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Scribal Punchlines: The Masoretic Divisions as Witnesses to Narrative and Rhetorical Sensitivity of Scribes in the Books of Samuel

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The medieval manuscripts that contain the Masoretic Text display a text structured in open passages (*parashiyot petuhot*) and closed passages (*parashiyot setumot*); they are delimited by spaces that more or less represent the equivalent of our indentations. A simple comparison between the subdivisions of these manuscripts with those chosen by the editors of modern translations of the Bible demonstrates the differences: the elements that captured the scribes’ attention and the groupings they effected were not necessarily the same as ours.¹ The criteria that guided their work of subdivision are the subject of several hypotheses, which I shall summarise. After this brief *status quaestionis*, I would like to demonstrate that one aspect of the question has been neglected. Certain subdivisions that can be observed in the masoretic manuscripts, at least in the books of Samuel,² correspond to passages of great dramatic intensity; in particular, a selection of them mark punchlines and key pieces of information provided by the narrator. The observation of this phenomenon suggests that these text divisions have, at the very least, an *effect* on the manner in which the text is read. But it seems to me that they also testify to the way in which the scribes who are responsible for them read

¹ AULD 2011 is an interesting exception since the translation and the commentary proper are divided according to the closed passages in the Leningrad codex.

² This article was the product of a workshop on 2 Samuel, so the examples given here are from this book; of course the division between 1 and 2 Samuel does not exist in the masoretic manuscripts.

the text themselves, which thus provides another criterion in addition to those already identified.³

1. A brief *status quaestionis*

According to Emmanuel Tov, the books of Samuel contain two hundred and eleven closed passages and one hundred and six open passages, that is three hundred and seventeen passages for a total of one thousand five hundred and six verses. The frequency is thus one division every 4.9 verses on average, which makes the books of Samuel one of the works of the Hebrew Bible that contains the highest density of sections, far above Genesis or Kings, for example.⁴ With regard to the *petûḥôt*, Auld reckons forty-nine dividers in the Aleppo codex and thirty in the Leningrad codex, and notes that only fourteen are shared by these two manuscripts.⁵

As Yosef Ofer explains, distinguishing between open and closed passages is not always easy and has provoked numerous debates over the centuries:

The early rabbinic authorities had different opinions regarding the form of open and closed passages. They all agreed that if the scribe finished a passage at the beginning of a line and left a space, starting the next passage on the same line – this next section is a closed passage. They also agreed that if the scribe finished the passage close to the beginning of the line, left the rest of the line blank and started the next passage at the beginning of the next line – that next section is an open passage.

In other cases, for example if the scribe finished a passage near the end of a line or at the very end of the line, they had different opinions.⁶

In a number of situations, the distinction between open and closed passages needs to be qualified; a masoretic codex sometimes has a *setumah* where another has a *petuḥah*, for instance.⁷ Whatever the case, the divisions of the text observed in the medieval manuscripts

³ I thank my wife, Sarah Richelle, for translating this article (including the quotations from French publications) from French to English.

⁴ TOV 2004, p. 153.

⁵ AULD 2011, p. 7.

⁶ OFER 2019, p. 68.

⁷ See below the case of 2 Sam 13, 31.

are the work of scribes copying the consonantal text, a task which should be distinguished from the masoretic work proper, which consisted of providing the text with vowels, accents and other cantillation signs, as well as a double marginal apparatus (*masorah parva* and *masorah magna*). As we shall see later, the system of division is at least in part inherited from previous scribes who worked in periods when the text was purely consonantal. At the same time, the medieval codices present numerous fluctuations in these divisions. It often remains difficult to determine to whom the choices that were made should be imputed, that is to distinguish between what was inherited and new initiatives. The expression “masoretic division” must above all be understood as being descriptive: it indicates that these divisions are present *de facto* in the masoretic codices, but it does not signify that they are always the initiative of the scribes who copied the consonants of these manuscripts.

With all this being established, the principal hypotheses on the origin of the sections are the following.

Remnants of the the composition process of the books

It is generally accepted that the authors of biblical books subdivided their compositions themselves and that the sections that can be observed in the preserved documents represent in part a legacy of archetypal manuscripts.⁸ Two pieces of evidence lend credit to this hypothesis. On the one hand, we can see the equivalent of open and closed passages in documents written in Aramaic by Jews from Egypt in a period as old as the 5th century BCE (for example the story of Ahiqar).⁹ It is thus a practice that existed at a time when several biblical books were in the process of being written.

