442; thus already R. Kittel, as noted by H.W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (ET J.S. Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 290.

subsequent generations'.³ One of the tenets of biblical minimalism has been to deny that Israel's King David ever existed. Discovery of the Tel Dan 'House of David'⁴ inscription should have laid this claim to rest. Unhappily it did not.⁵ Supported by the Tel Dan Inscription,⁶ A. Lemaire and E. Puech have restored 'the house of David' in the Mesha Inscription (or Moabite Stone),⁷ buttressing the view of those of us not convinced by the case against the biblical traditions. To those who are open to the idea that David was a historical figure, 2 Samuel 8 should be of particular interest.

Literary Criticism

Herrmann has described the literary situation of this chapter aptly. It follows the 'History of the Rise of David' (1 Sa. 16:14–2 Sa. 5:25) and precedes most of the 'Succession Narrative' or 'Court History of David' (2 Sa. 6; 7; 9–20; 2 Ki. 1:1–2:11).⁸ Albrecht Alt once argued that 2 Samuel 8 was the continuation of 2 Samuel 5:17–25,⁹ but Martin Noth's masterful treatment of the literary critical issues of the entire Deuteronomistic History (Dtn) correctly resisted that analysis.¹⁰ If the Succession Narrative includes chs. 6 and 7 of 2 Samuel, then ch. 8 stands alone with the two masterpieces of Hebrew literature.¹¹ Ch.

³ Millard, 'Israelite and Aramaean History', 267.

⁴ A. Biran and J. Naveh, 'An Aramaic Stela Fragment from Tel Dan', *IEJ* 43 (1993), 81–98; Biran and Naveh, 'The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment', *IEJ* 45 (1995), 1–18.

⁵ See the excellent discussion by W.M. Schniedewind, 'The Tel Dan Stela: New Light on Aramaic and Jehu's Revolt', *BASOR* 302 (1996), 75–76.

⁶ Even before the Tel Dan discovery there had been scholars who found David's name in the Moabite stone, at line 12 in the phrase 'r'l dwdh, possibly 'the lion figure of David'; J.C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions I: Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 79–80. Cf. *KAI*, 181 for alternative views.

⁷ Schniedewind, 75 and n. 2.

⁸ Siegfried Herrmann, *A History of Israel in Old Testament Times* (ET J.S. Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 149.

⁹ Albrecht Alt, 'Zu II Sam 8', *ZAW* 14 (1936), 149–52.

¹⁰ Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (ET Jane Doull et al.; JSOTS 15; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 56.

¹¹ In my view, Fokkelman is correct in seeing the placement of chapter 8 as a device that allows the subsequent material to focus on problems for David's administration. But in other respects I find his treatment of the chapter forcefully imputes too much to the material at hand. J.P. Fokkelman, *Throne and City* (Vol. III, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*; Assen: van Gorcum, 1990), 256.

8's placement after ch. 7, which implies that Yahweh had settled matters among the countries neighbouring Israel (7:1), is somewhat awkward, perhaps requiring that 7:1 be understood to mean 'At a time [unspecified] when the king was enthroned in his house, and Yahweh had given him rest around about from all his enemies...'

A curious feature of the narrative is its verbatim repetition of 'Yahweh gave victory to David everywhere he went' (vv. 6b, 14b). Stoebe sees this repetition as evidence that the chapter divides into two independent segments,¹² but this seems doubtful in view of the unity of purpose and style of the whole. The text merely reiterates its central message: it is Yahweh who stands firmly behind King David.

Chapter 8 begins with a redactional link to what precedes: 'Afterwards then' (וַיְהִי אַחֲרָיוֹכֵן).¹³ The same phrase plays an identical role elsewhere in Dtn (2 Sa. 10:1). This artificial link draws attention to the original independence of ch. 8, an impression borne out by other considerations. The only link between the language and contents of 2 Samuel 8 and Dtn is the notice in v. 13 that David made a 'name' (שֵׁם) for himself, a rather trivial coincidence. 2 Samuel 8 presupposes David in Jerusalem, and so must follow ch. 6 redactionally. The chapter shows no interest in covenant or ark. It mentions Jerusalem without reference to the cult. Its only interest in religion is to affirm that Yahweh was David's strong supporter and the source of his success and to credit David with offerings of booty to Yahweh. Both themes—the strong support of a national god and the proper dedication of spoils to that god can be found in the Moabite Stone (lines 4, 12). 2 Samuel 8 reveals no concern for the *dynasty* of David. It lacks the stylistic hallmarks of the Court History of David, such as the use of conversations¹⁴ to advance the story line. Nothing in the chapter depends on other parts of Dtn, and nothing in Dtn depends on this passage. Indeed, the inclusion of Ammonites among David's conquests in 2 Samuel 8 sits somewhat awkwardly with the story of the Ammonite war that begins with ch. 9.

