

Jonathan's Love for David: Ambiguity as Liberation
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According to biblical narratives, King David was the second king of Israel and King Saul preceded him. Saul had a son named Jonathan.

This is how 1 Chronicles portrays these characters.

Saul begot Jonathan, Malchishua, Abinadab, and Eshbaal; and the son of Jonathan was Merib-baal [. . .] The Philistines pursued Saul and his sons, and the Philistines struck down Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchi-shua, sons of Saul. [. . .] Thus Saul and his three sons and his entire house died together. [. . .] Saul died for the trespass that he had committed against the LORD in not having fulfilled the command of the LORD; moreover, he had consulted a ghost to seek advice, and did not seek the advice of the LORD; so He had him slain and the kingdom transferred to David son of Jesse. (9:39, 10:2, 10:5, 10:13)

In other words, Chronicles essentially does not connect Saul and Jonathan to David. God simply replaces Saul with David as king. Later in the narrative, Chronicles references David's flight from Saul, but does not show any interaction between the two characters. Jonathan is a member of a set of brothers, none of whom have a connection to David. Chronicles positions Jonathan in a way that both downplays his status as an individual character and completely separates him from David.

1 Chronicles begins narrating the transition from Saulide to Davidic kingship at the very end of Saul's life. 1 Samuel, on the other hand, includes narratives of the institution of monarchy under Saul, the introduction of David to Saul's court, David's exile from Saul's court, and a lament David sings over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. Throughout David's presence at Saul's court, he and Saul's son Jonathan have a relationship consistently defined by the Hebrew word *ahav*, "love." Indeed, Jonathan's love for David motivates their very first interaction (1 Samuel 18:1) and at the death of Jonathan, the narrative has David close the story with the word love.

The following verse from the lament has prominence in the ongoing debate over the Bible's positions on same-sex love and desire:

My brother Jonathan,
You were most dear to me.
Your love was wonderful to me
More than the love of women. (2 Samuel 1:26)

The enclosure of the narration of David and Jonathan's relationship with the term "love" means that they are, as far as the shape of the text is concerned, literally *in love*.¹

I open with this contrast between the portrayal of Saul, Jonathan, and David in 1 Chronicles and in 1 and 2 Samuel to clear away a strategy scholars use to dismiss the possibility that 1 and 2 Samuel depict the love of David and Jonathan as a sexual love, namely the idea that because Leviticus 18 and 20 condemn homoerotic behaviors, it would have been impossible for biblical writers to portray David and Jonathan as lovers, rather than as friends. Scholars who have made this argument include Steven McKenzie, Robert Gagnon, and Markus Zehnder. These three scholars have somewhat different aims: McKenzie is striving to provide a picture of the historical David, Gagnon is making a large argument about biblical sexual ethics, and Zehnder is engaging in a specific scholarly conversation on David and Jonathan. McKenzie sees 1 and 2 Samuel's depiction of Jonathan's love for David as part of an apologetic argument for David's rule. He construes the fact that Leviticus condemns homosexual acts to mean that "David's apologist would hardly have described him as a homosexual or included a piece that described him that way."² He goes on to make a very broad cultural comparison between "Western" and "Middle Eastern" sexual norms and associates biblical societies with the latter, so Leviticus reflects cultural norms. Gagnon is aware that biblical scholars see the

Bible in terms of competing trajectories, rather than as a unified text. Nevertheless, he neglects the differences between Deuteronomic and Priestly sources to underscore his thesis that “there is clear, strong, and credible evidence that the Bible unequivocally defines same-sex intercourse as sin”³ He pursues his refutation of the notion that David and Jonathan might have had sex as an expression of their love in this context of understanding the Bible as a coherent book. Zehnder more credibly brings Leviticus into his discussion of David and Jonathan.⁴ His refutation of an early scholarly examination of David and Jonathan as an example of same-sex sexual love proceeds on three levels: semantic, narrative, and canonical. Because he differentiates the narrative from the canonical layer, his use of Leviticus to defend a non-homoerotic understanding of David and Jonathan does not require his argument to stand or fall on the presumption that Levitical assumptions informed the producers of 1 and 2 Samuel. Nevertheless, his argument ultimately aligns the semantic, narrative, and canonical perspectives into a unified statement that there is no firm ground on which to base a homoerotic understanding of the love of David and Jonathan. The effect in all three cases is to remove the most obvious candidate for a biblical affirmation of same-sex love and desire from discussion.

One answer to the attempt to exclude a homoerotic interpretation of Jonathan’s love for David through recourse to Leviticus is to point out that the prohibitions in Leviticus are much more circumscribed than traditional readings have allowed. For example, Saul Olyan has argued that the prohibitions in Leviticus, rather than being a sweeping prohibition of all same-sex sexual activity, specifically prohibit anal sex, while David Tabb has pointed to verb forms and narrative parallels to read Leviticus as

prohibiting male-male incest, not all male-male sexuality.⁵ On this reading, to exclude an erotic component from the characterization requires an interpretive leap from a prohibition of specific same-sex acts to a prohibition of an anachronistic category, “homosexuality.” On this reading, an erotic dimension to David and Jonathan’s friendship could have stayed within the bounds of Levitical prohibitions, either, *pace* Olyan, by refraining from anal sex, or *pace* Tabb, by not being an incestuous one. One could also turn to critical legal studies to ask questions about the extent to which the legal construction of homophobia in Leviticus was productive, rather than reflective, of ancient Israelite mores. The primary importance of attending to the arguments that limit the meaning of Leviticus, however, is that it calls our attention to the fact that what counts as sex varies across history and across cultures. It is entirely possible that at various points in the process of oral transmission of the stories, descriptions of physical intimacy interacted with changing or conflicting notions of where to draw the line between sexual and non-sexual physical contact.

