My paper examines the biblical analogues in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* The title itself is an allusion to 2 Samuel 19:4, in which King David cries, “Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!” after he learns that his rebellious son was killed in battle against his own army. This leads the reader to compare Sutpen to king David, an interesting analogue that certainly seems applicable to Sutpen and his sons, especially after Bon is killed. However, the reference takes on even greater significance after considering an earlier story about Absalom. Chapter 13 of 2 Samuel tells the story of Absalom’s brother, Amnon, who rapes their sister, Tamar, and is killed by Absalom. This dynamic mirrors the ambiguous relationship between Bon, Henry, and Judith as well as Bon’s murder. David’s rise to power makes an interesting analogue for Sutpen’s design, and Henry killing Bon follows the same pattern Absalom’s rebellion and murder of his brother. I argue that Faulkner borrows these and other archetypal elements of Old Testament thematics, language, and characters. These form a thematic nucleus, a skeletal structure that directs the novel’s prose style, characterization, conflict, and action.
Faulkner and the Old Testament:
The Thematic Skeleton of Absalom, Absalom!

William Faulkner is famous for borrowing well-known quotations for his titles. His work *Go Down Moses* refers to the black spiritual of the same name, and *The Sound and the Fury* obviously refers to the passage of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, “A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” While these references are fairly straightforward, both easy to catch and understand (particularly the latter obviously referring to the part of the narrative delivered by the impaired Benjy Compson), the biblical allusion in the title of his novel *Absalom, Absalom!* is slightly less obvious. Not only is the passage it refers to relatively obscure compared to the previous two, but it is also unclear what Faulkner intends by making this reference. The title refers to the passage in 2 Samuel in which King David cries out, “Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Would God that I had died for thee,” after learning that his rebelling son Absolom has been killed in battle by Joab (2 Sam 18:33).

While the passage it refers to is clear, scholars have argued about the effect referring to the King David story has on the novel. There are several similarities between the two narratives, to be sure. Both stories engage in a discourse that is highly concerned with sons, with dynasties, and with succession. Both show the rise of young men from country outsiders to prominent aristocrats, and both such men watch their respective empires destroyed by feuding sons. However, many have found comparing the “design” of the manipulative, shrewd, and calculating “man-horse-demon” (as Rosa Coldfield calls him) known as Thomas Stutpen to a biblical hero like King David to be problematic. Some scholars, like David M. Monaghan, argue that the reference is “basically ironic,” and that comparing him to so lofty a figure merely satirizes the
Southern aristocracy and notions of capitalistic greed (Monaghan 28). Others assert that the intertextuality is a simple manifestation of the religious culture in which Faulkner grew up and set his novel, H.L. Mencken’s so-called “Bible Belt” of Evangelical Christianity (Wilson 56). However, Faulkner’s engagement with the biblical text seems much deeper and more sophisticated than these explanations. Though he never explicitly quotes the biblical text apart from the novel’s title, the Old Testament characters, language, and thematics of the King David story permeate Absalom, Absalom! to such a degree, I argue that Faulkner uses the Old Testament story as an intertextual thematic nucleus, a skeletal structure that directs the novel’s prose style, characterization, conflict, and action. Faulkner defines the novel in both the ways it follows the biblical archetype and the ways it deviates from it.

The particular style Faulkner’s prose emulates is the first indication of this thematic skeleton. Nearly all Faulkner scholars agree that Faulkner had a strong affinity and affection for the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. The part of this phenomenon, however, that affected was Faulkner was less the result of a religious culture (though that was a contributing factor), and more a literary tradition. Growing up in the South, the Bible was “the very stuff of Faulkner’s world” (Gold 142). The fact that Faulkner was raised below the Bible Belt, meant that the Bible was the one book he and his southern neighbors were certain to have read. It was a book that even “the least literate” of southerners would be familiar with, and it would be the only text that he could set up an analogous structure with that would be guaranteed to be understood by all of his neighbors (Gold 141). Not only was the text one very familiar to Faulkner, but one he also took personal pleasure in. According to Faulkner own, he made a tradition of reading it “once every ten or fifteen years,” and he considered it “some of the finest, most robust, and most amusing folk-lore I know” (Behrens 29). Apparently, he thought of the idea of the novel and the
though the narrative itself may not explicitly follow its biblical counterpart, Faulkner has built his story upon it and the two are inseparable.

