

David's Treason against Saul: A hidden storyline within the Biblical texts.

Samuel Sostre, M.D., Ph.D., D. Min.

Published in edited form in *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* Vol. 43:4 (172), October-December, 2015, p.233-240.

Introduction

In antiquity the people of Israel had made a covenant with Jahveh. God had selected them for His possession, his people, and had bestowed His benefits upon them. He had also given them a law and bound himself to bless them under the presupposition that they would observe that law (Exod. 19:1-6). However, simple observation showed that in their experience the rewards were not bestowed neither upon the nation nor upon the individuals in the proportion expected ⁽¹⁾. The constant pounding they received from neighboring countries, the droughts, sickness, poor crops, hunger, infertility and other woes made them wonder where they had gone wrong. The worse heartbreak was to come in the experience of the humiliating exile in Babylon. But when the hope of liberation from that calamity and of returning to their land entered the people's mind the main concern centered on what they should do next to have the blessed country God had promised them. They surmised that a good ruler was key. Who was to rule Judah in order to become what it was meant to be, some member of the royal family or the priests that had controlled the now destroyed temple or some other group? ⁽²⁾.

The compilers and redactors of the Books of Samuel, probably Deuteronomists and Judahites, felt that after their return from the exile, finding the right ruler would be crucial

to the future success of the country and they began to search their ancient texts and traditions, both written and oral, to find answers. They asked: in our past, under which kind of ruler did the star of Israel shine brighter? The texts, according to their understanding, led them to David. Under the rule of King David Israel had been able to overpower their enemies, to expand the dominion of Israel in the land, and to bring peace to the nation; what Tushima calls the Pax Davidide ⁽³⁾. Israel needed a king just like David. Theologically speaking, David must have been blessed and anointed by God to achieve all he did for Israel.

For the promotion of this idea they retrieved their ancient texts and traditions, written and oral, from different sources, picked the pertinent material and sat down to write. They organized their writing so as to convince the readers of the need for a David-like ruler. This rewriting of the history was done with the idea of making David's actions and monarchy look very noble and appealing so the people would vie to now adopt a king with David's characteristics. However, the character the Bible presents is an idealized David ⁽⁴⁾. To realize that the biblical narrative is pro-David, however, is also to realize that it cannot be read at face value if we want to know the real history of David's life ⁽⁵⁾. On the other hand, these authors were apparently very respectful of ancient tradition and did not edit the texts greatly and were not overly prone to harmonize inconsistencies within the texts they used ⁽⁶⁾. Therefore, some of the retrieved texts and traditions which spoke against the main storyline were not cut out or harmonized to fit their main thesis and today we are able to find a thread of the narrative texts– an alternative storyline - that points to a more obscure side of David's character.

Purpose of the article

The purpose of this article is to analyze the alternative storyline found in 1 and 2 Samuel and in 1 Chronicles which reveals a different David; not the one the authors wanted to portray. It is likely that these texts represented very authoritative traditions because they were kept in the text in spite of not supporting the author's intentions.

This narrative thread, although not in chronological order, suggests that after having been welcomed into Saul's house, after having been loved by Saul's family and after having been given a prestigious position in Saul's army, David began a movement to wrest the kingdom from Saul. The narrative also tells us that David allied himself with Jonathan, Saul's son, to rule the kingdom between the two. This storyline also reveals that while banished from Saul's house, David formed a large army in Ziklag to fight against Saul and suggests that he may have actually been able to take away the control of Judah from Saul more than 5 years before Saul's death. The narrative also leads us to believe that Saul's persecution of David was not due to jealousy as the authors imply, but to rid his kingdom of a usurper.

The alternate storyline

Initially, when he came to Saul, David was immediately loved and given a position of trust in Saul's house and in his army. *So David came to Saul and entered his service; [Saul] took a strong liking to him and made him one of his arms-bearers. (1Sam. 16:21).* The same happened with Jonathan. *When [David] finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan's soul became bound up with the soul of David; Jonathan loved David as himself. Saul took him*

[into his service] that day and would not let him return to his father's house. (1 Sam. 18:1-2)... Now Michal daughter of Saul had fallen in love with David (1 Sam. 18:20).

