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‘You’re Fired’: An Application of Speech Act Theory to 2 Samuel 15.23–16.14

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Abstract

While the role of speech act theory in studying how words do things in real life continues to yield insight into the study of language, the theory can also contribute to an understanding of the performative nature of words in regard to biblical narrative. In this article speech act theory is applied to the narrative of 2 Sam. 15.23–16.14 in two ways. First, the speech acts of the characters are analyzed as real speech acts using the categories presented by John Searle to see how they function within the story. Second, the reality that these speech acts are in fact parasitic is taken into account, and all speech acts including those of the narrator are examined for the way they create a literary world that consists of perlocutionary acts intended to affect a presumed audience.

Keywords: Absalom’s Revolt, Succession Narrative, 2 Samuel, King David, Ahithophel, Shimei, speech act theory, John Searle

1. Introduction

‘You’re fired’.

More than a description of the recipient’s present or future employment status, this utterance is the means by which one’s employment is

terminated.¹ Such a simple yet provocative recognition that words do things fuels speech act theory.² While the role of speech act theory in studying how words do things in real life continues to yield insight into the study of language, the theory also can contribute to an understanding of the performative nature of words in regard to literature. The purpose of the present study is to examine one way in which speech act theory can be applied to narrative and more specifically to a biblical narrative such as 2 Sam. 15.23–16.14. This article suggests that while speech act theory does not overcome all the challenges to understanding biblical narrative, it provides a way of understanding the narrative through elements made available by the narrative itself. This is made possible by a hermeneutic of self-involvement which assumes that what can be meant can be said³ and seeks to understand what is said through what is written.

2. Application of Speech Act Theory to 2 Samuel 15.23–16.14

This narrative proves to be an excellent candidate for an application of speech act theory as the plot is presented almost entirely through speeches made by the characters.⁴ The performative function of language is assumed in the narrative by the characters as they react to each other's speeches as if they are actions. What is more, several actions are described as what a character says, such as David speaking of Yhwh in

1. Of course, certain external conditions apply. For example, the speaker must have the authority to perform this action and the recipient must be employed by the speaker.

2. For information regarding the early development of speech act theory, see John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and *idem*, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979). For an excellent summary, see Hugh C. White, 'Introduction: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism', *Semeia* 41 (1988), pp. 1-14. For more recent work in the theory, see Jim Adams, *The Performative Nature and Functions of Isaiah 40–55* (LHBOTS, 448; New York: T&T Clark International, 2006).

3. Searle, *Speech Acts*, pp. 19-20.

4. This study uses the author's own translation of the MT that attempts, whenever possible, to follow the flow of the story as it is woven by the Hebrew storyteller. This at times comes at the expense of good English. This translation is presented in a form similar to the script of a play, with the character or narrator's name added to the left of each speech. White comments that Stanley Fish has noted that speech act theory is useful for understanding narratives which are 'about' speech acts such as the Shakespearean play *Coriolanus* (see White, 'Introduction: Speech Act Theory', p. 54).

15.16, David instructing Hushai in 15.34, and Ziba's accusation against Mephibosheth in 16.3.

A summary of speech act theory may be appropriate. According to John Searle there are five categories of speech acts: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declaration.⁵ Assertives are used to tell people how things are. Directives are used to try to get people to do things. Commissives are used to commit the speaker to doing things. Expressives are used to express feelings and attitudes. Declarations are used to bring about changes to the world through the utterance itself.⁶ Searle defines each type of speech act as consisting of three primary variables that combine with the propositional content of the act: the illocutionary point, the direction of fit, and the sincerity condition.⁷ The illocutionary point is the purpose of the act. The direction of fit describes a speech act as either an attempt to get the words to match the world (word-to-world) or the world to match the words (world-to-word). The sincerity condition describes the psychological state of the person making the utterance.⁸ While this system provides one way to examine speech acts, the constitutive nature of language leads Searle to identify some illocutionary acts as indirect speech acts. An indirect speech act is the performing of one type of utterance under certain constitutive rules that are themselves being used under the category and rules of another. For example, 'Can you pass the salt?' will most often be properly understood by the hearer as a request to pass the salt, not as an inquiry into her/his ability to do so.⁹

Speech act theory will be applied to this passage in two ways. First, the speech acts of the characters will be analyzed as real speech acts using the five categories presented by John Searle. Second, the reality that the speech acts within narrative are in fact parasitic will be taken into account and examined not only for their impact on the plot but for their impact upon a presumed audience. Searle labeled speech acts within fictional discourse with the term 'parasitic' to show that they imitate speech acts performed in real life and do not form an entirely new category. It is true that speech acts within fictional discourse are not held to the same standard of veracity as those in reality, for example, the

5. Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p. viii.

6. Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p. viii.

7. Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, pp. 3-5.

8. Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, pp. 3-5.