On the other hand, the oldest biblical manuscripts that are available, the Dead Sea scrolls, attest to the same practice. Moreover, some of the sections that can be found in them correspond to the sections in the medieval codices. For instance, Tov notes that 4QSam^a (= 4Q51) contains between 70 and 80 % of the divisions that can be found in 1–2 Samuel in the Leningrad codex.¹⁰ To take another illustration, the list of the sons born to David at Hebron (2

⁸ OESCH 1979, followed by LANGLAMET 1984, p. 497, and TOV 2004, p. 155.

⁹ TOV 2004, p. 155.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 150.

S 3, 2–5) is separated from what surrounds it by divisions, both in 4QSam^a and in the Aleppo codex.

An analogy can be made with the preservation of the stichometric presentation of poems in the Hebrew Bible, which relies on spaces between the colons or the hemistiches. In the exceptional case of the Song of the Sea (Exod 15), this presentation can be observed in three stages of the transmission of the text; that is, going backwards in time, in the oldest complete medieval manuscripts, whether codices (Leningrad codex, 11th c.) or scrolls (Bologna scroll, 12th c.); in the Ashkar-Gilson manuscript, dated to the 7th–8th c., one of the rare missing links from the “silent period” that separates the Dead Sea scrolls from the masoretic manuscripts;¹¹ and in a fragment from the Dead Sea (4Q14) as well as in 4Q365, also called the “Reworked Pentateuch” or simply 4QPentateuch.¹² There is therefore no doubt that the scribes were able to transmit, throughout the first millennium CE, the ancient divisions of the text.

Julio Treballe Barrera has also noted that the sections in the manuscripts often correspond to passages suspected by exegetes to be interpolations.¹³ Thus, the passage mentioned earlier on the list of sons born to David at Hebron (2 Sam 3, 2–5) seems to be an addition that interrupts the theme of the war between Saul and David, which theme is mentioned immediately before (v. 2) and after (v. 6). This brief passage is framed by the technique of resumptive repetition (*Wiederaufnahme*), in other words by a near-repetition of the same phrase: compare vv. 6a and 1a. (In this case, the end of the addition is also similar to its beginning, which creates a second frame.) While it is well-known that authors who inserted passages sometimes marked them with this scribal technique, it is possible that they also did it by presenting their insertions as new paragraphs. Admittedly, the phenomenon highlighted by Treballe Barrera could equally be the work of *copyists* isolating the passages in question because they perceived that what surrounded them was thematically distinct. In addition, in the cases where we see a *Wiederaufnahme*, we can wonder if the authors of the passages, having already employed this technique to mark their contribution, would really have used a

¹¹ SANDERS 2014.

¹² MILLER 2015.

¹³ TREBALLE BARRERA 2016.

second procedure (indentation) for the same result. But the fact remains that the hypothesis is plausible in a number of cases.

Divisions made by copyists in relation to the reading of texts

A second, widespread hypothesis, postulates that the open passages are witnesses, to a large extent, to synagogal reading cycles. As Charles Perrot noted, in the Torah, the beginning of a seder is often an open section. We must of course remember that the masoretic codices are not made for liturgical reading since they do not follow the prescriptions of the *halakha* (they are not scrolls and are vocalised). But no doubt a substantial part of their divisions are inherited from older manuscripts, as we have seen.

However, this hypothesis meets with three difficulties. First, the sections could just as well be the *cause* as the consequence of the divisions for synagogal reading, as Tov thinks,¹⁴ especially if we accept the idea that some of them date from the time when the books were written. Second, this theory does not account for closed passages. Third, not all the Tanakh is read at the synagogue, although all of it is divided into sections; so we must find another explanation for books such as Samuel.

Choices made by scribes according to the form and the content of texts

It is generally accepted that the open passages introduce long paragraphs, whereas the closed passages indicate a pause or a “minor articulation” within a paragraph. But Charles Perrot noted that “the *parasha* is not a simple indentation which is meant to render a text easier to read; it is also, if not more, an accentuation of a particular aspect of the text”¹⁵. The same author has explained more precisely the roles attributed to the two types of division.

