

The Nature and Motive of the Love Between Jonathan and David: An Exegesis of 1 Samuel 18:1–5

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Abstract

The Jonathan–David relationship in 1 Samuel 18:1–5 has attracted different interpretations among scholars. Exegetes have tried to examine the nature and motive of the love Jonathan and David shared and have arrived at different conclusions. Among the prominent views is that their love was political, for personal gain, homoerotic, or characterized by brotherly love. The key verb in this discussion is אָהַב. This study examines the broad semantic range of this verb in its context to determine the nature and motive of the love Jonathan and David shared and its implications. Love is a significant theme in the Bible. It provides both the stability and consistency in which life thrives; thus, it is relevant and essential even for believers today. The exegesis of 1 Samuel 18:1–5 sheds light on understanding the original context and the possible meaning of the problematic Hebrew word that has been the center of disagreement among biblical scholars. Therefore, through grammatical-historical analysis and discourse analysis approach, the researcher explores different views of love in this text and concludes that the love between Jonathan and David was brotherly.

Keywords: David, Jonathan, Love, Motive, אָהַב,

Introduction

The Hebrew word אָהַב (love), as used by Jonathan (1 Sam 18:1, 3) and later alluded to by David (2 Sam 1:26), has a wide range of usage. First, it refers to interpersonal relationships, including the husband-wife relationship, as in the case of Elkanah and Hannah (1 Sam 1:5), David and Michal (1 Sam 18:20), and Jacob and Rachel (Gen 29:18, 20, 30). It also refers to the parent-

child relationship as in the case of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22:2) and David and Amnon (2 Sam 13:21). Second, it refers to the Divine-Human relationship, for example, YHWH's love for the Israelite (Deut 7:6; 23:5). Thompson¹ and Ackroyd² argue that in 1 Samuel 18:1 the word has political overtones. Jobling³ and Von⁴ suggest that Jonathan and David were engaged in a homosexual relationship. Angel⁵ and Keren⁶ consider it a mutually beneficial relationship, while Harding⁷ sees it as a genuine friendship. The paper examines ambiguities in the text to ascertain the nature and motive of the love shared by Jonathan and David.

Background Information of 1 Samuel 18:1–5

Historical Context

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book in the Hebrew Bible. However, the LXX divided the book into two because of its length.⁸ The division between 1 and 2 Samuel was introduced in the Hebrew Bible in 1517.⁹ Although the division seems to make sense because it ends with the death of King Saul, it also splits into two the story of the rise of David, which runs from 1 Samuel 16:14—2 Samuel 8. Since the two books were one originally and the division is not inspired, it is more helpful to see the book of Samuel as one.

The authorship of the book of Samuel is anonymous.¹⁰ However, Samuel's prominent role in the early chapters might have led to the association of his name with the book. He died before the end of 1 Samuel (1 Sam 25); thus, he could not be the author of the entire 1 and 2 Samuel. 1 Chronicles 29:29 records that Samuel was among those who left records that the writers or editors might have used to compile the book. Evans notes that "any investigation of

¹ J. A. Thompson, "The Significance of the Verb *Love* in the David-Jonathan Narratives in 1 Samuel," *Vetus Testamentum* 24, no. 3 (1974): 334–338.

² Peter R Ackroyd, "Verb Love—'Āhēb in the David-Jonathan Narratives: A Footnote," *Vetus testamentum* 25, no. 2 (April 1975): 213–214.

³ David Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1998).

⁴ Dirk Von der Horst and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Jonathan's Loves, David's Laments: Gay Theology, Musical Desires, and Historical Difference* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2017).

⁵ Hayyim Angel, "When Love and Politics Mix: David and His Relationships with Saul, Jonathan, and Michal," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (January 2012): 41–51.

⁶ Orly Keren, "David and Jonathan: A Case of Unconditional Love?," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37, no. 1 (September 2012): 3–23.

⁷ James E. Harding, *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception*, BibleWorld (Sheffield ; Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub, 2013).

⁸ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, The New American Commentary v. 7 (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 18.

⁹ Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary 10 (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1983), xxv.

¹⁰ Tim Chester, *1 Samuel For You*, God's Word For You (UK: The Good Book Company, 2014), 8.

the authorship of the book of Samuel is fraught with difficulty.”¹¹ It is a complex matter because nothing is known about those responsible.¹² However, the authorship challenge does not affect the credibility of texts as God’s word.¹³

Literary Context

The book of Samuel falls in the Old Testament historical books, which record the history and life of Israelites in the promised land. It captures different transitions in the life of the Israelites from the era of Judges to Kings. The book can be divided broadly into three major divisions: King Saul’s rise and fall (1 Sam 1:1—16:13), political moves to establish David as King to replace the disobedient King Saul (1 Sam 16:14—2 Sam 8), and stories of David’s middle years as king (2 Sam 9—24). 1 Samuel 18:1–5 lies within the second division.