9. Searle, *Speech Acts*, p. 30.

assertive in a fictional discourse that 'it is raining' does not mean that the reader will walk outside and get wet. Nevertheless, such a statement utilizes the same constitutive rules as a real speech act and thus operates within the story in a parasitic way.¹⁰

The narrative of 2 Sam. 15.23–16.14 describes King David's flight from Jerusalem in the context of his son Absalom's active plot to overthrow him as king beginning in 15.1. Upon receiving word of his precarious situation in 15.13, King David hastens to gather his officials and leave the city before Absalom arrives with his army. The frantic pace of the royal departure slows down in v. 23 with a broad description of the land weeping as the king and the people cross the River Kidron and approach the wilderness. Once outside Jerusalem, David encounters four characters: Zadok, Hushai, Ziba, and Shimei.¹¹ The narrative can be divided into four scenes that correspond to these four encounters: 15.23–29; 15.30–37; 16.1–4; 16.5–14.

2.1. Scene 1: 2 Samuel 15.23–29

2.1.1. *Speech Acts of the Characters in the Narrative (15.23–29).*

NARRATOR ²³And all the land was weeping with a loud voice, and the king and all the people were crossing over the Kidron River, and all the people were crossing over toward the wilderness. ²⁴And behold, also Zadok and all the Levites with him were carrying the ark of the covenant of God. And they set down the ark of God, and Abiathar came up, until all the people had finished crossing over from the city. ²⁵And the king said to Zadok,

THE KING 'Return the ark of God to the city. If I find grace in the eyes of Yhwh then he will bring me back and let me see it with its habitation. ²⁶But if thus he says, "I do not delight in you", here I am, let him do to me that which is good in his eyes'.

NARRATOR ²⁷And the king said to Zadok the priest,

THE KING 'Do you see? Return to the city in peace. And Ahimaaz your son and Jonathan son of Abiathar, your two sons, [shall return] with you. ²⁸See, I will be waiting at the fords of the wilderness until a word comes from you to declare to me'.

NARRATOR ²⁹And Zadok and Abiathar returned the ark of God to Jerusalem. And they remained there.

10. Searle, *Speech Acts*, p. 64.

11. There is also a significant encounter with Ittai the Gittite in 15.19, which precedes the encounter with Zadok. For this study the encounter is viewed as background for the following encounters due to the physical location of its occurrence within the limits of the city and its literary position before the narrative statement of v. 23.

In his first speech to Zadok in scene 1 (vv. 25-26), the king performs several illocutionary acts that begin with a simple speech act and conclude with an utterance intricately woven to include several speech acts. The king's initial command to Zadok, 'Return the ark of God to the city', clearly falls under Searle's category of directives (cf. Austin's exercitives). The illocutionary point of David's utterance is to direct Zadok to return the ark to the city. The direction of fit is world-to-word and the sincerity condition is David's desire for the action to be accomplished. The next two utterances out of the king's mouth are assertives that have been modified with opposing given worlds, each introduced by the word 'if' (אם). The first assertive indicates the (possible) given that the king has found favor with Yhwh. If this is so, then it is asserted that the words will fit that world with belief as the sincerity condition. The next assertive contains the exact opposite of the previous given and is slightly more complex. Instead of describing the given as before, the king presents it as speech act, an assertive, placed in Yhwh's mouth, 'I do not delight in you'. This is followed by two speech acts in the king's own mouth, a commissive and a directive. The phrase הנה אנכי ('here I am') functions as a commissive by which the king fits the world to his words with the intent of himself submitting to Yhwh's will. An ensuing directive is made to Yhwh through the use of the third-person address to Zadok, 'let him do to me that which is good in his eyes'. While this directive functions with the same illocutionary point as the directive given to Zadok (an attempt to get the hearer to do something), a softer illocutionary force makes the directive more of an invitation than a command. Nevertheless, this first speech of the king both begins and ends with a directive.

The king's second speech to Zadok consists of five speech acts: one question, two assertives, a directive, and one final assertive. While the first illocution—'Do you see?'—at a basic level fits the simple pattern of a yes/no question, judging from the utterances that follow, it is more likely that this short phrase is being performed as an indirect speech act. Such a question could be a way to ask if Zadok understands what the king is really directing him to do, or even simply a call to pay close attention to what will follow, or both. Since Zadok does not answer, it is likely he understands the illocution as a directive to 'see' what is required of him. This interpretation looks even more plausible when the king ends his speech with the same word 'see', only this time as a directive in v. 28, 'See, I will be waiting...' The two consecutive assertives suggest this phrase is being performed as an indirect speech act as the king describes

the situation (world) into which Zadok will enter. Again, these utterances could also be understood indirectly as directives of what Zadok is to do once entering the city. Zadok is told that he is returning in peace and that he is going with Ahimaaz his son and Jonathan the son of Abiathar. While possibly intended to achieve the perlocutionary act of convincing Zadok that he will be safe, since he will not be alone, it is more likely that the entire speech is crafted to direct Zadok in what he is to do. The primary reason for the indirect means for this speech act is what John Austin calls 'the conditions for felicity of the utterance',¹² and Searle similarly describes as 'the difference in status between the speaker and hearer'.¹³ If the king makes a directive, the hearer under normal circumstances will obey. That David is indeed king is one of several points emphasized by the narrator in the framework of the story to which we now turn.