According to him, the open passages “indicate the pericopes that were important for the liturgy, theology and history of the people;” they also isolate pericopes for the synagogal reading. As for the closed passages, they “bring to the reader’s attention the stories that may cast some well-liked people in an unfavorable light;” they “indicate... the places, the people

¹⁴ TOV 2004, p. 147.

¹⁵ PERROT 1969, p. 84.

and the events that were not appreciated in the haggadic tradition”; they “mark divine curses”, funereal stories; they also indicate doublets and repetitions, and punctuate lists and enumerations of laws.¹⁶

The case of the books of Samuel is the subject of an in-depth and essential study by François Langlamet.¹⁷ This dominican scholar highlighted two elements that govern a large part of the choices made by the scribes for dividing the text of Samuel. On the one hand, there is the *structure of the narration*: the beginning of a section is often “triggered” by the inauguration of a new scene, by the use of verbs of movement, by the mention of messengers being sent, etc. In other words, the beginnings of sections frequently fit closely the movement of the narration, in the sense that they correspond to the beginnings of new episodes or micro-episodes.

On the other hand, Langlamet underlines the existence of a veritable “speech system” at work within the books of Samuel. No fewer than one hundred and eighty-five divisions serve to isolate the quotations introduced by the verb *'amar* (of which one hundred and twenty are in the form *wayyomer*). Among them, we find one hundred and thirty-seven “theological” or edifying divisions (two times out of three, they are *setumot*). They mark the presence of divine words, of prayers, intercessions, expressions of praise or respect for the sacred, or words of blessing, oath or curse.

This second aspect can be partially explained by the influence of the Torah, where many pericopes begin with the divinity speaking (think of Leviticus), to the extent that the masoretic divisions naturally mark many speeches; the scribes who structured the books of Samuel may have wanted to imitate this feature of the Pentateuch.¹⁸ At the same time, we can note that the role played by words with a religious connotation is not sufficient to account for the whole of the “speech system” that has been detected, since, according to Langlamet’s calculations, forty-eight divisions corresponding to speech remain unexplained. Moreover, Langlamet describes his “system” with great flexibility, which enables him to include, for example, not

¹⁶ PERROT 1969, p. 89-91.

¹⁷ LANGLAMET 1984.

¹⁸ TOV 2004, p. 157.

only actual oracles, but also in practice any word pronounced by a prophet.¹⁹ Alongside the precious light that the classification proposed by this author sheds on the masoretic divisions, we sometimes have the impression that he includes lists of verses gathered into *ad hoc* categories, with the aim of covering the greatest possible number of cases. But he modestly presents his work as a “rough sketch” and the last section of his article, on the “theology” of the divisions in Samuel in the Aleppo codex, as “a sort of index under construction”.²⁰

This article aims to contribute to the refinement of Langlamet’s approach by taking into account an aspect that he neglected: the narrative effect of the words that are highlighted by the divisions of the text. In addition, this aspect extends also to segments of text that are not speech.

The personal tastes of the scribes

Insofar as the divisions of the codices present a high level of coincidences, Langlamet postulated the existence of a shared set of divisions, which the medieval scribes had inherited.²¹ Tov, for his part, is struck by the differences that can be observed from one manuscript to another, and deduces that the divisions are largely a question of individual choice. From this perspective, the coincidences are simply due to the fact that numerous pericopes clearly stand out from what surrounds them and are therefore naturally isolated in the same way by scribes who are working independently from one another.

Tov goes as far as to write that “it was often the personal taste of scribes that determined the indication or non-indication of the text division with open and closed sections”.²² In his view, “we are often faced with practices, not systems, of individual scribes” and even “contextual decisions”; as a result, “there is no overall explanation for the whole corpus or for Hebrew Scripture”.²³

¹⁹ See LANGLAMET 1984, p. 512-513.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 509.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 504.

²² TOV 2004, p. 19. See also p. 152-154.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 156.

