



A House Set in Order (Part 1): The King Returns to Israel (2 Sam 21-22)

Notes: Week Eleven

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

V. Aside: Illustrations of David's Roles in His Relationship with the Lord

The final four chapters contain a carefully arranged set of six accounts and lists that are chronologically detached from the previous narratives. Although they all relate to David's life in some way, they are collected from different periods in his career. At least one section may relate events from days prior to his kingship ([23:9-17](#); cf. [18:13-17](#)); at least one is apparently from a period in David's life chronicled in 1 Kings ([23:1-7](#); cf. [1 Kgs 2:1-10](#)). Because of the evident organization of the materials as well as their lack of strong association with the previous narrative, these chapters are often termed an "appendix" or "epilogue." Because I believe 1 Samuel-2 Kings is a literary unity, I prefer to think of this section as an "aside."

As has been commonly observed by post-WWII commentary writers, the six distinct units of material in this section have been arranged into three chiasmic pairs (*A B C C' B' A'*). All three pairs focus on David's relationship with the Lord: *A* ([21:1-14](#)) and *A'* ([24:1-25](#)) portray David acting effectively in leadership roles the Lord assigned him—as royal judge and royal priest, respectively; *B* ([21:15-22](#)) and *B'* ([23:8-39](#)) reflect aspects of David's role as the leader of the Lord's earthly forces, with *C* ([22:1-51](#)) and *C'* ([23:1-7](#)) giving poetic voice to David's words of faith in the Lord. As the chiasmic structure implies, David's career began, was centered in, and ended with his relationship with the Lord. Thus, these final chapters offer a significant theological portrayal of the public roles and private reflections of Israel's consummate citizen.

David plays two disparate roles effectively in the outer pair of the chiasmic structure. As a proper royal judge he settles a difficult dispute between the former dynastic house and the citizens of a group whose sacred treaty rights had been violated. As a royal priest David intercedes in behalf of a nation that had aroused the Lord's anger, successfully curtailing the full expression of the divine wrath.

The second pair of literary units in this section centers on David's relationship with loyal and heroic soldiers—what they did ([21:15-22](#)) and how David honored them ([23:8-39](#)). This dyad taps into David's role as one who zealously fought the battles of the Lord. David was a man of unmatched battlefield success (cf. [1 Kgs 5:3](#); [1 Chr 22:8-10](#)) who was used mightily by the Lord to deliver Israel from their enemies; yet in a very real sense, David's success was the success of the troops under his command. From beginning to end David's career and calling were inseparably bound to his troops. Thus it was appropriate that his soldiers—not his wives or children—be memorialized in this section.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 440-462.

The core of David's legacy to the world was his intense, intimate relationship with the Lord, especially as it came to expression in the medium of poetry. Built into his life was the desire to carry out the Lord's will at every turn, a desire that was matched by his experience of the Lord's help in every crisis.

Taken as a whole, the so-called aside to 1, 2 Samuel serves as a fitting symbol of and tribute to the career of Israel's most celebrated king. Being placed where it is, the aside serves the useful function of permitting the comparison of David with Israel to be satisfyingly complete; his story ends where the story of Israel must have ended at the time of 1, 2 Samuel's composition (see Introduction), with the return to a ravished Jerusalem and the need to deal with resistant troublemakers in the land.

1. David Ends a Divinely Sent Famine

[21:1–3](#) No indication is given here about when during David's reign this famine occurred. It probably was after Mephibosheth had come under David's protection in Jerusalem (cf. [9:1–13](#)) and before Absalom's rebellion (cf. [16:7–8](#)). Because of Palestine's almost total dependence on rainfall and dew for crop moisture, poor harvests were not uncommon and were not automatically considered a sign of divine displeasure. However, when crops failed for three successive years, David rightly concluded that Israel had offended the Lord and was experiencing a judgmental Torah curse (cf. [Lev 26:20](#); [Deut 28:18](#)).

Accordingly, "David sought the face of the LORD," perhaps with the assistance of Ira the Jairite (cf. [20:26](#)) or a priest who wore the revelatory ephod (cf. [1 Sam 23:9](#); [30:7](#)). The Lord revealed to the king that "Saul and his blood-stained house" were responsible for this disaster that had come upon Israel.

The specific crime that Saul had committed was heinous: the slaughter of the Gibeonites, thus violating a centuries-old nonaggression treaty established before the Lord between Israel and these non-Israelite "survivors of the Amorites" (v. [2](#); cf. [Josh 9:15–18](#); [Ps 15:4](#)). On the one hand, Saul's reason for doing so was commendable—he had "zeal for Israel and Judah," apparently to give them total control of the Promised Land. On the other hand, it was despicable because it put nationalism ahead of zeal for the Lord, the kingdom of Israel ahead of the kingdom of God.

Now that the Lord had revealed the cause of the curse, David met with the Gibeonites to determine a means of turning it aside. Though they were Israel's virtual slaves (cf. [Josh 9:27](#)), David placed himself at the Gibeonites' mercy by asking what he could do "to atone [from *kāpar*; NIV, "make amends"] so that they [NIV, "you"] will bless the LORD's inheritance" (v. [3](#)). David's request subtly referenced the Abrahamic blessing (cf. [Gen 12:3](#)): the king could not bring a blessing to the Gibeonites; but as the Gibeonites' attitude toward Israel changed to one of blessing, the Lord himself would bless the Gibeonites.

