When Love and Politics Mix

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When Love and Politics Mix:

David and His Relationships with
Saul, Jonathan, and Michal [1]

Introduction

Few biblical narratives are so richly intricate as those in the Book of Samuel. Throughout these episodes, love and politics mix. While David and Saul and his family were human beings with personal feelings, they also were involved in a complex and oftentimes painful saga of royal succession and competition. They also had to maintain public images.

The prophetic narrator regularly reveals the feelings of Saul and his children toward David. At the same time, David's feelings toward Saul and his children are

concealed. [2] For that matter, the passionate David is never explicitly said to have loved anyone in the Book of Samuel! A number of contemporary scholars have exploited this and related textual evidence to describe the emotional imbalance in these relationships.

However, Susan Ackerman has observed that in most biblical relationships involving the term ahavah (love), only one of the parties is explicitly said to love (the Song of Songs is a notable exception). Generally, husbands are said to love their wives without explicit mention that the wives love the husbands. Parents are said to love their children without explicit mention that their children love them.

For example, Isaac is said to have loved Rebecca (Gen. 24:67), Jacob loved Rachel (Gen. 29:18), Samson
loved Delilah (Jud. 16:4), and Elkanah loved Hannah (1 Sam. 1:5). Rebecca is said to have loved Jacob while Isaac loved Esau (Gen. 25:28), and Jacob loved Joseph (Gen. 37:3-4) and Benjamin (Gen. 44:20).
Ackerman maintains that generally the more dominant party is said to love, even though the loving relationship may well be reciprocal. [3] Therefore, the omission of references to David's loving Saul, Jonathan, or Michal does not necessarily indicate any lack of love from David toward these characters. In fact, it would have been surprising had there been explicit reference to David's love!

These ambiguities become more pronounced when considering that the verb a-h-v (love) is used biblically both for affectionate interpersonal love and also for political alliances such as that between David and Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 5:15). [4] To some degree, then, the ambiguity is due to the limited lexicon of Biblical Hebrew, where one word may serve multiple functions.

The Sages of the Talmud and medieval rabbinic commentators such as Ralbag and Abarbanel also were fully conscious of the public political roles of the protagonists. Contemporary scholars often have followed suit, ascertaining textual clues or simply speculating that the text may not depict the full range of the characters' emotions toward one another. This article will consider the relationships between Saul's family and David and how their different motivations are presented in the Book of Samuel. In most instances, it is exceptionally difficult to draw the line between where love stops and politics starts.

David and Saul

After Samuel anointed David as a replacement for Saul, Saul became afflicted by an evil spirit (1 Sam. 16:14). One of the king's officials recommended David as

one who could play the lyre and thereby soothe the troubled monarch. David was immediately successful: “So David came to Saul and entered his service; [Saul] took a strong liking to him [va-ye’ehavehu me’od] and made him one of his arms-bearers” (1 Sam. 16:21). The imbalance of the depiction of the respective feelings of Saul and David toward one another harks back to this, their first encounter. [5]

However, this does not mean that David had no positive feelings toward Saul. Perhaps the greatest expression of David’s feelings can be found in 1 Samuel 24, when David had the opportunity to kill Saul but instead cut off the corner of his robe to indicate that he had the ability to assassinate the monarch:

And David said to Saul, “Why do you listen to the people who say, ‘David is out to do you harm?’ You can see for yourself now that the Lord delivered you into my hands in the cave today. And though I was urged to kill you, I showed you pity; for I said, ‘I will not raise a hand against my lord, since he is the Lord’s anointed.’ Please, sir, take a close look at the corner of your cloak in my hand; for when I cut off the corner of your cloak, I did not kill you. You must see plainly that I have done nothing evil or rebellious, and I have never wronged you. Yet you are bent on taking my life. May the Lord judge between you and me! And may He take vengeance upon you for me, but my hand will never touch you. As the ancient proverb has it: ‘Wicked deeds come from wicked men!’ My hand will never touch you. Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog? A single flea? May the Lord be arbiter and may He judge between you and me! May He take note and uphold my cause, and vindicate me against you” (1 Sam. 24:10-16).

David expressed conflicted emotions of loyalty to Saul as God’s anointed, coupled with a desire for God to judge Saul harshly for his unjust actions.

