

***HE SAID: 'IT'S AN EVENT NOT PURE,
FOR IT'S NOT PURE!' (I SAM. 20:26b)***
A POLITICAL ANALYSIS

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I Samuel 20 records the story of the friendship of David and Jonathan in the face of King Saul's mounting paranoia and distrust of his son-in-law, the Judean upstart shepherd who has won so many hearts in Israel through his successes against the Philistine enemy. Now a member of the royal household and an officer in Saul's army, David is expected to attend the meals served at the royal table, much as a ranking officer is expected to attend meetings of the army general staff or a cabinet minister is expected to attend cabinet meetings. When David fails to appear for the meal on the festival of the New Moon, Saul makes a note of it, saying to himself: *'It's accidental [mikreh], he must be unclean [bilti tahor] and not yet cleansed [lo tahor]'* (I Sam. 20:26). This is the JPS translation, which notes that the Hebrew construction is unclear.

The verse itself has an unusual construction, stating twice that David is not pure, each time using a negation of the term *tahor*. This seems redundant, as noted by Rabbi Isaiah di Trani in his commentary to this verse, "it is a repeated phrase, not needed." The traditional insight presented by Rashi in his commentary suggests that Saul thought that David might have become ritually defiled and not yet purified, and thus ineligible to partake of the New Moon ritual sacrifice, as stipulated by Leviticus 7:20f. In order to explain the repetition in the verse, Rashi explains that in the first clause Saul assumed David *must be unclean*, and in the second clause Saul rationalized that David did not come so that he would not render the food at the meal impure, *lo tahor*. Abarbanel, in his commentary to the preceding verse, takes the repeated phrase to be a criticism of David's character in the mind of Saul. Saul thinks that David *must be unclean*, and furthermore that is the kind of person David is, always being involved in unseemly matters and not caring about ritual purity, David is a type of person who is *lo tahor*.

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There is another way to understand this verse. Note that the verse uses the pronoun *hu* to describe who is not pure, a word that can be referring to David, or to the event itself. In fact the word *hu* earlier in the verse, *mikreh hu* [*It's accidental*], is referring to the impure event, not to David. If we take the pronoun to be referring to the event both times in the verse, we get a different reading, *it's an event not pure, for it's not pure*.

This translation is meant to indicate a political interpretation. Assuming a critical interpretation of the biblical texts, the ritual concerns for purity in Leviticus might be considered to be the product of a later stage in the development of Israelite religion. Yet even if these Levitical concerns are indeed early, it seems that our text should be considered as a foreboding on Saul's part that finds full expression the following day when David's absence is now quite apparent. Saul is angry with Jonathan's excuse; his flash of homicidal anger at his own son indicates that Saul's suspicions have been brewing for some time. At the least, we have a double-entendre in this verse. This interpretation suggests a similar intention to Marcellus' statement at the end of *Hamlet* I:IV: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." In this vein the verse would mean: *It is an event not pure*, i.e., David's absence is an occurrence that can be attributed to impurity, *because it is not pure*, i.e., because his motivations for being absent are not pure, in that David is showing his disloyalty. While the Bible tends to use the terms *tahor* and *tameh*, pure and impure, in ritual contexts, we do find that it can refer to moral purity as well, as in Psalms 51:12, *Fashion a pure [tahor] heart for me, O God*. This would be the double meaning of the usage of impurity here.

Furthermore, when Jonathan attempts to explain David's absence by saying that David *begged leave of me to go to Bethlehem* (I Sam. 20:28), to join in the *family feast in our town* (I Sam. 20:29), Saul flies into a *rage against Jonathan* (I Sam. 20:30). David attending a family feast in Bethlehem rather than the royal celebration may itself be interpreted as having political connotations. Hearing this explanation after already suspecting that some crafty maneuvering is taking place makes this strong reaction of Saul understandable.

Saul's suspicions are aroused by the absence of David from the royal table; although he can't quite yet identify it, he feels that something is amiss as regards David's personal loyalty. On the morrow Saul's fears are confirmed

when Jonathan fronts for David. Saul’s full rage vents itself upon the crown prince when the king hurls his spear toward Jonathan after calling him a disgrace to his mother (I Sam. 20:30-31). Saul is correct. It is an event not pure.



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