[21:4–9](#) At first the Gibeonites refused to make any requests—much less demands—of the king. As members of a servile alien subculture in Israel, they had "no right to demand" material compensation ("silver or gold"; v. [4](#)) from Israel's former dynastic family. They also had no "right to put anyone in Israel to death." No doubt the Israelites had limited the power of Gibeonite courts so that they could not carry out a death penalty, much as the Romans did to the Jewish courts following their subjugation of Palestine hundreds of years later (cf. [John 19:6–10](#)).

Although the Gibeonites had not initially given David a specific proposal for atonement, they did have one in mind. When the king repeated his request, the Gibeonites shared it with him. Compensation was not to come in the form of money or land, but in a manner prescribed by the Torah. In cases involving the unsanctioned taking of human life, the Torah called for retribution-in-kind (cf. [Exod 21:23](#); [Lev 24:21](#); [Deut 19:21](#)), even though the case might involve aliens (cf. [Lev 24:22](#)). Thus the Gibeonites requested that justice be served by executing seven of Saul's descendants. It is probable that the request for seven deaths carried symbolic value. Since Saul likely had been responsible for far more than seven

Gibeonite deaths, blind justice might have required equal numbers of Saulides' deaths. Mercifully, however, only a limited, symbolic retribution was requested. Saul had murdered most of the Gibeonites in their hometown, so now the house of Saul would be decimated in his hometown. Perhaps also in an attempt to create symmetry between Saul's act and that of the Gibeonites, the request was also made that the corpses be left unburied "before the LORD."

As D. F. Payne notes, the situation described here "is strange and repellent." Nevertheless, after evaluating the Gibeonites' proposal, David approved it. The proposal was consistent with the Torah's stern rules regarding the unsanctioned taking of human life, and so David "handed" (v. 9) seven of Saul's male descendants "over to the Gibeonites." Because David took responsibility for this virtual elimination of the house of Saul, it is not surprising that Benjamites were among David's least supportive followers in the latter portion of his reign (cf. [16:5–14](#); [20:1–2](#)). It also is not surprising that many modern biblical scholars have accused David of ordering the deaths based on ulterior motives, specifically the desire to eradicate the house of Saul.

Now that David had decreed that seven Saulides must die, he was faced with the disturbing task of choosing whom to include among that number. To carry this out, David would have to do essentially the impossible—keep faith with an oath of loyalty and protection to the house of Saul (cf. [1 Sam 18:3](#); [20:42](#); [23:18](#); [24:21–22](#)) and satisfy the legitimate demands of the Gibeonites. In this deadly balancing act "the king spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul" (v. 7). Having done this, he fulfilled the terms of "the oath before the LORD" that he had made with "Jonathan son of Saul."

From the pool of those who remained, the king chose the two sons of Saul's concubine, Rizpah. Because of their status as a concubine's offspring, they probably were ineligible for consideration as heirs to Saul's throne. If this is so, then it probably was this inferior status that doomed them.

A textual problem raises questions regarding the remaining five individuals. The remaining males were selected from the offspring of one of Saul's daughters, either "Michal"—so the **MT**—or "Merab," as a few ancient manuscripts and versions suggest. The NIV, attempting to harmonize biblical passages as much as possible, states that David delivered up "five sons of Saul's daughter Merab, whom she had borne to Adriel son of Barzillai the Meholathite" (cf. [1 Sam 18:19](#)). This choice takes into account the biblical claim that Michal had no children (cf. [6:23](#)) and that no mention is made of a husband for her named Adriel. If Michal was in fact the mother of these sons, then she must have had two other husbands besides David, for she was also previously married to Paltiel son of Laish (cf. [1 Sam 25:44](#); [2 Sam 3:15](#)); also, [6:23](#) must be taken to mean that Michal produced no offspring by David.

The Gibeonites ritually "killed and exposed" Saul's male relatives "on a hill before the LORD" (v. 9). The form of killing is not mentioned in the passage; proposals include crucifixion, dismemberment, and dropping the men from a height. The killings took place on a single day "during the first days of the harvest, just as the barley harvest was beginning"—that is, in the month of Nisan (March–April), at the beginning of the religious year. The fact that this taking of life occurred "before the LORD" suggests that it was carried out with due consideration of the Lord's will and was religious in nature. The fact that the corpses were left "exposed" indicates that they were considered to be the objects of divine displeasure (cf. [Ps 53:5](#); [Ezek 6:5](#)).

[21:10–14](#) Rizpah represents perhaps the supreme expression of maternal loyalty in the Bible. Death had taken her two sons from her, but through her selfless efforts she made sure it would not also rob them of their dignity. Thanks to her efforts, her sons and relatives were given the honor of a mourned death. Her sackcloth bed provided for her a spartan abode in which to grieve among the corpses. Furthermore, until the Lord lifted the curse that had eventuated the death of her loved ones through the sending of drought-concluding rains, she protected the corpses from being dishonored by birds and wild animals. By

vigilantly seeing to it that none of the bones were stolen or destroyed, Rizpah preserved the possibility of a dignified and proper burial for her sons and relatives.

