

2 Samuel 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Samuel chapter 1 And also many of the people have fallen and are dead, and Saul and his son Jonathan are also dead.

Then David said to the young man who told him, How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead? And the young man who told him said, By chance I happen to be on Mount Gilboa, and there was Saul leaning on his spear, and behold the chariots and the horsemen were close upon him.

And when he looked behind him he saw me, and called to me, and I answered, Here I am. And he said to me, Who are you? I answered him, I am an Amalekite. And he said to me, Stand beside me and kill me, for anguish has seized me, and yet my life still lingers.

So I stood beside him and killed him, because I was sure that he could not live after he had fallen. And I took the crown that was on his head, and the armlet that was on his arm, and I have brought them here to my lord.

Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

[1 : 34] And David said to the young man who told him, Where do you come from? And he answered, I am the son of a sojourner and Amalekite. David said to him, How is it that you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?

Then David called one of the young men and said, Go execute him. And he struck him down so that he died. And David said to him, Your blood be on your head, for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, I have killed the Lord's anointed.

And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and Jonathan his son, and he said it should be taught to the people of Judah. Behold, it is written in the book of Jasher.

He said, Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places. How the mighty have fallen! Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.

You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor fields of offerings. For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul not anointed with oil.

[2 : 42] From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty. Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely, in life and in death they were not divided.

They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. You daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

How the mighty have fallen, in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain on your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan. Very pleasant you have been to me.

Your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished. 2 Samuel chapter 1 begins after David returns to Ziklag after recovering the captives from the Amalekites.

He has won a stunning victory, strengthened his reputation among his men, and won greater favour in Judah through his generous gifts. On the third day, however, news of Saul and Israel's catastrophic defeat arrives.

[3 : 47] As I've previously noted, three-day periods occur on a few key occasions at the end of 1 Samuel, representing critical transitions. The man bringing the news declares that he played a part in Saul's death.

This conflicts with the description of Saul's death back in 1 Samuel chapter 31. While there are elaborate ways of harmonising the accounts, the most natural reading is probably to say that the man lied, hoping to get some reward from David for his part in killing Saul, and bringing the crown and the armlet.

While the Lord has clearly avenged David, David has scrupulously resisted taking vengeance into his own hands. Should David reward this man, who clearly expects to be rewarded for playing a part in Saul's death, and for bringing him the crown and armlet, symbols of royalty, David's relationship to the death of Saul would become far less innocent, and the foundations and legitimacy of his own kingdom would become less clear.

By judging the man, David keeps his hands clean. The man turns out to be an Amalekite. The Amalekites, as we've seen elsewhere, are often those who pick off the weakest, and here we see an Amalekite acting as a scavenger, opportunistically picking clean the bones of the fallen.

Saul had lost the kingdom on account of his taking spoil from the Amalekites, rather than destroying them, and there is some poetic justice in an Amalekite claiming to kill him and taking spoil from his body.

[5 : 12] David has just defeated the Amalekites who raided Ziklag, and now he strikes down another Amalekite, acting where Saul failed to. However, at points like this, troubling concerns can surface.

Saul and his house are cut off, while David's hands are kept clean, with convenient alibis, plausible deniability, and personal distance. Nevertheless, things really do work out so very conveniently for David.

David's response affirms the inviolability of the Lord's anointed, even while it is apparently to his benefit that Saul was struck down. Also as the one to inherit the throne, the principle of the inviolability of the Lord's anointed, and resolute opposition to rebellion and regicide, increasingly plays to David's personal advantage.

David's magnanimity to the house of Saul, and his mourning over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, are likely genuine and unfeigned. However, as Marcia Halbertal and Stephen Holmes perceptively highlight, the political expediency of such outcomes for David, coupled with the distance that David is able to maintain from them, and the posture of sorrow that he takes up relative to them, expose troubling realities about the character of politics more generally.

For those whose lives are a public spectacle, like political leaders, it is almost impossible for moral behaviour not to have a tactical dimension. For instance, David not avenging himself on Nabal is moral, but it is also tactical, as avenging himself would make David into a very different sort of leader, a warlord with a vicious protection racket, whose legitimacy as a just king would always be questionable.

