THE HIDDEN STORYLINE WITHIN THE BIBLICAL TEXTS REGARDING DAVID AND SAUL

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INTRODUCTION

The compilers and redactors of the Books of Samuel fundamentally present an idealized David.[1] To realize that the biblical narrative is pro-David, however, is also to realize that it cannot be read at face value if we want to know the real history of David's life.[2] On the other hand, these authors apparently showed great respect for ancient tradition and did not heavily edit the historical texts, nor were they overly prone to harmonize inconsistencies within the texts they used.[3] Therefore, some of the retrieved texts and traditions which spoke against the main storyline were not cut out or harmonized to fit their main pro-David thesis, and today we are able to find a thread in the narrative texts – an alternative storyline – that points to a more obscure side of David's character.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the hidden alternative storyline found in I and II Samuel and in I Chronicles which reveals a David unlike the one the authors wished to portray. These texts probably represented very authoritative traditions because they were retained, in spite of the fact that they did not support the authors' intentions.

This narrative thread, though not always chronological, suggests that after having been welcomed into Saul's house, after having been loved by Saul's family, and after having been given a prestigious position in Saul's army, David began a movement to wrest the kingdom from Saul. The narrative also tells us that David allied himself with Jonathan, Saul's son, to rule the kingdom together. This storyline also reveals that, while banished from Saul's house, David formed a large army in Ziklag to fight against Saul and it suggests that he may actually have been able to take control of Judah years before Saul's death. The narrative also leads us to believe that Saul's persecution of David was not due to jealousy, as the author contends, but aimed to rid his kingdom of a usurper.

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THE ALTERNATE STORYLINE

The story of David begins with him being chosen by God, anointed by Samuel (I Sam. 16:13), and hired as a court musician for Saul (I Sam. 16:17ff.). When he came to Saul, David was immediately favored and given a position of trust in Saul's house and army. *So David came to Saul and entered his service;* [Saul] *took a strong liking to him and made him one of his arms-bearers* (I Sam. 16:21). The same happened with Jonathan. *When* [David] *finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself. Saul took him* [into his service] *that day and would not let him return to his father's house* (I Sam. 18:1-2) . . . *Now Michal daughter of Saul had fallen in love with David* (I Sam. 18:20).

However, after David killed Goliath and returned from his many successful battles with the Philistines, the women came from *all the towns of Israel* dancing and singing: *Saul has slain his thousands; David, his tens of thousands* (I Sam. 18:7; cf. 21:12). David was a handsome, charismatic warrior and people loved him. The singing, we are told, made Saul very angry and he began to suspect David of having designs on the kingdom (I Sam. 18:8-9). By that time David was a commander of the army, leading a thousand men in his successful and masterly campaigns (I Sam. 18:13-14). He was popular with everyone except King Saul, who feared David and turned away from him (I Sam. 18:12-13). A struggle developed between the two men, but all Israel and Judah loved David.

At one point, Saul felt it would be prudent to have David marry his older daughter Merab. According to the narrative, Saul promoted this union because David, as a member of the royal family, would then become more and more involved in fighting the wars of the Lord (i.e., those of Israel and of Saul), which would increase the likelihood of David being killed in battle against the Philistines (I Sam. 18:17). Saul may also have felt that David's obligation as a son-in-law would dampen his desire for the throne.

In an effort to have David killed, and knowing that Merab's sister Michal was in love with him, Saul asked David for 100 Philistine foreskins in place of a dowry for Michal's hand. David survived the task, however, and Saul was compelled to make his own arrangements for David's elimination. *Saul urged his son Jonathan and all his courtiers to kill David. But Saul's son*

Jonathan was very fond of David (I Sam. 19:1). This attempt also failed, because Jonathan warned David. Other efforts by Saul to kill David or to have him killed were likewise unsuccessful (I Sam 19:10-17).

   In an access of rage Saul even hurled a spear to *pin David to the wall*, but David managed to escape (I Sam. 19:10). With his life at risk, David fled from Saul's wrath with the help of Michal and later of Jonathan (I Sam. 19:11-17; 20: 12ff.). When Saul discovered that David had fled and that Jonathan had somehow connived at his escape, the king flew into a rage and (the narrative relates) cursed Jonathan: *'You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!' he shouted. 'I know that you side with the son of Jesse – to your shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness! For as long as the son of Jesse lives on earth, neither you nor your kingship will be secure'* (I Sam. 20:30-31). Saul accused Jonathan of aligning himself with a man whose aim was to usurp the throne and deprive Jonathan of his rightful inheritance.

   While Saul's behavior is traditionally explained as a result of his paranoia (I Sam. 16:14), the hidden narrative suggests that Saul had many valid reasons for his seemingly irrational behavior. An analysis of the biblical text shows that Saul was far from naïve and understood David's intentions very well from the start. He realized that David's primary goal was to become king. Not surprisingly, therefore, he was furious with Jonathan, his intended successor, who had so easily given up the throne.

   The narrative hints at David's early ambitions in the story of his first act as warrior, when he arrived at the military camp and heard of the taunts by Goliath. The text notes that David asked more than once about the reward for killing Goliath (I Sam. 17:26, 30), stressing this fact even after the reader was informed earlier that part of the reward marrying the king's daughter (I Sam. 17:25).