A problem with the approach of either delimiting or criticizing the legal perspective is that it leaves intact an assumption of a general ancient Israelite attitude toward same-sex desire. However, since the nineteenth century, biblical scholars have recognized that the Hebrew Bible consists of ideologically competing perspectives, best revealed in source criticism.⁶ Different sources have different approaches to gender and sexuality, as shown by Deborah Ellens and Sarah Schechtman in their enquiries about women and sexuality in ancient Israel.⁷ Ellens investigates the conceptual differences between Leviticus and Deuteronomy with regard to the treatment of women in its texts relating to sex. She finds that Leviticus has an ontological focus while Deuteronomy

focuses on property. While concerns of purity and property are common to both strands, the way the different texts conceptualize these issues points to very different worldmaking enterprises within the legal thought of ancient Israel.⁸ Schechtman sees Priestly sources in the Pentateuch as considerably more misogynistic than Yahwistic ones. Since discussion of “homosexuality” always proceeds within a larger context of a sex-gender system, Ellens and Schechtman provide valuable clues that can help ferret out subtleties of meaning when considering what “Jonathan loved David” might have meant at its time. The recognition of multiple perspectives in the production of the Bible also opens room for looking for minority reports or subversive voices. Along this line, theologian Gary David Comstock postulates the possibility that the David and Jonathan story may have been reworked by a closeted gay scribe who wished to hide evidence of same-sex love in plain sight.⁹ While he frames his proposal in anachronistic terms, his hypothesis comes from insights derived from the LGBTQ experience of having to read between the lines to discover one’s history and thus should not be dismissed out of hand. In light of these ideologically different takes on gender and sexuality within the biblical world, it strains credulity to observe a claim that the biblical canon, which shows remarkable comfort with a multiplicity of views on matters as weighty as the nature of divine being or the creation of the world would carve out homoeroticism as the one single matter on which it mandates uniformity of opinion.

The depictions of David and Jonathan in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles sit within two such competing ideologies. In their final form 1 and 2 Samuel contain elements of Deuteronomic ideology whereas 1 and 2 Chronicles have a closer relationship to the Priestly tradition. Deuteronomic and Priestly perspectives have clearly

different conceptions of religious authority, holiness, power, and sexuality.¹⁰ One does not need to posit an absolute divide between these perspectives in the production of biblical texts—the parallel narratives of the deaths of priests’ sons in Leviticus 10:1-3 and 1 Samuel 2:12-17 are an example of where the two books can be profitably read together—to take the fundamental opposition between Deuteronomic and Priestly perspectives seriously when reading the broad trajectories of Leviticus-Ezekiel-Chronicles or Deuteronomy-Jeremiah-Deuteronomic History. While Deuteronomy condemns a particular role that might have involved male cultic prostitutes, it has no blanket condemnation of same-sex erotic behaviors.¹¹ The depiction of David in 1 Chronicles is consistent with a general approach of removing moral ambiguity from the narratives in the Deuteronomic History. With the exception of David’s commissioning of a census, which both 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles judge negatively, Chronicles excises unsavory elements of David’s narrative: his duplicities, his cooperation with enemy forces, his nude dancing, his adultery with Bathsheba, and his murder of Uriah. In this light, it makes sense to allow the possibility that Chronicles does not depict intimacy between David and Jonathan because it recognized an erotic element it would have seen as unbecoming God’s chosen king. Along these lines, the German biblical scholar Hans-Joachim Stoebe postulates that such a dynamic of suppressing recognized homoeroticism in the David and Jonathan stories underlies the specification of Targum Jonathan’s translation of “the love of women” as “the love of two women.” In Stoebe’s reading, the translation is evidence that later generations experienced embarrassment over the homoerotic potential of the text.¹² If we are trying to establish a historical basis for the meaning of the love of David and Jonathan, a good first move would be to establish

clarity about these ideological differences and not confuse the matter by substituting canonical sources of meaning for historical sources of meaning. This is not to say that both the Priestly and Deuteronomic perspectives could not have drawn on a common cultural “common sense” of ancient Israelite sexual morality, which may very well have included a general disdain for homoerotic behaviors.¹³ Rather, it is simply to say that using Priestly sources to delimit the meaning of a text in a Deuteronomic framework already glosses over important and documented ideological tensions in the biblical record.

