

SAUL AND JONATHAN

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INTRODUCTION

Saul was the first king of Israel. His life was full of drama and tribulations, and ended tragically. Many passages in the Hebrew Bible portray Saul negatively - as a paranoid man who chases demons, obsessed with the pursuit of David. In addition, he struggles constantly with his own family members as well as his circle of friends. In the current paper we will examine the development of Saul's relationship with his son Jonathan.

FATHER AND SON RIVALRY

In spite of the fact that Jonathan is one of the main characters in the book of Samuel, he does not appear alone. Jonathan is always mentioned with his father Saul or with David. From the start, tension exists between Saul and Jonathan.¹ In Jonathan's second attack against the Philistine garrison we are told: *but he did not tell his father* (I Sam.14:1). At first glance, it is possible that Jonathan did not reveal his plans to his father in order to guard the element of surprise. Indeed in verse 3 we also read *the people did not know that Jonathan had gone*. According to Radak and Ralbag had Jonathan's men known that he was going they would have joined him. We believe that by a large force joining Jonathan he would lose the element of surprise. More so, had he known, Saul probably would not have approved his plan. Jonathan was Saul's heir as the crown prince - the next king, thus, Saul would be hesitant to put his son in a dangerous situation. Another possible explanation holds that Jonathan wanted to glorify himself, not his father. The narrator inserted this piece of information in order to illuminate the tension between father and son.

To highlight the differences between Saul and Jonathan, the narrator compares the two in chapters 13 and 14. Saul commands the military camp at Michmas and Bethel, while Jonathan was at Gibeah. Jonathan assassinated the Philistine prefect, while Saul called and assembled the people in Gilgal. Praise for Jonathan killing the Philistines is given to Saul and not to Jonathan

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(I Sam 13:4). According to Radak it is possible that Saul had done it or that Jonathan had acted on his father's instructions. If indeed this is the case, we can see that Jonathan is loyal to his father fighting his wars as he would later, on mount Gilboa.

Saul failed time after time to inquire of the Lord (13:8–14; 14:18–19). Moreover, a priest had to remind Saul to inquire of God if he should go after the Philistines (14:36–37). In contrast, Jonathan asked for a sign from God (14:9–10) before he attacked the Philistine outpost.

Saul is passive. He fears the dwindling numbers of his soldiers, and a Philistine attack in Gilgal (13:8–12). Saul camps at Gibeah, he and his six hundred men sit idle (13:15–16; 14:2). Jonathan, on the other hand, is active. In spite of his military disadvantage, he attacked the Philistine's outpost. He believed that it was God's will, and not the number of soldiers, that would determine the outcome of the battle. This thought will be echoed many hundreds of years later by Judah Maccabaeus: "It is easy for many to be delivered into the hands of a few. Heaven sees no difference in gaining victory through many or through a few, because victory in war does not lie in the weight of numbers, but rather strength comes from Heaven" (I Macc 3:18–19).

We can see that the tension between father and son at first is more like a rivalry of prestige between father and son, who are competing for glory. However, this will change with the arrival of David.

EATING HONEY

During the fight with the Philistines, Saul made the army take an oath to fast. Sexual abstinence (I Sam. 21:6), vows to sacrifice (Judg. 11:30–31), and avoiding sleep (Ps. 132:3–4) were part of the warriors commitment in Israel. It was not unusual for warriors to take an oath. But by taking the vow Saul failed to see the negative effect of this had on the army. According to McCarter, Saul's vow was a blunder.² Medieval commentators such as Rashi and Radak tried to explain his behavior by saying that he wanted that the people to continue the pursuit of the enemy and stopping to eat would distract them from their goal. On the other hand, Malbim explains that Saul wanted the people to fast as means of repentance. Jonathan meanwhile did not hear about the oath and ate honey and his eyes lit up. When he was told about the

oath, Johnathan disagreed with his father's oath. According to Radak the nation of Israel would have won a decisive victory had they not been weakened by the fast. Another interpretation was given by Abarbanel who believed because they did not eat, they only had the strength to pursue the Philistines for a short distance, from Michmas to Aijalon.