One particular remark by Tov deserves to be quoted since it seems in direct opposition to Langlamet's ideas, which accentuate the analysis of the content by the scribes:

To a great extent, the division into section units by scribes was impressionistic (...) After all, in order to ascertain the exact relation between the various section units, a scribe would have to carry out a close reading of the context and be involved in literary analysis of several adjacent section units. Since we do not believe that scribes were so actively involved in content analysis, it appears that scribal decisions on the type of relation between section units should often, but definitely not always, be considered *ad hoc*, made upon completion of one unit and before embarking on the next.²⁴

2. Masoretic divisions and narrative or rhetorical effects in 2 Samuel

As we have seen, a whole series of explanations – sometimes contradictory, often complementary – have been put forward in order to account for the masoretic divisions. In this next section, I suggest that another aspect, neglected up until now by research, has played a role in a certain number of cases. Indeed, a whole series of divisions correspond to punchlines thrown out by protagonists, to moments where the narrator himself speaks, and to moments of high dramatic intensity. These are cases which Langlamet's typology does not necessarily adequately account for, since they are generally not words with a religious dimension. The principle that is shared by these situations is the desire to accentuate crucial points of the story on the dramatic level. These correspond to places in the text that are particularly pertinent from a narratological point of view.

In the following examples, I indicate in brackets, using the letters C, A and L, the presence of a *setumah* (S) or a *petuḥah* (P) in the Cairo, Aleppo and Leningrad codices.²⁵ Langlamet's

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 144.

²⁵ The texts discussed below are too badly preserved (when they are preserved at all) in the Dead Sea Scrolls to allow us to decide whether the latter attest open or closed passages (for 4Q51, see the list in Cross et al. 2005, p. 21-22; 4Q52 only attests verses from 1 Samuel; 4Q53 is not really relevant because it does not seem to attest any

article contains a very useful table indicating all the divisions in these three manuscripts in 1–2 Samuel;²⁶ the tables below are taken from it, but I add a column of comments. These tables often cover a slightly longer text than that being studied, in order to shed light on the immediate context.

2 Samuel 12, 1–15

The first example is taken from the famous passage where the prophet Nathan rebukes David, through a parable, for having caused Uriah's death and for having stolen his wife (represented by a lamb). Nathan tells him the story of an animal stolen from his master as that of a rich man mistreating a poor man, after which the following dialogue takes place:

Translation (NRSV) and indication of divisions

Petuḥah [C, A, L]

(1) And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. (...) (5) Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; (6) he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Setumah [C, A]

(7a) Nathan said to David, "You are the man!

Setumah [A]

(7b) Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel (...) (10) Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.

Setumah [C and A]

(11) Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house (...)

Setumah [C, A, L]

(13a) David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD."

Setumah [C, A, L]

(13b) Nathan said to David, "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die (...)

paragraphing, see *ibid.*, p. 252). The exception is 2 S 13, 11, where 4Q51 seems to have a closed passage (see below).

²⁶ LANGLAMET 1984, p. 485-487.

Table 1: Sections of 2 Samuel 12, 1-15

	C	A	L	comments
v. 1	P	P	P	beginning of the episode, the Lord sends Nathan to David
v. 7a	S	S		punchline: “you are the man!”
v. 7b		S		oracle
v. 11	S	S	S	oracle
v. 13a	S	S	S	David’s confession: “I have sinned against the Lord!”
v. 13b	S	S	S	Nathan’s word

In the Cairo and Aleppo codices, the phrase where Nathan reveals the identity of the man whose behaviour was condemned by David himself (v. 7a) is clearly separated from what precedes it and forms a closed passage. The same is true, in the Aleppo codex, of the very next phrases (vv. 7b–10), which are introduced as an oracle (“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel”), then, in the three codices, of the following oracle (vv. 11–12). Note that one effect of the succession of the first two of these closed passages is to visually isolate the punchline of v. 7a in the Aleppo manuscript by spaces before and after.²⁷

The *oath* of v. 5, however, is not highlighted in any of the three codices, which demonstrates that the presence of such a formula is not sufficient to motivate a scribe to introduce a new section: the criterion underlined by Langlamet is not applied systematically and clearly does not take priority here. Nor is it the alternation between the speeches of different characters that counts. It is the *striking* words of Nathan that are highlighted. The same will be true of his last phrase in the narrative, in v. 13b. Crucially, while two of the prophet’s phrases here are formally presented as oracles and thus correspond to one of the situations cited by Langlamet, it is not the case for the first (v. 7a) or the last (v. 13b). This is a situation where the dominican scholar is a bit too eager, it seems to me, in his use of the general category of a prophetic word in order to account for the masoretic divisions. In reality, if v. 7a is highlighted, it is because of its powerful rhetorical function, and also probably because of its role as a veritable pivot of the narrative: it marks simultaneously the beginning of the elucidation of the parable, and the instant when David is hit with the naked truth at the