Ralbag and Abarbanel suggest an additional reason why David did not kill Saul. Since David knew that he would become the next king, he wanted to send the unequivocal message that assassination of any monarch is unacceptable. These interpreters repeat this argument when explaining David’s killing of the Amalekite youth (2 Sam. 1:14-16) and Ish-bosheth’s assassins (2 Sam. 4:9-12). From this vantage point, David offered a calculated address and not exclusively spontaneous heartfelt thoughts. [6]

Responding to David’s address, Saul cried and poignantly referred to David as his “son”:

When David finished saying these things to Saul, Saul said, “Is that your voice, my son David?” And Saul broke down and wept. He said to David, “You are right, not I; for you have treated me generously, but I have treated you badly” (1 Sam. 24:17-18).

It appears that Saul loved David but also envied him to the point where he lost all balance. David also appears to have loved Saul but also cautiously protected his own future position as monarch. Because of this latter consideration, it is difficult to know whether to interpret David’s words as a sincere expression of his love for Saul, as rhetoric, or as some combination of genuine affection and political considerations.

David and Jonathan

After David killed Goliath, Jonathan became enamored of David and made a pact with him:

When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan’s soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself.… Jonathan and David made a pact, because [Jonathan] loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the cloak and tunic he was wearing and gave them to David, together with his sword, bow, and belt (1 Sam. 18:1-4).

Whatever the reasoning behind Jonathan’s reluctance to fight Goliath, he graciously ceded his right to the throne to David as a result of David’s superior heroism. [7] That Jonathan is said to have loved David “as himself” attests to his remarkable feelings toward David.

Throughout the narrative, Jonathan reiterated his commitment to David’s well-being:

Jonathan told David, “My father Saul is bent on killing you. Be on your guard tomorrow morning; get to a secret place and remain in hiding. I will go out and stand next to my father in the field where you will be, and I will speak to my father about you. If I learn anything, I will tell you” (1 Sam. 19:2-3).

David fled from Naioth in Ramah; he came to Jonathan and said, “What have I done, what is my crime and my guilt against your father, that he seeks my life?” He replied, “Heaven forbid! You shall not die. My father does not do anything, great or small, without disclosing it to me; why should my father conceal this matter from me? It cannot be!” David swore further, “Your father knows well that you are fond of me and has decided: ‘Jonathan must not learn of this or he will be

grieved.’ But, as the Lord lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death.” Jonathan said to David, “Whatever you want, I will do it for you” (1 Sam. 20:1-4).

In the first instance, there is no recorded response by David. The second dialogue reports David’s first words to Jonathan in the text, and they hardly sound personal. David could have said these words to anyone. [8]

After Jonathan confronted Saul at a public meal and subsequently told David that he must flee, the scene ends with a touching encounter:

David emerged from his concealment at the Negev. He flung himself face down on the ground and bowed low three times. They kissed each other and wept together; David wept the longer (1 Sam. 20:41).

Although they kissed and David cried longer than Jonathan, this scene does not necessarily indicate David’s affectionate feelings toward Jonathan. He could have been distressed over becoming a fugitive from the king (cf. Ralbag). At the same time, however, this emotionally charged scene could indicate a profound mutual love as well.

Perhaps the most dramatic textual expression of David’s feelings toward Jonathan, and to some degree Saul, is found in his eulogy after they were killed in battle:

And David intoned this dirge over Saul and his son Jonathan—He ordered the Judahites to be taught [The Song of the] Bow. It is recorded in the Book of Jashar. “Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights; how have the mighty fallen…. Saul and Jonathan, beloved and cherished, never parted in life or in death! They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions…. I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan, you were most dear to me. Your love was wonderful to me more than the love of women. How have the mighty fallen, the weapons of war perished!” (2 Sam. 1:17-27).

Most of the lamentation is a heroes’ eulogy. However, verse 26 reflects the strong feelings David harbored toward Jonathan. Only after Jonathan’s death does David unambiguously express his positive emotions toward Jonathan.

Despite the seemingly heartfelt outpouring of David’s emotions, however, Robert Alter maintains that David’s public recital of this eulogy also served his political aim of proclaiming that David did not wish for Saul’s death. [9] Tod Linafelt suggests further that the eulogy reflects David’s positive personal feelings toward

Saul and Jonathan but simultaneously is a carefully crafted rhetorical piece that reflects Saul and Jonathan as failures as military men and as national leaders. [10] These interpretations are reminders of the various elements likely to have affected all of David's relationships.