Once we have made clear that bringing Leviticus 18 and 20 into discussion of 1 and 2 Samuel can muddy the waters just as easily as it can provide an interpretive limit, we are in a better position to ask the question about David and Jonathan that figures within the seemingly endless contemporary debate about Bible and homosexuality: Were David and Jonathan friends or lovers? The simple answer to this question is that the text lets us have it either way. There is much in 1 and 2 Samuel that, following the “plain sense” of the text, makes more sense if an erotic bond between David and Jonathan underlies their friendship. On the other hand, centuries of interpreters have either not seen or not spoken openly of David and Jonathan as a basis for same-sex desire. Those who, in the present day, argue against a homoerotic understanding of the friendship do not have to strain their interpretive practices against the particularities of the text. The fact that both defenders of and objectors to the homoerotic understanding of David and Jonathan can reasonably defend their positions means that “the text itself” will not save current discussions from the stalemate between competing views.

Because the text is so ambiguous, it may be tempting to resolve the question by pushing through the text to answering the question, “did David and Jonathan really sleep with one another?” From the perspective of arguments for LGBTQ inclusion, this move is dangerous because it is possible that the answer is “no, they did not.” In this regard, it is important to recognize that there is a considerable gap between the events described in 1 and 2 Samuel, which took place in the tenth century BCE, and written description of those events. By and large the archeological record has disproved the existence of a large, centralized monarchy centered at Jerusalem during the time of David and Solomon.¹⁴ To arrive at a very specific historical fact about David and Jonathan, we must wade into a context where the texts depicts specific events in an overall context that is inconsistent with the archaeological record. Vehement disagreement exists among scholars over the question of how many events in 1 and 2 Samuel date to the early tenth century. On the one hand, recent scholarship tends to push authorship later, and in its extreme version, King David disappears entirely from the historical record and moves into legendary status, as argued by Thomas Thompson and Francesca Stavrakopoulou.¹⁵ On the other hand, scholars focusing on the criterion of embarrassment, such as Steven McKenzie, Baruch Halpern, and Joel Baden, attribute much of 1 and 2 Samuel to apologetic work covering the historical David’s misdeeds, giving us a text that brings us much closer to the historical reality.¹⁶ In a position that lies somewhere in between these two perspectives, John Van Seters attributes the positive view of David to the Deuteronomic layer of the story and the negative view of David to a Persian editorial layer that is critical of him. The question of private interpersonal behavior between two specific persons is a particularly thorny one to ask of events of 3000 years ago not attested to by

contemporary documents. For the purposes of this paper, the point is less to cut through the arguments to find the historical origin of the stories than to highlight that reconstructing the historical record already involves an ambiguity between the facts of history and the assumptions and commitments of historians who construct those facts into coherent narratives. Regardless of whether or not we can trace an oral tradition back to an actual love affair between David and Jonathan, 1 and 2 Samuel give us a literary creation that provides a plausible basis for a imagination of a sexually expressed love between the two men that 1 Chronicles does not.

If opening this essay with the contrast between Chronicles and 1 and 2 Samuel allowed us to frame the David and Jonathan narratives outside the terms set by Priestly sources, it also allows us to see that 1 and 2 Samuel preserve many ambiguities that Chronicles tries to clean up. For example, 1 Chronicles omits the anointing of Saul's son Ishbosheth as king after Saul's death and the subsequent war between the house of Saul and the house of David. This omission removes ambiguity around the legitimacy of David as Saul's successor. If Chronicles aims to remove ambiguity, the canonical inclusion of both sets of texts increases ambiguity, because one has to negotiate the juxtaposition of "embrace ambiguity" and "clean up ambiguity" before one even confronts the ambiguities in 1 and 2 Samuel. While much Christian theology has followed Chronicles in attempting to remove ambiguity from biblical narratives, a retrieval of biblical embrace of ambiguity is a crucial factor in breaking the stalemate in which discussions of "Bible and homosexuality" are mired. It is as much in 1 and 2 Samuel's embrace of ambiguity as it is in the forthright depiction of love between two men that it offers modern readers a potentially liberating encounter with biblical

spirituality. This liberating encounter is itself ambiguous because to call on ambiguity as the interpretive center of the text both has the advantage of deepening responsibility and self-reflection in relation to one's reading strategies but also can mire political disputes within an unending series of unresolved back-and-forths.

1 and 2 Samuel depict David and Jonathan's friendship within a narrative section sometimes identified as a discernable unit called the History of David's Rise. While scholars debate the parameters of and sources for the narrative section, the story follows the reluctant establishment of the monarchy under Saul, Saul's fall from God's favor, and the ordination of David as king. The running subplot of the friendship of David and Jonathan does much to legitimate David's claim to rule. The story of their friendship begins after David kills Goliath, at which point David and Jonathan form a covenant. The narrator informs us that the life forces of the two men are bound to one another and that Jonathan loves David as his own self. Following this incident, the women of Israel sing the praises of Saul and David, but attribute more military prowess to David, which begins Saul's distrust of David. After Saul attempts to kill David, he gives David his daughter Michal in marriage. Saul again speaks of killing David, about which Jonathan warns David. Both Michal and Jonathan help David flee from Saul's court and David and Jonathan have an extended farewell in a field, where they renew their covenant. David and Jonathan are not reunited before Saul's and Jonathan's death, at which point David laments for them and makes the comparison between women's love and Jonathan's love.