²⁷ Auld notes that “David’s response to the terrible and sufficiently specific threat is given in all brevity and accorded its own paragraph in MT” (AULD 2011, p. 467).

moment when Nathan starts to accuse him head-on. As Brueggemann writes, “in verse 7 there is a daring change of rhetoric. Now the address of Nathan is bold and direct.”²⁸

A little further on, it is David’s reaction (v. 13a) that is highlighted: “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD’”. Langlamet suggests that this phrase is showcased because of its edifying or “exemplary”²⁹ nature. This analysis, which underlines the value of a textual division for a devout reading, does not seem sufficient. If there is a moralising speech in this passage, it is to be found in v. 7b-10. We could no doubt imagine that the phrase in v. 13a has been isolated in order to offer to the reader a *model* of contrition, but such an explanation is not valid for v. 7a, which can hardly be taken as a “model” of accusation for the reader. Rather, the most arresting element that these two phrases have in common is their striking nature, which provokes a turning point in the narrative. In the case of v. 7a, the phrase marks a narrative turnaround where Nathan accuses David, a moment when the tension falls after having attained its highest point: the reader has read the parable of v. 1-4, suspecting that it was targeting David, but without knowing if he realised; in v. 5-6, the reader sees that the king has not understood;³⁰ in v. 7a, Nathan gives the king the key through a punchline made of “twice two syllables.”³¹ In v. 13a, the reader finally discovers David’s reaction when he has understood the situation. The suspense largely depends on his attitude; will he deny it, claim to be offended, or on the contrary admit his fault? The laconic phrase he uses (two words in Hebrew: *חַטָּאתִי לַיהוָה*) has a narrative impact that is all the stronger since David describes his fault not as a sin against Uriah (which would have been the logical consequence of the parable), but as a sin with regard to God. Brueggemann notes that “David’s words [in v. 13a] correspond in terseness and directness to the words of Nathan [in v. 7a],” and he also sees a connection with Bathsheba’s equally brief sentence in 11, 5 (“I am pregnant”): “the entire narrative is caught in these three phrases.”³²

²⁸ BRUEGGEMANN 1990, p. 280. Nathan’s directness seems necessary to make sure that his point is understood by David, since “the brilliance of Nathan’s parable is that its thinking is so lateral that it almost misses the mark” (CAMPBELL 2005, p. 116).

²⁹ LANGLAMET 1984, p. 515.

³⁰ On the discrepancy between the reader’s understanding and that of David, see WÉNIN 2019, p. 151-153.

³¹ FOKKELMAN 1981, p. 77.

³² BRUEGGEMANN 1990, p. 282. Bar-Efrat also notes that David replies in two words to Nathan’s two words accusation (BAR-EFRAT 2009, p. 119).

All in all, this example confirms Langlamet's theory on the role played by the presence of speeches and notably oracles in the choices made by the scribes for the division of the text, but it also demonstrates that this approach must be refined. The cases of vv. 7a and 13a prove *a minima* that the masoretic divisions *result in* the highlighting of certain punchlines. It is easy to imagine the way in which these two words could be emphasized during an oral performance guided by these divisions. But it is likely that it was the perception of the strong rhetorical and dramatic charge inherent to these phrases pronounced by the characters that drove the scribes to highlight them. The phrases underlined by the masoretic divisions are not always treated this way because of their religious or theological impact; it is also sometimes because of their narrative function.

2 Samuel 14, 4-20

Let us consider now the dialogue between David and the woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14, 4-20). She is sent by Joab in order to manipulate David, so that Absalom could return to the king's favour. This is not the place to discuss the subtlety of a narrative whose multiple ironic aspects have recently been underlined by V. Miller.³³ Suffice to note that the scene presents parallels with the passage of 2 Sam 12 mentioned above; in both narratives, a character (here the woman of Tekoa, there Nathan) manipulates king David through a "coded" story.³⁴ This passage is interesting for testing and if possible refining Langlamet's approach founded on the role of speeches, because here there is a dialogue where only a fraction of the phrases are put in the spotlight by masoretic divisions, which raises the question of the reasons that led the scribes to highlight some and not others.

Translation (NRSV) and indication of divisions

(4) When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and did obeisance, and said, "Help, O king!"