2.1.2. *The Narrative as Speech Act (15.23-29)*. The king's speech acts are framed in scene 1 by a narrator who effectively conveys that the king is composed and in control even in the face of national tragedy. As the scene opens, the assertion is made that 'all the land was weeping and the king and all the people were crossing over the River Kidron and all the people were crossing over the face of the wilderness' (v. 23). Within these assertions, the more basic illocutionary act of reference is utilized in several ways. First, the reference to those weeping as 'the land' paints a vivid picture in which the crossing over of the king and his people to escape the coming of Absalom was not the king's personal tragedy but a national tragedy. King David is only referred to in this scene as 'the king', perhaps to emphasize the unquestioned authority with which his speeches to Zadok are to be taken. The king remains active in maintaining control over the situation as he instructs Zadok regarding the plan, which it is assumed he will follow precisely. The narrator makes sure to tell how Zadok began to obey the king's orders immediately.

That the readers should trust the king is presented in a similar fashion. The specific reference of location, the Kidron, could be intended to draw ancient readers into the story, perhaps the way a present-day Western reader might relate more to a story that begins on a familiar road or in a well-known neighborhood. The assertion that the ark of the covenant is being lifted by the Levites in procession with Zadok and Abiathar does

12. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 14.

13. Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, p. 5.

more than just describe what is happening. The intended perlocutionary act of this illocution could be to convince readers that their priests and priestly leaders and even God (as shown by the ark) is on the king's side. What is more, the speech act in which the king uses the prophetic term 'Here I am' (הִנְנִי) could be indirectly referring to the king as a prophet of Yhwh. After setting this part of the plan in motion, all the king/prophet has to do is wait for word from Zadok.

Even though today's readers may not be as affected by the reference to location, people, and cultic symbols, they are nevertheless invited to join this world by the particle 'and behold' (וַיַּבְהִי), functioning as a directive to the reader. The use of participles within the narrative assertions, as well as the prevalence of speech acts that though parasitic are presented as 'real', create an effect similar to an audience watching a play as it unfolds.¹⁴ The audience, its interest gained, waits to see what will happen.

2.2. Scene 2: 2 Samuel 15.30-37

2.2.1. *Speech Acts of the Characters in the Narrative (15.30-37).*

- NARRATOR ³⁰And David was going up upon the Mount of Olives, going up and weeping, and his head was covered and he was walking barefoot. And all the people that were with him, they each covered their head and went up, going up and weeping. ³¹And David declared,
- DAVID 'Ahithophel is with those conspiring with Absalom'.
- NARRATOR And David said,
- DAVID 'Please make foolish the counsel of Ahithophel, O Yhwh'.
- NARRATOR ³²And it came to pass that David came as far as the top, where God was worshipped, and behold! To meet him was Hushai the Archite, his tunic torn and earth upon his head. ³³And David said to him,
- DAVID 'If you cross over with me you will be a burden to me. ³⁴But if you return to the city and you say to Absalom, "I will be your servant, O king. I was your father's servant in time past and now, and I am your servant." And you will make the counsel of Ahithophel ineffectual for me. ³⁵Are not Zadok and Abiathar the priests with you there? And every word that you hear from the house of the king you will tell to Zadok and to Abiathar the priests. ³⁶Behold! Their two sons are with them there, Zadok's son Ahimaaz and Abiathar's son Jonathan, and you will send to me every word that you hear by their hand.'
- NARRATOR ³⁷And Hushai, David's friend, came to the city. And Absalom came to Jerusalem.

14. Whether or not this passage records actual historical speech acts is not crucial for the goals of this type of study.

As in scene 1, scene 2 has King David as the only character who performs an utterance within the story. Although there are noticeable differences between these utterances and those in scene 1, the overall outlook of these speech acts is similar. The first is clearly an assertive David makes to those around him: 'Ahithophel is with those conspiring with Absalom' (v. 31). Although one might expect this type of utterance to be given by the narrator, the fact that it is performed by David emphasizes that the characters as well as the readers are to know this pivotal information. David then addresses Yhwh, saying, 'Please make foolish the counsel of Ahithophel, O Yhwh' (v. 31). This act fits Austin's flexible category of behabitives and also belongs to Searle's category of directives. The directive is an attempt by David, who acts with the sincerity condition of desire, to get Yhwh to fit the world to David's own words in a very specific action. There is no indication in the speech act itself that this necessarily is a prayer, as the particle translated 'please' (סֵלָה) would be expected because of the difference in authority between the speaker and hearer. Even though David is now lower in status than his hearer, this directive for Yhwh to act could be viewed as David telling Yhwh—albeit politely—how to fit into David's plan as he had told Zadok.

David's next speech is directed towards a newcomer in the story, Hushai. As was the case with Zadok, Hushai does not answer but simply obeys David's implied directives. But there are notable differences in these illocutions, beginning with David's inclusion of the word 'if' before his assertives regarding Hushai's actions. David speaks to Hushai as to one of equal authority rather than to one under his control. Nevertheless, there is not any difference in illocutionary force between the directive made to Hushai and the directives made to Zadok, as David intends for Hushai to fulfill a part of the master plan. The first two indirect directives do not present equally desirable propositions as the propositional content in the first utterance involves Hushai being a burden to David, while the second involves a carefully woven speech act that Hushai would give to Absalom if he went back to the city. David seeks to place words in Hushai's mouth that will doom the counsel Absalom had gained in acquiring Ahithophel.