The chapter ends with a roster of David's cabinet, material that stands apart from the preceding narrative and might be an addition from Dtn, precisely as Noth argued with a further eye to 2 Samuel

¹² H.J. Stoebe, *Das zweite Buch Samuelis* (KAT VIII.2; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1994), 246.

¹³ E. Dhorme has correctly noted that 'after this' 'peut se rattacher à n'importe quel chapitre précédent....', *Les Livres de Samuel* (Paris: Gabalda, 1910), 335.

¹⁴ E. Sellin and G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (ET D. Green; Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 222, following L. Rost, *The Succession to the Throne of David* (ET M.D. Rutter & D. Gunn; Sheffield: Almond, 1982), *passim*.

20:23-26 and 1 Kings 4:2-6.¹⁵ But see below for a case to join these verses to the body of the chapter as an original unity. Before the advent of biblical minimalism there was a broad accord that the roster of David's cabinet was ancient and authentic. Certainly the form of the office name 'over the soldiery' ('general' v. 16) fits with authenticated titles from as early as the Late Bronze Age, as in the Ugaritic *'l bt* for steward (Hebrew עַל הַבַּיִת).¹⁶ The end of 2 Samuel 8 does not offer a smooth transition to ch. 9, and this reinforces the impression that ch. 8 is neither a part of nor an antecedent to other materials in 1–2 Samuel.

Form Criticism

2 Samuel 8:1-14 (15-18?) remains as an independent text. Dtn did not compose this material. Contents and style are limited to the exaltation of David. The form of the chapter can be described as a *royal encomium as apology*. Indeed, David's name occurs with remarkable and grammatically unnecessary frequency in the passage. Revealingly, P. Kyle McCarter's superb commentary on the books of Samuel suppresses David's name in the translation of v. 4,¹⁷ yielding a smoother English text but departing from the Hebrew. An English translation can capture the superfluity in the mention of David by name. In breaking the chapter down into small units I hope to prepare a comparison with a relevant ancient Near Eastern inscription while highlighting the formal character of the chapter.

David defeated¹⁸ the Philistines. He subjected them.

David took Metheg Ha'ammah¹⁹ from the Philistines.

[*David*]²⁰ defeated Moab and measured them by the rope line. He forced them to lie on the ground. He measured two lines for death and one entire line for life.

Moab became tribute-bearing vassals of *David*.

David defeated Hadadezer son of Rehob king of Zoba when he went to establish a monument on the Euphrates River.

¹⁵ Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 56.

¹⁶ R.M. Good, 'The Ugaritic Steward', *ZAW* 95 (1983), 110-11.

¹⁷ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 242.

¹⁸ For the range of meanings and nuances of the verb נָכַח (hiphil) see Ernst Jenni, "'Schlagen" in 2 Sam 2,31 und in den historischen Büchern', *EI* 24 (1993), 114*-18*; J. Conrad, נָכַח, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 9.415-22.

¹⁹ See McCarter, 243, for a discussion of the difficult expression *meteg-'ammah*. Cf. S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 279-80.

²⁰ Reading with LXX.

David captured from him 1,700 cavalry and 20,000 foot soldiers.
David hamstringed all of the chariot horses keeping one hundred of them.
 Aram Damascus came to assist Hadadezer king of Zoba.
David killed 22,000 men of Aram.
David put garrisons in Aram Damascus.
 For *David*, Aram became tribute-bearing vassals.
 Yahweh gave victory²¹ to *David* everywhere he went.
David took the golden shields belonging to the servants of Hadadezer and he brought them to Jerusalem.
David took an enormous amount of bronze from Betah and Berouti, cities of Hadadezer.
 Toi king of Hamat heard that *David* struck all of Hadadezer's army.
 Toi sent Yoram his son to King *David* to sue for peace and to greet him because he [*David*] fought Hadadezer and defeated him. Hadadezer was often at war against Toi. Silver vessels, gold vessels, and bronze vessels were in his [Yoram's] hand.
 So King *David* dedicated these to Yahweh along with the silver and gold he had dedicated from the nations he subdued: from Aram; from Moab; from the Ammonites; from the Philistines and from the Amalekites; and from the spoils of Hadadezer son of Rehob king of Zoba.
David made a name as he returned from defeating Edom²² in Salt Valley, killing 18,000 [men]. He garrisoned Edom. In all Edom he put garrisons.
 All Edom became servants to *David*.
 Yahweh gave victory to *David* everywhere he went.
David ruled over all Israel. *David* acted with justice and righteousness for all his people.
 Joab son of Zeruiah was general [על־הצבא]. Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was herald. Zadoq son of Ahitub and Ahimelek son of Abiathar were priests. Seraiah was secretary. Benaiah son of Jehoiada commanded the Cherethites and the Pelethites. *David*'s sons were priests.²³

