


# “He May Do Harm . . .”: Translation and Meaning of 2 Sam 12.18

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## Abstract

Three major English translations, NRSV, ESV, and NASB, render **וַאִיֶּךָ נֹאמַר אֵלָיו** : **מִתְּהִלָּד וְעַשָּׂה רָעָה** as “How then can we tell him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm.” These translations insert the reflexive pronoun “himself” as the object of **עַשָּׂה**. While such a reading is possible, it is not at all probable when we take into account how reflexives are expressed in Biblical Hebrew, as well as the syntax and semantics of **עַשָּׂה**. This article contributes to our understanding of 2 Sam 12.18 not by offering a new translation of **וְעַשָּׂה רָעָה**, but by providing a linguistic explanation for why translators should reject the reflexive “harm himself” and instead render the phrase as “he may do harm” (so MEV).

## Keywords

2 Sam 12.18, David, reflexives

Three major English translations, NRSV, ESV, and NASB, render **וַאִיֶּךָ נֹאמַר אֵלָיו מִתְּהִלָּד וְעַשָּׂה רָעָה** as “How then can we tell him the child is dead? He may do *himself* some harm.”<sup>1</sup> These translations insert the reflexive

<sup>1</sup> Emphasis mine. Commentators also render the clause to include the reflexive “himself.” Hertzberg (1965, 315), for example, translates, “He may do himself some harm,” and later comments, “it looks as though the court suppressed the news because they feared a desperate act on the part of the king, perhaps even suicide.” Firth (2009, 429) also writes, “Nevertheless, his activities were so striking that palace staff, fearing self-harm, tried to withhold the news of the death.” Morrison (2013, 160) does not give a proper translation but observes, “As the servants do not understand any of this, they worry that David could become despondent when the child dies: he could even do harm to himself! Their fear underscores the disparity between what we know (David’s crimes) and what they know (that Bathsheba’s child is Uriah’s son).” The reflexive is also present in German translations. See, for example, HFA “Er könnte sich etwas antun!” (he could do something to himself!).

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pronoun “himself” as the object of עָשָׂה. While such a reading is possible, it is not at all probable when we take into account how reflexives are expressed in Biblical Hebrew (BH) as well as the syntax and semantics of עָשָׂה.

This article claims that רָעָה וְעָשָׂה does not mean David may do *himself* harm, but that David may do harm. The difference is that David may harm anyone—his servants, himself, or even someone else.<sup>2</sup> Thus, rather than the servants being concerned only with David’s life, they may well be anxious for their own. This article contributes to our understanding of 2 Sam 12.18 not by offering a new translation of רָעָה וְעָשָׂה, but by providing a linguistic explanation for why translators should reject the reflexive “harm *himself*” and instead render the clause as “he may do harm” (so MEV).<sup>3</sup>

## I. Reflexivity in Biblical Hebrew

For our argument to convince we must observe how reflexivity is expressed in the Hebrew Bible. There are several ways by which BH can denote a verbal action performed both by the subject and on the subject (he hit *himself*).

The first is the use of an explicit noun, such as נַפְשׁוֹ “neck,” “life,” “soul.”<sup>4</sup> Jones (2017a), for example, demonstrates that נַפְשׁוֹ has grammaticalized over time to become a reflexive. Cross-linguistically, it is quite common for a noun meaning “life” or “soul” to become a marker of reflexivity (Rubin 2005; Heine 2005; 2011; Françosi 2008; Anghelescu 2012).

### (1) Job 18.4

טָרַף נַפְשׁוֹ בְּאַפוֹ

You who **tear** (*qal*) *yourself* in your anger<sup>5</sup>

In (1), נַפְשׁוֹ indicates that the subject tears *itself*.<sup>6</sup> The verb טָרַף licenses two participants: a subject (agent) and an object (patient). The object slot in

<sup>2</sup> GuNB, for example, renders the last clause as “wird es für uns gefährlich!” (it will be dangerous for us!).

<sup>3</sup> The German Lu 2017, for example, leaves it ambiguous: “Er könnte ein Unheil anrichten” (he could wreak havoc), as do Zür and EU. The same is true for the Spanish NVI, “¿qué locura no hará ahora si le decimos que el niño ha muerto?” (what madness will he not do now if we tell him that the boy is dead?), and similarly BTX; the French SG21, “il réagira mal” (he will react badly), so also Sem; the Italian NR, “Potrebbe commettere un gesto disperato” (he could make a desperate gesture); and the Dutch HTB, “wat zal hij doen als wij hem vertellen dat het dood is?” (what will he do if we tell him he is dead?).