1 Samuel 18:1–5 occurs within chapter 18, where we see God protecting and granting success to His anointed leader. God is raising His anointed servant as king over his people, causing him to be loved by everyone, including Saul’s children. Jonathan loving him is part of God’s providence of protecting him. Therefore, 1 Samuel 18:1–5 is not primarily about the love between Jonathan and David but about God granting His anointed servant favor with the royal family and success in battle as He propels him toward the throne, for God had rejected Saul as King. The nature and motive of the love between Jonathan and David are secondary in this text, although it has attracted a lot of debate and differing opinions among scholars.

Exegesis of 1 Samuel 18:1–5

Jonathan Establishes a Relationship with David (v. 1)

וַיְהִי כְּכֹלְתּוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֶל-שָׂאוּל וְנָפֶשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן נִקְשְׁרָה בְּנֶפֶשׁ דָּוִד (וַיֵּאָהֲבוּ) [וַיֵּאָהֲבֵהוּ] יְהוֹנָתָן כְּנֶפֶשׁוֹ:

Translation: *As soon as David finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.*¹⁴

Verse 1 begins with the wayyiqtol verb, וַיְהִי, which does not necessarily need to be translated, for it is a discourse marker signaling the beginning of a new unit¹⁵ (see also Gen 6:1; 40:1; Josh 1:1;

¹¹ Mary J. Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, New International Biblical Commentary 6 (Peabody, Mass.: Carlisle, Cumbria: Hendrickson Publishers; Paternoster Press, 2000), 2.

¹² Peter R. Ackroyd, ed., *The First Book of Samuel*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 4.

¹³ Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 3.

¹⁴ Translations for verses 1–5 are my own translations.

1 Sam 28:1; 2 Kgs 25:27). The infinitive construct, *בְּכִלְתּוֹ*, is temporal given the time when the narrative occurred. When the preposition *בְּ* is used together with an infinitive, it connotes action that occurs immediately preceding that of the finite verb. It may be translated as “the moment when” or “as soon as.”¹⁶ The second infinitive *לְדַבֵּר* completes the verbal idea of the first infinitive. Therefore, the construction of a wayyiqtol plus two infinitives gives the scene’s setting, when it happened, and signals the beginning of a new discourse unit. This unit captures Jonathan and David’s conversation after David’s victory over the Philistines (1 Sam 17:58).

After the introductory formula, the author described what happened: “the soul of Jonathan was bound with the soul of David.” Bergen notes, “Saul’s firstborn son found a soul mate, and Jonathan’s soul was tied to David’s soul.”¹⁷ Here in this clause, *וַיִּבְּשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן נֶקֶשְׁרָה בְּנֶפֶשׁ דָּוִד*, there is an unexpected word order: subject, verb, and object, instead of verb, subject, and object. Here the verb follows the subject, *וַיִּבְּשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן*. Fokkelman observes that this symmetry in syntax shows a deep sense of affection.¹⁸ In my view, Fokkelman’s view is fair, for the phrase is a verbless clause offering a small break within the narrative to give information about the story; before resuming the narrative, the narrator comments that their brotherly bonding was tight.

A close parallel for this description is Genesis 44:30–31, where Judah talked to Joseph when they had gone to buy food in Egypt the second time. Joseph wanted Benjamin to be left behind in Egypt since the stolen cup was found in his sack. Judah said: “now, therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound in the boy’s life, (*וְנִפְשׁוֹ קָשְׁרָה בְּנֶפֶשׁוֹ*) as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die....” The word *קָשַׁר* (Gen 44:30) signifies a bond of affection between Jacob and Benjamin.

The verb *קָשַׁר* is used in 1 Samuel 18:1 in the same way as in Genesis 44:30 to describe the indissoluble love between Jonathan and David. Although in Genesis 44:30, the verb is qal, it is a passive participle, thus capturing the same middle niphal nuance as in 1 Samuel 18:1. Therefore, the word signifies a deep bonding between two individuals (Gen 44:30; 1 Sam 18:1).

¹⁵ Matthew H. Patton, Frederic C. Putnam, and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Hebrew Discourse: A Guide to Working with Biblical Hebrew Prose and Poetry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 71.

¹⁶ Bill T Arnold and John H Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69, accessed March 21, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511610899>.

¹⁷ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 199.

¹⁸ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses*, *Studia Semitica Neerlandica* 20, 23, 27, 31 (Assen, The Netherlands ; Dover, N.H: Van Gorcum, 1981), 195.

In only one other instance does קָשַׁר appears in the niph'al, (Neh 4:6; Heb 3:38), also conveying the meaning of “to bind.”¹⁹ In Nehemiah 4:6, the verb is associated with the biding of concrete objects, “So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together (וַתִּקְשָׁר) to half its height, for the people had a mind to work” (Neh 4:6). In this context, Nehemiah used the verb to show the essence of permanently fusing two objects into one, inseparable objects. As Arnold and Choi expound on the use of the niph'al stem, the author uses a passive stem because he was not interested in specifying the agent, but his focus was on the action as a whole.²⁰ Just as the walls (Neh 4:6) were fused using mortar, the Jonathan- David relationship was fused in unity by love.