The text of 2 Samuel 8 does not resemble other Northwest Semitic inscriptions in all of its peculiarities. The frequent naming of the king is very unusual, although in iconic religions the frequent naming of the king can be replaced by an image of the monarch. Thus the Tel Fekheriyeh inscription surrounds a representation of the form (*dmwt*') of Haddyis'i.

The chapter divides into small units, each one of which names *David* at least once. Apart from the remarkable frequency of the name *David*, two features of the text are prominent. First, its style is quite spare. Neither the circumstances nor the tactics of *David*'s victories are given. The emphasis is entirely on the name of *David* as the triumphant king. In this light, the tally of casualties and booty has a particular interest. They provide an objective measure of *David*'s

²¹ Cf. Ps 20:6, and Sawyer and Fabry, ש"ש in *TDOT* 6.442-63.

²² Following McCarter and others and reading 'dm for 'rm.

²³ The 'additions' to vv. 7-8 are to be rejected as anachronisms. Stephen Pisano, *Additions or Omissions in the Books of Samuel* (OBO 57; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 43-47.

achievements. Evidently a man's body count could signal his competence to be king. We compare 1 Samuel 18:7-8:

And the women sang to one another as they made merry:
'Saul has slain his thousands,
And David his ten thousands.' (RSV)²⁴

On hearing of this song, Saul assumed that David was staged to become king of Israel. Royal inscriptions that measure military success in casualties, captives, and booty are as old as the genre in Assyrian literature.²⁵

Second, the good character of David's reign is asserted rather than illustrated. Justice and righteousness characterised proper rule nearly universally in the political thought of the ancient Near East.²⁶ And so David ruled in accordance with these virtues. In different ways, the chapter is showing David's fitness to rule.

What might explain the conciseness of the chapter's style? One possibility is that the chapter was intended for display on a stone stela. The text we have received would need some introduction for public display, and allowing for an introduction the entire inscription behind 2 Samuel 8 might have had about 300 words. This would be somewhat larger than the 9-8 century BC Tel Fekheriyeh Inscription (perhaps 200 words) but quite close to the length of the Moabite Stone (ca. 315). The Karatepe Inscription (*KAI* 26) would be longer still, running almost 400 words in columns 1-2 alone. The availability of stone in a size large enough to permit a less spare text may have been a limiting factor.

What sort of introduction would 2 Samuel 8 need as an inscription? Something as simple as 'Stela which David erected' would work. Less likely but more entertaining would be an emulation of the Kilamuwa inscription (*KAI* 24): 'Saul was king, but he did nothing; David became king, and Yahweh gave him victory everywhere he went.' To summarise, 2 Samuel 8 is a free-standing text with the form of a royal encomium as apology. It mentions David with exceptional frequency. It has an interest in David's measurable accomplishments. It links David to Yahweh in a special relationship of devotion and advocacy, and it marks David as a righteous king.

²⁴ See the important study by S. Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilizations 32; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 15-24.

²⁵ Shalmaneser I (ca. 1280 BC), *ARAB* § 116.

²⁶ See K.W. Whitelam's excellent study, *The Just King* (JSOTS 12; Sheffield: JSOT, 1979), 17-37.

The length of the chapter is appropriate for public display on a stela, and there are points of contact between it and some very old Northwest Semitic Inscriptions, especially the Moabite Stone (C9 BC).

Among ancient Near Eastern inscriptions, one stands out as particularly similar to the text of 2 Samuel 8. It is the Behistun Inscription of Darius Hystaspes, written ca. 510 BC. The inscription was placed on a cliff above and visible from a caravan route between Baghdad and Teheran. A bas-relief of Darius in triumph, with prisoners roped together and Ahuramazda his god overseeing matters with benevolence, accompanies the inscriptions.²⁷ The inscription, written in Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian, was executed too high to be legible from the caravan route. To assure a proper hearing of his story, Darius had copies of the text circulated for the edification of his empire. An Aramaic version of the encomium as apology survived at Elephantine among the documents of the Jewish colony there.