When David learned of Rizpah's vigil, he chose to reward her efforts and at the same time create a lasting memorial to honor Israel's first dynastic family. The king ordered that "the bones of those who had been killed and exposed" (v. [13](#)) be gathered up and taken to an appropriate burial site. Then David had "the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan" (v. [12](#))—and no doubt the bones of Abinadab and Malki-Shua as well—exhumed from a burial site under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh Gilead (cf. [1 Sam 31:13](#)) and brought back across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The text's special emphasis on the bones of Saul and Jonathan is no doubt because they were the two most prestigious individuals being honored in the reburial and because the biblical writer wished to emphasize David's loving loyalty to his father-in-law and best friend, a loyalty that extended beyond death.

The site selected by David for memorializing the house of Saul was "Zela in Benjamin" (v. [14](#); cf. [Josh 18:28](#)), an unidentified spot a few miles north of Jerusalem. The location was appropriate, for it permitted Saul and his descendants to be buried "in the tomb of [his] father Kish."

2. Loyal and Heroic Soldiers of David—I

The Philistines were Israel's most foreboding foreign threat during David's lifetime. They had been the primary focus of Israel's military efforts since the days of Samson, and individuals who helped Israel defeat them were lionized. The four Israelite heroes mentioned in this section were particularly noteworthy because they defeated four "of the descendants of the Rapha" (v. [16](#)).

The events recorded here cannot be correlated with previous narrative accounts. It is likely that they occurred earlier, rather than later, in David's career—probably prior to the Bathsheba affair (cf. comments at [11:1](#)). A. F. Kirkpatrick speculates that the material for this section came from "some 'golden book of deeds' recording the exploits of David and his warriors."

[21:15–17](#) Of the four accounts of heroic actions David's men took, clearly the most significant was the one mentioned first. On this occasion, rather than directing his troops from a distance, David placed himself in the midst of the fray.

When the Philistines became aware that Israel's king was on the battlefield, they doubtless focused their efforts on eliminating him. As a result David "became exhausted" but was unable to retreat from the conflict. As David wilted, "Ishbi-Benob" (v. [16](#)) moved forward to kill him.

Ishbi-Benob was a particularly formidable foe. First of all, he was one of the descendants of the Rapha (the Hebrew has the definite article). The significance and meaning of this description is unknown and contested. The KJV translates the Hebrew *hārāpā* as "the giant"; the **NRSV**, as "the giants," understanding the singular noun collectively. Perhaps taking a cue from [1 Chr 20:6, 8](#), where the word is spelled *hārāpā*, they seem to connect the word with [Deut 2:11](#) and [Josh 17:15](#), a decision accepted by Youngblood. By omitting the definite article from the translation and treating the noun as a name, the NIV breaks this linkage. McCarter, following recent scholarly speculation, translates it as "the votaries of Rapha," suggesting that Ishbi-Benob and the other three Philistines mentioned here were members of an elite military unit devoted to a pagan god. Second, Ishbi-Benob possessed remarkable weaponry. His "bronze spearhead weighed three hundred shekels"—about 7.5 pounds. The Hebrew term for "spearhead," *qayin*, occurs as a noun with this meaning only here; however, it is also the name of Cain, the first murderer (cf. [Gen 4:8](#)). Furthermore, he "was armed with" an unnamed "new" weapon; the NIV, following some ancient versions, has speculated that it was a sword.

Before Ishbi-Benob could complete his objective, however, “Abishai son of Zeruiah” (v. [17](#))—whom David would later entrust to quell the rebellion by Sheba (cf. [20:6](#))—killed him. After Abishai helped David and the battle was over, the king was confronted by his loyal troops. They established a rule that David, referred to here as “the lamp of Israel,” would “never again” go out with his troops “to battle.” The laudatory title “lamp of Israel” is used in the Bible only here; it suggests that David’s leadership was as valuable to the nation as a steady light source would be on a dark night. David apparently followed this rule, for in the narratives extending from [2 Samuel 11–20](#) he always assigned the leadership of his troops to others: Joab ([11:1](#); [18:2](#)), Abishai ([18:2](#); [20:6](#)), Ittai ([18:2](#)), and Amasa ([20:4](#)).

[21:18–22](#) For killing Saph, another descendant of the Rapha known elsewhere as Sippai (cf. [1 Chr 20:4](#)), David appears to have rewarded Sibbecai, one of David’s mighty men (cf. [1 Chr 11:29](#)), by making him the commander of a division of twenty-four thousand men (cf. [1 Chr 27:11](#)). Both Saph and Goliath were killed “at Gob,” a so-far unidentified site but perhaps the same as Gezer (cf. [1 Chr 20:4](#)).