Although some scholar such as Ackroyd argues that the word means “to conspire” in order to read a political overtone in the text,²¹ such reading is unwarranted since the meaning “to conspire” usually capture a more “negative” context of planning against another (2 Kings 21:23; 2 Chronicles 24:21), and there is no such hint in our context. In the context of 1 Samuel 18:1–5, the word קָשַׁר is used to show strong devotion to another. Both Klein²² and McCarter²³ affirm that Jonathan was so attracted to David that he became tightly devoted to him in affection and loyalty. Jonathan’s soul was bound to David’s soul, resulting in him (Jonathan) loving David as himself. This clause has been taken to mean different things by different people, as noted earlier in the problem statement. This issue will be dealt with later.

Saul Takes David as his Warrior (v. 2)

וַיִּקְחֵהוּ שָׁאוּל בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְלֹא נָתַן לָשׁוּב בֵּית אָבִיו

Translation: *And Saul took him that day and did not allow him to return to his father’s house.*

In 1 Samuel 8:10–18, Samuel solemnly warned the Israelites and stipulated the ways of the king who would reign upon them. The first warning was that the king would *take* (יָקַח) their sons and appoint them to his chariots to be horsemen and run before his chariot (1 Sam 8:11). Unlike when David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father’s sheep at Bethlehem (17:15), King Saul took him (וַיִּקְחֵהוּ שָׁאוּל) never to return to his father’s house. He would now join the active service of the king as a soldier, leading battalions in (v. 5). His joining the military service

¹⁹ Gerhard Johannes Botterweck and Elmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Volume XIII: Qôš - Raqîa'* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 196.

²⁰ Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 38.

²¹ Ackroyd, “Verb Love--'Āhēb in the David-Jonathan Narratives: A Footnote,” 213–214.

²² Klein, *1 Samuel*, 182.

²³ P. Kyle McCarter, *2 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1985), 304.

will now overshadow his role as Saul's harpist, as is observed in the rest of the book of Samuel (1 Sam 18:6—30:31).

Since we haven't yet encountered David, the warrior, Saul's action of taking him must have been informed by the events in chapter 17, where David defeated Goliath. Although the author is silent regarding Saul's motives and intentions for taking David, the negative formulation of the phrase לֹשׁוֹב בֵּית אָבִיו וְלֹא נָתַן (did not allow him to return to his father's house), leaves the reader with a hint of some tension in the Saul-David relationship. The rest of the book affirms this fact when we see Saul plotting to kill David because of his success and popularity. Fokkelman rightly interprets Saul's action as the first step on the way to the suppression and pursuit of David.²⁴

The Covenant between Jonathan and David (v. 3–4)

וַיַּכְרֵת יְהוֹנָתָן וְדָוִד בְּרִית בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֹתוֹ כְּנַפְשׁוֹ: V. 3

Translation: So, Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as his own soul.

Presumably, David's full-time service allowed for more interaction with Jonathan, thus laying a foundation for what follows (v. 3.) The relationship between Jonathan and David continues to unfold after Jonathan declares his love for David (v. 1). Verse 3(a) tells us the result of their love, that is, making a covenant (3b).

Verse 3 starts with a qal wayyiqtol וַיַּכְרֵת whose verbal root has three essential meanings in qal, to cut, exterminate, and to get into a covenant.²⁵ Here, the word captures the third meaning, to make a covenant. The two words בְּרִית and וַיַּכְרֵת used together seem to serve as a technical expression for covenant making (Gen 21:27; 26:28; 31:44; Exo 23:32; Joshua 9:6; 1 Sam 11:1; 23:18; 2 Sam 3:12; 1 Kings 20:34; 2 Kings 11:17). The question is, what kind of covenant was it? The ANE treaties fall into two broad categories, the parity treaties, and the suzerainty treaties.²⁶ These classifications had distinguishing elements between them; for the former, both parties were bound to obey identical stipulations.²⁷ It was more of an agreement between two equals, as was the case between Jonathan and David. Although Jonathan was the

²⁴ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 200.

²⁵ Willem VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1997), 729.

²⁶ J. A. Thompson, *The Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and The Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), 12, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/tp/treaties_thompson.pdf.

²⁷ George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenants in Israel and The Ancient Near East* (Pennsylvania: The Bible Colloquium Pittsburgh, 1955), 29.

crown prince, he did not enter into the covenant as a prince but as David's equal since this was a parity treaty. The context does not indicate a king–servant relationship as is the case for the suzerainty treaty but a covenant between two equal friends, thus, affirming it as a parity treaty.