<sup>4</sup> See also Waltke and O’Connor (1990, 388). For a recent linguistic study of נַפְשׁוֹ, see Müller (2018, 171–78; 214–44).

<sup>5</sup> Translations are NRSV or adaptations of NRSV where added explicitness is helpful. Emphasis (*italics*) is mine. In the examples, the verbs in focus are indicated in bold, and patients are indicated in *italics*.

<sup>6</sup> See Jenni (2012, 248) and Jones (2017a, 423–24).

(1) is filled by *נָפֵשׁוּ*, rather than, for example, the cognate object *טָרַף* found with this verb in Ezekiel (19.3, 6; 22.25, 27; Jenni 2012, 248).<sup>7</sup> To communicate reflexivity in (1), *נָפֵשׁוּ* is required. There are two reasons for this.

First, *טָרַף*, a verb of violent action, is an “other-directed” predicate (König and Vezzosi 2004, 219).<sup>8</sup> That is, its meaning supposes an action on someone or something other than the subject itself. Peitsara (1997, 298), for example, notes, “verbs denoting destructive and similar negatively coloured actions . . . are usually not directed at oneself.” Therefore, if reflexivity is intended with *טָרַף* (*qal*), then it must be explicitly marked in some way.<sup>9</sup> Second, as is well known, the *qal* stem itself does not designate reflexivity (Waltke and O’Connor 1990, 362–67; *BHRG*, 76).<sup>10</sup> In sum, (1) illustrates that *נָפֵשׁוּ* may serve as a marker of reflexivity. However, it does so quite infrequently in the Hebrew Bible (Jones 2017a; Jenni 2012).

The second way in which reflexivity may be explicitly expressed is with the preposition *לְ* “to/for.” On this form, R. Holmstedt (2019, 7) argues that “when reflexivity and reciprocity cannot be adequately expressed within the verb itself, BH delegates the task to a prepositional phrase with cliticised pronoun.”<sup>11</sup>

## (2) 1 Chr 15.1

וַיַּעֲשֵׂה־לוֹ בְּתֵימִים בְּעִיר דָּוִד וַיִּבְנוּ מְקוֹם לְאָרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּטְּלוּ אֹהֶל:

**David built** (*qal*) **houses** for himself in the city of David, and he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it.

Miller-Naudé and Naudé (2019, 14) remark that (2) accords with the statement in *BHRG* (299):

The position of the syntactic antecedent of a pronominal suffix determines the nature of the pronominal suffix. If the syntactic antecedent occurs in the same clause as the pronominal suffix, the pronominal suffix has a *reflexive (anaphoric) nature* and is usually translated with *self (himself, herself, etc.)*.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Ezek 19.3, 6; 22.25, 27.

<sup>8</sup> See also Haiman (1983) and König and Siemund (2000).

<sup>9</sup> This observation of “other-directed” predicates is also made by Haspelmath (2008), who terms verbs like *טָרַף* as “extroverted.” Haspelmath lays out seven universals of reflexive marking and attempts to explain them with a frequency-based methodology.

<sup>10</sup> Joüon and Muraoka (2006, 116) observe that there are some verbs that “express a reflexive action” in the *qal*: רָחַץ “to wash”; טָרַף “to pour”; מָשַׁח “to anoint”; טָבַל “to dip.” However, reflexivity does not derive from the *qal binyan* itself. Rather, the concept of “non-other-directed” predication would seem to be in play.

<sup>11</sup> Holmstedt builds upon earlier research in generative linguistics, particularly Haegeman (1994).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, 1 Sam 8.11. Emphasis is mine.

While one might regard לו “for himself” as *dativus commodi* (“for his own benefit”) the prepositional phrase (PP) in (2) is best understood as an ethical dative or reflexive anaphor (Naudé 2013c). The PP is co-referential to the subject (he = David). Thus, it cannot be a *dativus commodi* (Naudé 2013a).<sup>13</sup>

Also relevant to our study of 2 Sam 12.18 is the fact that this same construction, וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ, can be non-reflexive (Holmstedt 2019, 7), as in the following example:

### (3) Neh 13.5

וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ לְשִׁכָּה גְדוֹלָה

He prepared for him (Tobiah) a large room

Miller-Naudé and Naudé (2019, 14) maintain that (3) aligns with another statement by *BHRG* (299): “If the syntactic antecedent does not function in the same clause as the pronominal suffix, the pronominal suffix has a *pronominal nature* and is usually translated with *him/her/them*.”<sup>14</sup>

Examples (2–3) illustrate the fact that the pronoun in BH “allows either pronominal or reflexive readings in appropriate contexts” (Holmstedt 2019, 8). The distinction between reflexive (2) and non-reflexive (3) cannot be made by syntax alone, however. Put differently, “There do not seem to be simple syntactic conditions for distinguishing the reciprocal-reflexive and non-reciprocal-reflexive meanings” (Miller-Naudé and Naudé 2019, 10). Rather, as Holmstedt (2019, 8) rightly recognizes, the choice between reflexive and non-reflexive can be made “by recourse to the discourse context.”