Three different scholarly arguments have situated Jonathan's love for David within approaches that stress various forms of ambiguity, those of David Harding, David Jobling, and Susan Ackerman. Harding pursues a close textual reading of the David and

Jonathan narratives with Umberto Eco's concept of an "open text" as a guiding theme. Harding explores in detail the textual ambiguities that make for an open text, and then asks why, given these ambiguities, do we not see a homoerotic interpretation until the twentieth century? Harding could have looked to renaissance art to find examples of David as an object of homoerotic desire, however, the story to which renaissance artists turned was not that of David and Jonathan but of David and Goliath. Renaissance artists such as Donatello and Caravaggio would portray the artist as Goliath, slain by the beauty of the young male model.¹⁷ So, the question is less "why was a homoerotic reading impossible before the twentieth century" than "why was violence a compelling model for it in the sixteenth century?"

David Jobling uses a (post-)structuralist approach to 1 Samuel that stresses the work of the reader in creating the structures that make meaning of a text.¹⁸ For example, the passage in 1 Samuel 4 in which the Philistines capture the Ark is motivated differently if read in conjunction with Judges than if one starts at the beginning of the book of Samuel. In both cases, someone's culpability must explain the loss of the Ark. If read in conjunction with Judges, the people's culpability is apparent, whereas the blame lies squarely on the individuals Hophni and Phineas if read separated from Judges.¹⁹ In contrast to structures such as the canonical books or the Deuteronomic History, Jobling constructs two large narrative structures from the available text, "The Extended Book of Judges," which runs from Judges 2:11 to 1 Samuel 12 and "The Book of the Everlasting Covenant," which runs from 1 Samuel 13 to 2 Samuel 7. He reads these "books" through the lenses of class, race, and gender. His attention to various lenses and structures leads him to two separate analyses of Jonathan that are in tension with each other. In the first

analysis, Jobling focuses on “class” as an analytic category and finds that Jonathan’s character lacks normal motivation and is rather overdetermined by the plot of transfer from Saulide to Davidic kingship. In a second analysis, Jobling discusses Jonathan in relation to gender, probing the virtues of a gay reading of Jonathan and noting that Jonathan “in terms of the way the text exploits women’s power, is a better woman than David’s women.”²⁰ Jobling is explicit that the second reading is an alternative to the first reading, and though he does not use the language of ambiguity, it is in the gap between these two readings that the agency of the reader becomes apparent.

Finally, in a comparative approach, Susan Ackerman hones in on the anthropological concept of liminality to stress the ambiguity of *eros* in the Gilgamesh as well as the David and Jonathan narratives. In her view, the fact that it is difficult to discern whether or not David and Jonathan’s love was sexual makes perfect sense given that their entire relationship occurs within the liminal period in which the transfer from Saul’s kingship to David’s kingship gradually occurs. As the narrative lingers on a moment of ambiguous royal legitimacy, it lingers on an ambiguous portrayal of sexualized friendship to underscore the larger theme of transfer of power.

Several aspects of the depiction of David and Jonathan in 1 and 2 Samuel give rise to the erotically ambiguous portrayal of their relationship. First and foremost, it is clear that it never explicitly says that David and Jonathan had sex. Hebrew terms designating sexual intercourse, such as *shachav* (lie/lie with), *yada* (know), *lakach* (take), and *bo* (go/go into) are absent from the stories. At one point, Saul *takes* David, though here again, because “take” can have sexual or non-sexual connotations, the meaning here is ambiguous. The language is suggestive enough that some have postulated that David

was sexually active with both Saul and Jonathan.²¹ If 1 Samuel is engaging in a double entendre about Saul's taking of David, the absence of similar terms describing activity between David and Jonathan may have the contradictory effect of granting a homoerotic dimension to the text while removing a source of securing a homoerotic interpretation of David and Jonathan. The absence of these terms, in any case, means that homoerotic interpretations of must do some reading between the lines. Because readers will never agree as to how much reading between the lines, or what sort of reading between the lines, is either warranted or appropriate, the debate over the love of David and Jonathan is unresolvable. However, the notion that all reading between the lines is illegitimate is as indefensible as the notion that any meaning found "between the lines" is equal to any other such meaning. As long as Bibles are read in a context that people can imagine homoerotic experiences, the David and Jonathan stories will provide space for such imaginations. And as long as people are wary of same-sex sexual activity, counter-readings will contest those imaginations. The task is to keep imagining in the face of the reality that there is no end point within human experience to fighting over the meaning of the text.

A good example of finding space for imagining the sexual dimensions of David and Jonathan's love is Susan Ackerman's interpretation of the use of arrows in the stories, which draws on the explicit phallic imagery of arrows in the ancient Near East.

Jonathan's offering of his bow in 1 Sam 18:4, his shooting of arrows in 1 Sam 20:36, and David's subsequent lauding of Jonathan's prowess as an archer in 2 Sam 1:22 might therefore all be read in terms of homoerotic innuendo: a sexual proposition, followed by coitus, and the a fulfilled lovers words of gratitude.²²

Other aspects of the text that give rise to interpretations that see David and Jonathan as sexually active include the following.