A lot was cast to find the transgressor who broke the vow of fasting and it was found that Jonathan was the one. Jonathan accepted the verdict although he could argue that he was unaware of the ban. Our story is very similar to the Jephthah story. In both stories the fathers took an oath which impacted their children's futures. In both incidents the children accepted the verdict and insisted that the vow would be kept.³ Explaining Jonathan's reaction to his father's verdict, Josephus says: "Nor do I desire you, father, to spare me: Death will be to me very acceptable, when it proceeds from thy piety, and after a glorious victory. For it is the greatest consolation to me, that I leave the Hebrews victorious over the Philistines."⁴ Saul was ready to carry the verdict and impose the death penalty on Jonathan, similar to Jephthah the Gileadite. We can praise his willingness to follow his own oath. He does not show any favoritism towards his son, Saul shows his piety here. It is this piety which leads to tragic consequences. It was only on account of the troops that Jonathan's life was spared. The people maintained that Jonathan had brought victory to Israel and did not deserve the death penalty. God would not have made him the instrument of such a great victory had he been a sinner, so they redeemed Jonathan and he did not die. What emerges from this story is that Saul, in his zeal to defeat the Philistines, took an oath that had tragic consequences. He was willing to sacrifice his own son in order to keep his vow to God. Jonathan appears as an obedient son who accepted his father's verdict although he criticizes his father's action.

DAVID'S ARRIVAL

The tension between Saul and Jonathan will increase with David's arrival at Saul's court. Hence, the text says that Saul wanted to kill David, yet on the other hand, Jonathan was *very fond* of David (I Sam 19:1). The narrator used the words *very fond* in order to show the disparity between father and son. Indeed, in the previous chapter, Saul's servants told David that the king was *fond of him* (18:22-23), but evidently they were not being honest. At first,

before David defeated Goliath, Saul was really pleased with David, Saul loved him (16:22-23). Texts from the Ancient Near East describe the language of love as “to describe the loyalty and friendship joining... king and subject.”⁵ According to Thompson, King Saul officially recognized David and made a legal commitment to him. He “loved” him and made him his weapon bearer and intimate servant of the king.⁶ However, all of this changed after David’s victory against Goliath. The servants who spoke to David were high ranking members of Saul’s court. When the servants told David that the king was *fond of him* and *all his servants love you* they used double talk, concealing Saul’s true intention.

Saul understood the situation that he was facing. God was with his enemy, David, the pretender to the throne. We read that all Israel loved David after his victory against Goliath (I Sam 18:16). To counter this, he devised a plan to enlist Jonathan and his servants. Saul informed Jonathan and his courtiers about his plan to kill David. His plan however backfired. Jonathan went directly to David to inform him about his father’s plan. He advised David to hide. This counsel saved David’s life. Jonathan acts contrary to his father’s wishes; he aids his father’s enemy. He also promised David that he would speak on his behalf and keep him informed about what he discovered; in other words, he was David’s spy.

At this point, Jonathan tried to mediate between David and Saul. Jonathan is torn between his loyalties. In his plea to save David, we are told that Jonathan spoke well of David. McCarter points to the Amarna archives, where the king of Jerusalem Abdi-Heba requested the Egyptian scribes act as his advocate and “speak good/beautiful words” to the king.⁷ McCarter recognizes the political overtones in Jonathan’s words; that David has done well, that he acted with the loyalty that he owes his king. Jonathan stressed the fact that David did not sin against his father Saul, thus, his father should not sin against David. Moreover, he mentioned David’s great victory against Goliath, in which he risked his life. The words *he took his life in his hands* (I Sam 19:5), describe David’s bravery. Because of the victory and because David did not sin, Jonathan admonished his father not to sin by shedding David’s blood. Prevention of bloodguilt was very important for any king, in order not to pollute his kingdom with his own sin. For the moment Jonathan succeeds, since Saul swore that he would not harm David. Following this, Jonathan

informed David about his conversation with his father, and brought him back to the King's court where David served Saul, as before.

Although Saul swore not harm David he still harbored hatred towards him. On the surface it appears that he agreed with his son but the mention of David's victory was like pouring salt on the wound. It reminded him of the women's victory song that greeted the army following the victory against the Philistines: *Saul has slain his thousands; David, his tens of thousands* (I Sam 18:7). Saul heard the song jealously; from his perspective, even the idea of equality was unacceptable. Indeed, Freedman notes: "the very fact that David was accorded equal treatment with the king in the song would be sufficient to arouse the suspicions of any monarch, and especially of one insecure in his position and jealous of his prerogatives."⁸ Saul's displeasure is articulated by two expressions *he was very chagrined* and *the matter displeased him* (18:8). The second expression blatantly exposes the contrast with the people's attitude towards David's success, *and he was pleasing in the eyes of all the people* (v. 5). While the women mentioned Saul before David, here he changed the order, mentioning David first, hinting that David was looked upon as worthier than he was. By saying *all that he lacks is the kingship*, Saul expressed his jealousy and fear that David was the worthier man Samuel spoke about. It was from that day that Saul kept an eye on David.