The pact between Jonathan and David as a mutual friendship agreement is reinforced by ANE parallels, as captured in a letter of Buraburiash, King of Karaduniash, to the Pharaoh Amenophis IV. The treaty read, “My brother²⁸ and I pledged each other friendship and made this declaration: As our fathers were friends with each other, we truly will be friends.”²⁹ As mentioned earlier, it is a pact of amity. Although the text is not explicit, they had a spirit of mutuality. Their deep affection for each other made them brothers (Prov 18:24), confirming the covenant as a brotherly pact rather than one based on manipulation and influence of power.

The preposition כִּי (because) in בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ identifies a cause or reason for the preceding action.³⁰ The noun בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ is in construct form with the literal rendering, “because of his love.” This is a genitive of source that captures the action that Jonathan loves David. 1 Samuel 20 gives us more insight into the nature of the covenant that Jonathan and David made in 1 Samuel 18:3. According to Davis, the covenant in 1 Samuel 20 is a reaffirmation and extension of 18:1–5.³¹ In 1 Sam 20:1, we see David running to Jonathan's house for his security. David could only have trusted Jonathan because of the covenant they had earlier. In 1 Samuel 20:8, David, when appealing to Jonathan, uses the word חֶסֶד which is often translated as “kindness” or “steadfast love.” According to Chester, this steadfast love is undergirded by covenant commitment in 1 Samuel 18:3. The dialogue between Jonathan and David in 1 Samuel 20:11–16 reveals more details of the covenant. Also, this time round, it is not just between Jonathan and David but extends to their households. In 1 Samuel 20:17, there is a reaffirmation of the covenant as we see David swearing again, and the language of 1 Samuel 18:1, 3 repeated: “for he loved him as he loved his own soul.” This helps reinforce and extend Jonathan and David's covenant, an intergenerational friendship.

וַיִּתְּפֹשֶׁט יְהוֹנָתָן אֶת־הַמָּעִיל אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו וַיַּתְּנֵהוּ לָדוֹד וּמַדְיּוֹ וְעַד־חֶרְבּוֹ וְעַד־קִשְׁתּוֹ וְעַד־חֲגָרוֹ: Verse 4

²⁸ The text, as many Ugaritic documents, does not speak here of brothers and sons by birth, but by alliance.

²⁹ Paul Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East*. (Loyola Press, 1983), 101.

³⁰ Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 105.

³¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000), 203.

Translation: *And, Jonathan stripped himself of³² the robe which was upon him, his cloth garment, and his sword, and his bow, and his belt, and he gave them to David.*

Verse 4 starts with a wayyiqtol, וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ, which is a reflexive hithpael denoting that Jonathan acted for himself. He demonstrated everything he meant and felt by giving David his robe and arms. Does Jonathan's giving his robe to David symbolize the transfer of power, or was it a gesture to seal the love covenant? Jobling argues that giving his robe represented the transfer of power,³³ yet unlike in other instances where there is a clear nuance of transfer of power in the context (Num 20:24–28; 1 Kings 19:19–21; Isa 22:21), this verse does not have such nuance. Tsumura argues that this act was simply a strong statement of affection and respect.³⁴

Usually, in ANE, parties would make either a verbal oath or a sign to enact the covenant after a pact was made. However, Kalluveettil recognizes that there were different ways to enact a covenant: decisions, a sign of assent, documentation (not necessarily text-treaty based), a reminder, a monument, or a gift.³⁵ Therefore, Jonathan's gifts to David were meant to seal the covenant they made in verse 3 rather than to symbolize a transfer of power.

Since the word הַמָּעֵיל symbolized a royal robe, one worn by royals and specifically by men of ranks (1 Sam 2:19; 15:27; 24:5, 12; 28:14; 1 Chron 15:27; Job 1:20; 2:12; Ezk 26:16), it is easy to conclude this suggested a “transfer of power” when one focuses on just one item alone. On the contrary, we should not itemize the gifts and overread the meaning of each item. The central focus should be on the token as a whole rather than the individual gifts. In addition, the gifts should be construed as tools to seal the covenant rather than trying to examine what would be the meaning and significance of each gift.

The context here is that of covenant-making and ratifying the covenant. Homer's Iliad describes a covenant between Glaucus and Diomedes, exchanging armor in a token of their ancestral friendship, just like Jonathan and David did when they made a covenant of love and brotherhood. Glaucus and Diomedes' covenant reads, “So let us avoid each other's spears [at Troy] ... And let us exchange our armor so that everyone will know our grandfathers' friendship

³² Wawyiqtol Hithpael 3ms

³³ Jobling David, “Jonathan: A Structural Study in 1 Samuel,’ in The Sense of Biblical Narrative,” *Sheffield Academic 7*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament (1986): 12.

³⁴ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 473.

³⁵ Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant*, 5.

has made friends of us.”³⁶ As Fokkelman rightly observes, Jonathan’s gifts to David were given as tokens of love and material signs of the pact³⁷ to seal the covenant of love and brotherhood between them.

Saul Sends David to Fight (v. 5)

וַיֵּצֵא דָוִד בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלְחֵנּוּ שָׁאוּל וַיִּשְׁמְהוּ שָׁאוּל עַל אֲנָשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה וַיִּיטֹב בְּעֵינָיו כָּל־הָעָם וְגַם בְּעֵינָיו עֲבָדֵי שָׁאוּל:

Translation: *So, every time David went out wherever Saul sent him, he prospered. Therefore, Saul set him over the men of war, and it was pleasing in the eyes of all the people and also in the eyes of Saul’s servants.*

Just like verse 2, verse 5 pertains to the relationship between Saul and David. In verse 2, Saul enlisted David into his army after David’s victory over Goliath. However, unlike before, when he went back and forth (17:15), Saul did not allow him to return to his father’s house this time. Verse 5 starts with a wayyiqtol, וַיֵּצֵא, which is a consequential wayyiqtol.³⁸ The waw is translated here as ‘so’ to show that verse 5 results from something that happened earlier. Is it a result of verse 4 or 2? Fokkelman argues that the sequence which immediately brings verse 5 after the enumeration suggests the link between what has happened in verse 4 and his success.³⁹ Thus, verse 4 explains the action of verse 3 and forms the partial basis for his success in verse 5.

The phrase וַיֵּצֵא דָוִד בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלְחֵנּוּ שָׁאוּל can be translated in two different ways; “so, every time David went out wherever Saul sent him” to show the frequency of the mission or “so, in all mission that Saul sent David” to emphasize the different assignment. According to the context, the author wants to emphasize the frequency of David’s going out to war. Like his brothers, he was active in the king’s army. He was not only active in going to battles, but also he was יִשְׁכִּיל. The verb יִשְׁכִּיל primarily occurs in hiphil, and it has various usage such as to understand, to have insight, and to be wise. It can also focus on the result of having insight, in other words, to be successful, like in this case (18:5).⁴⁰ Instead of using the perfect form of שָׁכַל, which would have communicated the same idea, the author chose an imperfect form. The customary imperfect indicates that he regularly went out for battles, emphasizing the repeated nature of the action.

³⁶ Homer et al., *The Iliad*, Nachdr., Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 6. 216-218.

³⁷ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 199.

³⁸ Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 85.

³⁹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 199.

⁴⁰ Terence E. Fretheim, “שָׁכַל,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1997), 1243.

Earlier, the author mentioned that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him from the day Samuel anointed him. Therefore, his success was not supposed to be just associated with his skillfulness. David's success was primarily from God. Bergen argues the word שָׁכַל is theologically significant; according to the Torah (Deut 29:9), those who would keep the Sinai covenant would “prosper in everything” they do.⁴¹ Therefore, the author's use of the language that would remind his audience of the Torah promises was intentional to emphasize that God was with David, and it was Him who caused him to be successful in battle and not Jonathan's sword or his skillfulness, although they were necessary for the battle.

Was Saul happy with David's victory? That remains the issue, although he set him over the men of battle. After his promotion, everyone acknowledged and approved him, including Saul's servants, but Saul remained silent. Verse 5 concludes the discourse unit (18:1–5) and sets the stage for what follows: David continues to be successful, and Saul becomes jealous of David's success and, as a result, tries to kill him in several instances (1 Sam 18:6–16; 19:10). However, God delivers him from Saul's wrath and fury.

Since the issue of what kind of love Jonathan and David shared has attracted different interpretations, the following section examines the nature and motive of this love.

What Kind of Love Did Jonathan and David Share?

As noted earlier, different camps see the love relationship between Jonathan and David differently. Some see it as political, others as brotherhood/friendship, others mutually beneficial, while others contend it was homoerotic. This question is the subject of this section.

First, we must establish the semantic range of the two key terms, אָהַב and אֶהְבֶּה, in order to determine the possible and most likely meanings for these terms in context. The verbal root of אָהַב is used in the OT to capture different relationships. The word can be divided broadly into religious and unreligious (interpersonal) meanings. Religious use of the verb captures the essence of divine love, the salvation history of God's relationship with Israel as the expression of Yahweh's freely bestowed love. God expressed His love to Israel by choosing them among other nations and covenanting with them (Deut 4:37; 10:15; 23:5), multiplying them, and showing them kindness. Israelites were, in return, to obey and keep God's statutes and commandments to express their love for Him (Deut 10:16). They were also required to extend this love to sojourners

⁴¹ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 200.

who were dwelling among them (Deut 10:18) since they were formerly sojourners in Egypt (Lev 19:18, 34; Deut 10:18, 19). The unreligious use of the verb entails all interpersonal relationships, e.g., heterosexual and parental relationships. However, the study here has narrowed the scope to secular use, especially human-human relationships because the subjects are humans. The verb *אהב* in the category of human-human relationship has a wide range of meanings.

First is parental love, which describes the relationship between parents and their children, especially sons (Gen 22:2; 25:28; 37:3, 4; 44:20). In parental love, parties love each other because they are relatives.

Second, man-woman love describes how a man relates with women, either his wife or a woman he is romantically attracted to. A man-woman relationship can either be intimate/physical (Gen 24:67; 29:30; 34:3; 1 Kings 11:1) or a romantic attraction without being physical/intimate (Gen 29:18; 2 Sam 13:1, 4, 15). It also means to confide in a woman (Judges 14:16; 16:15), or showing deep care, compassion/empathy, and devotion to his wife (Gen 29:32; Deut 21:15; 16; 1 Sam 1:5; 2 Chron 11:2). Therefore, a man-woman relationship does not necessarily entail physical intimacy. Intimate love is just one of the ways of expressing love between a man and a woman. In this relationship, a man is always the subject of love, and a woman is the object of love. It is only between Michal and David (1 Sam 18:20, 28) that we see a woman being the subject of love, and it is because the author wanted to contrast the relationship between Saul and David and his children (Jonathan and Michal) and David.

Third, political love is when a King of a powerful kingdom accepts deals with a King of a less powerful kingdom to trade with them or protect them from external danger (1 Kings 5:1). It could also refer to when a King shows special favor to his subject because of their loyalty and service to the king (1 Sam 16:21), or when civilian and junior warriors praise a senior warrior because of victory in battle (1 Sam 18:12, 22). Finally, it could also refer to advisers of a government official (Esther 5:10, 14; 6:13). In this relationship the one giving love has a power advantage because of their position. Thus, parties do not equal in status.

Fourth, friendly love entails sharing a bond of mutual devotion and commitment (1 Sam 20:17) or being devoted to the well-being of another (Ruth 4:15; Job 19:19; Proverbs 17:17; 18:24). The devotedness and commitment may be expressed in confiding in each other, or being there for each other in all times. Unlike in political love, where social ranking and status influence the relationship, in this case, parties relate with one another as equals and are supposed

to love each other selflessly (Prov 17:17; 18:24). How one loves himself is the measure of how you ought to love the other person. This love stems from the Deuteronomic love, where God sets the standard for people to relate with one another (Deut 10:19; Lev 19:18, 34). This love can be between the same gender or the other gender

The range of meaning for the noun אֶהְבָּה parallels closely that of the verb: Divine love, love between humans.⁴² When אֶהְבָּה is used to describe divine love, God is usually the subject of love, and Israelites are the object. It is specifically between Yahweh, and His covenant people, the Israelites. It involves redeeming them from the days of trouble (Deut 7:8; Isa 63:9; Hosea 11:4; Zeph 3:17), showing them mercy (Jer 31:3; Hosea 3:11), and establishing them as a nation (2 Kings 10:9; 2 Chron. 2:11; 9:8). Sometimes this love is seen in God judging them so that they would return to Him (Jer. 2:33; Hosea 9:15). As a result, Israelites were expected to respond to Yahweh's love by obeying his commandments and statutes (Jer 2:2; Micah 6:8).

Human love captures horizontal relationships, i.e., how people relate with one another. It entails friendships and romantic relationships. In a romantic relationship, the subject of love is always a man, and the object is a woman. But not so in a friendship relationship, for friendship love confides in someone (1 Sam 20:17) and is not vengeful (Psalm 109:4, 5; Prov 10:12; 15:17; 17:9; 27:5).

Evaluation of the Various Views

A. Royal Political Love

Thompson observes that among the key texts outside of Samuel that the proponents of the “political love” view appeal to is 1 Kings 5:1, which describes Hiram King of Tyre as always having loved David.⁴³ The word אֶהְבָּה is used to mean political love when a King of a powerful kingdom accepts a partnership with the king of a less powerful kingdom so that they can either trade together or protect the powerful kingdom. From 1 Kings 5:1 and 2 Sam 5:11, it is clear that David and Hiram had some diplomatic arrangements as rulers of the neighboring kingdoms. For example, King Hiram would supply the building materials and labor to build King David's house, and King David would protect them from external threats. Therefore, the use of אֶהְבָּה in 1 Kings 5:1 has a political nuance.

⁴² P. J. J. S Els, “אֶהְבָּה,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren, vol. 1, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1997), 277–99.

⁴³ Thompson, “The Significance of the Verb Love in the David-Jonathan Narratives in 1 Samuel,” 334.

Ackroyd, supporting the political interpretation of the Jonathan–David relationship, argues that the use of the verb *קָשַׁר*, which can carry both a non-political and political meaning, is a further indication that political overtones are present.⁴⁴ But Ackroyd explores the word study of the verb *קָשַׁר* beyond the niph'al stem, which is used in the text. He primarily relies upon other stems, such as qal, piel, and hithpa'el, to assign meaning to the verb. The root *קָשַׁר* is passive, like in our context, and it means “to bind” in qal and “to be bound” in niph'al. As noted earlier, the author used a passive stem because he was not interested in specifying the agent, but his focus was on the whole action of how the Jonathan–David relationship was fused by love. A political interpretation would have a King-subject relationship (2 Kings 21:33; 2 Chron 24:21), but in 1 Sam 18:1–5, there is no such relationship; thus, the word carries a different nuance from political interpretation.

B. Personal Gain

Angel is a strong proponent of this view. She argues that, contextually, Jonathan’s love for David was because he stood to gain. She further contends that Jonathan loved David since David would be the throne’s ultimate heir, so he wanted to be second in command and protect his progeny.⁴⁵ She concludes that their relationship was materialistic, based on what one will gain rather than on affectionate love. In my view, Angel judges the parties’ actions too skeptically. The incidents she quotes, like 1 Samuel 20:13-16, are everyday conversations that one would have with a close confidant.

Although 1 Samuel 20:13–16 could be used to shed more light on the Jonathan–David relationship, it should be applied cautiously to 1 Samuel 18:1–5 because this is a later development in their relationship given the changed circumstances whereby David is now imperiled. For sure, they both gain from the relationship, but there is no indication from 1 Samuel 18:1–5 that they are entering into the relationship simply to use the other person for personal gain. Rather, the most natural way to read the text is that they value and love one another as persons.

One Mishnah text idealized the love between Jonathan and David as the quintessential friendship. It says, “All love that depends on a [transient] thing, [when the] thing ceases, [the] love ceases; and [all love] that does not depend on a [transient] thing lasts forever. What kind of

⁴⁴ Peter R. Ackroyd, “The Verb Love: *’aheb* in the David-Jonathan Narratives: A Footnote,” *Vetus Testamentum* 25, no. 2 (April 1975): 214.

⁴⁵ Angel, “When Love and Politics Mix: David and His Relationships with Saul, Jonathan, and Michal,” 48.

love depends on a [transient] thing? The love of Amnon for Tamar, and [what kind of love] does not depend on a [transient] thing? The love of David and Jonathan (Avot 5:19).⁴⁶

C. The Homosexual Interpretation

In their book, *Jonathan's Loves, David's Laments*, Horst and Ruether examine whether the Jonathan–David relationship is emblematic of an erotic relationship. They contend that David and Jonathan's love was homoerotic, and they argue that the story of David and Jonathan is proof that homosexuality is affirmed in the Bible.⁴⁷ Also, in favor of a queer understanding of the Jonathan–David relationship, Comstock argues that both historical reality and the imagination of biblical editors manifest an egalitarian and erotic relationship.⁴⁸ In his response to Comstock and others who see the Jonathan–David relationship as a model of erotic egalitarianism, Pixley argues that distortion of the biblical text is necessary for this to hold.⁴⁹

When the OT refers to homosexuality, it uses the word תועבה (abomination) because it views it as a sinful practice (Lev 18:22; 20:13). Also, God punished those who practiced homosexuality תועבה (Gen 19:5; Jude 1:7). As Nissinen rightly observes, the Israelites' holiness code (Lev 17–26) presented sexual activity between two men as an example of the repulsive ways of the so-called Canaanites that Yahweh's people were supposed to separate themselves from.⁵⁰ Apostle Paul writes, “for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom 1:18). He adds, “For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error (Rom (1:26–27, ESV).” Paul instructs that being consumed with the desire for a same-gender relationship is an unnatural act that leads to the judgment of men. God's word stipulates that homosexuality is sinful. Hence, despite numerous arguments that some scholars mount for this kind of relationship, either hermeneutical, social, or otherwise, the interpretation remains Scripturally inconsistent.

⁴⁶ Keren, “David and Jonathan: A Case of Unconditional Love?,” 4.

⁴⁷ Von der Horst and Ruether, *Jonathan's Loves, David's Laments*, 19–49.

⁴⁸ Gary David Comstock, *Gay Theology without Apology* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

⁴⁹ Jorge V. Pixley, *Biblical Israel: A People's History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

⁵⁰ Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 1998), 38.

Even scholars who argue that this relationship was complex rightly observe that the homoerotic reading is extremely improbable.⁵¹ Zehnder further argues that neither of the biblical terms that directly and unambiguously designate sexual activity, such as שָׁכַב and יָדַע appear nowhere in the narrative's description of Jonathan and David's interactions.⁵² The absence of such strong and explicit terms shows that the homosexual reading in the narrative is mainly eisegesis. Gagnon argues that "the narrator's willingness to speak of David's heterosexual sex life (1 Sam 18:17–29; 25:39–43; 2 Sam 3:2–5, 13–16; 5:13–16; 11) puts in stark relief his complete silence about any sexual activity between David and Jonathan or any sexual activity with men after Jonathan's death."⁵³

Moreover, the interpretation of the Jonathan–David relationship as erotic was a mid-twentieth-century development necessitated by the need to reconcile biblical faith and gay identity, which was wrong since it defies God's order in creation (Gen 1–2). The homosexual reading was imposed by those desperate to find the slightest shred of support for homosexual practice from the Bible. Therefore, the Jonathan–David relationship was not necessarily symbolic of a homoerotic relationship.

D. Friendship/Brotherly Love

So far, we have seen that the Jonathan–David relationship was neither political nor out of personal gain nor a homoerotic relationship. Nevertheless, beyond all these possibilities, the Jonathan–David relationship most naturally depicts a deep commitment between two friends. From the earlier section, friendly love entails having a bond of mutual devotion and commitment (1 Sam 20:17) or being devoted to the well-being of another (Ruth 4:15; Job 19:19; Prov 17:17; 18:24).

The phrase "the soul of Jonathan was bound with the soul of David and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Sam 18:1) depicts the intensity of Jonathan's love for David. The same language is used when describing Jacob's special love for his son Benjamin in Gen 44:30. Judah used this phrase to show how much Benjamin meant to Jacob and how affectionate they were. In Ruth 4:15, when Ruth gave birth, the women of the neighborhood told Naomi that "for

⁵¹ Markus Philipp Zehnder, "Exegetische Beobachtungen Zu Den David-Jonathan-Geschichten," *Biblica* 79 (1998): 156.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵³ Robert A. J. Gagnon, ed., *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, 8. [print]. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 153.

your daughter-in-law (Ruth) who loves (אָהַבְתָּ) you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” The women used hyperbolic language to describe how dear Ruth was to Naomi. Ruth was devoted to her wellness. The same meaning is intended in 1 Samuel 18:1, 3, i.e., Jonathan and David were not only mutually devoted and affectionate to one another, but also they were devoted to the wellness of each other. The author repeated the word אָהַבְתָּ four times within three verses to emphasize the intensity of their bonding. Keren argues that the word אָהַבְתָּ is a *Leitwort* that points to the central motif of the narrative: the intensity of Jonathan’s love for David.⁵⁴

Additionally, there is no indication that Jonathan was threatened by the fact that David would be king instead of him. Their friendship is more evident as Jonathan gifts David (v. 4). Through this sacrificial act, Jonathan expresses true brotherly love. A deep sense of affection characterized their relationship. Proverbs rightly express, “a friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17, ESV). The word study of אָהַבְתָּ affirms that their love was not to be understood negatively, for the author compared it to how one loves himself.

As we see in the broader story between Jonathan and David, their relationship is marked by the high essence of loyalty, commitment, and devotion (1 Sam 20:8, 14, 15), which is an instrumental part of any friendship. In demonstrating his loyalty and commitment to his friend, Jonathan chooses David over his father; for him, friendship takes precedence.

From the above examination of different aspects of the love that Jonathan and David shared, one thing that stands out is that the author does not interpret it negatively as being sexually intimate. Also, from the word study of both verbal and nominal forms of אָהַבְתָּ the word is used to portray love as a God-ordained feeling. As we saw earlier, the context of this text is that God is protecting and granting success to his anointed servant for the sake of His people, Israel. This protection looks like giving him favor with the family of Saul: Jonathan, and Michal as a stepping stone to the throne. Therefore, his relationship with Jonathan is God-ordained to propel him to the throne. Thus, the view that best describes the nature and motive of the love Jonathan and David shared is that of brotherly affection.

⁵⁴ Keren, “David and Jonathan: A Case of Unconditional Love?” 6.

Conclusion

This study examined the nature and motive of the love between Jonathan and David in 1 Samuel 18:1–5 and arrived at conclusions. First, the study argues that significant Scripture distortion must occur for this relationship to be understood as homoerotic. As noted earlier, the absence of clear and direct terms that designate sexual activity is strong evidence against this reading. When the Bible speaks of homosexuality, it uses the word *תוֹעֵבָה*, which God condemns because it is a sin against him, but not *אָהֵב*. Whenever the Bible uses the word *אָהֵב/אֶהְבֶּה* to describe a sexual relationship, the parties are always man and woman but not man-man or woman-woman.

Second, for a relationship to be considered to have political overtones, it has to safeguard political interests, or a suzerain rewards a vassal for their loyalty in serving the suzerain. The relationship is primarily top-down. It is only bottom-up when the vassal is praising the suzerain. In Jonathan and David's case, they entered into a covenant as equals, thus disqualifying the Jonathan–David relationship from being political.

Third, this study argued that the Jonathan–David relationship was brother/friend love. Both demonstrate a high level of commitment to the relationship by safeguarding their relationship from external threats like Saul. Even during his lament for Jonathan, David's laments for Jonathan is more personal. He calls Jonathan "brother" to show how affectionate they are. These brothers are a remarkable fulfillment of Proverbs 18:24, "there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother." Their relationship portrays friendship as a great gift from God that we ought to treasure. True friends are there for one another. Fokkelman notes that "by loving David as himself, Jonathan fulfills the natural and yet so deep command, the famous command from Leviticus 19:18b: "love your neighbor as yourself." Therefore, the love between Jonathan and David is an example of true friendship anchored in a covenant.

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