1. The consistent use of “love” to describe the relation between David and Jonathan
2. The nature of the covenants David and Jonathan make with one another
3. Saul’s invective against Jonathan regarding his relationship with David
4. The activity David and Jonathan engage in during their penultimate farewell
5. David’s exchange with the priest at Nob following the events of his penultimate farewell

As in English, the Hebrew word “love” has several meanings. Because the translators who produced the Septuagint had access to a wider range of Greek terms, *agape*, *eros*, *philia*, one might hope for help in sorting out subtleties of meaning by double checking against the Greek text. However, in the David narratives, the Septuagint restricts itself to *agape*, the term it uses to describe both Michal’s love for David and Jonathan’s love for David. Faced with an opportunity to make a clear distinction between a woman’s love for a man and a man’s love for a man, the translators refused and kept the parallel between Michal and Jonathan intact. In an earlier era in which Anders Nygren’s *Agape and Eros* was still an immensely influential theological text, the Septuagint’s choice to use *agape*, rather than *eros*, would have been seen as particularly significant.²³ However, contemporary translators sometimes see Michal’s love for David within the romantic conventions of “falling in love with” as a prelude to marriage, whereas Jonathan’s loving David is seen in Platonic terms. This distinction, seen in the

commentary of Kyle McCarter, enforces a heterosexist perception of the text where it is not necessarily warranted.

Another distinction biblical scholars often make to secure the straightness of David and Jonathan's friendship is to highlight the distinction between political and sexual meanings of the word love and to imply that this distinction is impermeable. An article by J. A. Thompson from 1974 established the political meaning of love in the narratives. He does not draw a contrast between political and sexual love, but uses 1 Kings 5:1, in which King Hiram of Tyre is described as having always loved David, as an interpretive key to the David and Jonathan stories.²⁴ The love of King Hiram for King David is understood as an aspect of diplomatic language. For Thompson, in the case of both of Hiram's and Jonathan's love for David, the use of love in ancient Near Eastern political contexts forms the understanding of love. Here, the fact that the general movement of the narrative is a "series of steps on the way to the throne."²⁵ In this context, the repeated refrain of love underscores the political drama of regime change. This political understanding of love brings much coherence to the narrative and should certainly be integrated into interpretations of David and Jonathan. However, both Zehnder and Gagnon seize on this level of meaning to draw a sharp distinction between political and sexual understandings of the term.²⁶

If the strategy of securing a heterosexist interpretation of David and Jonathan by using Leviticus 18 and 20 as an interpretive tool depends on a sloppy blurring of opposing ideologies in the ancient world, another strategy to keep David and Jonathan straight depends on a nervous separation of political and sexual meanings of love. Given the extent to which political alliances were secured through marriage in medieval and

early modern Europe, the idea that sexual and political issues can be neatly separated is indefensible. This strategy is particularly confounding given that in contemporary America, presidential politics profoundly depend on sexual conduct. President Bill Clinton was impeached over sexual conduct and the presidential candidacies of Gary Hart in 1988 and John Edwards in 2008 both imploded over incidents of sexual misconduct. The move to secure a heterosexual David by neatly separating love and politics not only depends on a willful ignorance of contemporary events, but also fails to account for the fact that David's narrative consistently intertwines sex and politics. Nowhere is this more brutally apparent than when David's son Absalom tries to seize power from David, he takes David's concubines to a roof and has sex with them in public view. David himself expands his power throughout his rise through marriage. His marriage to Abigail gives him leadership over a larger number of people while he is establishing himself. His marriage to Saul's daughter Michal is explicit, while it is possible that the text depicts David's marriage to Saul's wife, Ahinoam. The heartbreaking scene of David's forcible separation of Michal from her second husband, Paltiel, underscores his sense of absolute sexual rights to "his" women and makes clear that those rights are a forum in which he also enacts absolute power over his subjects. The erasure scholars perform on both the details of the text and contemporary incidents one might use to think about love and power generally and actual details of the text shows the attempt to save David from homoeroticism by saying Jonathan's love for David is only about politics to be a strategy more motivated by a desired outcome than a willingness to follow the implications of the text to logical outcomes.

While the attempt to disprove a homoerotic relationship between David and Jonathan through recourse to a strict division between political and sexual meanings of “love,” does not work in light of how the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel link them, it is similarly problematic to completely erase the difference between political and sexual usage of the terms. What drawing attention to the ways that sexual and political uses of the term “love” overlap does is show that the distinction does not prove David was a heterosexual man in the way that some scholars want him to be. What it does not do is prove that David was a homosexual or bisexual man in the way that queer advocates want him to be. It is the ambiguities of both distinction and overlap between sexual and political meanings of the term love that provide interpretive agency to readers.