For obvious reasons v. [19](#) is easily the most controversial verse in this entire section—its declaration that “Elhanan son of Jaare-Oregim the Bethlehemite killed Goliath the Gittite” appears to contradict the affirmations of [1 Sam 17:50](#), [57](#); [18:6](#). Scholars have dealt with v. [19](#) in three ways: they either treat it as a true contradiction present in the original manuscripts, a true contradiction introduced by a careless copyist in pre-Christian times, or as only a seeming contradiction that can be removed in interpretation. The traditional Jewish explanation resolves the difficulty by asserting that “Elhanan” was an alternate name for David; others have expanded this concept, suggesting that “Elhanan” was David’s original name and that “David” was his regnal name, that is, the name given him when he became king. No explanation acceptable to all scholars can be given to resolve the tension between [1 Sam 17](#) and this verse. The suggestion that best harmonizes [1 Chr 20:5](#) with [2 Sam 21:19](#) suggests that the present verse was corrupted during the copying process. For that reason it may be the most satisfying proposed solution.

The following table summarizes the explanations given:

View	Explanation
True contradiction, present in the original manuscript of 1, 2 Samuel	Proof of conflated sources; accurate document is 2 Sam 21:19 ; 1 Sam 17:50 attached to David late in time for hero worship
True contradiction, introduced by a careless pre-Christian-era copyist	1 Chr 20:5 preserves accurate text of 1 Sam 21:19 ’s original reading
Seeming contradiction	Various possible explanations: 1. “Elhanan” an alternate name for David 2. “Goliath” a title, not a personal name 3. Two fighters from Gath named Goliath

The Philistine defeated by Elhanan “had a spear with a shaft like a weaver’s rod.” This statement may be either a reference to the unusually large size of Goliath’s weapon or to its construction—that it had a loop of cord attached to it (cf. discussion at [1 Sam 17:7](#)). Goliath, like the other Philistines mentioned in this passage, was one of “the Rapha.”

The fourth Philistine was killed in “another battle, which took place at Gath” (v. [20](#)), in the heart of Philistine territory. At that location David’s nephew “Jonathan son of Shimea” (v. [21](#)) slew “a huge man with six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot” (v. [20](#)). This individual, who had the unusual condition known as hexadigitation, was killed when “he taunted Israel.” He too was one of the descendants of the Rapha.

3. David Utters a Hymn of Praise to the Lord

At the center of the biblical writer’s appendix are the words of David himself—words spoken here in praise to the Lord. Among David’s words, none are marked as more significant in the appendix than those in this section. Besides being the longest quotation attributed to David (365 words in Hebrew) and displaying the richest variety of vocabulary, the section is cast in a formal structure, a classic example of Hebrew poetry. The psalm is closely related to [Psalm 18](#)—which is itself the longest of the psalms specifically attributed to David—though it differs from the psalmodic work in its function and in subtle language features. Differences between [Psalm 18](#) and the present section can be accounted for by their differing functions; whereas [Psalm 18](#) was intended for hymnic use in public worship, [2 Sam 22:1–51](#) was intended to reveal the religious core of Israel’s most revered king. In its general shape it usually is classified as an individual thanksgiving psalm and is recognized as “one of the oldest major poems in the OT,” dating to the tenth century B.C.

On the semantic level the psalm is constructed as a symmetrical chiasmus consisting of five units of thought, with a one-verse postscript. It can be analyzed as follows:

- a Praise for the Lord (vv. [1–4](#))
- b The Lord’s deliverance of David (vv. [5–20](#))
- c Reasons for David’s deliverance (vv. [21–29](#))
- b’ The Lord’s deliverance of David (vv. [30–46](#))
- a’ Praise for the Lord (vv. [47–50](#))
- d Postscript: the Lord’s enduring support for the house of David (v. [51](#))

Since the main body of the psalm has an odd number of units, there is a natural focus on the central component, which contains the material of primary thematic significance. If this is so, then this psalm can be seen as a restatement of a central thesis of the Torah—obedience to the Lord results in life and blessing. The message of the psalm may thus be summarized as follows: Because David scrupulously obeyed the Lord, the Lord rewarded him by responding to his pleas, delivering him during times of trouble and exalting him. For this the Lord is to be praised. This unit of material therefore “is a theological commentary on the history of David.”

(1) Praise for the Lord [22:1–4](#)

[22:1](#) The narrator’s introduction to this psalm suggests it was composed after David had been king in Israel for several years. The separation of Saul from the category of David’s enemies is consistent with the author’s portrayal of David elsewhere as a loyal servant and supporter of the house of Saul.

The introduction to the psalm found here differs from the one preceding [Psalm 18](#) in that it contains no musical directions. Whereas the rendition in the Book of Psalms states it is “for the director of music” ([Ps 18](#), preface), such a notation is absent in the present text. The difference demonstrates how the same piece of literature might be employed for different purposes in Israelite religious life: in one case it was

intended as an aid for public worship, to be sung by an individual or group as part of a public religious service; here, however, it is used to showcase the pious core of David's being.

[22:2–4](#) Using language replete with metaphors, David began his psalm with eight praise-filled descriptions of the Lord: the Lord is “my rock” (v. [2](#)), “my fortress,” “my deliverer,” “my shield” (v. [3](#)), “the horn of my salvation,” “my stronghold,” “my refuge,” and “my savior.” All of the images conjured up by Israel's king reflect his perception that the Lord is a strong and benevolent protector. Each of the eight descriptions is highly personal: the Lord is not just a source of salvation for the world in general. The extensive use of the first-person personal pronoun suffix is significant: for David, the Lord is a very personal helper, a living resource whose interventions in the king's life have consistently spelled the difference between life and death. David did not deny that the Lord is a Savior for others as well, but he wrote this psalm to affirm that the Lord was indeed his deliverer.

