

5:1–5. David has already been anointed king in the south, affirmed by the “men of Judah” (**2:1–4**). The Judean act gave no claim of legitimacy in the north, however. The carefully wrought narrative of chapters **2–4** concerns the moves required to gain the north for David. Saul, Jonathan, Abner, and Ishbosheth are all eliminated. They have all been struck down, yet none has been struck by David. The northern leaders need a leader and have no visible candidate, other than David.

The tribes of Israel, the old Saul party, come to David at Hebron. Abner had promised that “all Israel” would come to David (**3:21**), but Abner died too soon. Without Abner the northerners do not come with strong bargaining power. They come almost as suppliants, making no condition as Abner might have done, almost begging David to take their crown. They make two arguments, when they come, to persuade David to take their throne. First, David and the northern elders belong to each other in covenantal solidarity (v. **1**). The formula of “flesh and bone” is probably not a statement about biological kinship, but it recognizes that the two parties have long stood together in strength (bone) and in weakness (flesh). The elders propose to give formal

certification of that long-standing relation.

Second, even while Saul was king, it was “*you*” (v. **2**). The Hebrew is emphatic. “You, it was you,” who in fact did the things a king is supposed to do. It was you, David, who led out and led in (cf. **1 Sam. 8:20**). It was David who was the real leader of the armies of Israel. While the narrative of **1 Samuel** has emphasized the tension between Saul and David, it is also the case that David was Saul’s most formidable, feared, and effective soldier (cf. **1 Sam. 18:13**). Even the Philistines knew David was Saul’s best man (**1 Sam. 29:3–5**).

On the basis of these two arguments (which effectively dismiss the claims of Saul), the tribes of Israel make their plea: “You shall be shepherd ... you shall be prince over Israel.” The statement legitimating David in the mouth of “all Israel” is an alleged quote from Yahweh: that is, the north does not make its own appeal to David but claims to be enacting the intention of Yahweh. The statement the northerners quote does not in fact appear earlier in the narrative; there is, however, no doubt the statement alludes to the initial anointing in **1 Samuel 16:1–13**, which utilizes the metaphor of shepherd. The important point is that David’s kingship is presented and understood not as a

human political decision but as a decree of Yahweh.

The term “shepherd” is a conventional metaphor in the ancient world for king, indicating the responsibility of the king to guard, feed, nurture, and protect the flock: that is, the community over which he presides. With the use of this metaphor, we are now able to see how the entire narrative of David’s rise is staged from shepherd boy (1 Sam. 16:11) to shepherd king. The ascension narrative begins with the initial announcement that David is “keeping the sheep” (1 Sam. 16:11). This role is reinforced by the self-description of David, “Your servant used to keep sheep” (1 Sam. 17:34–36). By a return to the metaphor of shepherd and sheep at the end of this long narrative, we are able to see how the initial act in 1 Samuel 16:1–13 with this shepherd boy has had its focus from the outset on the outcome of 2 Samuel 5:2. It is Yahweh’s overriding intention in the narrative that the shepherd boy should become the shepherd of Israel.

The use of the shepherd-sheep metaphor for David suggests a variety of other uses of the metaphor that may be related to our exposition. Reference should be made to Psalm 23 and the extensive use of the figure in Ezekiel 34.

The primary requirement of a “good shepherd” is to remember that the shepherd exists for the sake of the sheep and their well-being. A bad shepherd, by contrast, is one who acts as though the sheep exist for the well-being, enhancement, and profit of the shepherd. The use of the metaphor applied to David thus provides a critical criterion for David, who on occasion gives himself for his flock and on occasion uses the flock for his own ends. It is not accidental that Nathan’s parable utilizes the shepherd-sheep metaphor to indict David (12:1–4). In the episode of Bathsheba and Uriah, David misuses his role as shepherd and at enormous cost works only to enhance his own situation. In this initial invitation from “all Israel” to David, the elders have in mind that David should use his enormous gifts and great power for the sake of the community. His performance in the subsequent account is a mixed one.

The metaphor of shepherd and sheep introduces an entire theory of governance and power. That theory receives its most remarkable embodiment in the vocation of Jesus, who is the good shepherd whose death is interpreted as a complete sacrifice of the shepherd for the sheep: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Thus the

metaphor is pushed to its interpretive limit, a limit obviously not approached by David.

In their appeal to David the elders use a second phrase, again allegedly quoting Yahweh: “You shall be prince over Israel” (v. 2). The precise meaning of the term “prince” (*nagid*) is much disputed. At the least, it is a word used to avoid the title “king” (*melek*). To be sure, the narrative commentary of verse 3 uses the term “king,” but the actual wording of the elders seems to want to avoid that high title. Two reasons for such an avoidance are likely. First, to call David “prince” leaves room for the kingship of Yahweh. This *nagid* is one way out of the vexed notion that human kingship is a rejection of the kingship of Yahweh.

Second, the elders apparently do not wish to overlegitimate or excessively exalt David in office. One may imagine that in this carefully phrased formulation the elders of Israel are acutely aware of the dangers of creating a “royal monster,” who overrides traditional notions of covenant and operates as Samuel had warned (1 Sam. 8:11–19). The elders have no intention of giving David too much room in which to operate.

This restrained authorization on the part of the northern elders is underscored

by the covenant-making in verse 3. We are given no particulars, but the very notion of covenant (interpreted by 5:2) suggests a theory of political power that is conditional, limited, and negotiated. As noted long ago by Alt, the terms of kingship given by the north seem to be very different from those of Judah, in which there is no mention of covenant (cf. 2:1–4). This important difference is seen again in the negotiations and schism of 1 Kings 12 concerning David’s grandson Rehoboam. David himself is such a powerful and dominant figure that the differences between north and south are not crucial as long as his personality dominates. It is clear in any case that David has no blank check from the northern elders but must operate in a framework of mutuality.

On this covenantal basis, David is “anointed” king (v. 3). The act of anointing is a very different authorization from the act of Abner in 2:9, wherein he “made Ishbosheth king.” Abner’s act was a bold, unilateral political act; this anointing is in the framework of careful and binding agreements.

Verses 4b–5 suggest a chronological figure of forty years for David’s entire reign, which is taken by scholars to be roughly correct. David enjoyed a long

season of stability, security, and, on the whole, success. While the taking of Jerusalem has not yet been narrated, the proleptic reference to Jerusalem in verse 5 shows that the narrator already knows the end of the story. Finally, David's "home" is not Hebron with the "men of Judah." Nor does David settle in the north with "the elders." David is something quite new. He must have a new place all his own, unencumbered by Israel's old memories. That new home is Jerusalem, given him by Yahweh as a private domain. It will be David's city. He will be unencumbered, unindebted, autonomous when he arrives there.