However, after David had established himself as a successful warrior in Saul's army and had returned from his many battles, the women began to come out of "all the cities of Israel" dancing and singing: *Saul has slain his thousands; David, his tens of thousands (1 Sam. 18:7)*. David was a nice-looking, charismatic man and people loved him, mostly the women. The narrative tells us that this chanting made Saul very angry and, at that point, he began to suspect David as a possible rival for his kingdom (1 Sam. 18: 8-9). By that time David was already captain of the army leading 1000 men and we are told that he always acted prudently and wisely in all his campaigns (1 Sam. 18:13-14). He attracted the favor of all the people except of Saul who feared him and had already distanced himself from David (1 Sam. 18:12-13). There was an incipient internal struggle between Saul and David, but all Israel and Judah loved David.

At one point, Saul felt it would be wise to marry David to one of his daughters. What could be the reason for this? The narrative tells us that Saul promoted this marriage because, as a member of the royal family, David's involvement and compromise in fighting the Lord's war (which meant the wars of Israel and the wars of Saul) would increase and this could raise the chances of David dying in battle with the Philistines. It is possible that Saul also felt that as his son-in-law and in a closer affective relationship with him and his family, the desire for Saul's kingdom may somewhat ease in David.

Also, instead of a dowry, Saul asked David for 100 Philistine foreskins as a requisite for his daughter's hand. This was no simple task. He would have had to first kill 100 Philistines and have access to their bodies increasing the chances that the Philistines could kill him.

But David survived the task and Saul had no recourse but to arrange for David's death himself. *Saul urged his son Jonathan and all his courtiers to kill David. But Saul's son Jonathan was very fond of David (1 Sam. 19:1).* This attempt failed, because Jonathan warned David. Other attempts by Saul to kill or to have David killed were likewise unsuccessful (1 Sam 19: 10-17).

During an episode of rage Saul even hurled a spear to "pin David to the wall" but David escaped. (1 Sam. 19: 10). At this point and with his life at risk, David flees from Saul's house with the help of Mikal and later of Jonathan (1 Sam. 20: 24 – 31). When Saul realizes that David has fled and that Jonathan has somehow participated in his escape the king becomes furious and the narrative tells us that he cursed Jonathan: *You son of a perverse, rebellious woman!" he shouted. "I know that you side with the son 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 Sam. 20: 30 – 31).* Saul accuses Jonathan of siding with a man whose purpose is to take away his kingdom and to keep Jonathan from his righteous kingly position. Is Saul wrong? Had Jonathan really sided with David? Is Saul simply mad and paranoid as the main storyline suggests? Professor Shaul Bar has said: On many occasions, Saul's strange behavior was attributed to his madness. Was Saul really a mad man or can we say that Saul had many good reasons for his seemingly irrational behavior? Analysis of the Biblical scriptures shows that Saul was not naïve and understood David's intentions very well from the start. He realized that David's primary goal was to become king. Therefore, not surprisingly, he was angry with his son Jonathan, who easily gave up the throne. Saul wanted his son Jonathan to succeed him (7).

Saul's fear are confirmed by a narrative exposing the contents of a secret conversation between Jonathan and David. *And Saul's son Jonathan came to David at Horesh and encouraged him in [the name of] God. He said to him, "Do not be afraid: the hand of my father Saul will never touch you. You are going to be king over Israel and I shall be second to you; and even my father Saul knows this is so. And the two of them entered into a pact before the Lord. (1Sam. 23: 16-18).* Thus, we see that in the covenant it was accorded that David would occupy Saul's throne and Jonathan would be second in command. According to this narrative, Saul was right. It is interesting that Saul persecuted but could not find David but Jonathan had exact knowledge of how to get in touch with him. What the narrative never explains is why Jonathan never demonstrated ambitions of becoming king of Israel as he rightly should? ⁽⁸⁾.