The speech act that Hushai is to perform is a commissive that seems straightforward but may in fact contain conflicting illocutionary points masked by a sincerity condition of deception. As spoken dialogue, the utterance serves as a promise by Hushai to serve Absalom. Hushai is to tell Absalom, 'I will be your servant, O king; as I have been your father's

servant in time past, so now I will be your servant' (NRSV). Absalom will understand that, like Ahithophel, Hushai has changed sides and is now offering his services to Absalom. Yet the commissive may not be so simple. The word order of the sentence reads,¹⁵ 'Your-servant I O-king I-will-be a-servant of-your-father and-I from-that-time and-now and-I your-servant'. The utterance begins with 'Your servant (am) I, O king' and ends with 'and I (am) your servant', both of which are clearly commissives with the meaning mentioned above. But if they are removed, then the center of the utterance holds a different commissive, 'I will be a servant of your father and I (am) from that time and now'. If seen in this way, David gives Hushai a speech act with the sincerity condition of deception and the illocutionary point that of masking Hushai's true purpose. Hushai will not act like Ahithophel. He is the anti-Ahithophel.

The final two assertives (intended as directives) tell Hushai what he is to do if he accepts the mission and how he is to use the mechanism already in place for communication back to David through the presence of Zadok, Abiathar, Ahimaaz, and Jonathan. In an ironic play of reference, David tells Hushai that he is to report 'every word that you hear from the house of the king' to his carefully positioned spies. When Hushai arrives he will infiltrate the house of the assumed new king Absalom. But it has been made clear that Hushai is returning to David's house and David is still king.

2.2.2. *The Narrative as Speech Act (15.30-37)*. Although the speech acts of the king in scene 2 are similar to those in scene 1, they are framed by the narrator in a fashion that differs greatly, one which suggests to the reader that the king is not as confident in scene 2 as he is in scene 1. The first word of the scene indicates an important change, 'And-David'. This reference to the name 'David' instead of the title 'the king' makes him much more personal to the reader. The new location of David is not surprising since the Mount of Olives lies between Jerusalem and the wilderness. But what is a surprise is David's demeanor. David is weeping. Rather than the land weeping and mourning, as in scene 1's national tragedy, it is now David who is weeping and mourning, from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. Therefore the announcement

15. Hyphens are used to indicate when a Hebrew word means what is translated as two or more words in English. This style of translation retains word order and number and is suggested by Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 105.

‘Ahithophel is with those conspiring with Absalom’ comes to be seen by the reader less as an informative assertive made by a strategist who will soon explain how this matter will be overcome, but rather as a desperate and forlorn assertive blurted out by the no-longer kingly David as he and his company trudge up the Mount of Olives. David’s directive to Yhwh is therefore in fact seen as a prayer from one who has lost all hope except that which can come from God.

The narrator continues in a story-telling mode, ‘And it came to pass...’ The reader is told that David has come to the top of the mountain to bow down to God when a new character enters the scene. Introduced with ‘behold’ (וְהִנֵּה), Hushai is no longer a mere reference to an individual, but is an answer to David’s heartfelt prayer. This may help explain why even out of context David’s speech to Hushai resembles his speech to Yhwh, for David is treating Hushai as if he were the answer sent from God to counter the devastating effect of Ahithophel’s desertion. It is notable here that the readers have known that Ahithophel has changed sides ever since 15.12 and perhaps have wondered what effect this would have on David’s plans.

The framework provided by the narrator does not cause the audience to regard David’s clever plan to utilize Hushai as any less clever, but now portrays Yhwh as working towards its success. Yhwh has provided Hushai as a way in which to counter the power of Ahithophel against David. David simply is putting the pieces together. Perhaps the term ‘behabitives’ is in fact more appropriate to describe the illocutions that David performs regarding Hushai, as it becomes obvious that David is desperately trying to cater to Hushai’s commitment to David rather than order a loyal subject into the secret service. The narrator shows that this perlocutionary act is successful as the propositional content of the final assertive of the scene speaks of Hushai as David’s *friend* (רֵעַ). Hushai is not going back to Jerusalem because he has to, but because he is helping his friend.

A perlocutionary act of David’s prayer in this scene is to create an emotional attachment between the reader and the character of David. The results of such a connection conceivably differ depending on factors such as historical context. For instance, an Israelite living at the time of King David might be encouraged to respect the king’s authority, if David is such a humble and God-fearing Israelite. Something similar could be said for Israelites living at the time of a king who is closely identified with David, such as Solomon, Rehoboam, and Josiah. On the other hand, an Israelite living in exile might connect with this depiction of David as a

representative of (exilic) Israel who, like David here, has nowhere to turn but to God. A reader today might connect with David in a more existential way, as the feelings of betrayal and despair attributed to David are in fact experiences of being human.