   Saul's fears are confirmed by the narrative revealing a secret conversation between Jonathan and David. *And Saul's son Jonathan came to David at* H*oresh and encouraged him in* [the name of] *God. He said to him, 'Do not be afraid: the hand of my father Saul will never touch you. You are going to be king over Israel and I shall be second to you; and even my father Saul knows this is so.' And the two of them entered into a pact before the Lord* (I Sam. 23:16-18). Here we see an indication in the covenant that David would occupy Saul's throne and that Jonathan would be second-in-command. According

to this narrative, Saul was right. It is worth noting that while Saul persecuted David but could not find him, Jonathan knew exactly how to get in touch with him.

*Saul left no doubt as to what he thought of David and of what he saw hap-*pening in the country, even among his Benjamite kinsmen. *Saul said to the courtiers standing about him, 'Listen, men of Benjamin! Will the son of Jesse give fields and vineyards to every one of you? And will he make all of you captains of thousands or captains of hundreds? Is that why all of you have conspired against me? For no one informs me when my own son makes a pact with the son of Jesse; no one is concerned for me and no one informs me when my own son has set my servant in ambush against me, as is now the case'* (I Sam. 22:7-8). Saul felt that his servants and fellow Benjamites were conspiring against him (which we will later discover to be true) and concealing the fact that Jonathan had allied himself with David. He also accused them and Jonathan of having a hand in the traps that David set for him. Now if David's men were in fact ambushing Saul's, there was no one-sided pursuit, as the main storyline would have us believe.

Saul hunted for David in the southern part of the country, where David had fled to avoid a confrontation with the stronger army of Saul. Even when there were people willing to deliver him into Saul's hands (I Sam. 23:19-21; 26:1), David's cunning always enabled him to escape. But how could he achieve his goal, to take possession of the kingdom, if Saul's army was larger and stronger than his? He would have to recruit warriors and increase the number of his troops. It is at this point that David decided to move into the land of Israel's worst enemies, the Philistines. There he allied himself with Achish, the king of Gath. We do not know what kind of agreement he reached with Achish, but it is clear that Achish lent him support and a haven in the Philistine city of Ziklag, where David remained for a year and four months (I Sam. 27:6-7).

DAVID IN ZIKLAG

The Book of Samuel tells us that David's move was to escape from Saul and the latter's ongoing pursuit (I Sam. 27:1-2). In other words, David went to the Philistines for protection.[4] The armies of the Philistines were superior to those of the Israelites and Saul would have taken a great risk by entering their territory in his search for David.[5]

However, the Book of Chronicles gives us a second reason in its account of these events: *The following joined David at Ziklag while he was still in hiding from Saul son of Kish; these were the warriors who gave support in battle; they were armed with the bow and could use both right hand and left hand to sling stones or shoot arrows with the bow; they were kinsmen of Saul from Benjamin* (I Chron.12:1-2). As Saul suspected, many of his own relatives were deserting him and allying themselves with David. In the same chapter, the author lists the people from different tribes of Israel who came to Ziklag to help David in his battles. But battles against whom? According to Chronicles, *Some Manassites went over to David's side when he came with the Philistines to make war against Saul* . . . (I Chron. 12:20). The traditional understanding is that David was simply trying to escape from Saul, a goal he had now presumably achieved by moving into Philistine territory. If so, why did he gather warriors, and why does the text state that the Manassites joined him to fight against Saul? Clearly, David amassed troops precisely for this purpose: *Day in day out, people came to David to give him support, until there was an army as vast as the army of God* (I Chron. 12:23).

In summary, David went to the city of Ziklag where Saul could not attack him, as that would have involved a battle with the more powerful Philistines. David's main purpose was to assemble a large army, including warriors from all Israel and even from Saul's tribe of Benjamin, with the aim of going to war with Saul. That war never actually took place, for once Saul was killed in battle against the Philistines there was no reason for a civil war to break out.

Once again, we find that Saul's judgment proved correct. David was trying to topple him and usurp the throne. He had even teamed up with Saul's son and Benjamite kinsmen, who had gone over to David's side in this battle for the kingdom. According to I Chronicles, thousands of warriors came to Ziklag with that purpose in mind. Even if the numbers quoted are not to be taken literally, they do show that many fighters streamed to their hero David's camp.[6]

Initially, on the basis of his newly formed army, David appears to have strengthened his control of Israel's southern region, finally establishing his operational center at Hebron. According to the biblical data, as we will see, David may have been considered the ruler of Judah, with his headquarters in Hebron, several years before Saul's death.

THE STORYLINE AFTER THE DEATH OF SAUL AND JONATHAN

Soon after Saul and Jonathan died in battle against the Philistines, *Abner son of Ner, Saul's army commander, had taken Ish-bosheth son of Saul and brought him across to Mahanaim and made him king over Gilead, the Ashurites, Jezreel, Ephraim, and Benjamin* [and] *over all Israel* (II Sam. 2:8-9). The reign of Ish-bosheth was legitimate, but short lived, as he ruled only two years over the northern kingdom of Israel before his assassination. During that same time, according to the Bible, David was king of the southern kingdom based in Hebron. A bitter war prevailed between David (whose army was led by Joab) and Ish-bosheth (whose army was led by Abner). *The war between the House of Saul and the House of David was long-drawn-out; but David kept growing stronger, while the House of Saul grew weaker* (II Sam. 3:1). These hostilities only ended with the assassination of both Abner and Ish-bosheth.