At one point Saul expressed exactly what he thought about David and what he perceived was happening in the country and even among his fellow kinsmen from Benjamin. *Saul said to the courtiers standing about him, Listen, men of Benjamin! Will the son of Jesse give fields and vineyards to every one of you? And will he make all of you captains of thousands or captains of hundreds? Is that why all of you have conspired against me? For no one informs me when my own son makes a pact with the son of Jesse; no one is concerned for me and no one informs me when my own son has set my servant in ambush against me, as is now the case (1 Sam. 22: 7-8).*

Saul felt that his servants and fellow kinsmen from Benjamin were conspiring against him (which we will later find out that it was true) and hiding from him the fact that Jonathan had allied himself with David. He also regretted that due to their and Jonathan's complicity he had to suffer the ambushes that David was tending against him. If David was 'tending

ambushes' against Saul, then it is not, as the main storyline leads us to believe. It was not a one-sided persecution by Saul's men after David. Again, was Saul right or was he simply lying?

Saul persecuted David in the southern part of the country to where David had fled to avoid confronting the stronger army of Saul. Even when there were people willing to deliver David into Saul's hands, David's cunning always enabled an escape (1 Sam. 23: 19 - 21 and 26: 1).

But how could David achieve his purpose of conquering the kingdom if Saul's army was larger and stronger than his? Of course, he would have to recruit warriors and enlarge his army. It is at this point that David makes a strange decision. He decides to move into the land of the worst enemies Israel had, the Philistines. There he allied himself with Achish, the king of Gath. We do not know what type of agreement he reached with Achish, however, we do know that Achish gave him his support and the Philistine city of Ziklag where David remained for a total of 1 year and 4 months. (1 Sam. 27: 6-7). Why did David move to Ziklag?

David in Ziklag

The book of Samuel tells us that his move was to get Saul off his back; to have Saul stop persecuting him (1 Sam. 27:1-2). In other words, David went to the Philistines for protection ⁽⁹⁾. The armies of the Philistines were superior to those of the Israelites and Saul would have risked a lot by entering their country looking for David ⁽¹⁰⁾.

However, the book of Chronicles gives us a second reason. The twelfth chapter of 1 Chronicles details what happened while David was in Ziklag, stating: *The following joined David at Ziklag while he was still in hiding from Saul son of Kish; these were the warriors who gave support in battle; they were armed with the bow and could use both right hand and left hand to sling stones or shoot arrows with the bow; they were kinsmen of Saul from Benjamin (1 Chron.12:1 -2).* As Saul suspected, many of his kinsmen were deserting him and allying with David in the war he was preparing. In the same chapter the author details the people from the different tribes of Israel who came to Ziklag to help David in his war; in his battles. But battles against who? Wasn't David simply trying to escape from Saul and had now achieved it by moving into Philistine territory? Why did he recruit warriors to come and help him in his war? What war? 1 Chronicles tells us: *Some Manassites went over to David's side when he came with the Philistines to make war against Saul... (1 Chron. 12:20).* It was a war against Saul. He gathered a large number of warriors for this purpose. *Day in day out, people came to David to give him support, until there was an army as vast as the army of God (1 Chron. 12:22).*

In summary, David went to Ziklag, a city of the Philistines where Saul couldn't bring his troops (for he would have had to also war against the stronger Philistines) and his main purpose was to gather a large army, which included warriors from all Israel and even from Saul's tribe of Benjamin, with the purpose of engaging in war with Saul.

Again, we find that Saul was right. David was trying to topple him and take over his kingdom. He had allied even with Jonathan, his son, and the people of Benjamin, Saul's brothers and servants, who had been deserting Saul to join David in a war to take away Saul's kingdom. According to 1 Chronicles, thousands of warriors came to Ziklag with the

purpose of fighting Saul. The numbers provided should probably not be taken literally but they reflect that multitudes of warriors joined David ⁽¹¹⁾.