2.3. Scene 3: 2 Samuel 16.1-4

2.3.1. *Speech Acts of the Characters in the Narrative (16.1-4).*

- NARRATOR ¹And David crossed over a little from the top, and behold, Ziba, a young man of Mephibosheth, came to meet him. And a pair of donkeys were bound, and upon them were two hundred loaves of bread, one hundred bunches of raisins, one hundred summer fruits, and one skin of wine. ²And the king said to Ziba,
- THE KING 'What are these to you?'
- NARRATOR And Ziba said,
- ZIBA 'The donkeys are for the house of the king to ride, and the loaves of bread and the summer fruit are for the young men to eat, and the wine is for those who are weary in the wilderness to drink'.
- NARRATOR ³And the king said,
- THE KING 'And where is the son of your lord?'
- NARRATOR And Ziba said to the king,
- ZIBA 'Behold! He is sitting in Jerusalem because he said, "Today the house of Israel will return to me the kingdom of my father".'
- NARRATOR ⁴And the king said to Ziba,
- THE KING 'Behold! All that belonged to Mephibosheth is yours.'
- NARRATOR And Ziba said,
- ZIBA 'I bow down, may I find favor in your eyes, my lord the king'.

Scene 3 contains speech acts that occur in dialogue rather than unanswered speeches as in scenes 1 and 2. The role of the narrator is diminished and more emphasis is placed upon the performing characters. Though the scene still begins with a narration of the location, introduction of the new character, and a general description of the scene, the narrator then becomes essentially silent during the dialogue and does not provide a summarizing assertive at the close of the scene. The dialogue is initiated by the king with a question, which is then answered by Ziba. This is followed by another question made by the king, to which Ziba offers an assertive that contains an alleged speech act of another character, Mephibosheth. Ziba's assertive causes the king to perform a declarative that is followed by an assertive by Ziba.

The king's question is simple although a bit idiomatic within the Hebrew language: 'What are these to you?' (v. 2). This question also per-

forms the illocutionary act of reference ('these') to refer to the donkeys, bread, raisins, summer fruits, and wine that Ziba has with him. In the context of the story, most likely the king is not merely interested in the information about why Ziba has these things. Similar to other indirect speech acts such as 'Can you pass the salt?', this question is rightly interpreted by Ziba as a request. Ziba's answer could fall into two different categories: assertive or declarative. As an assertive, Ziba's answer describes to the king the status of the goods, which are meant for the house of the king (donkeys), his young men (bread and summer fruit), and people in general, who are described as 'the weary in the wilderness' (wine). As a declarative this answer would constitute the act of giving these things to the king and his companions as if each section contained an implied 'hereby'.

The king's second question also contains a reference as he asks to be informed of the location of 'the son of your lord'. This refers to Mephibosheth, a descendant of Saul to whom the king had given wealth and power on account of the king's friendship with Saul's son Jonathan (2 Sam. 9). As is often the case with questions, this utterance likely holds extra meaning in the context of the dialogue. By inquiring as to Mephibosheth's location, the king performs two additional indirect speech acts: an assertion (i.e. 'He should have come instead of you'), and therefore a question of Mephibosheth's loyalty (i.e. 'Why didn't he come?'). Ziba takes full advantage of the implied questions by not only asserting the location of Mephibosheth ('he is sitting in Jerusalem'), but also answering the implied question of 'why?' with the assertion 'because he said, "Today the house of Israel will return to me the kingdom of my father"'. Such a speech act would mean that Mephibosheth has abandoned King David.

In response to hearing of this treachery, the king performs a clear declarative, 'Behold! All that belonged to Mephibosheth is yours' (v. 4). The declarative illocutionary point is both to affect and describe the world without a sincerity condition. After this one might expect the narrator to summarize the effect and conclude the scene, but instead the conclusion is achieved by Ziba, who describes his own action in the assertive 'I bow down' and performs a commissive act of allegiance to the king, 'may I find favor in your eyes', along with an additional reference act, 'my lord the king'.

2.3.2. The Narrative as Speech Act (16.1-4). The absence of the narrator for most of this scene forces the reader to judge for her/himself what is

happening in the scene. But first the narrator does accomplish several acts in the scene's introduction. The assertive illocution that 'David crossed over a little from the top' tells the reader that not much time or space has passed since scene 2. As with Zadok and Hushai, the narrator prepares the reader for Ziba's entrance into the scene with 'behold'. A direct reference to Ziba as 'a young man of Mephibosheth' alerts the reader to the fact that Ziba and the king are not the only ones who might be a part of this scene. Once David encounters Ziba he is referred to again as 'the king', possibly to demonstrate that King David will act more as he did in scene 1 than in scene 2. Finally, a description of the goods with Ziba constitutes a word-to-world fit, which incidentally also resembles Searle's famous example of the detective describing the groceries in the man's cart.¹⁶

The dialogue might be puzzling for readers who know some of the background of the Davidic narrative, namely, that Mephibosheth is physically lame. With this in mind, the king's second question seems unnecessary, since one would think that David could easily assume that Mephibosheth, being unable to join this hasty processional himself due to his physical disability, sent his servant Ziba with the gifts for the king and his people. (Indeed, this is Mephibosheth's defense in 2 Sam. 19.26.) But Ziba's assertion has been held by the king to be felicitous, and the king has transferred all of Mephibosheth's possessions to Ziba. Through this alarming result of an unexpected dialogue the readers are masterfully led to feel that injustice has been done to Mephibosheth through Ziba's cunning use of language.