One Mishnah idealizes the love between David and Jonathan as the quintessential friendship:

All love that depends on a [transient] thing, [when the] thing ceases, [the] love ceases; and [all love] that depends not on a [transient] thing, ceases not forever. Which is the [kind of] love that depends on a [transient] thing? Such as was the love of Amnon for Tamar; and [which is the kind of love] that depends not on a [transient] thing? Such as was the love of David and Jonathan (Avot 5:16).

Rabbi Jonah of Gerona comments that the Mishnah idealizes Jonathan's love of David since Jonathan stood to lose directly by abdicating his right to the throne. Therefore, his love for David must have been pure. Of course, this interpretation does not account for David's love for Jonathan. One easily can identify more utilitarian (though hardly negative) reasons why David would pursue a relationship with Jonathan. Jonathan protected David against Saul and also ceded his rights to the throne.

However, one also can identify less altruistic (though again hardly negative) motivations for Jonathan's love toward David as well. During their last recorded encounter, Jonathan voiced his expectation that he would be second in command once David became king: "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'" (1 Sam. 23:17).

There is nothing negative about Jonathan's aspiration, but he evidently expected reciprocity for his graciousness. Consequently, one talmudic passage debates the extent of altruism underlying Jonathan's covenant with David:

Rabbi [Rabbi Judah the Prince] … said, three were humble… Jonathan, the son of Saul, for he said to David, "You are going to be king over Israel and I shall be second to you" (1 Sam. 23:17). But how does this prove it? Perhaps Jonathan the son of Saul [spoke thus] because he saw that the people were flocking to David! (Bava Metzia 84b-85a).

According to Rabbi's reading, Jonathan was gracious in ceding his right to the throne. According to the objection, however, Jonathan simply was acting prudently, correctly reading the writing on the wall that David would become

king. This talmudic debate captures both sides of the complex relationship between David and Jonathan.

On a more ominous level, Jonathan was concerned that David would exterminate his family. [11] Jonathan reiterated their pact at every possible opportunity (see 1 Sam. 18:3; 20:14-16, 23; 42; 23:18). Perhaps the most striking is Jonathan's reference to the pact juxtaposed to another mention that Jonathan loved David as himself:

"Nor shall you fail to show me the Lord's faithfulness, while I am alive; nor, when I am dead, shall you ever discontinue your faithfulness to my house—not even after the Lord has wiped out every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth. Thus has Jonathan covenanted with the house of David; and may the Lord requite the enemies of David!" Jonathan, out of his love for David, adjured him again, for he loved him as himself (1 Sam. 20:14-17).

John A. Thompson interprets this juxtaposition to mean that even this lofty expression of Jonathan's loving David as himself combines interpersonal affection and the aspect of covenantal alliance. [12] Alternatively, Abarbanel (on 20:17), Malbim (on 18:3; 20:17) and Shimon Bar-Efrat argue that the reference to Jonathan loving David as himself indicates that Jonathan was not motivated by personal gain and self-protection even in the context of such a prudent covenant. [13] Following Moshe Z. Segal, Yehudah Kiel advances this argument even further, suggesting that David responded with silence since he loved Jonathan so dearly that he refused to acknowledge that he and not Jonathan would rule. [14]

At any rate, Jonathan's pact with David proved effective. After Jonathan's death, David cared for Jonathan's son Mephibosheth: David inquired, "Is there anyone still left of the House of Saul with whom I can keep faith for the sake of Jonathan?" (2 Sam. 9:1). When David killed seven of Saul's descendants to appease the Gibeonites, he spared Mephibosheth because of this oath: "The king spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan son of Saul, because of the oath before the Lord between the two, between David and Jonathan son of Saul" (2 Sam. 21:7).

To summarize, although Rabbi Jonah of Gerona certainly is correct that Jonathan was an exemplar of graciousness by foregoing his right to the throne, the textual evidence indicates that Jonathan stood to gain as well. He expected to be second in command and also protected his progeny through his pact with David. [15]

David and Michal

Now Michal daughter of Saul had fallen in love with David; and when this was reported to Saul, he was pleased (1 Sam. 18:20).