Setumah (C, A, L)

(5) The king asked her, "What is your trouble?"

She answered, "Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead (...)"

³³ V. MILLER 2019, p. 111-134.

³⁴ See the study on the two passages by WÉNIN (2019).

Petuḥah (C, A, L)

(8) Then the king said to the woman, “Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you.”

(9) The woman of Tekoa said to the king, “On me be the guilt, my lord the king, and on my father’s house; let the king and his throne be guiltless.”

Setumah (C, A, L)

(10) The king said, “If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall never touch you again.”

(11) Then she said, “Please, may the king keep the LORD your God in mind, so that the avenger of blood may kill no more, and my son not be destroyed.”

He said, “As the LORD lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground.”

(12) Then the woman said, “Please let your servant speak a word to my lord the king.”

He said, “Speak.”

Setumah (C, A, L)

(13) The woman said, “Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again. (14) We must all die (...)

Petuḥah (C, A, L)

(18) Then the king answered the woman, “Do not withhold from me anything I ask you.”

The woman said, “Let my lord the king speak.”

(19) The king said, “Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?”

The woman answered and said, “As surely as you live, my lord the king, one cannot turn right or left from anything that my lord the king has said. For it was your servant Joab who commanded me; it was he who put all these words into the mouth of your servant (...)

Table 2: Sections of 2 Samuel 14:1–20

	C	A	L	comments
v. 1	S	S	S	beginning of the narrative
v. 5	S	S	S	David shows himself as a king who listens and is ready to act
v. 8	P	P	P	
v. 10	S	S	S	
v. 13	S	S	S	striking phrase by the woman
v. 18	P	P	P	question from David

The divisions are the same in the three manuscripts under consideration (C, A and L). It is clear that the criteria that guided these divisions are:

- neither the simple fact that there is speech, since there are fifteen speeches (indicated by phrases such as “and he said” and also marked in the translation above by a new line), but only five sections within the dialogue;
- nor the fact that it is a speech by *the king*, since in v. 13 it is the woman’s words that are marked by a closed passage;
- nor the presence of an oath: the only oath (“as the LORD lives...”) of the passage appears at the end of v. 11 and is *not* marked by a division.

It seems to me that it is rather the *rhetorical force* of certain phrases which explain their being highlighted by divisions. This may already be the case in vv. 5, 8 and 10: there David plays the role of a ruler ready to listen to one of his subjects and above all to take decisions, which confers on these words a certain weight. But it is especially in vv. 13 and 18-19 that we find words of great force.

In v. 13, the woman pronounces a phrase of crucial importance, which has been carefully prepared by v. 12 where she asks the king if she may speak a word to him – which is already a way of accentuating what will happen in v. 13. It is a decisive moment, for at this stage the woman of Tekoa needs to “pull David out of the blindness in which she has knowingly kept him up until now”.³⁵ In other words, it is necessary for the woman’s tactic that the king realises that she has manipulated him; so she must reveal her game without provoking an unfavourable reaction on David’s part. Under these conditions, she makes the choice, which seems risky at first, to throw out an accusation wrapped up in a question: “Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God?”³⁶ As Fokkelman writes, “this is plain language which is totally unexpected for David and must strike painfully. The woman has changed unrecognizably, so radically has she changed her tone.”³⁷ Here the parallel with 2 Samuel 12 resurfaces, since it was also through a very direct accusation that Nathan revealed his rhetorical tactic to David (in 2 Sam 12, 7a). His manoeuvre was crowned with success; the woman’s is too. It would hardly be convincing to argue that only the mention of bad behaviour towards the “people of God” gave this phrase such a theological load that the scribes wanted to isolate it by a division. It is rather the rhetorical function of the phrase that counted here.

³⁵ WÉNIN 2019, p. 160.

³⁶ The exact meaning of the sentence is debated, see e.g. MCCARTER 1984, p. 348.

³⁷ FOKKELMAN 1981, p. 135.

Lastly, in vv. 18-19, David's question (astutely prepared by the imperative in v. 18) represents a radical change of subject³⁸ and it no doubt marks the most delightful moment of the passage: the reader realises that the king has at last understood the woman of Tekoa's strategy.³⁹ The importance of this moment is marked by a *petuḥah*. It is interesting to note that the scribes acted in a similar way in 2 Samuel 12 and 14, highlighting accusatory punchlines (by Nathan and by the woman of Tekoa) and David's reactions at the moment when he recognises the manoeuvre that is being used.