[6 : 49] David also gets to have his cake and eat it too, in the situation with Nabal, and in this situation with Saul, as the Lord avenges him against his enemy on both occasions. The problem here is that when personal morality gets entangled with questions of reputation, political legitimacy and the like, with moral actions increasingly being expedient for cynical tactical reasons, action becomes a much, much murkier area, open to all sorts of mixed motives.

While I really do not believe that we should regard David as acting as a mere cynical political operative, making a public spectacle of his non-involvement in, and his sorrowful response to the death of his adversary for political expediency, the essential inclarity of David's motives should unsettle us at such moments, not least as they reveal the character that our good deeds take more generally when they are performed before men.

This is one reason why the realm of politics is viewed with an appropriate degree of moral suspicion, and why deep moral character is required to act faithfully within it. Even political operatives who, like David, are righteous men in their behaviour, are acting in a realm that can exert a corrosive effect upon true morality, something that I believe that we will see at points in David's life.

It is very dangerous when morality becomes instrumentalised by concerns of power and status, as it so easily can in the realm of politics. David's reaction to the news of the death of Saul may surprise some readers of 1 Samuel.

In that book, Saul had mercilessly pursued David and sought his life. Rather than rejoicing at Saul's comeuppance, or expressing relief at the removal of his adversary, David pours out his heart in lament over the loss of Israel's king.

[8 : 34] Within David's expression of distress over the death of Saul and Jonathan, some profound yet unappreciated truths about the character of political leadership is exposed. David's song of lament is entitled The Song of the Bow.

This suggests a particular emphasis upon the death of Jonathan, who is associated with the bow as a weapon both within the song and within the narrative of Samuel more broadly. Indeed, as we look at the song more closely, this accent upon lamenting the death of Jonathan may be borne out in its structure and content.

The parallel between verse 19 and verse 25 might suggest that Jonathan is the glory, beauty or gazelle of Israel that David speaks of as slain upon the high places.

Jonathan is the fleet-footed warrior, like Asahel in the chapter that follows. The swift gazelle leaping and skipping in the mountains appears as a romantic image for the beloved in the Song of Solomon, chapter 2, verses 8 to 9.

The voice of my beloved, behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. The image of the gazelle reappears in chapter 2, verse 17, and also in the concluding lines of the song, in chapter 8, verse 14.

[9 : 46] Jonathan is Israel's gazelle. He's the beloved of the people and their glory. His death robs Israel of its bridegroom and favourite son. David is concerned that the deaths of Saul and Jonathan will be caused for rejoicing among the Philistines.

He calls upon the land itself to mourn with him over the fallen Saul and Jonathan. You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor fields of offerings.

Saul and Jonathan were like strong lions and swift eagles. They were jewels crowning Israel's mountains. The weapons of Saul and Jonathan, the bow, the sword and the shield, come to stand for Saul and Jonathan themselves.

Jonathan is the bow, and Saul is the sword and the fallen anointed shield, in verses 21 and 22. David's song concludes with the declaration that the weapons of war perished.

Peter Lighthouse observes, The Lord's anointed king is the shield for his people. Jonathan and Saul not only had weapons, but were weapons. But now they lie unused and useless on the heights of Gilboa.

- [10 : 49] Sacrificial themes also play beneath the surface of the song. Jonathan and Saul offer up blood and fat, in verse 22, and they are slain on the high places. Gilboa is called upon not to provide fields of offerings, in verse 21.

Throughout the song, David refers to Saul and Jonathan in a way that presents them as romantic figures. Their physicality and virility are prominent throughout. They are described as possessing the strength and speed of majestic animals, identified with the action of their weapons, and described as beloved and pleasant.

While David wishes that the daughters of Philistia would not rejoice at Saul and Jonathan's demise, he calls upon the daughters of Israel to weep over Saul. Saul is like a father or a bridegroom to the daughters of Israel, who dresses them in the finest apparel.

David's personal grief at the death of his friend Jonathan overflows into a heart-wrenching declaration of the love between them. Jonathan, although the crown prince of Israel, has symbolically handed over his status to David, he had been loyal to David to the point of risking his life, and he had saved David from death.

Jonathan's love for David was remarkable. He had demonstrated a devotion to David far beyond any woman. David's song reveals some of the deeper dynamics of political leadership.

- [12 : 09] The leadership described in his song is romantic and erotic. The relationship between the king and his son and their people is shot through with love and desire. Israel's beloved gazelle, Jonathan, has perished on the high places, and her daughters mourn the loss of the king who dressed them for marriage.