Beyond וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ and לוֹ, BH makes use of a third strategy to communicate reflexivity: verbal stems, namely *niphal* and *hitpael*.<sup>15</sup> These stems do not require a noun or pronoun to indicate that the subject is performing an action on itself or bringing itself into a state. The *n* and *t* prefixes of the stems do so respectively (Jenni 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Naudé uses Government Binding Theory to explain that indeed the PP is a reflexive anaphor—not a sentence constituent. This theory observes “the formal properties (or ‘nuts and bolts’) of Hebrew which Hebrew shares with other languages that have similar properties” (Naudé 2013b). See also Miller-Naudé and Naudé (2019).

<sup>14</sup> Emphasis is mine. See 1 Sam 8.22 as an example.

<sup>15</sup> For the purposes of this article, I am using the terminology of reflexivity in quite a broad sense. Primarily I do so because my interlocutors use “reflexive” this way. For example, Holmstedt (2019, 6) states that “BH can express reflexivity and reciprocity by using specific verb-related root derivations (i.e., the *niph'al* and *hitpa'el binyanim* respectively).” However, I (Jones 2017b; 2020a; 2020b) and others (Jenni 2012; van Wolde 2019; Boyd 2017) have demonstrated that the *niphal* and *hitpael binyanim* are more properly considered middle or passive—not reflexive in a narrow sense.

Let us take verbs of hiding as an example. While hiding is quite ambiguous as regards to who or what is hidden, such an action is clearly co-referential in the *niphal* and the *hitpael*. Both (4) and (5) confirm that the subject is acting upon itself—in contrast to the subject acting on a differentiated object (6–7).

#### (4) Josh 10.16

וַיִּגְסוּ חֲמִשָּׁת הַמְּלָכִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּחְבְּאוּ בַּמְעָרָה בְּמַקְדָּה:

Meanwhile, these five kings fled and **[they] hid** (*niphal*) *themselves* in the cave at Makkedah.

#### (5) 1 Sam 13.6

וְאִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל רָאוּ כִּי צָרָלוּ כִּי נָגַשׁ הָעָם וַיִּתְחַבְּאוּ הָעָם בַּמְּעָרוֹת וּבַחֲוֹתִים וּבְסֻלְעִים וּבְצִרְחִים וּבְבָרוֹת:

When the Israelites saw that they were in distress (for the troops were hard pressed), the **people hid** (*hitpael*) *themselves* in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns.

#### (6) Isa 49.2

בְּצֵל יָדוֹ הִחְבִּיאֵנִי וַיְשִׂימֵנִי לְחֵץ בְּרוּר בְּאֶשְׁפָּתוֹ הִסְתִּירֵנִי:

In the shadow of his hand **he hid** (*hiphil*) *me*; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver **he hid** (*hiphil*) *me*.

#### (7) Josh 6.17

כִּי הִחְבְּאתָהּ אֶת־הַמְּלָאָכִים אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחְנוּ:

because **she hid** (*hiphil*) *the messengers* we sent.

Semantically, we observe that hiding involves an agent and patient (see 4–7). In (4–5) the agent and patient are one and the same (van Wolde 2019).

In light of these examples above, we can conclude that BH makes use of nouns such as נֶפֶשׁ, the preposition לְ, and the *niphal* and *hitpael* stems to clarify that the agent and patient are co-referential. With regard to 2 Sam 12.18, we determine that these three primary modes of reflexivity do not apply. However, such an observation is not substantial enough to discount the translation “he may harm *himself*.” There are notable exceptions that we must consider.

First, as briefly noted above, the verbal lexeme itself can have an inherent reflexive sense:

**(8) Lev 16.4<sup>16</sup>**

כְּתוּבָהּ בְּקֹדֶשׁ יִלְבָּשׁ

He shall **put on** (*qal*) the holy linen tunic

Verbs of clothing, as in (8), necessitate that someone is or becomes covered in clothing.<sup>17</sup> The object of that action, however, does not have to be specified because this subclass of predicates can communicate an inherent reflexivity. It is typical across cultures for someone to clothe him/herself.<sup>18</sup> In cross-linguistic research, verbs of clothing are termed “non-other-directed” (König and Vezzosi 2004). Notably, the difference between “other-directed” (e.g., “hit”) and “non-other-directed” (e.g., “clothe”) predicates “should be considered as a major factor in the development of reflexive markers” (König and Vezzosi 2004, 213).<sup>19</sup>

Given that clothing predicates have inherent reflexivity, one does not have to add “-self” to communicate what happens in (8), for example. Moreover, if the typical reflexive meaning is not intended, one must explicitly note a different object, as in (9).