Seven of the initial images present the Lord as a defensive refuge in which David finds unflinching protection from all of life's threats. One of them portrays the Lord as one who actively moves against David's enemies: the Lord is not only a passive “rock,” but he also is an aggressive “horn of ... salvation”—a metaphorical comparison to a bull's dangerous horns (cf. [Exod 21:28–32](#))— whose intervention saves the king “from violent men.”

For the warrior David, a man who had been constantly threatened by enemies (v. [1](#)) on and off the battlefield, the Lord's shelter and shield were treasured provisions he never took for granted. Unflinching, when he called “to the LORD, who is worthy of praise” (v. [4](#)), David was “saved from [his] enemies.”

(2) The Lord's Deliverance of David—I [22:5–20](#)

[22:5–7](#) Using a vivid nautical metaphor, Israel's master poet described the threats to his life as “waves of death” (v. [5](#)) that “swirled around” him. The image must have been particularly effective to the original Israelite audience, since both the Mediterranean (cf. [Jonah 1:4–15](#)) and Red Seas were to them mysterious and foreboding and deadly regions of their world. Throughout the entire history of Israel, the nation made only occasional and often disastrous attempts to ply the seas.

In the parallel line (v. [5](#)) David described the threats to his life as “streams of Belial” (NIV, “currents of destruction”) that “overwhelmed” him. The use of the term *bēliyya‘al* (lit., “without worth”) to describe the threats to his life assures the reader that the threat to David is dangerous people, not dangerous waters. Within the recorded life of David he confronted *bēliyya‘al* people on three occasions: when dealing with Nabal ([1 Sam 25:17, 25](#)), Sheba ([2 Sam 20:1](#)), and some of his disgruntled soldiers ([1 Sam 30:22](#)). In each instance he overcame their threats with the Lord's help.

Graphically David continued his poetic description of the threats against him, calling them “ropes of Sheol” (v. [6](#); NIV, “cords of the grave”)—the realm of the dead—that “coiled around” him. “The snares of death” confronted him. A tactical misstep at any turn in David's career would have spelled death.

Through the use of yet another emphatic chiasmic structure, David revealed the secret that enabled him to cope with the stresses threatening to overwhelm him: he “called out to the LORD” (v. [7](#)) his God, an action Brueggemann terms “Israel's most elemental act of faith.” Though the Lord was in “his temple” (Hb., *hēkāl*)—perhaps a reference to the Lord's dwelling place in heaven or the earthly worship site where the ark of the covenant resided— David's cry nevertheless “came to his ears,” and “he heard” the king's voice. The Lord's ability to respond to David was not limited by physical distance: David did not need the ark of the covenant on the battlefield (cf. [1 Sam 4:3–4](#)) for the Lord to be near to rescue—he could bring his saving presence into any crisis by reaching out to him in faith.

22:8–10 The Lord’s overwhelming response to David’s desperate plea is magnified in these verses. God metaphorically moved mountains to respond to the king’s petition: “the earth trembled and quaked, the foundations of the mountains [NIV, “heavens”] shook” (v. [8](#)). Though there is no account in the biblical text of an earthquake occurring during David’s lifetime, the Lord certainly rearranged the political landscape of Canaan to carry out the divine plan through David.

In vv. [9–11](#) David depicted a striking contrast between his own frailty and the Lord’s strength. David’s cry was one of terrified weakness and vulnerability; the Lord’s response was one of terrifying, cataclysmic power. Weak, invisible sound waves had come from David’s mouth as he called out for help: “consuming fire came from [the Lord’s] mouth—burning coals blazed out of it” (v. [9](#)). David was earthbound and on his way to Sheol; the Lord was in heaven with “dark clouds ... under his feet”—nevertheless “he parted the heavens and came down” (v. [10](#)). David was sinking beneath the waves of death (v. [5](#); cf. [Jonah 2:5](#) [Hb. v. [6](#)]); the Lord “appeared [NIV, “soared”] on the wings of the wind” (v. [11](#)) as he “mounted the cherub [NIV, “cherubim”] and flew.”

22:12–16 Powerful meteorological images not unlike those found in Canaanite hymns abound in these verses. Each of them portrays the Lord as a being whose power and presence are vastly superior to all things human. Even his “temporary dwellings” (Hb., *sukkôt*; NIV, “canopy”) are vastly beyond those used by humans: his are darkness and rain clouds (v. [12](#)); the *sukkôt* used by humans were made of sticks and fronds.

In vv. [13–16](#) David extended the metaphor of the Lord the raincloud-dweller. Poetically picturing the internal lightning of a cumulonimbus cloud as the awesome presence of the Lord, the inter-cloud and cloud-to-ground “bolts of lightning” (v. [14](#)) that “blazed forth” were divine “arrows” (v. [15](#)) that “scattered” and “routed” the enemies. The thunder attendant with the awesome display of lightning was poetically expressed as “the voice of the Most High” (v. [14](#)). The powerful gusts of wind associated with a violent storm were brought into the metaphor as “the blast of breath from [the Lord’s] nostrils” (v. [16](#)).