However, as Robert Alter points out, as much as Faulkner enjoyed and appreciated the stylings of biblical prose, the “most distinctive traits” of Faulkner’s style are “antithetical to biblical prose or poetry as it is represented in the King James version” (Alter 84). The “labyrinthine-poetic and the pungently vernacular” stream of words and phrases that make up Faulkner’s prose style “is intrinsically resistant to the assimilation of elements of biblical style,” which are simple, neat, straightforward, formal, and elegantly brief. It would seem nigh impossible to find the “spare line of biblical prose” flood of polysyllabic words and enjambed clauses of Faulkner’s own writing (Alter 85). That being said, some noteworthy uses of highly biblical language are highly prevalent in the pages of Absalom, Absalom!

While there are no explicit references to the King David narrative outside of the title, there are a few emulations of Genesis, particularly at the very beginning. The founding of Sutpen’s Hundred “out of the soundless Nothing” as described by Rosa Coldfield strongly echoes the creation of the earth in Genesis (Blake 128). Coming seemingly from nowhere, Sutpen appears to construct this house out of “the void” with nothing except the sheer force of his will, just as God creates the heaven and earth out of the formless void in the first chapter of Genesis (Behrens 28). Throughout the entire novel, Faulkner also makes use of several biblical terms which form what Alter calls “a thematic lexicon” (Alter 85). These terms are a particular type of language used by the King James Bible that resonate thematically: seed and house, dust and clay, flesh and blood, land and curse; such phrases are all by themselves normal, everyday words, but grouped together they are loaded with powerful theological connotations. Alter claims that
though “we need not assume that Falkner subscribed” to the particular theological principles, “the theological framework” of the words gives him a powerful tool to evoke a very grim and theologically charged atmosphere (Alter 96).

The key things that these language interplays accomplish in the novel are establishing a suitable atmosphere, and “biblical tone” to introduce the novel and articulate certain thematic principles, such as a concern with sons and with the idea of dynasty. When the story’s numerous narrators use such language, they mimic Old Testament style without copying all aspects of the form. For example, when Rosa Coldfield or Quentin uses an example of these “thematic lexicon,” of pseudobiblical terms such as “land” or “curse,” the result is a projection of “melodrama” of the prophets that is heavily reflected in her speech (Behrens 29). “In the Hebrew Bible,” according to Alter, “the land is the theatre in which God bestows blessing on His chosen people” (Alter 94). The central feature of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel is the idea of “the promised land,” and if they chose to break the covenant, the books of the prophets and the books of law, such Deuteronomy, warn that God can and will turn the land against them (Alter 95). Thus, when Quentin asks his father, “What’s it to me that the land or the earth or whatever it was got tired of him at last and turned to destroy him?” and his father replies, “It’s going to turn and destroy us all someday,” Faulkner’s prose has the melodramatic effect of a Jeremiad prophesy or a passage from Revelation, foretelling doom, hellfire and brimstone (Alter 95).

By bookending the novel between the pattern of Genesis narrative and the final fall of the Sutpen’s design and his hopes of creating a dynasty and Rosa’s semi prophetic ramblings, Faulkner models the narrative after the old testament in its simplest, most watered down, and
diluted form: Genesis, the founding and fall of Israel (the rise and fall of Sutpen), and the prophets. It “is the Old Testament to the inhabitants of this world” (Alter).

The aspect of the novel that is probably the most affected by the formulaic biblical structure is its characterization, particularly regarding Thomas Sutpen, Henry, Judith, and Charles Bon. It is clear that Faulkner fashions Sutpen in the likeness of David, the patriarch of all subsequent Israelite kings. Like David, the youngest son of a poor shepherd from the tiny hamlet of Bethlehem, Sutpen comes from a simple, pastoral life in the hillbilly backwoods of West Virginia (Faulkner 179). When he decides to run away to Haiti he is fourteen years old, at the beginning of the transitional stage between boyhood and manhood, very close to the age David would have been when he faced Goliath as “but a youth” (1 Samuel 17:42). Interestingly enough, his noted accomplishments of marksmanship and physical prowess, “the pistol demonstration” he gives “on the first day of his arrival” in which he hits a playing card with both of his pistols and his wrestling matches with the “wild negroes” (who Faulkner constantly compares to animals) mirror David’s own feats of skill and strength: pegging Goliath in the head with his slingshot and fighting off lions and bears with his bare hands (Faulkner 25, 30; 1 Samuel 17:36, 49). Both of them are valiant soldiers who fight well and fearlessly. Both of them Even Sutpen’s fair complexion which “had the appearance of pottery” and his “short reddish beard” hint at David’s features which were “ruddy and of a fair countenance” (Faulkner 24; 1 Samuel 17:42).