**(9) Gen 3.21**

וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כְּתָנוּת עוֹר וַיִּלְבָּשֵׂם:

And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and **clothed** (*hiphil*) them.

The second way in which reflexivity can be communicated without the help of nouns (כְּתָבָהּ), prepositions, or verbal stems (*niphal* and *hitpael*) comes from the surrounding context. Let us first illustrate this with non-reflexive examples (10–11).

**(10) Ezek 22.20**

כִּן אֶקְבֵץ בְּאַפִּי וּבְחִמְתִּי וְהִנַּחֲתִי וְהִתְכַתִּי אֶתְכֶם:

so I **will gather** you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you.

<sup>16</sup> This inherent “-self” is noted in *DCH* as well. See, for example, Gen 28.20; Deut 22.11; 1 Kgs 22.30; Isa 59.17; Jer 46.4; Ps 93.1; 104.1; Esth 5.1.

<sup>17</sup> For a technical linguistic discussion of implicit reflexivity and the differing uses of verbal strategies (e.g., *hitpael* in BH) and noun strategies (e.g., כְּתָבָהּ in BH), see König and Vezzosi (2004, 213) and Spathas, Alexiadou, and Schäfer (2015).

<sup>18</sup> Haiman (1985; 1995) observes that grooming verbs, such as “wash” and “dress,” are “introverted.” That is, the specificity of “self” is not obligatory. In “he shaved,” for example, it is clear that he shaved *himself*.

<sup>19</sup> This view of reflexivity stands in contrast to Chomsky’s Binding Conditions (Chomsky 1981; 1986). It should also be noted that “not all predicates of a language belong to the one pole or the other, some (e.g. *clean up*, *look at*, *vote for*, etc.) do not seem to have an in-built directionality” (König and Vezzosi 2004, 220).

**(11) 2 Kgs 4.41**

וַיֹּאמֶר וְקַח-וּקְמַח וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ אֵלֶי-הַסִּיר

He said, “Then bring some flour.” He **threw** it into the pot.

In (10–11), there are objects that are required by the semantics of the verbs yet not explicitly present in the clause (Ágel and Fischer 2010). The object “you” in (10) is missing, though אָקַבֵּץ demands that the subject gather someone or something. The referent for the omitted object appears later in the verse: אַתָּה כֶּם. In (11) the *hiphil wayyiqtol* וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ requires someone or something to be thrown. The object of throwing is not explicit in the clause because it is contextually obvious—קְמַח appears immediately prior. In sum, when analyzing 2 Sam 12.18 we should be aware of the possibility of non-overt objects (10–11) as well as the directionality of predicates (8–9).

**2. Semantics and syntax of עָשָׂה**

Before returning to our text in question, we need to clarify the behavior of עָשָׂה throughout the Hebrew Bible. There are two significant questions for us here. First, how does עָשָׂה express reflexivity in the *qal*, if at all? Second, what is the syntax of the argument structure “Someone *does* Something (to/for Someone)”? The answers to these questions will help set our expectation of what should appear in 2 Sam 12.18 to denote reflexivity.

As shown below, the pattern “Someone *does* (עָשָׂה) Something” occurs quite regularly. The verb appears rather frequently with the object טוב “good.” The subscripts 1–3 in the following examples indicate subject, object, and recipients of the action, respectively.

**(12) Ps 14.1**

אֵין עֹשֶׂה-טוֹב

No one<sub>1</sub> does good<sub>2</sub>

The recipient of טוב is *always* someone other than the subject.<sup>20</sup> That is, the agent and patient are not co-referential. (13–15) are examples of this:

<sup>20</sup> Frequently טוב occurs as a relative complementizer (*BHRG*, 308) in הַטוֹב בְּעֵינַי: Gen 16.6; Deut 6.18; 12.28; Judg 19.24; 1 Sam 1.23; 3.18; 14.36, 40; 2 Sam 10.12||1 Chr 19.13; 2 Sam 19.19, 28, 39; 2 Kgs 10.5; 20.3||Isa 38.3; 1 Chr 21.23; 2 Chr 31.20. For טוב with a typical relative, see 2 Sam 19.38 (אֲשֶׁר-טוֹב בְּעֵינַיָּךְ). For more on the relative in BH, see Holmstedt 2016. For another example of “Someone does good to Someone,” see 2 Sam 2.6.