Life and breath were closely related in Israelite thought; thus when the Lord’s breath was portrayed as exposing “the valleys of the sea” and laying bare “the foundations of the earth”—things infinitely beyond the power of any human’s capacity—David was simultaneously affirming that the Lord’s life force was vastly superior to that of humanity.

22:17–20 David’s high and powerful God is also depicted as a caring and saving God. When David was sinking in “deep waters” (v. [17](#)), the Lord “reached down from on high, ... took hold of” him, and “drew [him] out.”

The narrator never portrayed David’s life as being threatened by water, but figuratively David’s life was often gravely imperiled by “foes who were too strong” (v. [18](#)) for him. Nevertheless, without fail the Lord “rescued” David from every “powerful enemy.”

David shifted the domain of poetic imagery in v. [19](#) from the sea to the meadow by drawing from his own pastoral background. In this verse he poetically described the Lord as being “a staff” (v. [19](#); NIV, “support”) to him. The term employed here—*miš’ān*—refers to the large stick with a bowed top used by shepherds to pull sheep out of danger or off a wrong path. By using this metaphor David affirmed that the Lord acted in his behalf as a protective deliverer—a good Shepherd (cf. [Ps 23:1, 4](#)) “in the day of ... disaster.” As the divine Staff intervened in David’s life to snatch him from disaster, the Lord “brought [David] out into a spacious place” (v. [20](#)).

(3) Reasons for David’s Deliverance [22:21–29](#)

[22:21–25](#) With these verses David moved the poem forward from discussing what the Lord had done on his behalf to the issue of why the Lord did it. This subject is of central concern in the poem, since it suggests how others can come to know the Lord’s blessing as well—a matter of great interest to all worshipers of the Lord. David indicated that his success resulted from scrupulous obedience to the Lord’s law: by implication, others who wish to experience God’s blessing must do the same. David’s personal appraisal of his conduct does not necessarily overlook the fact that he had also sinned grievously (cf. [11:27](#); [12:9](#)). To be accepted as accurate, however, one must assume that David’s actions against Uriah and Bathsheba were uncharacteristic (cf. [1 Kgs 11:4](#); [14:8](#); [15:3](#), [11](#); [16:2](#); [18:3](#); [22:2](#)) and thoroughly repented of (cf. [12:13](#); [Ps 51:1–12](#)[[Hb. 3–14](#)]).

To provide additional emphasis to this material, the poet employs a tightly knit eight-element chiasmic structure. This sophisticated literary device increases the organizational complexity as well as the aesthetic interest of this region of the poem and thus makes these verses more memorable to readers. The following chart illustrates the balance of semantic elements within vv. [21–25](#):

Chiasmic Element	Subject	Text
A	the Lord	The LORD has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me (v. 21).
B	David	For I have kept the ways of the LORD (v. 22);
C	David	I have not done evil by turning from my God (v. 22).
D	the Lord’s law	All his laws are before me (v. 23);
D´	David	I have not turned away from his decrees (v. 23).
C´	David	I have been blameless before him (v. 24)
B´	David	and have kept myself from sin (v. 24).
A´	the Lord	The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to my cleanness in his sight (v. 25).

David begins and ends this unit by giving ultimate credit for his success in life to “the LORD” (vv. [21](#), [25](#)). The Lord was the source of his success, but that success was not accidental. As the center of the chiasmus suggests, it was based on David’s diligence in keeping the Torah: he had kept “all” the Lord’s “laws” before him, refusing to turn “away from his decrees” (v. [23](#)). In accordance with the promises of the Torah (cf. [Lev 26:1–13](#); [Deut 28:1–14](#)) the Lord “rewarded” (vv. [21](#), [25](#)) him for the proper moral choices he had made in life, for David had “kept the ways of the LORD” (v. [22](#)). He had not “done evil” but had “kept [him]self from sin” (v. [24](#)), maintaining “cleanness in his sight” (v. [25](#)). To avoid creating a conflict with Pauline theology (cf. [Gal 3:10–11](#)), we must assume that genuine God-centered faith was the wellspring of David’s scrupulous attention to the law and his personal conduct. David received his reward from God because he had a faith-based righteousness that produced actions consistent with it (cf. [Jas 2:17](#)).

[22:26–28](#) Having revealed why he had experienced the Lord’s blessing, David here makes six observations about God’s treatment of various types of individuals. The statements in this section were addressed to the Lord but were clearly intended to instruct the reader in virtue.

David suggests four virtues that please the Lord: faithfulness, moral blamelessness, purity, and humility—the list is suggestive of God-honoring behavior, but not exhaustive. To one who possesses faithfulness (Hb., *ḥāsîd*)—that is, a commitment-based love for God and people—God demonstrates himself to be “faithful” (v. 26). To one who is a “morally blameless champion” (Hb., *gibbôr tāmîm*; NIV, “the blameless”) God shows himself “blameless”—one who acts with unmixed benevolence. To the morally “refined” (v. 27; Hb., *bārar*; NIV, “pure”) God conducts himself in a “refined” (NIV, “pure”) manner. To “the humble” (v. 28; Hb., *ānî*), the Lord brings salvation. Though different in structure and function from its New Testament counterpart, David’s list of virtues with attendant blessings foreshadows Jesus’ Beatitudes (cf. esp. [Matt 5:3, 7–8](#)).