Saul began to fear David, *then he eyed (oyen) David from that day* (I Sam. 18:9). The Hebrew verb, 'oyen comes from 'ayin, "eye." The verb is a hapax, however, it is known in Ugaritic 'yn "to behold."⁹ It also appears in the Talmud in Piel meaning "look carefully."¹⁰ In Phoenician, the verb 'yn could even mean, "look at (with the Evil Eye)."¹¹ In post-biblical Hebrew 'ayin often meant "the Evil Eye." But this seems unlikely in our text. Rashi, Radak, and Targum Jonathan render: "was lurking for David," i.e., he was seeking an opportunity to kill him when he would be off his guard. In other words, Saul paused here temporarily, he wanted to keep his son on his side, he tried to appease him but still he did not forget his murderous intentions.

THE FINAL BREAK

The final break between Saul and his son Jonathan occurred at a sacrificial meal. When Saul noticed David's absence, it appears he forgot about his murderous intentions towards David. He thinks that David's absence has to

do with ritual uncleanness; therefore, he asked Jonathan why was David absent? On many occasions, Saul's strange behavior was attributed to his madness. However, how can we explain the behavior of Jonathan and David in chapter 20 after knowing that Saul wished to murder David?

Jonathan stood up at the sacrificial meal, yielding his usual place at his father's side to Abner. According to Radak, Jonathan moved because he did not want to sit next to his father since Saul might become angry with him and attempt to strike him. Here we see that Jonathan feared his father. To his father's question about David's absence, he answered with a lie that was arranged by David and him. Accordingly, David had to attend a family feast; therefore he asked his permission to leave for Bethlehem. Jonathan used the phrase *let me slip away* (I Sam. 20:29), to describe David's request. The verb *mlt* appears several times to describe David's flight from Saul in the previous chapter (vv. 10, 11, 12, 17, 18).¹² This phrase here is striking since it provoked Saul's anger. In the previous chapter, it described Michal's assistance to help David escape; now his son helps his archenemy. The mention of the sacrifice also contributed to Saul's anger, it reminded Saul of David's rumored anointing by Samuel in a similar situation.¹³ Not surprisingly Saul's reaction was harsh. He called his wife a rebellious woman and said his son was just like his mother. This insult is directed towards Jonathan. By saying that his mother was a perverse rebel, he puts doubt on his mother's qualities that hints that he was not his son. Interestingly, 4QSamb and LXX have "son of rebellious maidens," and Mc-Carter accordingly reads "You son of a rebellious servant girl!" Saul accuses Jonathan of forsaking him, being "son of" meant member of the class, but Jonathan forsakes those to whom he owed allegiance.¹⁴ Being a son of a slave girl indicates a lower status, while son of a rebellious mother meant that he might be suspected of being a bastard. Alternatively, a rebellious son does not deserve kingship.

Saul is very angry with Jonathan since he sided with his enemy. He united with David, an act that casts a shadow on him and his mother who gave birth to him. This is the opposite of what we read in Proverbs: *A wise son makes his father happy; a fool of a man humiliates his mother* (15:20). His friendship with David was embarrassing, as it was embarrassing to the nakedness of his mother. The Hebrew word *erwa*, most often refers to genitalia (I Sam. 20:30), which seems to suggest that through his disgraceful actions, Jonathan

also brought shame to his mother. Saul wanted to help his son inherit the throne, but at the same time accused him of rebellion and siding with the enemy.

Saul tried to speak to his son's conscience by telling him that his kingdom would not be established as long as the son of Jesse is alive. Ironically, his words echo Samuel's warning to him: *the Lord would have established your dynasty over Israel forever. But now your dynasty will not endure* (1 Sam. 13:13). He commands Jonathan to bring David to him because he is *a son of death* (20:31). The Targum translates this "for he is a man deserving death." Saul fears David; he already knows that the throne will go to David and not Jonathan. *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* (1 Sam. 23:17). Jonathan still tried to defend David in spite of his father's harsh words. He asked his father Saul: *Why should he be put to death? What has he done?* (1 Sam. 20:32). Jonathan posed two questions that echo David's own words in the beginning of the chapter. This also echoes Jonathan's own words where he declared that David would not die. Jonathan affirms David's innocence. Saul did not respond directly to Jonathan's questions, rather he fumed at his son.