**(13) Ps 119.65**

טוב עשית עם־עבדך

You<sub>1</sub> have done good<sub>2</sub> to your servant<sub>3</sub>

**(14) Judg 9.16**

ואם־טובה עשיתם עם־ירבעל ועם־ביתו

And if you<sub>1</sub> have done good<sub>2</sub> to Jerubbaal<sub>3</sub> and his house<sub>3</sub>

**(15) 1 Sam 24.19**

עשיתה אתי טובה

You<sub>1</sub> have done good<sub>2</sub> to me<sub>3</sub>

A similar pattern occurs with חסד.<sup>21</sup> The recipient of חסד follows the preposition עם (16–17) and ל (18–19).

**(16) Gen 24.14**

כי־עשית חסד עם־אדני

For you<sub>1</sub> have shown lovingkindness<sub>2</sub> to my lord<sub>3</sub>

**(17) 1 Sam 15.6**

ואתה עשיתה חסד עם־כל־בני ישראל

but you<sub>1</sub> have shown lovingkindness<sub>2</sub> to all the sons of Israel<sub>3</sub>

**(18) Exod 20.6**

ועשה חסד לאֲלֵפִים לאֲהַבִּי ולשמרי מצותי

but [I<sub>1</sub>] showing lovingkindness<sub>2</sub> to the thousandth generation<sub>3</sub> of those who love me and keep my commandments.

**(19) 2 Sam 22.51**

ועשה־חסד למשיחו לדוד ולזרעו עד־עולם

and [he<sub>1</sub>] showing lovingkindness<sub>2</sub> to his anointed<sub>3</sub> to David<sub>3</sub> and to his seed<sub>3</sub> forever

<sup>21</sup> Gen 24.12, 14, 49; 40.14; 47.29; Exod 20.6||Deut 5.10; Josh 2.12 (2x), 14; Judg 1.24; 8.35; 1 Sam 15.6; 20.8 (text-critical issues with the preposition), 14; 2 Sam 2.5, 6; 3.8; 9.1, 3, 7; 10.2||1 Chr 19.2; 2 Sam 22.51||Ps 18.51; 1 Kgs 2.7; 3.6||2 Chr 1.8; Jer 32.18; Job 10.12; Ruth 1.8.

In (20), the imperative עשה and its objects (וְהִסֵּד וְרַחֲמִים) are at first ambiguous as to the recipient of the action. However, the final part of the clause (אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו) clarifies that the action should be reciprocal:<sup>22</sup>

**(20) Zech 7.9**

וְהִסֵּד וְרַחֲמִים עָשׂוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו

and lovingkindness<sub>2</sub> and mercies<sub>2</sub> [you<sub>1</sub>] do each man<sub>1</sub> to his brother<sub>3</sub>

This reciprocity of עשה requires the explicit phrase אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו. Thus, translators appropriately render the recipients of וְהִסֵּד וְרַחֲמִים as “to one another” (ESV; NIV; NRSV). In contrast, (21–22) have no explicit or contextual recipient of הִסֵּד:

**(21) Jer 9.23**

אֲנִי יְהוָה עֹשֶׂה הִסֵּד מִשְׁפָּט וּצְדָקָה בְּאֶרֶץ

I<sub>1</sub> the LORD am doing lovingkindness<sub>2</sub>, justice<sub>2</sub>, and righteousness<sub>2</sub> in the earth

**(22) Ps 109.16**

לֹא זָכַר עֲשׂוֹת הִסֵּד

He<sub>1</sub> did not remember to do lovingkindness<sub>2</sub>

Getting closer to the syntax and semantics of 2 Sam 12.18 (Someone *does* Something [to/for Someone]), we observe how עַל functions with עשה.<sup>23</sup> Rarely does the recipient of עַל appear explicitly (24–26); example (23) is an exception:

**(23) Gen 31.29**

יֵשׁ-לְאֵל יָדִי לַעֲשׂוֹת עִמָּכֶם עַל

It is in my power to do harm<sub>2</sub> to you<sub>3</sub>

Most often, עשה + עַל has no concern *to/for whom* the action is done, as (24–26) illustrate:

**(24) Isa 56.2**

וְשָׁמַר יָדוֹ מֵעֲשׂוֹת כָּל־רָע

The one who keeps his hand from doing any evil<sub>2</sub>

<sup>22</sup> For a recent study on reciprocity in BH, see Staps (2018).

<sup>23</sup> For עַל as object, see Gen 31.29; 1 Sam 29.7; Isa 56.2; Jer 2.13; Ps 34.17; Prov 2.14; Ecc 4.17; 8.11, 12; Neh 9.28.