To sum up, here again the masoretic divisions certainly had the *effect* of highlighting strong words, but it is likely that it is the rhetorical force inherent in them that had already justified their being put in the spotlight by the scribes.

2 Samuel 17, 5-14

The third case considered here is the dialogue between Absalom and Hushai (2 Sam 17, 5-14). The latter will contradict the advice previously given by Ahithophel (v. 1-4), which consisted of letting Ahithophel attack and kill David.

Translation (NRSV) and indication of divisions

Setumah (C, A, L)

(5) Then Absalom said, "Call Hushai the Archite also, and let us hear too what he has to say." (6)

When Hushai came to Absalom, Absalom said to him, "This is what Ahithophel has said; shall we do as he advises? If not, you tell us."

Setumah (C, A, L)

(7) Then Hushai said to Absalom, "This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good." (...)

Petuḥah (C, A, L)

(14a) Absalom and all the men of Israel said, "The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel."

Setumah (A)

³⁸ MORRISON 2013, p. 189. The same scholar notes that "in a comical reversal of roles, the woman, who had bowed to the ground before the king, begging to be allowed to speak, now gives the king leave to address her, albeit with proper deference: 'Let my lord, the king, speak'" (p. 189-190).

³⁹ WÉNIN 2019, p. 166.

(14b) For the LORD had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the LORD might bring ruin on Absalom.

Table 3: Sections of 2 Samuel 17, 1-14

	C	A	L	comment
v. 1	S	S	S	beginning of the narrative
v. 5	S	S	S	beginning of a sub-episode: Absalom demands that Hushai be brought in order to hear another point of view
v. 7	S	S	S	beginning of the response from Hushai, who declares point blank that Ahithophel's advice is not good
v. 14a	P	P	P	conclusion drawn by Absalom
v. 14b		S		narrator's comment on the Lord's plan

Several of the divisions here can easily be explained by the fact that they mark turning-points in the text: thus, v. 5 is the beginning of a sub-episode, since Absalom has another character called, in order to consult him (Hushai); in v. 7 Hushai's speech begins (v. 7). The conclusion drawn by Absalom and his entourage in the light of Hushai's words (v. 14a) is judged to be so important that it is marked by an open passage. This being said, it is interesting that the second of these three moments (v. 7) also corresponds to a striking phrase by Hushai, who declares point blank that "the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good" (v. 7).

But the most interesting element appears in v. 14b in the Aleppo codex. It is the rare occurrence of a narrator's comment explaining the situation as a divine plan.⁴⁰ This phrase plays a crucial role in the narration; Brueggemann regards it as "one of the key verses of Samuel."⁴¹ As Béatrice Oiry shows in her study on temporality in the books of Samuel, chapters 15-20 of 2 Samuel cover approximately four years but report essentially three days, thus creating an exceptionally ample narrating time, compared to the narrated time. Oiry notes that the narrator, by revealing to the reader Yhwh's plan in 17, 14b, that is, on the first day, shifts the suspense. In this way, "the defeat of Absalom is programmed, it remains for the reader to discover its mode. This shift of suspense results in a transfer of the tension in the

⁴⁰ See also 11, 27 and, in a lesser way, 12, 24. These phrases are not isolated by the scribes of the three codices under consideration, which shows the non-systematic, even subjective, nature of their work on this point.

⁴¹ BRUEGGEMANN 1990, p. 312.

unfolding of events – now that conqueror and conquered are known to the reader – to the inner life of the king”.⁴²

One could doubtless argue, like Langlamet, that it is the theological content of v. 14b that earned it the right to be highlighted,⁴³ but we need to go further than that. A phrase that also evoked divine plans, in 14, 14, was not entitled to such honours: “But God will not take away a life; he will devise plans so as not to keep an outcast banished forever from his presence”. The reason for this distinct treatment probably stems from the fact that the scribe is conscious of the difference in importance (and in reliability) between the words of a character and those of the narrator, as well as of the crucial role played by 17, 14b for the very logic of the narrative.⁴⁴

2 Samuel 13, 30-33

The final example will serve to illustrate a situation that is a little different from the previous ones.