2.4. Scene 4: 2 Samuel 16.5-14

2.4.1. *Speech Acts of the Characters in the Narrative (16.5-14).*

NARRATOR ⁵And King David came as far as Bahurim. And behold, from there a man was coming out from the family of the house of Saul whose name was Shimei son of Gera; he was coming out cursing. ⁶And he

16. Searle presents the illustration of a man who goes to the supermarket with a shopping list to buy what is on the list (world-to-word fit). A detective is following the man to see what he buys and writes down the items in a list of his own (word-to-world fit). While the lists are probably the same, they not only each serve a different direction of fit but also would function differently if a mistake was found. If the detective later realizes he wrote an item incorrectly, he merely can cross it out or erase it, replacing it with the correct word. But if the man later realizes he bought the wrong item he must return to the supermarket. See Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, pp. 3-4.

- was stoning David and all the servants of King David with stones, and all the people and all the mighty ones on his right hand and on his left. ⁷And thus said Shimei in his cursing,
- SHIMEI 'Out! Out! The man of blood and the man of destruction! ⁸Yhwh has returned upon you all of the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned, and Yhwh has given the kingdom into the hand of Absalom your son. And behold yourself, in your distress, for a man of blood are you.'
- NARRATOR ⁹And Abishai son of Zeruiah said to the king,
- ABISHAI 'Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Please let me cross over and let me take off his head.'
- NARRATOR ¹⁰And the king said,
- THE KING 'What have I to do with you, O sons of Zeruiah? For thus he curses because Yhwh said to him, "Curse David". And who will say, "Why are you doing so?"'
- NARRATOR ¹¹And David said to Abishai and to all his servants,
- DAVID 'Behold! A son which has come out of my inward parts is seeking my life, and also now this Benjaminite. Let him alone and let him curse, for Yhwh has said to him. ¹²Perhaps Yhwh will see in my iniquity and Yhwh will return to me good instead of his curse this day.'
- NARRATOR ¹³And David and his men walked on the path, and Shimei was walking on the side of the hill beside him and cursed as he walked, and he stoned him with stones and threw dust continually. ¹⁴And the king and all the people that were with him arrived, weary. And he refreshed himself there.

Scene 4 deviates from the pattern of the other three scenes. While there is still a similar introductory utterance by the narrator, it is the new character, Shimei, not David, who first utters a speech act. This act is preceded by the physical act of stoning David and his party—extra-linguistic actions are being performed in addition to the speech act. The next utterance is performed by a character named Abishai, who was not even formally introduced to the readers. He requests permission to perform his own extra-linguistic act of decapitating Shimei. Only then does King David utter two speeches: one to Abishai denying his request, and the other to all his servants explaining his actions.

Shimei's speech act is a curse against David, which belongs to the category of declarative illocutionary acts. This curse utilizes a variety of types of illocutionary acts as well as several stylistic devices that aid in the overall effect of the performance. It begins with a repeated directive, 'Out! Out!', which not only is intended as a command (world-to-word fit), but also ironically functions as a description (word-to-world fit)

since David is well on his way out away from Jerusalem. This is followed by two acts of reference that seem to be serving as assertives describing King David in an extremely violent and derogatory light, first as 'the man of blood' (אִישׁ הַדָּמִים) and then 'the-man of-destruction' (אִישׁ הַבִּלְיָעַל).¹⁷ The next assertive prophesies the imminent succession of Absalom over David, which is also directly attributed to the act of Yhwh through reference to Yhwh's name in the assertive. The curse concludes with an assertive that emphatically refers again to David as a man of blood.

Abishai son of Zeruiah then asks a question of David in which he attempts to set the record straight (or in other words, set the world right) in terms of his king's identity through a reference to Shimei as 'this dead dog' and a reference to David as 'my lord'. Abishai's reference to Shimei probably is also meant as a sort of prophecy given Abishai's request of David to allow him to 'let me cross over and let me take off his head' (v. 9). Abishai is eager to show Shimei just how much a 'man of blood' the king is to infidels who dare to defy him. David needs only to utter (or even motion) his approval of the act and it will be done.

But David does not answer in the way Abishai intends. In fact, in an ironic twist, the perlocutionary act of Abishai's question may be the opposite of that which Abishai intends. Instead of persuading David to have Shimei killed, it may in fact cause David to consider his question and thus save Shimei's life. If David takes Abishai's question not as an indirect assertive, that is, 'I believe this dog should be dead because he has cursed my lord the king', but instead as an actual question, 'Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king?', the answer might be, 'Because Yhwh told him to curse David'. Shimei does refer to Yhwh twice in this curse, and David concludes that the speech is directed by Yhwh. Instead of giving his approval of the attacker's beheading, David turns and performs a speech act against his own official, 'What to me and to you, O sons of Zeruiah?' (v. 10). While the exact wording of this utterance may be enigmatic, the speech act itself is clearly an indirect speech act that refuses Abishai's request. Perhaps in response to the form of the curse, David begins his next assertive in a formal manner, 'Thus he will curse for Yhwh said to him...' Then he includes the speech act, a

17. The translation given for the second reference in BDB, 'man-of-worthlessness', as many scholars have noted since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, is too weak for this curse, and the strange word 'belial' seems to be better connected to Sheol, death, and destruction. See J.A. Emerton, 'Sheol and the Sons of Belial', *VT* 37 (1987), pp. 214-18.

directive, supposedly uttered by Yhwh to Shimei, 'Curse David'. David concludes by turning the subject back to Abishai: 'And who will say, "Why are you doing so?"' As an indirect speech act, these questions assert that neither Abishai nor David is worthy to respond to a speech act of Yhwh with such violence.