The Bible relates that *Ish-bosheth son of Saul was forty years old when he became king of Israel, and he reigned two years. But the House of Judah supported David. The length of time that David reigned in Hebron over the House of Judah was seven years and six months* (II Sam. 2:10–11). This statement, probably retrieved from official court records, was evidently a well-established tradition, as the biblical text repeats it several times in exactly the same form (e.g., II Sam. 5:5).

If, after the death of Saul, Ish-bosheth sat on the throne of Israel and his kingdom lasted for two years, but at the same point in time David had reigned over Judah for seven years and six months, this strongly suggests that David had conquered the southern kingdom of Judah five and a half years before Ish-bosheth ascended the throne of Israel, and, most likely, five and a half years before Saul's death. To contradict the implications of this statement, traditional exegesis has proposed that Ish-bosheth did not begin his reign until five and a half years after Saul's death.[7] This would mean that Israel was left without a ruler for a long time, which seems improbable. The other possibility is that five and a half years had elapsed between Ish-bosheth's death and David's proclamation as king. This is also unlikely and has no biblical support whatsoever. Still others have proposed that right after Saul's death, Abner held sway in the north for about five years before he de-

cided to appoint Ish-bosheth as king.[8] None of these speculations find support in the biblical narratives and we are left with the fact that David became ruler of Judah five and a half years before Ish-bosheth ascended the throne of Israel. It is therefore very possible that David had gained some success in the war against Saul and had taken Judah from him prior to the battle on Mount Gilboa.

   Knowing that David was king of Judah helps us understand why, when the city of Keilah was raided by the Philistines, it was David who went to defend it. Keilah was located in the southern territory that David ruled and he it was who *saved the inhabitants of Keilah* (I Sam. 23:5). Saul had nothing to do with the defense of Keilah because it no longer formed part of his kingdom. It was in fact because of David that Saul intended to destroy Keilah (I Sam. 23:10). Since David ruled over Judah, it is no wonder that the Philistines who received him the first time he sought refuge with Achish exclaimed, *'Why, that's David, king of the land!'* (I Sam. 21:12).

CONCLUSION

   We have examined a narrative thread – an alternative storyline – in the Saul and David story that goes against the intended message of the final authors. The main storyline presents Saul as a paranoid individual, consumed with jealousy and ill feeling toward an upright man, chosen by God, who never did wrong to   Saul. Furthermore, this narrative tells us that David actually loved Saul and spared his life in more than one occasion. The alternative storyline, hidden within the main narrative texts, suggests otherwise. Initially, David, a charismatic and able man, gained the love and admiration of Saul's family and of all Israel; but he soon began to undermine Saul with the aim of appropriating his kingdom. There was at first an uneven war between the two in which David was continually on the run from Saul's more powerful army. On one occasion David even sought help from the enemy. Through an undisclosed arrangement with Achish, the Philistine ruler of Gath, David acquired Ziklag as his center of operations. In Ziklag he started to build a large army with which he was probably able to take control of Judah, moving his operational base to Hebron. His ascent to the throne and acknowledgment as ruler of the southern kingdom, so the Bible relates, may have occurred years before Saul and Jonathan died in battle against the Philistines.

According to Sheffler, "it is contended . . . that the Deuteronomist's nega-
tive view of Saul has influenced subsequent Bible readers to such an extent
that even today the Saul history is obscured. In order to enhance King David
as the first real king of Israel, the Deuteronomist downplayed the latter's du-
bious character and actions and accordingly sacrificed Saul's reputation. By
reading the Deuteronomist against the grain with a hermeneutics of suspi-
cion, the rhetoric of the Deuteronomist is exposed and a glimpse of a more
realistic Saul, as well as a more realistic picture of Israel's early history, is
gained."[9] That, I hope, we have achieved.

NOTES

1. J. Baden, *The Historical David: The Real Life of an Invented Hero* (New York: Harper
Collins, 2013) p. 12. See also S. Bar, "Was King Saul a Mad Man?" (2014; retrieved on March
28, 2014): http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/01/bar388021.shtml.

2. Baden, op. cit., p. 9.

3. J. L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York, NY:
Simon & Schuster, 2007) p. 447.

4. E. H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids,
Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008) p. 236.

5. F. Bruce, *Israel y las Naciones* (Madrid: Editorial Portavoz filial de Kregel Publications,
1988) p. 22.

6. K. L. Barker, *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 4th ed., 2008)
p. 603.

7. Ibid., p. 428.

8. Merrill, op. cit., p. 212.

9. E. Scheffler, "Saving Saul from the Deuteronomist," in J. C. Roy, ed., *Past, Present, Future:
The Deuteronomistic History and the Prophets* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publications,, 2000) p.
265.