**(25) Jer 2.13**

בִּישָׁתִּים רָעוֹת עָשָׂה עַמִּי

For my people<sub>1</sub> have committed two evils<sub>2</sub>

**(26) Ps 34.17**

פָּנֵי יְהוָה בְּעֵשִׂי רָע

The face of the LORD is against the ones who<sub>1</sub> do evil<sub>2</sub>

The most frequent pattern of עשה + רע is *Someone*<sub>1</sub> does *evil*<sub>2</sub> before or in the eyes of someone (27–28):<sup>24</sup>

**(27) 1 Sam 29.7**

וְלֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה רָע בְּעֵינֵי סַרְנֵי פְלִשְׁתִּים

[You<sub>1</sub>] do not do anything displeasing<sub>2</sub> in the eyes of the lords of the Philistines

**(28) Neh 9.28**

יָשׁוּבוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת רָע לְפָנֶיךָ

They<sub>1</sub> shall return to doing evil<sub>2</sub> before you.

A slightly different though nearly synonymous noun, רעה, often serves as the object of עשה.<sup>25</sup> Prepositional phrases עם (29), אֶת (30), and לְ (31–35) mark the recipient of the action:

**(29) Gen 26.29**

אִם־תַּעֲשֶׂה עִמָּנוּ רָעָה

That you<sub>1</sub> not do harm<sub>2</sub> to us<sub>3</sub>

**(30) Judg 11.27**

וְאַתָּה עֹשֶׂה אֶתִּי רָעָה לְהִלָּחֵם בִּי

And you<sub>1</sub> are doing me<sub>3</sub> wrong<sub>2</sub> by fighting me

<sup>24</sup> The phrase “in the eyes of someone” is not a proper complement licensed by the verb, but a clarification of the location of that action. By far the most frequent occurrence of רע is הִרַע בְּעֵינֵי. See, for example, Num 32.13; Deut 4.25; 9.18; 17.2; Judg 2.11; 3.7, 12(2x); 4.1; 6.1; 10.6; 13.1; 1 Sam 15.19; 2 Sam 12.9.

<sup>25</sup> For רעה as object of this verb with a recipient: Gen 26.29; 39.9; Num 24.13; Judg 9.56; 11.27; 15.3; 1 Sam 6.9; 12.20; 2 Sam 3.39; 2 Kgs 8.12; Jer 11.17; 44.7; Ezek 6.10; Ps 15.3; Lam 1.21; Neh 6.2.

**(31) 1 Sam 6.9**

הוא עָשָׂה לָנוּ אֶת־הָרָעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה הַזֹּאת

He<sub>1</sub> has done us<sub>3</sub> this great evil<sub>2</sub>

**(32) 2 Kgs 8.12**

תַּעֲשֶׂה לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רָעָה

You<sub>1</sub> will do to the sons of Israel<sub>3</sub> evil<sub>2</sub>

**(33) Ezek 6.10**

דִּבַּרְתִּי לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהֶם הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת

I have spoken to do to the sons of Israel<sub>3</sub> this disaster<sub>2</sub>

**(34) Ps 15.3**

לֹא־עָשָׂה לְרֵעֵהוּ רָעָה

He<sub>1</sub> does not do to his neighbor<sub>3</sub> harm<sub>2</sub>

**(35) Neh 6.2**

וְהֵמָּה חֹשְׁבִים לַעֲשׂוֹת לִי רָעָה

They are considering doing me<sub>3</sub> harm<sub>2</sub>

Most often when recipients of רָעָה do appear, רָעָה is the head of a relative clause (36).<sup>26</sup>

**(36) Judg 9.56**

וַיֹּשֶׁב אֱלֹהִים אֶת רָעַת אַבִּימֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְאָבִיו

God returned Abimelech's evil, which [evil<sub>2</sub>] he<sub>1</sub> did to his father<sub>3</sub>

The most instructive usage of עָשָׂה + רָעָה for the purposes of understanding 2 Sam 12.18 occurs in (37–38):

**(37) Jer 44.7**

לְמָה אַתֶּם עֹשִׂים רָעָה גְּדוֹלָה אֲלֵי־נַפְשֵׁיכֶם

Why are you<sub>1</sub> doing great harm<sub>2</sub> to yourselves<sub>3</sub>

<sup>26</sup> See also 1 Kgs 2.44; Jer 11.17; 18.8; 26.3; 32.32; 36.3; 42.10; Jonah 3.10; Neh 13.7.