Turning to all his servants, David then utters several speech acts that conclude his speeches for the scene. First comes a call to attention that is familiar to the readers but now serves as a directive to the characters, 'behold' (הִנֵּה). Then comes an assertive that describes David's desperate situation, emphasizing more the fact that David's son is seeking his life than the fact that 'a Benjaminite' is as well. David purposely does not refer to either Absalom or Shimei by name but only describes them, possibly with the illocutionary intent of showing how he views their lack of power in the situation. This is a situation between David and Yhwh. Then David utters a directive to all his people to leave Shimei alone and to let him curse on the grounds that Yhwh 'said' to him. David finally utters what fits into the category of expressive. The illocutionary point carries no direction of fit except to express his psychological state or attitude, which relates to the proposition that *perhaps* such a submission to Yhwh's speech act will end with the result that '...Yhwh will see in my guilt and Yhwh will return to me good instead of his curse this day'. Here David's utterance contains a text-critical issue that may adjust the meaning of what Yhwh will see, but the function of the expressive remains unchanged.¹⁸

2.4.2. *The Narrative as Speech Act (16.5-14)*. In the scene's introduction, the narrator presents Shimei's curse in such a way that it seems to be uttered in felicitous conditions, a point that David also seems to understand. The location is referred to as Bahurim, which is connected to the time when David ordered Ishbaal, Saul's son, to bring him Michal, the wife of Paltiel, for his own wife (2 Sam. 3.12-16).¹⁹ This reference could

18. The word in *BHS* is בְּעֵינַי, which may be translated 'in my guilt' or 'in my iniquity'. However, the *qere* indicates this should be read בְּעֵינַי which may mean 'in my eye' and the apparatus notes that a few variant readings of Hebrew manuscripts have בְּעֵינַי, which could carry a meaning such as 'in my distress'. Most English translations follow the variant reading, but what is written in *BHS* works well with the context since David is explaining why he may deserve Shimei's curse.

19. Paltiel followed the royal party weeping as far as Bahurim, where he was told to go home.

even therefore be a subtle allusion to David's similar action against Uriah when he not only took the man's wife, Bathsheba, but had him killed as well (2 Sam. 11). The narrator makes sure that the person who utters the curse is referred to as belonging to the house of Saul, which could similarly remind readers of the death of Ishbaal soon after he had delivered Michal to David (2 Sam. 4). Even though 2 Samuel 4 tells the story in such a way that guilt for this is not directly on David's hands, Shimei, who is of the house of Saul, may be holding him responsible, which itself may give the reader cause to consider Shimei's claim. A member of the house of Saul might be in a position to curse David. The assertion that Shimei enters performing the ritualistic act of stoning the king and his company prepares the way for Shimei's curse to be introduced with a judgment formula more widely used to introduce judgments made by Yhwh or one of Yhwh's prophets: 'And thus said...' (וְכֵן אָמַר). The stage is set for a felicitous performance of a declarative illocutionary act.

The effectiveness of blessing and curses in their utterance occurs throughout Old Testament narratives, and they had until recently been assumed in scholarly circles to function under a supposed ancient understanding of words as magical.²⁰ Anthony Thiselton, referencing Austin's conditions for successful performatives, points out that there is no basis for this assumption and that better reasoning lies in the concept of conventional procedure.²¹ Thiselton asserts that the reason blessings and curses are effective in their utterance and the reason they cannot be retracted is due to their connection to ancient institutions. Therefore the inability to retract a speech act such as a blessing or a curse is due to the lack of a convention for doing so.²² The curse issued by Shimei is uttered in supposedly felicitous conditions so much so that David takes it to be the answer to his test case in scene 1. The speech act is done, and if felicitous, then nothing—not even killing Shimei—can undo it. But there is one chance for David. Yhwh could change his mind. Therefore David, remaining true to his commissive in scene 1, is willing to submit to what he takes to be Yhwh's answer even as he hopes that he can counter the curse by gaining the favor of Yhwh and eliciting his sympathy and compassion for the downtrodden.

20. Anthony C. Thiselton, 'The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings', *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974), pp. 283-99 (283-84).