The two also share similarities that are less circumstantial. According to Robert Alter, Faulkner’s depiction of Sutpen shows a keen understanding of three key aspects of David’s persona: “the moral ambiguity,” the “tragic fixation on sons,” and the simultaneous paradoxical fall and founding of “the Davidic Dynasty” (Alter 80). The most prominent of these features,
“his obsession with sons” is one that Faulkner particularly emphasizes in Sutpen. However David’s fixation with them is slightly more complex and much more emotional. While both characters are exceedingly “preoccupied with establishing a dynasty” (Alter 82). Sutpen’s absolutely emotionless response to Bon’s death and Henry’s exile contrasts sharply with David’s extravagant displays of paternal affection, such as the despair he sinks into when he thinks all of his sons have been slaughtered or the outburst that Faulkner’s title refers to when he learns that the son who took arms against him has been killed. To Sutpen, his sons mean nothing more to him than another part of the design. To build his dynasty, he simply needs an heir. It does not matter to him whether that heir is Henry or Milly Jones’ baby, so long as the child is male and white.

The biblical thematics of King David’s story affect the characterizations of the younger generation of Sutpens as well. The two stories regarding Absalom in 2 Samuel provide approximate guidelines for the roles and behaviors of Henry and Bon, and to a lesser extent Judith. In first story, the story of Amnon and Tamar, David’s son Amnon falls in love with his half-sister Tamar. Feigning ill, he begs for her to come take care of him, and he rapes her after she falls for his ruse. Her older brother, Absalom, is furious, and he kills Amnon to avenge their sister’s honor, and he immediately flees into self-exile after his fratricide (2 Samuel 13:1-29). After reading this account, casting the younger Sutpens into their respective roles seems easy enough. Bon, Thomas Sutpen’s long lost son from his first wife, plays the role of Amnon, attempting to marry his half-sister Judith in order to reclaim his birthright. Henry plays the role of vengeful Absalom, and he shoots his brother and best friend to prevent the incest, and subsequently leaves in self-imposed exile. However, a few disconcerting details about the Sutpen narrative prevent the parallel from being perfect.
The first is that apart from the role of avenging brother, there are no facets of Henry that resemble Absalom at all. After he returns from exile, Absalom begins to try to usurp his father’s throne and “steal the hearts of the men of Israel” (2 Samuel 15:6). This is a far cry from the meek and mild Henry who as a child is "unable to bear the sight of' even the violence of the slave wrestling matches (Faulkner 30). Henry who spends his life at Sutpen’s Hundred and at college doing exactly what Bon or his father wanted him to do, even when that means killing his brother and best friend, has not the spine for such rebellion.

The description of Absalom after he returns from exile sounds much more like Bon, the unwanted son who comes to Sutpen’s seeking recognition and hoping to reclaim his birthright. Furthermore, the praise as Absalom receives “for his beauty: from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him” sounds much more like Bon who “seduces” both Henry and Judith with his looks, his clothes and “with his very manner” that inspires heartache from women and imitation from men (2 Samuel 14:25, Faulkner 76). One particular part of Bon’s death scene also seems particularly evocative of Absalom. Though obviously a pistol shot would be utterly anachronistic in the biblical account, one object carries into both the biblical and the Faulkner scene. As Bon and Henry sit facing each other “on the two gaunt horses, two young men not yet in the world,” Henry warns Bon, “don’t you past the shadow of this post, this branch, Charles,” with the gun “lying across the saddle bow, yet unaimed” (Faulkner 106). In the biblical account, a tree branch is actually the cause of Absalom’s demise:

“And Absalom met the servants of David. And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under him went away” (2 Samuel 18:9).
Though both of the sons both play a part in crumbling what would be the Sutpen Dynasty, neither of them truly fulfill the role of Absalom. They stand face as each other’s mirrors, playing part and counterpart to each other: one to play the role of two slain sons, both unmissed by their father, and the other to twice play the role of the thankless avenger, exiled by his love for his brother and made murderer by his obedience to his father. Perhaps this is why Faulkner drops the exclamatory “O” before each name in the title of *Absalom, Absalom!* leaving two identical titles of Absalom for the poor brothers to assume.