The Lord does not treat all people alike—to do so would demonstrate a moral indifference that is not found in the biblical view of God. While the virtuous find God to be a source of life and help, the wicked experience God’s wrath. Those who are “crooked” (v. 27; Hb., *iqqēš*) find that the Lord is “tortuous” (NIV, “shrewd”). Those who are “haughty” (v. 28; Hb., *rwm*), exalting themselves at the expense of God and others, ultimately find that the Lord brings “them low.”

In a world of darkness, unlit by opportunity and hope, David found the Lord to be his “lamp” (v. 29)—the one who turned his “darkness to light.”

(4) The Lord’s Deliverance of David—II [22:30–46](#)

[22:30](#) The blaze of the Lord within him enabled (cf. v. 29) David to burst forth beyond his own limitations: because of the Lord’s “help” (v. 30) David could “run through a barrier” (NIV, “advance against a troop”) and “scale a wall.”

[22:31–33](#) These three verses appear to make up a single semantic unit. Both vv. 31 and 33 begin with the same word—*hā’el*—and both contain the phrase *tāmîm darkô*. This suggests that this unit was constructed chiasmically, magnifying the Lord, whose way, word, and protection are perfect.

“The God” (v. 31; NIV, “God”)—that is, the one true God—had provided a pathway of life for David. The king had walked in that “way” and found it to be “perfect.” In the poetic context of a synonymously parallel distich, the divine “path” to which David referred should be understood as the “smelted” (NIV, “flawless”)—that is, devoid of all impurity—“word of the LORD.” The Lord’s word, both as it was written in the Law and spoken through the prophets, had invariably guided David to safety and success. Through the gracious provision of insight and help the Lord had been David’s “shield” and “refuge.”

The Lord was David’s only source of divine help because there was no other “God besides the LORD” (v. 32). Every other external hope was a sham; only “our God”—the God of Israel—was “the Rock” capable of shielding David from the terrors and troubles of life.

In v. 33 David continued and extended the reference to the Lord as a refuge; in this case he notes that the one true God is a “mountain stronghold” (v. 33; compare with v. 32). But the Lord is more than just a defense; he is also “power.” He is also the one whose “way” was “perfect”—that is, consistently trustworthy.

[22:34–35](#) By walking on the Lord’s path David found that God made his “feet like the feet of a deer” (v. 34), a metaphor expressing inner stability, strength, and adeptness at handling life’s struggles. This image may have been borrowed by Habakkuk at a later point in time (cf. [Hab 3:19](#)). David’s diligent adherence to the ways of the Lord transformed him, making the end result of his life something more than could be explained through natural processes. The Lord’s paths led the man of faith to great prominence and domination in the wildernesses of life—God enabled him “to stand on the heights.”

Every part of David's life was transformed by his walk on the Lord's path. Reflective of this fact is the confession that the Lord trained David's "hands for battle" (v. [35](#)). So effective was the Lord's transformation of David that his "arms can bend a bow of bronze"—an astonishing feat for anyone. Since bows were made of wood and not bronze in Israel, the description is likely to be taken figuratively and, as such, yet another poetic depiction of the Lord's power to make an otherwise ordinary life extraordinary.

[22:36–37](#) In vv. [34–35](#) David confessed that the Lord was the true source of his exceptional personal abilities. In these verses he confessed that the Lord was also the source of unparalleled external assets. God also provided him with a divine "shield of victory" (v. [36](#); Hb., *māgēn*), thus affording David protection from all threats that might be hurled against him. The Lord's gracious gift complemented the ones David had received from Jonathan (cf. [1 Sam 18:4](#)), thus granting him an invincibility denied the previous dynastic family (cf. [1:21](#)).

David had previously noted that though the Lord resided in heaven, he had come down to help David (v. [10](#)). Here David picks up that theme again to note with wonder that the Lord had humbled himself (NIV, "stooped down") to make David "great." God debased himself to exalt David! In God's action toward David we see a foreshadowing of the work of Christ (cf. [Phil 2:6–8](#)).

A further external blessing that came from the Lord was the provision of a broad "path beneath" (v. [37](#)) David "so that [his] ankles do not turn." The sovereign God who controls every facet of life granted his faithful follower circumstances that permitted him to stand and move confidently against all of life's foes.

[22:38–39](#) David did not idly accept these divinely wrought gifts and circumstances—he used them vigorously. With a holy zeal David "pursued [his] enemies and crushed them"; he "did not turn back till they were destroyed" (v. [38](#)). As the Lord's agent of judgment he "crushed" the enemy "completely," leaving them collapsed beneath his feet, unable to rise.

[22:40–43](#) David's unbridled victory celebration continues in these verses. He unabashedly recounts his triumphs over his foes and marvels over the international prominence given him as a result of his conquests. Overarching his celebration of success, however, is the recognition that the Lord—not any talent or ability naturally present within David himself—is the reason for his unparalleled success.