Ellen van Wolde offers a provocative analysis of “love” in Hebrew Bible narratives.²⁷ In contrast to contemporary English usage of love in a heterosexual context, in which “love” can be reciprocal and is understood often to precede sex; ancient Hebrew posits a unidirectional movement in which the act of loving is seen as establishing power over a subordinate. Van Wolde notes that Michal is the only woman in the Hebrew Bible to be the grammatical subject of the verb love, and she loves David. However, in this case, Michal loves David at the time that she is the daughter of the king and David is simply a shepherd at court. Once David is king, Michal is no longer characterized as loving David. It is social hierarchy in its “class” elements that Michal’s love for David establishes, not in its gendered aspect. Seen in light of van Wolde’s thesis, Jonathan’s behavior is odd: His “loving David” signals a relationship in which he makes a claim to assert power over David, but his actions, giving David his armour, seems to be an act of immediate subordination. A consistent reading of Jonathan’s initial love for David would

either show the limits of van Wolde's theory, indicate that the act of giving signs of prestige to David are not acts of subordinating himself, or point to a remarkably complex interaction of subordination and dominance that perhaps could be explored in terms of sadomasochistic dynamics.

The political understanding of love in ancient Near Eastern discourse appears in covenants, and David and Jonathan repeatedly make covenants over the course of the narrative. Gay theologian Gary David Comstock and biblical scholar Saul Olyan have both noted that the specific ways in which 1 Samuel describes the covenants between David and Jonathan are in tension with the conventions of the genre. Among the points Comstock makes are the following: When David and Jonathan make their covenant, the text replaces the usual language of "so-and-so made a covenant with so-and-so" with "Jonathan and David, he made a covenant."²⁸ That is the grammatical form of the covenant fuses the parties in a way that a conventional covenant would not. Olyan notes that 1 Samuel 26's comparison of Jonathan's love to the love of women is unique within ancient covenantal literature.²⁹ These deviations from the established pattern of covenantal formulas points to a crafting of the conventions to evoke a homoerotic bond, and not simply a political one.

At least one person in the narrative world of 1 and 2 Samuel seems to have suspected that David and Jonathan had a sexual relationship. Saul's feelings toward David sour to the point that it seems that David's life is in danger. At this point, Jonathan decides to test the situation by creating a ruse for David not to be at court. When Saul asks Jonathan why David is not there, Jonathan delivers David's excuse to which Saul replies:

“You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! [. . .] I know that you side with the sone of Jesse—to your shame, and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness! For as long as the son of Jesse lives on earth, neither you nor your kingship will be secure.” (1 Samuel 20:30-31)

Saul’s outburst does not directly say, “you are sleeping with David,” but the language of “your mother’s nakedness draws the entire accusation into the realm of sexual impropriety. Furthermore, because the basic logic of sexual purity works with an assumption of impurity as contagious, it is hardly a leap to see the link between Jonathan’s mother’s nakedness and Jonathan’s sexual behavior. Again, Gagnon brings out the firm distinction between the political and the sexual to argue that this passage has no sexual overtones. He states that “it is Jonathan’s acquiescence to David’s political ascendancy, not Jonathan’s adoption of the female role in a homosexual relationship with David, that Saul is referring to.”³⁰ Here the interpretive circle becomes vicious. The certainty in Gagnon’s rhetoric relies on a prior assumption of a unified biblical testimony to the sinfulness of homosexuality.

However, the text does open room for Saul’s statement to be the definitive proof that nothing sexual was going on between David and Jonathan: namely, the characterization of Saul as paranoid. Robert Alter has shown how narrative conventions immediately establish Saul as a character who does not recognize the truth of situations, and the text depicts him as prone to fits of madness.³¹ It is in Saul’s mouth that the narrator places an explicit accusation of “shameful” behavior. If the narrator is underscoring Saul’s paranoia, then we have a statement from the narrator that David and Jonathan were “innocent” of enjoying each other beyond the proper limits of a friendship “without benefits.”

After Jonathan realizes that Saul intends to kill David, he arranges a meeting with him on a field where they have an extended farewell. Jonathan brings a young man to shoot some arrows in a coded manner, and then has the boy run ahead to find the arrows, leaving space for David and Jonathan to meet privately. In this farewell, David and Jonathan kiss each other and weep together until something happens that has caused translators difficulty: David “exceeded” (King James Version), “recovered himself” (New Revised Standard Version), “wept the longer” (Jewish Publication Society), or “[...?...]” (*sic*) (Kyle McCarter).³² The Hebrew here reads *ad David higdil* (until David made large). In the context of two men kissing each other, it is easy to imagine that what “making large” means is getting an erection. The verb does not take an object, which could be a way of maintaining a bit of decorum while describing sexual activity. The verb’s lack of an object also means it is unclear if David himself got an erection, made Jonathan have an erection, or both men were hard. The King James Version’s “exceeded” could easily suggest ejaculation. In this reading, Jonathan’s closing statement in the chapter, “Yahweh be between your seed and my seed, forever,” would not only have the metonymic meaning of seed as offspring, but the literal reading of the result of a shared orgasm. If the biblical laws equate sex with penetration, this shared orgasm may not be the result of “sex,” but rather of a non-penetrative act in which both partners’ seed ends up in the same place. Jonathan’s statement returns the language to the political associations of love by framing their connection across generations. In this respect, it is significant that it is *David* who causes to become large, as that underscores his agency. Indeed, in this sentence, the movement of the grammatical subject from “the man and his friend” to “David” encapsulates of the narrative of the history of David’s rise, in which

he emerges from obscurity, establishes a connection with the House of Saul, and goes on to become the main character of the narrative, independent of the House of Saul.