**(38) Jer 26.19**

וְאִנְחֵנוּ עֲשִׂים רָעָה גְדוֹלָה עַל־נַפְשׁוֹתֵינוּ:

But we<sub>1</sub> are about to bring great disaster<sub>2</sub> on ourselves<sub>3</sub>

Examples (37–38) confirm that עשה is not an inherently reflexive predicate (i.e., non-other-directed predicate), as clothing verbs in (8). Moreover, as noted above, the *qal* stem does not denote reflexivity as its default semantics, unlike the *niphal* and *hitpael* (see examples 4–5). Rather, (37–38) demonstrate that an explicit reflexive anaphor is necessary to verify that the subject is acting upon itself, similar to (1).

Continuing with עשה + רעה, we observe, as above, that mention of the recipient is not necessary (39–40):

**(39) Gen 39.9**

וְאֵיךְ אֶעֱשֶׂה הַרְעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה הַזֹּאת

How can I<sub>1</sub> do this great evil<sub>2</sub>

**(40) Num 24.13**

לַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹבָה אוֹ רָעָה מִלְבִּי

Doing good<sub>2</sub> or evil<sub>2</sub> on my own accord

It is also possible that עשה could have a non-overt though contextually present recipient. However, there is no evidence of this occurring elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and there is no reason to think it is the case in our verse.<sup>27</sup>

There are other objects similar to טובה and רעה that occur infrequently (examples 41–42). They too do not provide evidence for an implicit reflexivity of עשה (*qal*):

**(41) Prov 16.12**

עֲשׂוֹת רָשָׁע

To do wickedness<sub>2</sub>

<sup>27</sup> An omitted object does occur with עשה. However, it is not the recipient; in Lam 1.21 we read, שָׁמְעוּ כִּי נִאֲנָחָה אָנִי אִין מִנְחָם לִי כְּלִי־אֵיבִי שָׁמְעוּ רַעְתִּי שָׁשׂוּ כִּי אֶתָּה עֲשִׂיתָ הַבֹּאֵת זֶם —“They heard that I am groaning; there is no one to comfort me! All my enemies have heard of my calamity; they rejoiced, for you have done [this]. You brought the day you announced (may they be like me!).” Within the context of Lam 1.21 there is no ambiguity as to what the LORD has done; it is certainly רַעְתִּי “my calamity.” The insertion of [this] clarifies that there is an antecedent of עשה. This is a contextual complement of *what* is done, not *to/for whom* it is done. Thus, there is a significant and substantial difference between Lam 1.21 and 2 Sam 12.18.

**(42) Isa 53.9**

לֹא־חָמַס עָשָׂה

He<sub>1</sub> did not do violence<sub>2</sub>

Examples (39–42) provide further confirmation for how unexceptional 2 Sam 12.18 is. We should not be surprised, therefore, that no recipient is present in רָעָה עָשָׂה.

**3. רָעָה עָשָׂה in 2 Sam 12.18**

We have observed that if רָעָה + עָשָׂה or רָע + עָשָׂה is to express reflexivity, the reflexive anaphor needs to be made explicit (e.g., וְאֲנַחְנוּ עֲשִׂים רָעָה, וְגִדּוּלָה עַל־נַפְשׁוֹתֵינוּ).<sup>28</sup> In light of that, we can make at least two remarks about 2 Sam 12.18. First, עָשָׂה (*gal*) has no overt object that receives רָעָה. Second, if reflexivity is intended (*David-himself*), then it must be contextually obvious.

The context of 2 Sam 12.18 does not support a reflexive reading. Rather, the semantics, syntax, and pragmatics are similar to Ps 109.16 (לֹא זָכַר עֲשׂוֹת הַסֵּד) and Ps 14.1 (אֵין עֲשָׂה־טוֹב) in which the recipients of הַסֵּד and טוֹב are of no interest to the speaker/author. The focus is on the doing (עָשָׂה) of הַסֵּד and טוֹב. Thus for these psalms and 2 Sam 12.18, it may be possible to infer a specific recipient, but the inference is not at all certain. Moreover, we may confidently state that the recipient of רָעָה in 2 Sam 12.18 is by no means the most salient feature of the clause; רָעָה itself is the most prominent participant—syntactically and pragmatically.

We can consider more carefully, however, the possibility that “himself” was pragmatically intended but syntactically omitted. Holmstedt (2019), for example, draws on several studies of non-overt objects in order to clarify null object anaphora in BH. The first comes from Creason (1991). In short, Creason argues that an object may be syntactically missing if two criteria are met: the antecedent is active (or at least semi-active), and the antecedent is not a major participant in the discourse.

Accounting for Creason’s principles of pragmatics and syntax, we could certainly say that “himself” in 2 Sam 12.18 does not meet the second criterion; David is a major character within the discourse. However, Holmstedt (2019, 11) observes counterexamples that call Creason’s criteria into question, as (43) illustrates.