Saul was so consumed with hatred and fear of David that he considered every ally of David as his enemy. His fury was so great that he tried to kill his own son Jonathan. Saul cast his spear at Jonathan to slay him. Jonathan thus finds himself in the same situation that David experienced when Saul tried to kill him twice. Jobling points to the merging of identities and roles played in the portrayal of David and Jonathan in these chapters.¹⁵ Alternatively, Saul brandished the spear in a threatening move, but he really did not have any intention of killing him. According to Josephus, Saul was eager to kill him but: "he did not indeed do what he intended, because he was hindered by his friends."¹⁶ It is at this juncture that Jonathan knew without any doubt the true intent of his father. Previously, he tried to convince himself that his father did not have any lethal intentions, but here is the final break between father and son.

Jonathan rose from the table with rage, he was so angry with his father that he left without asking permission and without bidding farewell. He was so grieved that he did not eat that day. Jonathan was shocked by his humiliation;

his father not only rebuked him in public but also tried to kill him. Some say that Jonathan was more shocked at his father's humiliation of David.¹⁷ Jonathan resented the wrong done to David. We believe, however, that he was angry over his own and David's humiliation. As Klein observed, Jonathan's anger in v. 34 seems righteous while Saul's anger in v. 30 is motivated by fear and envy.¹⁸

JONATHAN

What emerges from the stories about Jonathan are his idealized characteristics in juxtaposition to those of Saul whom God had rejected as king. Jonathan is portrayed as a military hero who fought for freedom from the Philistine oppression. In the second part of the stories, Jonathan becomes a loyal friend of David, the man who becomes king instead of him. In spite of this, Jonathan is not envious of David, but remains friends with him. The pact between David and Jonathan aided David.

But what about Jonathan? Didn't he have any ambition to become king of Israel following his father? Moreover, according to the biblical narrative, Jonathan regarded David as Saul's natural successor (I Sam. 20:13–17). It was Morgenstern who raised the possibility that the son-in-law had greater claim to the throne than the son, so a pact between Jonathan and David was sealed.¹⁹ The fact that he was the son-in-law and a mighty warrior made him the natural candidate to succeed Saul.²⁰ However, this is unlikely since Jonathan was also a great warrior, and was the king's son. Perhaps the narrative is written this way in order to legitimize David's right to the throne. Therefore, not surprisingly, we read about the rift and mistrust between Jonathan and Saul. Both Saul and Jonathan regarded David as the legitimate successor to the throne. Yet, in spite of it all, with all the negatively portrayed relations between Jonathan and Saul, Jonathan did not desert his father. In the final battle on Mount Gilboa, he went and fought with his father against the Philistines, where he and his two brothers died with him.

CONCLUSION

It appears that at first the tension between Saul and Jonathan was no more than rivalry for glory. However, with David's arrival at Saul's court tensions intensify. Jonathan repeatedly sides with David, and conceals his relationship

with David from his father. Saul wanted his son Jonathan to become the king and was very angry with Jonathan since he sided with his enemy. The fact that Jonathan gave up his right for kingship raises the possibility that the narrative contains an agenda, wanting to legitimize David's right to the throne. Despite of all the tensions between father and son, Jonathan did not desert his father and went with him to his final battle and died with him.

NOTES

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2. P.K. McCarter, *I Samuel* (AB 8; Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), p.249.
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4. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*. 6.127.
5. W.L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 25(1963):78-79.
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12. D. V. Edelman, *King Saul in Historiography of Judah* (JSOTSup 121; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), p.159; J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. Vol. 2. , *The Crossing Fates* (I Samuel.13-31 and II Sam.1), (SSN 23; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), p. 335.
13. Edelman, *King Saul*, p. 159.
14. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 343.
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16. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*. 6.238.
17. Klein, *I Samuel* (WBC10; Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 209.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Julian Morgenstern, "David and Jonathan," *JBL* 78(1959): 322–25.
20. *Ibid.*



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