It may be that, with the strength of his newly formed army, David initially took further control of the southern part of Israel finally establishing his operational center at Hebron. According to the scriptural data, and as we will see, David may have been considered ruler of Judah with his base in Hebron, several years before Saul's death.

The storyline after the death of Saul and Jonathan

Soon after Saul and Jonathan's death ... *Abner son of Ner, Saul's army commander, had taken Ish-bosheth son of Saul and brought him across to Mahanaim and made him king over Gilead, the Ashurites, Jezreel, Ephraim, and Benjamin [and] over all Israel (2 Sam. 2: 8-9)*. The reign of Is-bosheth was legitimate but short lived and he ruled only two years in the northern kingdom of Israel before being assassinated. During that same time, according to the Bible, David was king of the southern kingdom based in Hebron. During those two years there prevailed a fierce war between David (whose army was led by Joab) and Is-bosheth (whose army was led by Abner). *The war between the House of Saul and the House of David was long-drawn-out; but David kept growing stronger, while the House of Saul grew weaker (2 Sam. 3:1)*. The war only ended with the assassination of both Abner and Is-bosheth.

The Bible then tells us: *Ish-bosheth son of Saul was forty years old when he became king of Israel, and he reigned two years. But the House of Judah supported David. The length of time that David reigned in Hebron over the House of Judah was seven years and six months (2 Sam. 2: 10 – 11)*. This statement, probably retrieved from official court records, was

apparently a very well-established tradition as it is repeated in exactly the same form several times in the Bible.

If after the death of Saul, Is-bosheth took over the reign of Israel and his kingdom lasted 2 years but at the same point in time David's kingship in Judah had lasted 7 years and 6 months, it all suggests that David had conquered the southern kingdom of Judah five and a half years before Is-bosheth ascension to the throne of Israel and, most likely, 5 ½ years before Saul's death. To contradict the implications of this statement, traditional exegesis has proposed that Is-bosheth did not begin his reign until five and a half years after Saul's death ⁽¹²⁾. This would mean that Israel was left without a ruler for a long period of time, which would have been unlikely. The other possibility is that 5 ½ years elapsed between Is-bosheth's death and David's proclamation as king which is also unlikely and has no biblical base or support at all. Still others have proposed that right after Saul's death, Abner held the power in the north for about five years before he decided to appoint Is-bosheth as king ⁽¹³⁾. None of these speculations are supported by the Biblical narratives and we are left with the fact that David became ruler of Judah 5 ½ years before Is-bosheth ascended to the throne of Israel. It is very possible then that David had some successes in the war against Saul and had taken Judah from him prior to the fatidic Mount Gilboa battle.

Conclusion

We have examined a narrative thread – an alternative storyline - in the Saul and David story that goes against the intended message of the authors. The main storyline presents Saul as a mad and paranoid character full of jealousy and ill-feelings against a man who was noble, God-anointed, and who never did anything wrong against Saul. Moreover, it described David as loving Saul and having spared his life in more than one occasion. The

alternative storyline, found hidden within the main narrative texts, suggests otherwise. From the beginning, David, a very charismatic and able man, gained the admiration and the love of Saul's family and of all Israel. But soon began to plot against Saul to seize the kingdom for himself. Initially an uneven war began between the two in which David was continually fleeing the stronger army of Saul. At one point David even decided to seek help from the Philistines and, through an undisclosed arrangement with Achish, acquired Ziklag as his operational base. In Ziklag he began to build a large army with which he was probably able to achieve control of Judah, moving his operational base to Hebron. His ascension and recognition as ruler of the southern kingdom, according to the Bible, may have happened approximately 5 ½ years before the final defeat and demise of Saul and Jonathan in battle.