<sup>28</sup> For other passages with עָשָׂה having an object, e.g., הַסֵּד, and an additional object receiving the action, see Ps 119.65; Gen 24.49; 2 Sam 8.15.

## (43) Josh 8.29

וְאֶת־מֶלֶךְ הָעִי תָלָה עַל־הָעֵץ עַד־עֵת הָעֶרֶב וַכְּבוֹא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ צָוָה יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיִּרְדּוּ אֶת־גִּבְלֹתָיו מִן־הָעֵץ וַיִּשְׁלִיכוּ אוֹתָהּ אֶל־פֶּתַח שַׁעַר הָעִיר וַיִּקְמוּ עָלָיו גַּל־אֲבָנִים גְּדוֹל עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:

And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening; and at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree, threw it down at the entrance of the gate of the city, and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.

The *piel* צָוָה is missing a recipient object, possibly יִשְׂרָאֵל (see Josh 8.27). Given that יִשְׂרָאֵל is surely discourse prominent in the remainder of Josh 8, Holmstedt (2019, 11) finds Creason’s criteria infelicitous for defining null anaphora.

Recently, Cook (2019a) presented research on non-overt objects in BH. Cook argues that most missing objects are not high in animacy or specificity.

## (44) Gen 28.11

וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשֶׂם מִרְאשֵׁתָיו

He **took** (*some* or *one*) of the stones of the place and **placed** (*them* or *it*) at his head.

In (44) the object of לָקַח and שִׂים is non-overt. What is more, this non-overt object is non-animate and generalized. Inanimate antecedents account for 87% of all null objects in the Pentateuch (Cook 2019b, 11).<sup>29</sup> In addition, animals comprise another 7% of the null objects. Concerning specificity, Cook observes that “80% of the null objects in the Torah have non-specific antecedents” (12). Taking both animacy and specificity into consideration, Cook finds only six cases throughout the first five books of the Hebrew Bible in which the null object has an animate and specific antecedent. Even more striking is the fact that Cook notes only one example in all the Pentateuch where the null participant is an indirect object (Num 21.3).

Applying Cook’s criteria (2019a; 2019b) to our text, it seems most unlikely that “himself” is a non-overt object in 2 Sam 12.18; “himself” as reference to David would be both animate and specific. The research by Cook and by Creason (1991), therefore, corroborates our argument that הָעֵשָׂה רָעָה does not mean that David may do harm *to/for himself*.

Moving to the wider context of 2 Sam 12.18, the servants, who are afraid to tell David about the death of his son (וַיִּירָאוּ עַבְדֵי דָוִד לְהַגִּיד לוֹ), do not appear to be exclusively worrying about what David would do

<sup>29</sup> Cook 2019b is an incorporation of his (2019a) and other recent study. Thanks to John Cook for sharing this forthcoming research.

to/for himself. Rather, their concern seems to be that David may do harm (וַעֲשֶׂה רָעָה). Such a supposition, of course, involves interpretation beyond analyzing the grammar and syntax of עָשָׂה.

In sum, we conclude in light of the linguistic explanation above that the translation of וַעֲשֶׂה רָעָה should be “he may do harm.” Such a translation does justice to how BH expresses reflexivity (section 1) and the syntax and semantics of עָשָׂה specifically (section 2). Translators and exegetes, therefore, should reject the reflexive translation “harm *himself*.” Instead, they should render וַעֲשֶׂה רָעָה as “he may do harm,” leaving the clause as ambiguous and ominous as it is in Hebrew.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> I would like to thank the peer reviewers of *The Bible Translator* for their insightful comments.

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## Abbreviations

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| BH      | Biblical Hebrew   |
| BHRG    | <i>Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar</i> (Van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze 2017, in References) |
| BTX     | La Biblia Textual (1999)  |
| DCH     | <i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> (Clines 1993–2011, in References)                         |
| ESV     | English Standard Version (2016)   |
| EU      | Einheitsübersetzung (2017)  |
| GuNB    | Gute Nachricht Bibel (2000)   |
| HFA     | Hoffnung für Alle (2015)  |
| HTB     | Het Boek (1987)   |
| Lu 2017 | Lutherbibel (2017)  |
| MEV     | Modern English Version (2013)   |
| NASB    | New American Standard Bible (1995)  |
| NVI     | Nueva Versión Internacional (1999)  |
| NR      | Nuova Riveduta (2006)   |
| NRSV    | New Revised Standard Version (1989)   |
| PP      | prepositional phrase  |
| Sem     | La Bible du Semeur (1992)   |
| SG21    | La Segond 21 (2007)   |
| Zür     | Zürcher Bibel ([1531] 2007)   |