The Behistun Inscription of Darius I begins with an introduction of Darius and his genealogical claim to be a king. It narrates the confusing story of the struggle to succeed Cambyses as king of the empire founded by the great king and Messiah (Is. 45:1) Cyrus († 530 BC). Cyrus had two sons eligible to reign in the empire, Cambyses and Smerdis. It was Cambyses who succeeded Cyrus. By 522 BC Cambyses had brought Persian rule to Egypt. According to Darius, Cambyses had long before killed the true Smerdis, but a Magian named Gaumata pretended to be Smerdis (ca. 522 BC) and claimed the throne. Soon afterward Cambyses died, allegedly committing suicide when confronted by the apparent success of the usurper Gaumata. A civil war erupted. Before the Persian civil war was over, there would be others claiming to be Smerdis. The inscription proceeds to recount Darius' valiant struggle to regain the throne for his family, to wit himself. It is a long story, given in some detail. The modern historian's view of the events surrounding the rise of Darius is somewhat sceptical of the story Darius told. It is entirely possible that the first man claiming to be Smerdis was really Smerdis (or Bardiya in Herodotus' retelling of the story).²⁸ Darius' inscription tells us that

²⁷ R.G. Kent, *Old Persian: Grammar Texts Lexicon* (American Oriental Series 33; New Haven: AOS, 1953), Plate One.

²⁸ See the recent review of events by Pierre Briant, *Histoire de l'empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre* (Achaemenid History X, ed. Briant et al.; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1996), 119-50.

he enjoyed the backing of the god Ahuramazda. The character of the story can be sensed in brief extracts from the inscription:²⁹

¶8 Saith *Darius* the King: Within these countries, the man who was loyal, him I rewarded well; (him) who was evil, him I punished well; by the favor of Ahuramazda these countries showed respect for my law; as was said to them by me, thus it was done.

¶20 Saith *Darius* the King: After that, Nadintu Bel with a few horsemen fled; he went off to Babylon. Thereupon I went to Babylon. By the favor of Ahuramazda both I seized Babylon and I took that Nadintu-Bel prisoner. After that, I slew that Nadintu-Bel at Babylon.

¶21 Saith *Darius* the King: While I was in Babylon, these are the provinces which became rebellious from me: Persia, Elam, Media, Assyria, Egypt, Parthia, Margiana, Sattagydia, Scythia.

¶22 Saith *Darius* the King: One man, by name Martiya, son of Cincikhri—a town by name Kuganaka, in Persia—there he abode. He rose up in Elam; to the people thus he said, ‘I am Imanish, king in Elam...’³⁰

Needless to say, Darius put paid to this claim.

¶38 Saith *Darius* the King: A province by name Margiana—it became rebellious to me. One man by name Frada, a Margian—him they made chief. Thereupon I sent forth against him a Persian by name Dadarshi, my subject, satrap in Bactria. Thus I said to him: ‘Go forth, smite that army which does not call itself mine!’ After that, Dadarshi marched out with the army; he joined battle with the Margians. Ahuramazda bore me aid; by the favor of Ahuramazda my army smote that rebellious army exceedingly....³¹

The Aramaic text corresponding to Kent’s ¶38 should be compared:

Thus says Darius the king, the country called Margiana rebelled. A king over them they made one Frada by name. Then I sent (the man) called Dadarshish, governor of Bactria. I said, ‘Go kill the army, the rebels. Then Dadarshish joined battle with the Margians. Auramazda helped me. By the protection of Auramazda they killed those rebels. On the 23rd of Chisleu [Nov.-Dec.] they joined battle. They killed of them 55,243, and took alive 6,972.’³²

The inscription follows the lengthy process of bringing Cyrus’ empire into submission to *Darius*. Near the end of the inscription, Darius remembers his allies:

²⁹ For convenience, I quote and follow R.G. Kent’s translation of the Old Persian version of the inscription (note 27). The inscription at Behistun is trilingual, with Akkadian and Elamite versions alongside the Old Persian text. The Akkadian text may have been the authoritative edition, since Akkadian was the language of international affairs. See A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Osnabrueck: Otto Zeller, 1967 [orig. 1923]), 249; J. Greenfield and B. Porten, *The Besitun Inscription of Darius the Great, Aramaic Version* (London: Lund and Humphries, 1982-83).