Yes, David was the king of Judah. That is why when the southern city of Keilah was invaded by the Philistines it was David who went to defend it. Keilah was in the southern territory David ruled and it had to be David the one who "delivered the inhabitants of Keilah" (1 Sam. 23:5). Saul had nothing to do with the defense of Keilah because it was no longer part of his reign. In fact, Saul's intentions were to destroy Keilah on account of David (1 Sam. 23:10). And no king would want to destroy any of his own cities. Also, if David ruled in Judah, it is no wonder that the Philistines who received him for the first time in his search for support exclaimed "...Why, that's David, king of the land! (1 Samuel 21:12).

But Judah was not enough for David. As soon as Saul died and Is-bosheth ascended to the throne of Israel, David declared war against him as well (2 Samuel 2: 12 - 13). And it is apparent that the aggression came from David's side. We hear Abner (Is-bosheth Army chief) cry out to Joab (David's army chief): *...Must the sword devour forever? You know how*

bitterly it's going to end! How long will you delay ordering your troops to stop the pursuit of their kinsmen? (2 Samuel 2: 26). Abner and Is-bosheth apparently did not want this war and therefore begged David to stop his aggression.

David's ambitions didn't quell until Is-bosheth and Abner were dead and he achieved his dream of becoming king of all Israel. He had to betray Saul to do it; he had to kill and deceive many to achieve it; but, by God, he did it. In the process, even Michal came to hate him (2 Sam. 6:16).

Jonathan on his part, in spite of his love for David and in spite of their covenant, never left Saul and died with his father defending the land of Israel. Although not fully recognized in the Biblical texts, Saul and Jonathan were devoted heroes and martyrs for the cause of their country.

In an article, Sheffler has said: It is contended in this article that the Deuteronomist's negative view of Saul has influenced subsequent Bible readers to such an extent that even today the Saul history is obscured. In order to enhance King David as the first real king of Israel, the Deuteronomist downplayed the latter's dubious character and actions and accordingly sacrificed Saul's reputation. By reading the Deuteronomist against the grain with a hermeneutics of suspicion, the rhetoric of the Deuteronomist is exposed and a glimpse of a more realistic Saul, as well as a more realistic picture of Israel's early history is gained ⁽¹⁴⁾. That I hope we have done.

"David was 30 years old when he became king and he reigned for 40 years. In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months and in Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah for thirty-three years".

Bibliography

1. E. Schurer, (Reprinted from the original published in 1890). *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus (Translated by Sophia Taylor and Rev Peter Christie) Vol. II* . (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), p.128.
2. J.L. Kugel, *How to read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Shuster, 2007) p.9
3. C.T. Tushima, *The Fate of Saul's Progeny in the Reign of David*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), p.9.
4. J. Baden, *The Historical David: The Real Life of an Invented Hero* (First Edition ed.), (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), p.12.
5. J. Baden, *The Historical David: The Real Life of an Invented Hero* (First Edition ed.). (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), p.9.
6. J.L. Kugel, *How to read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Shuster, 2007) p.447.
7. S. Bar, Was King Saul a Mad Man? (2014, Retrieved on March 28, 2014)
<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/01/bar388021.shtml>.
8. S. Bar, Was King Saul a Mad Man? (2014, Retrieved on March 28, 2014)
<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/01/bar388021.shtml>.
9. E.H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*. (Second Edition ed.), (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008) p.236.
10. F. Bruce, F.). *Israel y las Naciones*. (Edición en Castellano ed.). (Madrid, España: Editorial Portavoz filial de Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988) p.22.
11. K.L. Barker, *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* (4th ed.). (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008) p.603.
12. K.L. Barker, *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* (4th ed.). (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008) p.428.
13. E.H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*. (Second Edition ed.), (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008) p. 212.
14. E. Scheffler, *Saving Saul from the Deuteronomist*. In J. C. Roy (Ed.), *Past, Present, Future: The Deuteronomistic History and the Prophets* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Publications, 1st Edition, 2000) p.265.