Following David's meteoric rise to national fame, Saul's daughter Michal loved David. This is the only reference in the entire Bible to a woman said to love her man. Although no doubt Michal was attracted to marrying a hero, there appears to be genuine affection in her reaction, as well. When Saul sent his troops to capture David, Michal heroically put herself at risk by siding with David over her father (1 Sam. 19:10-17). [16] Once again, we never hear how David felt about Michal. Perhaps their love was reciprocal, but perhaps David viewed her primarily as another means of gaining legitimacy to the throne.

Rabbi Amnon Bazak assumes from the lack of mention of David's love that David was more interested in marrying Saul's daughter as part of his monarchial aspirations (see 1 Sam. 17:25; 18:23, 26). [17] However, Bazak's assumption is not compelling. As noted at the outset of this essay, in most biblical relationships involving the term ahavah (love), only one of the parties is explicitly said to love. Following her thesis that the more dominant party is said to love, Susan Ackerman suggests that Michal was the more powerful party at the outset of the narrative. David depended on his marriage to Michal to advance his monarchial ambitions. [18]

At any rate, we still cannot ascertain if David really did not love Michal at all. Bazak argues more convincingly that the ongoing emphasis on Michal's being Saul's daughter may suggest that this aspect was paramount to David. David wanted Michal back when Abner expressed a desire to reconcile the two kingdoms:

He replied, "Good; I will make a pact with you. But I make one demand upon you: Do not appear before me unless you bring Michal daughter of Saul when you come before me." David also sent messengers to Ish-bosheth son of Saul, to say, "Give me my wife Michal, for whom I paid the bride-price of one hundred Philistine foreskins" (2 Sam. 3:13-14).

When speaking to Abner, David stressed Michal's being the "daughter of Saul" in order to legitimize the political unification of the north and south. When addressing Ish-bosheth, David referred to "my wife Michal," since he wanted to emphasize his legal marriage to Michal so that Ish-bosheth would be responsive. [19]

In the final encounter between David and Michal, Michal again is three times referred to as Saul's daughter. Aside from the surface debate over the dignity of the monarchy, Bazak interprets Michal's outburst as an expression of her deep anguish at being unloved despite her love for David:

As the Ark of the Lord entered the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the Lord; and she despised him for it.… David went home to greet his household. And Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, "Didn't the king of Israel do himself honor today—exposing himself today in the sight of the slave girls of his subjects, as one of the riffraff might expose himself!" David answered Michal, "It was before the Lord who chose me instead of your father and all his family and appointed me ruler over the Lord's people Israel! I will dance before the Lord and dishonor myself even more, and be low in my own esteem; but among the slave girls that you speak of I will be honored." So to her dying day Michal daughter of Saul had no children (2 Sam. 6:16-23).

This confrontation terminated their relationship and they had no children afterwards. David never spoke (in the text) to Michal until this explosion at the end, and then never again. However, the absence of mutual dialogue does not prove that David had not previously loved Michal. For example, Ralbag (on 6:22) suggests that David loved Michal before this confrontation, but afterwards, stopped loving her. However, it also is possible that David never loved her, and now realized that he no longer needed this marriage with Michal to legitimize his monarchy.

Conclusion

Do you know why you were unable at that time to know "the meaning of love"? Because one only knows it when one both loves and is loved. Everything else can, at a pinch, be done one-sidedly, but two are needed for love, and when we have experienced this we lose our taste for all other one-sided activites and do everything mutually. For everything can be done mutually; he who has experienced love discovers it everywhere, its pains as well as its delights (letter from Franz Rosenzweig to his fiancée Edith Hahn, January 16, 1920). [20]

Franz Rosenzweig stressed the mutual aspect of love to his fiancée, Edith Hahn. The Book of Samuel, in contrast, keeps David's reciprocal feelings toward Saul, Jonathan, and Michal opaque. Though there are clues that David loved Saul and certainly Jonathan, many of these references can be interpreted in multiple directions given the nature of private and public, as well as personal and political

relationships.