A land filled with the burgeoning life of awakened love now falls into the barrenness of mourning. Romantic and erotic themes are present throughout the narrative of Samuel and the early kingdom.

Leaders are noted for their arresting physical appearance and by the desire and love that they provoke. Saul is head and shoulders above all of the people. He's more handsome than any other in Israel.

David is ruddy, bright-eyed, and good-looking. Solomon's physical appearance is a prominent theme within his song. The king is the lover, the bridegroom, the husband of his people, a theme that is powerfully illustrated by the song of Solomon.

Around these figures cluster all of the ingredients of great romance, tales of derring-do, the composition and playing of music, a fecundity of poetic imagery, and the affection and attention of young women.

- [13 : 18] David and Solomon are the archetypal kings, not so much on account of military might or prowess, but because they are the great lovers of Israel. David's story is one of power gained through the winning of people's love.

Saul loved him. Jonathan loved him. The women of Israel loved him. Michael, Saul's daughter, loved him. All of Israel and Judah loved him. And that's just up to the end of chapter 18.

David, whose name means beloved, is loved by God and expresses a deep love in return. As Augustine once observed, it is the lover who sings. And David is the sweet singer of Israel.

He's the one in whom Israel's devotion to the Lord bursts forth into the joy of song. The friendship between David and Jonathan reflects David's gaining of power through love.

The story of their love begins with the young David being taken from his father's house and brought into the house of Saul, much as a bride would be. And as Jonathan initiates a covenant with him, David's attractive appearance, he's ruddy and bright-eyed, is not the arresting masculinity of Saul's great stature and physique, but a softer, more feminine one.

- [14 : 25] However, after stripping himself of the garments that displayed his royal masculine status and giving them to David, Jonathan, who formerly distinguished himself as a man on the battlefield, stays at home, is paralleled with Michael, is cast as a mama's boy, and becomes more and more dependent upon David in emotional and material ways.

Meanwhile, the text goes out of its way to masculinize David, who goes out and fights in the most virile fashion, obtaining 200 foreskins from the Philistines. Yaron Peleg observes that the literary portrayal of David and Jonathan's relationship engendered imagery serves the purpose of highlighting the political reversal whereby David is being established as the husband and father for the nation in Jonathan's place.

Within David's Song of Lament, we witness the romance and the eros of political leadership. This romantic political lament is not without modern parallel. Jackie Kennedy's appropriation of the line from the musical, *Don't Let It Be Forgotten That Once There Was A Spot For One Brief Shining Moment That Was Known As Camelot* describes one such tragic modern political romance in a manner redolent of David's lament.

Though it often evades our analysis, contemporary politics is suffused with such eros and romance. The countless dollars expended on political advertising and the careful cultivation of image are designed not principally to inform the public, but to evoke their love and desire.

We vote for our leaders not merely for their policies and competence, but for their charm, their charisma, their personal magnetism, their likability, their virility or attractiveness, and other such factors.

- [16 : 06] We attend to their physicality, to their personal presence, and to their image. Incumbencies can play out like love affairs, with a honeymoon period, followed by a cooling of affections.

The book of Samuel's unembarrassed treatment of the dimensions of romance and eros in its account of political rule may provoke our enlightened judgement, leery as we can be of the superficiality of image-based politics.

We may appeal to the Lord's example of looking beyond the outward appearance, searching for virtues such as economic prudence, political intelligence, and the like. Yet the rest of the text of the book of Samuel suggests that, in choosing a leader, God looked primarily for a fitting lover for his people, and that even though the appearance of such a person wasn't sufficient to fit them for rule, it wasn't unimportant either.

Perhaps in our pretensions to a rationality that exceeds the eros of politics, we leave ourselves unprepared to reckon with its necessary presence, and hence more vulnerable to its vicissitudes.

Reflection upon the erotic politics of Samuel may prove helpful, alerting us to its continuing power and importance in our own day. A question to consider.

- [17 : 21] The ambivalent character of morality in the realm of political spectacle, where moral actions can so easily be cynically instrumentalised for the sake of power, self-advancement, social standing, as they almost unavoidably play out in ways that shape and often build up people's reputations, is by no means exclusive to politics.

Nor, for that matter, is it something that people can easily opt out of. If people are within the realm of the spectacle, the character and the motivations of their actions, even if they are righteous, will be cast into a sort of shadow.

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