However, it should be clear that to interpret this passage in such explicitly sexual and genital terms is a reading strategy largely dependent on early post-Sexual Revolution mores. The historical specificity of this reading practice does not in theory rule out the possibility that it captures the ancient context better than another reading, but it does mean that the parallels should not be assumed, but investigated. Because the verb *higdil* does not take an object, there is no way to settle the question of what is being discussed here. For example, while some commentators find the phrase *ad David higdil* so awkward as to consider the possibility of scribal error, David Tsumura turns to brachyology, the omission of key words in idiomatic expressions, to account for the unusual form of the sentence.³³ Rather than construing the missing object as “penis,” Tsumura supplies “voice” as the missing object. He then renders the meaning, “until David cried the louder.”

The fact that “kissing” is one of the interpretive clues to *ad David higdil* pushes the interpretive ambiguity further, as kissing has a range of affective qualities that need not necessarily be sexual in nature. On the one hand, we have examples of kissing in the Song of Songs that are clearly sexual in nature, so ancient writers could have used the word in a sexual sense. On the other hand, as Zehnder points out, in none of the other references in 1 and 2 Samuel do kisses between men seem to carry the erotic connotations that the kisses in the Song of Songs do. However, Fokkelmann points out that the kiss here is the only mutual kiss in 1 and 2 Samuel, a point that distinguishes this kiss from other kisses in the text.

Immediately after this farewell, the text offers a tantalizing clue that can push the reading of “until David made large” in a sexual direction: David makes a denial of contact with women in response to a question about the purity status of his followers. This exchange brings the matter of purity, and by extension sexual purity, into David’s account of preceding events. According to the narrative sequence, the pertinent preceding event is David’s farewell from Jonathan. After David and Jonathan say their farewells, David goes to the priest Ahimelech at Nob and asks him for food. First Ahimelech asks David why he is alone. David’s response is clearly a lie: “The king has ordered me on a mission.” (21:3) When David asks for food to sustain the young men whom he has sent ahead, Ahimelech replies that he has no ordinary bread, only consecrated bread that may be distributed on the condition that the young men have kept away from women. Here the priest is working more with a Levitical understanding of women’s sexuality as potentially impure than a Deuteronomic perspective on women’s sexuality as an object of male ownership, so we see a moment in the final form of the text that weakens the methodological strategy I advocated at the outset of separating Priestly and Deuteronomic perspectives. However, the Deuteronomic history is critical of priests at several points, so it cannot be assumed that the text is endorsing the priest’s perspective. If we stay with the question of how the sequence of events in a narrative shapes meaning, the question arises, why is this detail being provided *here*?

Why is the narrator slowing the progress of David’s flight to give us an exchange that raises the question of sexual impropriety? David’s response remains within the context of his first lie, and while one lie does not mean that subsequent statements are also lies, the narrator has cued the reader into David’s untruthfulness. David’s response

does refer to a group of men who are not depicted in 1 Samuel 20, nor is there a description at this point of men joining him, so at the surface level of the text, David is referring to men who, taking the narrative at face value, do not exist, but David's inclusion of himself in this group points to a way in which he could simply be saying, "I haven't touched a woman lately." So, David's response—"I assure you that women have been kept from us, as always" (21:6) – may be a sly and perhaps even hinting evasion of the question the priest does not know to ask: "Have you had a seminal emission with a man?" On a narrative level, if this is the reading, the link between chapters 20 and 21 becomes much stronger.

However Harding's question about the sexualized meaning of *ad David higdil*—"why, in a text that is otherwise so ambiguous in its portrayal of the relationship between the two men, would we suddenly be confronted with such a no-holds barred picture?"³⁴—points to the fact that there is a reciprocal process of reading "until David made large" and "women have been kept from us." If David is indeed providing an evasive answer, his own rhetorical strategies depend on plausible deniability for his strategy to work. To move from a hinting suggestion to a firm diagnosis may be emotionally satisfying, but it does not land us in the territory of certain knowledge.

The hope of many queer readers is that establishing that David and Jonathan were "more than friends" can serve as a basis for proclaiming an unambiguously LGBTQ+ friendly gospel. However, we can see from a sixteenth-century interpretive practice that positing a conjugal relationship between David and Jonathan is no guarantee against homophobic violence. In the years 1562 and 1563, John Calvin preached a series of sermons on 2 Samuel.³⁵ In his sermon on 2 Samuel 1, he posed the question of what kind