21. Thiselton, 'The Supposed Power of Words', 293.

22. Thiselton, 'The Supposed Power of Words', 294.

Present-day readers may struggle to understand why David takes this path. This is due to an anachronistic reading of Shimei's curse as if it were an expressive rather than a declarative. It is therefore helpful to compare Shimei's declarative against David with a modern-day metaphor. The effect of the metaphor will be heightened by using a hermeneutic of self-involvement that presents the following situation to the present reader in the second person. Shimei's cursing of David can be compared to the declarative 'You're fired' being delivered to you from management by a gleeful and disliked coworker. The coworker declares that s/he is acting upon direction from the highest management and there is no reason to dispute the message. This news had even been expected, and recently you had requested that your boss reconsider what appeared to be an imminent termination of employment. Your loyal assistant offers to punch the coworker, but you decline the favor, realizing that any chance of convincing your boss to reconsider involves showing that you are a mature and level-headed person and a valuable employee. Who knows? Perhaps the boss intentionally even sent this coworker in particular to deliver the message to see how you would respond to the test. Perhaps there is a slim chance to save your job after all.

The scene ends with a string of assertions that serve to conclude the flight of David. In a rather comical procession, the weary royal party is described as walking along the path with Shimei following them throwing stones and earth. Finally, the king is able to refresh himself. No location is given in the MT, although the Septuagint indicates this place of refreshment as the Jordan. Nevertheless the lack of a reference to the location in the MT heightens the fact that every other location on the journey during which these speech acts were performed was named. Now the focus will shift to Jerusalem—to Absalom, Ahithophel, Zadok, Abiathar, Ahimaaz, Jonathan, and Hushai—as the readers finally get to see how David's cunning plan is put into effect.

Together, these four scenes seem to be constructed to perform at least three distinct perlocutionary acts. The first is to demonstrate that David is still a good king. Chapter 19 reveals that all of the people throughout the Israelite tribes were disputing among themselves what to do now that Absalom was dead and David had returned. (This is incidentally reported in the form of a speech act of the people.) The people are said in v. 9 to be in dispute in part over the fact that David had 'fled out of the land because of Absalom' and were unsure what to do, seeing that Absalom was dead. Against this King David is here revealed as the catalyst whose

shrewd strategic placement of Hushai as well as his humble faith in Yhwh had doomed Absalom's revolt even as he himself fled from the city. David's role in the victory over Absalom certainly could also have been in question. After all, David had been unaware of Absalom's conspiracy and even allowed him to travel to Hebron where he had amassed his army (15.6-13). It is Joab, not David, and *his* servants who actually kill Absalom (18.14-15) and then inform David of the outcome, whose only response is to weep for the traitor (18.33). Ever present could have been the idea that all of the trouble was due to David's sin, either with Bathsheba (11.1-12.19) or through his lack of disciplinary action after the royal fiasco regarding Amnon and Tamar (13.1-33). From the position of an onlooker, David appears not only to be a weak and disassociated leader, but an emotional wreck who had almost caused his own demise. These four scenes could convince the readers of that time that, although they may not have seen David at work against Absalom, he nevertheless is still a brilliant strategist, faithful follower of Yhwh, and the mastermind behind Absalom's fall.

The second perlocutionary act is a presentation of the question of whether there is hope for someone in exile that Yhwh might change his mind and turn from the act of punishment even after it has been declared. This utterance of David in scene 4 is remarkably similar to two statements made in the book of Jonah, first by the ship's captain and then by the king of Nineveh. The ship's captain orders Jonah to pray as the ship was threatening to fall apart in the storm and attaches the utterance, 'Perhaps the gods will spare us a thought so that we will not perish' (Jon. 1.6). The king of Nineveh, after hearing Jonah's declaration of God's judgment against Nineveh, orders the entire city to go into mourning and utters a similar phrase, 'Who knows? God may relent and change his mind...' (Jon. 3.9). Both leaders pose the question made in the face of punishment of whether Yhwh will yet turn from his wrath. But neither of these characters are Israelites and neither seem to know much about Yhwh as opposed to other gods. The illocutionary force of this question in the mouth of David is therefore strengthened, for as both Austin and Searle note, the success of an illocution is often directly tied to the one performing the utterance. By having this question and this situation applied to David, the esteemed king of Israel, the writer seems to at the very least give credibility to the question and at the most answer it affirmatively for Israel's situation.

A third perlocutionary act can be seen as effective not only to ancient readers but present-day readers as well in that the reader is encouraged to put her/himself in David's shoes. For present-day readers, the existential aspect of some of David's utterances allows readers far removed from the story to apply this experience to her/his own struggle to overcome adversity and possibly her/his confusion over God's place in a difficult situation.

Of course, the intended perlocutionary acts may or may not be successful. For instance, it is possible that readers, both ancient and modern, might not be convinced and could instead perceive King David in this passage as a gullible, impulsive, weak leader who would send his priests and friends into enemy territory to fix problems that he has caused rather than confront the danger himself.

3. Conclusion

In his introduction to speech act theory, Hugh White states that literary critics have been attracted to speech act theory for two reasons: (1) it provides a way to examine what literature does and not only what it means, and (2) it examines a text's content without becoming bogged down in the psychological, social, and historical conditions of its production.²³ The present study has shown that speech act theory can similarly be a useful tool for understanding biblical narrative, especially a narrative such as 2 Sam. 15.23–16.14 that itself emphasizes the power of speech.

23. White, 'Introduction: Speech Act Theory', p. 7.