In an intimate, confessional section of the psalm, David here meditatively confesses to the Lord that he is simultaneously the source of David's prowess and the reason for his enemies' defeats. It was the Lord who "armed" the king "with strength for battle" (v. [40](#)); it was the Lord also who caused his enemies to "turn their backs in flight" (v. [41](#)) and ultimately "bow at [David's] feet" (v. [40](#)).

Because of the Lord's help, David "destroyed [his] foes" (v. [41](#)). But the Lord's provision of assistance was selective; when David's adversaries—perhaps Israelites in this case (cf. [18:2–7](#); [20:15–22](#))—cried out to the Lord for help, "he did not answer" (v. [42](#)). As a result, David "beat them as fine as the dust of the earth; [he] pounded and trampled them like mud in the streets" (v. [43](#)).

[22:44–46](#) By the time David penned this psalm, he had faced and overcome both Israelite and non-Israelite opposition. The Lord "delivered" David "from the attacks of my people" (v. [44](#)), whether they came from a family member (i.e., Absalom) or from someone of another Israelite tribe (i.e., Sheba the Benjamite). These assaults, coming as they did from family members and fellow countrymen, were perhaps the most difficult of all to endure.

Throughout David's battles with foreign adversaries the Lord had "preserved" him, so that the son of Jesse maintained his position as "the head of nations," including Moab, Edom, Ammon, Damascus, and various other Aramean city-states (cf. [8:2](#), [6](#), [14](#); [10:19](#); [12:29–31](#)). So successful was David in his military encounters with foreigners that even "peoples" he "did not know" became "subject to" him. Apparently, some foes would "lose heart" (v. [46](#)) and come "trembling from their strongholds" (v. [46](#)) before David could mount a full-scale assault on their position. These subjugated foreigners would "come cringing to" (v. [45](#)) Israel's king and would servilely "obey" whatever command he might issue.

(5) Praise for the Lord [22:47–50](#)

[22:47–50](#) While David marveled at the incredible social power he possessed, he was careful to contextualize it. David's victory was in a larger sense the Lord's victory; if David reigned over neighboring peoples, it was because the Lord reigned supreme over all peoples. Therefore it was fitting that, after describing his own enviable success, he should bring the psalm to a climactic end with the brightest sustained praise of the Lord found in the composition.

References to the Lord as the Rock, the declaration that God "avenges" (lit., "gives vengeance to") David's enemies and the statement that "the Lord lives" link this latter portion of David's last song with the latter portion of the song of Moses, especially [Deut 32:31–43](#). The similarity in vocabulary and themes suggests that the writer consciously attempted to produce an echo and a parallel between the final song of Moses and the final song of David.

David begins the crescendo of praise by declaring the first and greatest reason for celebration: "the LORD lives!" (v. [47](#)). But the good news does not end with this most profound reality: the Lord is also on David's side! The Lord is praiseworthy because he is "the Rock" (cf. [Deut 32:30–31](#))—that is, a protector and "Savior." Furthermore, the Lord is to be praised because he acted on the basis of moral considerations: in keeping with Torah promises (cf. [Deut 32:35](#)), he "avenges" (v. [48](#)) David for the wrongs done to him and has "put the nations under" David's control.

The Lord was also to be praised because he was David's source of true freedom: God "causes [him] to go forth" (v. [49](#); NIV, "sets me free"), liberating him "from violent men." As if all this were not enough, the Lord was also the one who set David "above [his] foes."

In view of all the Lord is and has done, David exuberantly commits himself to the task of proclaiming the greatness of God to all, even those outside the covenant community. The king himself "will sing praises to" the Lord's name "among the nations" (v. [50](#)).

(6) Postscript: The Lord's Enduring Support for the House of David [22:51](#)

Undergirding David's ministry was the certain knowledge that he was the Lord's "anointed" (Hb., *māšiah*; v. [51](#); cf. [1 Sam 16:13](#))—one chosen by the Lord to be "king," formally set apart and empowered for divine service. His ministry was sustained by God's "unfailing kindness" (Hb., *hesed*), that is, a commitment on God's part to fulfill every promise he had made to David. The Lord's transforming acts of grace and "unfailing kindness" had given this one-time shepherd from the rural regions of Judah a higher and deeper purpose in life—David would use his considerable gifts to make the Lord known throughout the world.

Among the most prized of the Lord's promises to David was that "his descendants" would sit on Israel's throne "forever" (cf. [7:11–16](#)). David's conviction that future generations of his descendants would follow in his footsteps as the Lord's designated leader over Israel must have caused him to act with a certain sense of sobriety: his actions would be models for good or ill as long as Israel had a king.

A notable similarity exists between the final verse of Hannah's song ([1 Sam 2:10](#)) and the final verse of David's song. Both speak of the Lord assisting "his king" and "his anointed" and mention these two nouns in the same order. At the same time, there is a notable difference—David names himself and his descendants as being the Lord's kings, whereas Hannah made no such mention. The resulting effect of the apparently intentional contrast between the two verses is the affirmation that the house of David was in fact the fulfillment of Hannah's prophetic word.