It appears likely that David viewed Michal as a ticket to the throne, and once David had secured a consolidated kingdom he no longer needed that relationship. However, it remains plausible, as per Ralbag's reading, that they also enjoyed a mutual loving relationship until their final confrontation.
Although the text explicitly reports that Saul, Jonathan, and Michal loved David, their loves likewise featured political-public dimensions in addition to the personal affectionate love they likely felt toward David. These complexities and ambiguities further enhance the reader's experience of such gripping narratives. What is striking is how these ancient texts continue to be so compelling precisely because the language is sufficiently multifaceted to sustain multidimensional interpretations.

NOTES

[1] This article appeared in Jewish Bible Quarterly 40:1 (2012), pp. 41-51.

[2] Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 118-9. This fact becomes all the more ironic in light of the name "David" likely meaning "beloved."

[3] Susan Ackerman, "The Personal is Political: Covenantal and Affectionate Love (’AHEB, ’AHABA) in the Hebrew Bible," Vetus Testamentum 52 (2002), pp. 437-458.

[4] See especially William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," Catholic Bible Quarterly 25 (1963), pp. 77-87.

[5] Literally, the verse reports that "he took a strong liking to him" (va-ye'ehavehu me'od). The NJPS translation follows the reasonable assumption of virtually all commentators that Saul is the subject who loved David. For one objection to this reading, see Gordon C. I. Wong, "Who Loved Whom? A Note on I Samuel 16:21," Vetus Testamentum 47 (1997), pp. 554-556. Although Yehudah Kiel favors the majority opinion, he expresses uncertainty as well (Da'at Mikra: 1 Samuel [Hebrew], [Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1981]), p. 164.

[6] For a fuller analysis, see Hayyim Angel, "Why Didn't He Do It? An Analysis of Why David Did Not Kill Saul," in Angel, Through an Opaque Lens (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006), pp. 169-185; revised second edition (New York: Kodesh Press, 2013), pp. 135-148.

[7] Cf. J.T. Pesahim 6:1 (33b): “Three set aside their crowns in this world and inherited the life of the world to come: namely, Jonathan, son of Saul….”

[8] Cf. Robert Alter, The David Story: A Translation and Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), p. 123.

[9] Robert Alter, The David Story, p. 198.

[10 Tod Linafelt, “Private Poetry and Public Eloquence in II Samuel 1:17-27: Hearing and Overhearing David’s Lament for Jonathan and Saul,” Journal of Religion 88 (2008), pp. 497-526.

[11] Similarly, Saul was concerned that David would exterminate his family: “‘I know now that you will become king, and that the kingship over Israel will remain in your hands. So swear to me by the Lord that you will not destroy my descendants or wipe out my name from my father's house.’ David swore to Saul” (1 Sam. 24:21-23).

[12] John A. Thompson, “The Significance of the Word Love in the David-Jonathan Narratives in I Samuel,” Vetus Testamentum 24 (1974), pp. 334-338.

[13] Shimon Bar-Efrat, Mikra LeYisrael: 1 Samuel (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv, Am Oved, 1996), p. 262.

[14] Yehudah Kiel, Da’at Mikra: 1 Samuel, p. 207.

[15] See also Orly Keren, “David and Jonathan: A Case of Unconditional Love?” Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 37:1 (2012), pp. 1-23.

[16] It is worth noting that the two most important biblical figures—Moses and David—both were saved by princesses who defied their own fathers’ murderous decrees. Pharaoh’s daughter rescued baby Moses (Exod. 2:5-10), and Michal saved David from Saul.

[17] R. Amnon Bazak, Makbilot Nifgashot: Makbilot Sifrutiyot be-Sefer Shemuel (Hebrew) (Alon Shevut: Hegyonot, 2006), pp. 109-121.

[18] Susan Ackerman, “The Personal is Political,” esp. pp. 441, 447, 452-453.

[19] When Michal saved David against the wishes of her father Saul, the text fittingly identifies her as David’s wife: “Saul sent messengers to David’s home to keep watch on him and to kill him in the morning. But David’s wife Michal told him, ‘Unless you run for your life tonight, you will be killed tomorrow’” (1 Sam. 19:11). Cf. Shemuel Avramsky and Moshe Garsiel, Olam HaTanakh: 1 Samuel

(Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Dodzon-Iti, 1996), pp. 168-169; Shimon Bar-Efrat, Mikra LeYisrael: 1 Samuel, pp. 244, 249; 2 Samuel, p. 37.

[20] In Nahum Glatzer, Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought (New York: Schocken