Translation (NRSV) and indication of divisions

(30) While they were on the way, the report came to David that Absalom had killed all the king’s sons, and not one of them was left.

Setumah [C, L], *Petuḥah* [A]

(31) The king rose, tore his garments, and lay on the ground; and all his servants who were standing by tore their garments.

Setumah [C, A, L]

(32) But Jonadab, the son of David’s brother Shimeah, said, “Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men the king’s sons; Amnon alone is dead. This has been determined by Absalom

⁴² OIRY 2021, p. 437. On the synchronic level, this important role played by v. 14b does not exclude, but is complementary to, the interplay of human causality in the life of Absalom (see AVIOZ 2013). Recently, Chapman has noted that this verse has important implications for the characterization of God: “This kind of ‘double causality’ – God and humans working mysteriously in tandem – means that there is finally no absolute distinction between God and other characters in the Samuel narrative” (CHAPMAN 2020, p. 41).

⁴³ LANGLAMET 1984, p. 512 (17, 14b as a “theological remark”).

⁴⁴ See MCCARTER 1984, p. 387, 390.

from the day Amnon raped his sister Tamar. (33) Now therefore, do not let my lord the king take it to heart, as if all the king's sons were dead; for Amnon alone is dead.”

Table 4: Sections of 2 Samuel 13, 23-34

	C	A	L	comment
v. 23	P	P	P	beginning of the episode (“after two full years...”)
v. 28	S	S	S	order given by Absalom to his servants
v. 31	S	P	S	poignant information about David
v. 32	S	S	S	Jonadab's remarks

It is v. 31 that I would like to consider briefly here. The fact that this verse constitutes a section (a closed passage in the Cairo and Leningrad codices, an open passage in the Aleppo codex)⁴⁵ is not self-evident. There is no speech, no indication of a new episode or sub-episode, no theological content, etc. Langlamet includes this case in a category entitled “death and mourning rites”.⁴⁶ It is possible that the scribes did choose to highlight each mention of such a situation. But it seems to me that it is just as plausible here that it is the poignant nature of the situation that led a scribe to underline v. 31: king David has just learned that Absalom has killed his brothers, he reacts by rending his clothes and sitting down on the ground, surrounded by his servants standing up. If that is correct, then it is not the presence of a mourning scene in itself that led a scribe to highlight v. 31, it is the emotional charge of the scene, which is one of the most harrowing of the book.

Conclusion

Previous research has put forward a whole series of explanations for the sometimes surprising distribution of the masoretic divisions. On the basis of a few examples, I have sought to demonstrate that in the books of Samuel, 1/ these divisions *result* in the highlighting of punchlines by characters, a remark from the narrator and poignant situations; 2/ the narrative potential of the phrases in question had in reality already been perceived by the scribes and this guided part of their choices in the subdivision of the text. While Langlamet rightly

⁴⁵ It seems that v. 31 marks the beginning of a closed passage in 4Q51 (CROSS et al. 2005, p. 22, 148, and Pl. XVIIIa).

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 516.

insisted on the *theological* concerns underlying many masoretic divisions, I suggest that a number of them stem from a sensitivity to the *narrative and rhetorical force* of striking sentences.

The divergences between masoretic codices as to the division of the text (see 2 Sam 12, 7a; 13, 31; 17, 14b) suggest that the medieval scribes were not merely heirs of a pre-existing system, but that they also intervened according to their appreciation of the narrative effects of certain phrases – or, alternatively, that they echoed the traditions of “dynamic” reading, effected by oral performances, underlining striking passages or those with a high emotional charge.⁴⁷ These last two explanations can of course be combined, accumulating individual initiatives and the exploration of a tradition, in order to refine the network of divisions even more. In this sense, Tov is right to speak of “the scribes’ personal tastes”, but his idea that these scribes paid little attention to the content of the narrative and to their literary analysis seems debatable, at any rate in the cases found in 1–2 Samuel. The fruit of their work leads us in the opposite direction, unless, again, one considers that they were merely reflecting reading traditions that emphasized certain sentences. Even if one were to suppose that, it would still mean that the scribes were sensitive to the nuances of these reading traditions with regard to the emphasis put on some striking sentences, and that they made sure that this emphasis was reflected in the manuscripts.

It remains to extend the investigation to other narrative books to see if the hypothesis defended here will also bear fruit there.

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