³⁰ Kent, 119, 123.

³¹ Kent, 127.

³² Cowley, 258.

¶68 Saith *Darius* the king: These are the men who were there at the time when I slew Gaumata the Magian who called himself Smerdis; at that time these men cooperated as my followers: Intaphernes by name, son of Vayaspara, a Persian; Otanes by name, son of Thukhra, a Persian; Gobryus by name, son of Mardonius, a Persian; Hydarnes by name, son of Bababigna, a Persian; Megabyzus by name, son of Datuvahya, a Persian; Ardumanish by name, son of Vahauka, a Persian.

¶69 Saith *Darius* the King: Thou who shalt be king hereafter, protect well the family of these men.³³

The similarities between Behistun (BI) and 2 Samuel 8 are fairly obvious. BI breaks into short units each of which names Darius, and so Darius' name appears with tedious regularity. BI manages to be in both the third person and the first person discourse. 'Saith Darius' (third person) leads into memoirs in the first person. Just as David ruled with justice and righteousness, the rule of law under Darius was as it should be (¶8). The Old Persian text of BI does not show an interest in body counts and the like, but the Akkadian and Aramaic texts do (see ¶38 and its Aramaic counterpart). It cannot be ruled out that Persian royal traditions did not assign importance to the measures of military success so common in Assyrian literature.

BI may throw an interesting light on the cabinet of David in 2 Samuel 8. In BI Darius listed his early supporters for the explicit purpose of securing their immunity from persecution by any later king. Jerusalem, we may suspect, was not free from palace intrigue. It is conceivable that David would list his own supporters who, logically enough, made up David's cabinet, for the purpose of immunising them against future action. To suggest this role for the list of David's officers would invite problems in The Succession Narrative, since by its account David prompted Solomon to eliminate Joab (1 Ki. 2:5ff.). This could suggest a date for 2 Samuel 8 before Joab's fall from David's grace. Solomon of course had his own reason to eliminate Joab, who had openly supported Adonijah's abortive effort to steal David's throne (1 Ki. 1:5-8).

To summarise: 2 Samuel 8 has a number of features that could be explained if an inscription lay behind the biblical text. The most striking feature of the biblical text, its repetitive naming of David, has an interesting parallel in a later Persian inscription, Darius' Behistun Inscription. Since we know that Darius had papyri with the BI circulated in the Persian empire, we are aware of two ways that an old Israelite inscription could have made its way into the biblical text, by preservation of a stone original or by circulation on papyrus.

³³ Cowley, 132.

Much can be learned about the historical David and his reign from 2 Samuel 8. For example, it is surprising to find David at the Euphrates River establishing his monument there. Some control over trade routes through Tadmor (Palmyra) would seem to be implied. Or again, David's lame advice to Solomon to eliminate Joab seems a less securely established fact. Solomon had his own reasons for murdering Joab, who miscalculated and threw his support behind Adonijah, Solomon's older brother and heir apparent to David, in an exciting story from the Court History of David (1 Ki. 1:5ff.). Furthermore, the outlines of a foreign policy may be in view. David took captives from nations that are far away from Israel (Zoba), but killed those in neighbouring states. The distance and harsh terrain to Zoba would deter slaves from trying to escape, while the proximity of neighbouring peoples might have the opposite effect. Taking captives ordinarily implies a use for slaves, often in public works programs. Palaces, temples, and city walls come to mind. Holding captives can have a deterrent effect on the policies of the captives' country of origin. To kill the soldiery of nearest neighbours (Aram, Moab,³⁴ Edom, no details give about Ammon) would have the effect of 'pacifying' those neighbours as well for at least one generation.³⁵ It would also deal a blow to the economies of those neighbours. So it looks as though David intended to control neighbouring peoples defining a band from the Mediterranean Sea into the Syrian desert. Arguments from silence are dangerous, but we do notice that the roster of David's military adversaries excludes Egypt and the Phoenician states. To conclude that David wanted to control regional trade and thus exploit Israel's greatest natural resource (her location) is certainly admissible.

Finally, 2 Samuel 8 could play a useful role in adjudicating some of the claims of biblical minimalists. There are good reasons to judge that with the material in this chapter, historians are on *terra firma*.

³⁴ 2 Sa. 8:2 presents the treatment of Moab as though it were especially magnanimous. One entire line of men (out of three) was preserved alive.

³⁵ Fierce enmity is the cost of such a policy. Already in the ninth century BC the deep hatred of the Moabites for Israel can be read in the Moabite Stone.