Stylistically, evocation of the scriptural lines of 2 Samuel in the title of *Absalom, Absalom!* provides Faulkner with a theologically resonant vocabulary, highly biblical atmosphere to use in his narrative, and the basic structure of the Old Testament for his plot elements to conform to. Using the biblical text as a reference, it the evocation also provides him with a framework to build his characters upon, either by adhering to the precepts of their biblical counterparts or by deviating from them. Thematically it also offers him an opportunity to a central question raised by the novel, a question that Ralph Behrens argues is the “thematic center” underpinning the entire novel: “Why does Sutpen’s dynasty fail?”

Sutpen and David follow similar paths to establishing their respective dynasties. “Given the occasion,” both David and Sutpen “can and will do anything” to establish their respective dynasties (Alter 81) They both marry shrewdly to advance their respective social statuses; David’ marriage to King Saul’s Daughter Michael is comparable to Sutpen’s union with Ellen Coldfield and Charles’ mother. Both lead successful military careers and become war heroes (David slaying Goliath a Sutpen receiving a certificate of bravery from General Lee). Both show adaptability and the ability to move when necessary (David to Zicklag and Sutpen to Jefferson). They also both make one critical mistake.
David commits adultery, conceiving an illegitimate child with his lover Bathsheba and murdering her husband so that he can marry her himself (2 Samuel 11). He repents when the prophet Nathan confronts him, and he is allowed to keep his kingdom and his line intact. As punishment, however, God declares through Nathan “I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbor, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun” (2 Sam 12:11). This prophesy is fulfilled through Amnon and Absalom. According to Sutpen, his mistake is marrying Eulalia Bon, who, unbeknownst to Sutpen, is part black. Because this does not fit his design, he moves to Mississippi to start over and try again, despite the fact that he has already established a dynasty in Haiti, complete with a male heir. “The spiritual superiority of David,” according to Ralph Behrens, “is apparent in his acknowledging his errors” (Behrens 31). Unable to see the flaw in his design, Sutpen not only delays his enterprise and deprives himself of one heir, but he also loses his second and chosen heir, Henry, by turning him against his brother. If he had simply acknowledged the error of his design, it could have been successful.

Furthermore, Sutpen’s cold apathy towards his sons is a marked departure from the David model, and his plan to turn Henry against Bon is patterned after the actions of not David, but his failed predecessor, Saul. After Saul disobeys the Lord in the battle against the Amorites Samuel tells him that the kingship will pass from his house unto another, and despite his best efforts, Saul fails to fearing that David might threaten his own dynasty, counsels his son Jonathan to kill David (1 Samuel 19:1). While Jonathan refuses to kill David, but Saul’s plan itself reoccurs in Faulkner’s narrative, and so does his ironic lapse in judgment. Though David and Jonathan are not born of the same parents, they are legally brothers through Michael’s marriage to David. Though he fears David and his influence, David is in fact Saul’s son. Though David many times
refuses to “raise his hand against the Lord’s David could have succeeded Saul and continued his Dynasty. However, this did not fit Saul’s designs, and his hostility drives David and his men away, weakening his own army, which leads to his defeat at the hands of the Amalekites which ends his reign and the lives of Saul and Jonathan, crumbling his dynasty. In the same way, Sutpen drives Henry away, depriving him of a male heir to inherit the dynasty. Furthermore, his death at the hands of Wash Jones mirrors Saul’s request of his armor bearer to kill him (1 Samuel 31:4). Though armor bearer does not kill Saul, and Sutpen certainly does not ask Wash to kill him, dying by Wash’s blade hints at Saul’s request. Also callous treatment of Milly is what drives Wash over the edge, suggesting that Sutpen dies, in a sense, by his own hand, like Saul. These parallels to the other dynasty of 1 Samuel suggests that Sutpen’s design fails because it departs from the successful model of David. By emulating Saul’s mistakes, he adopts a model rooted in biblical failure:

“And Samuel said to Saul, ‘You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel!’ As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. Samuel said to him, ‘The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors—to one better than you.’” (1 Samuel 15:26-27).
Works Cited:


