

June 27, Ordinary 13B (2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27)

When David praises Saul and Jonathan, is he acting out of expediency, faithfulness, or both?

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [June 16, 2021](#) issue

Biography may be my favorite genre of writing. In his biography of the ancient king David, David Wolpe writes that the first biography of David, the book of Samuel, is arguably the first biography of anyone. Like any excellent example of the genre, Samuel is not only the story of one figure who achieved power or fame. It depicts the people whose lives shaped David's as complex actors in their own right.

In this Sunday's reading, we hear the Song of the Bow, David's soaring elegy for Saul and Jonathan. It is a pivotal moment in David's life, in which several threads of his story come together.

We stand at the midpoint of the two-part book of Samuel. We have already met a bevy of fascinating characters in addition to David, including Hannah and her son Samuel, the priest-prophet-judge, and Saul and two of his children, Jonathan and Michal.

Compared to other books of the Bible, Samuel provides a stunning amount of character development. Yet there remain gaps between events and utterances, parts of the story where we can only imagine and wonder. Wolpe points out that while many people in Samuel are described as loving David—both named individuals and the people of Israel and Judah collectively—the text is less clear about how much he reciprocates..

Michal, Saul's daughter, loves David. He marries her and then is forced to flee—with how much regret, we do not know. Jonathan loves David "as his own soul" and risks his life to help David when he is a fugitive. Jonathan is dear to David, but does David love him? Most translations of 2 Samuel 1:26—other than the NRSV, which has "greatly beloved"—stay closer to the Hebrew root for "to be pleasant, delightful, lovely." A word from the same root is translated *lovely* in verse 23.

Saul loves David (1 Sam. 16:21) even before he becomes his son-in-law, but is David simply acting the part, playing the lyre to soothe Saul and appealing to Saul's affection to justify himself before the soldiers when a murderous Saul pursues him?

Many have tried to map Saul's "evil spirit" (1 Sam. 17:14-15, 23) onto the various diagnoses we have today for illnesses that cause a person to feel a stranger to themselves and make household members tremble. The most searing part of Geraldine Brooks's *The Secret Chord*, a novel laid upon a foundation of careful research into scripture and the ancient world, is Michal's description of what she calls "our father's wretched malady." She laments the cruel way Saul's affliction has eaten away at her memories: "I have to struggle to think of my father as he was, when I was small. I can barely find a day, an hour, when I see him clearly: that big, powerful man, sweet and patient, intelligent and kind."

Saul is "one of the Bible's most tragic figures," write Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes in *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel*. The priest-prophet Samuel witnesses how "the people dragged Saul to a kingship that he had unequivocally never sought for himself." Yet Samuel "couldn't resist treating Saul as an illegitimate usurper of his own role and power" and undermines him on several occasions, until Saul is spurned by God in favor of David as king.

Halbertal and Holmes note that the public display of mourning in David's elegy for Saul and Jonathan is necessary in order for him to distance himself from their deaths. It's hard to avoid the fact that, alive, they stood between David and the throne. David could have been at the Battle of Mount Gilboa, fighting on the other side—he did, after all, hire himself out to the Philistines when he was on the run from Saul (1 Sam. 27). It was luck only—in the form of distrust by others in the Philistine army—that kept him off the battlefield. Better to praise Saul's and Jonathan's bravery in battle than to let rumors of David's year as a mercenary be the top story spreading among the people.

In the end, we can't know whether David does what he does out of expediency, faithfulness, or both. "This irrepressible ambiguity about the underlying motivations of rulers," Halbertal and Holmes argue, "helps explain why their moral excuses are politically effective."

David is a man after God's own heart, and only God sees his heart fully. David may be genuine in encouraging lavish public mourning for the slain king, his memories

still fresh of the last times he saw his father-in-law in life, occasions when he chose not to kill the king himself.

Brooks imagines the moment when Saul calls out, "Is that your voice, my son David?" David struggles to respond: "There was a catch in his voice. That one word, 'son,' had undone him." Like Michal, David remembers Saul as he was before he was consumed by his inner turmoil. He weeps genuinely for both Jonathan and Saul, for the years he might have had with his dearest one by his side, and for the reconciliation he may have yearned for with one who was like a father to him.

How the mighty have fallen. What loss they leave in their wake.