of love David and Jonathan shared and answered his question with the assertion that this love can only be that of a man and his wife. While Calvin clarified that this love is a chaste love, there is a difference between chastity and sexual renunciation, so the sexual elements of married love cannot be completely excised from the range of connotations of “love” in Calvin’s reading, though this seems to have been his intention. That those contemporaries of Calvin’s who had power to enact policy would most likely have heard “chaste” as “celibate” can be seen in the fact that Calvin’s sermon did not translate into affirmation of same-sex relations in sixteenth-century Geneva. In 1562, Pierre Jobert and Thibaud Lesplingly, two Genevan men who lived as a couple were executed for sodomy.³⁶ What we can learn from the juxtaposition of Calvin’s conjugal imagery for David and Jonathan and the execution of Jobert and Lesplingly is that finding the “correct” interpretation is useless for liberation outside of a praxis of queer self-determination. By giving up the illusion that the Bible will provide a sure foundation for the humanity of queer people, we are in a stronger position to remember that all readings are an interaction between a text and a reader who is other than the text. Delving into the ambiguities of *eros* in the David and Jonathan stories allows us to probe the ambiguities of our love for and anger with the biblical tradition and to claim our own experience not as authorized by the biblical text but as an equal dialogue partner with it.

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- ¹ See Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), for a method of deriving meaning from the shape of the text.
- ² Steven McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), 85.
- ³ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 37. Texts that read biblical texts in terms of competing trajectories include James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) and Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98:2 (1979), 161-85.
- ⁴ Markus Zehnder, "Exegetische Beobachtungen zu den David-Jonathan Geschichten," *Biblica* 79 (1998), 153-79.
- ⁵ Saul Olyan, "'And with a Male You Shall Not Lie the Lying Down of a Woman': On the Meaning and Significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994), 179-206; David Tabb, "Leviticus," in Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM, 2006).
- ⁶ The classic text in this discussion is, of course, Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel; With a Reprint of the Article Israel from the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, preface by W. Robertson Smith, foreword by Douglas A. Knight. (Scholars Press, 1994).
- ⁷ Deborah Ellens, *Women in the Sex Texts of Leviticus and Deuteronomy: A Comparative Conceptual Analysis* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008) and Sarah Schechtman, *Women in the Pentateuch: A Feminist and Source-Critical Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009).
- ⁸ The two strands continue to be in effect into the New Testament writings, as demonstrated by L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), with "dirt" reflecting the Priestly strand and "greed" reflecting the Deuteronomistic strand.
- ⁹ Gary David Comstock, *Gay Theology Without Apology*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 87-8.
- ¹⁰ See Norbert Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy*, translated by Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) and Eyal Regev, "Priestly Dynamic Holiness and Deuteronomistic Static Holiness," *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 2 (April 2000), 243-61.
- ¹¹ See Phyllis Bird, "The End of the Male Cult Prostitute: A Literary-Historical and Sociological Analysis of QĀDĒŠ-QĒDĒŠĪM," in *Congress Volume: Cambridge 1995*, VT Sup 66 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 37-80.
- ¹² Hans-Joachim Stoebe, *Das zweite Buch Samuelis* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1994), 93, cited in James E. Harding, *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 221.
- ¹³ See Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), for an anthropological reconstruction of ancient Israelite masculinity.
- ¹⁴ Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2006).
- ¹⁵ Thomas Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (London: Basic Books, 1999). In 2011, Francesca Stavrakopoulou hosted a BBC2 series, "The Bible's Buried Secrets," in which an episode, "Did King David's Empire Exist?" fundamentally questioned the historicity of David (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhiABi6vw3A>).
- ¹⁶ McKenzie, *King David*, Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), and Joel Baden, *The Historical David: The Real Life of an Imagined Hero* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).
- ¹⁷ Laurie Schneider, "Donatello and Caravaggio: The Iconography of Decapitation," *American Imago* 33 (1976), 67-91.
- ¹⁸ David Jobling, *1 Samuel* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998).
- ¹⁹ Jobling, *1 Samuel*, 30.
- ²⁰ Jobling, *1 Samuel*, 162.
- ²¹ Schroer and Stabli, and Wilson.
- ²² Ackerman, *When Heroes Love*, 184.

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- ²³ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*.
- ²⁴ J. A. Thompson, "The Significance of the Verb *Love* in the David-Jonathan Narratives in 1 Samuel," *Vetus Testamentum* 24:3 (1974), 334-8.
- ²⁵ Thompson, "Significance," 334.
- ²⁶ Zehnder, "Exegetische Beobachtungen," 168-74; Gagnon, *The Bible*, 147-54.
- ²⁷ Ellen van Wolde, "Sentiments as Culturally Constructed Emotions: Anger and Love in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008), 1-24. Discussion of Michal on pages 18-24.
- ²⁸ Comstock, *Gay Theology*, 84.
- ²⁹ Saul Olyan, "'Surpassing the Love of Women': Another Look at 2 Samuel 1:26 and the Relationship of David and Jonathan," in *Authorizing Marriage? Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions*, ed. Mark D. Jordan, with Meghan T. Sweeney and David M. M. Mellott, 7-16 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- ³⁰ Gagnon, *The Bible*, 151.
- ³¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New and Revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 72-3
- ³² Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 334.
- ³³ Tsumura, 64-65.
- ³⁴ James E. Harding, *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 215.
- ³⁵ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel: Chapters 1-13*, trans. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992).
- ³⁶ William Naphy, "Sodomy in Early Modern Geneva: Various Definitions, Diverse Verdicts," in *Sodomy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Tom Betteridge, 94-111 (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 101-2