

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VERB *LOVE* IN THE DAVID-JONATHAN NARRATIVES IN 1 SAMUEL

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Recent discussions on the root *'-b-b* in certain Old Testament contexts have drawn attention to the political overtones that sometimes attach to this word or to its semantic equivalent in a wide range of ancient Near Eastern texts <sup>1</sup>). Thus in 1 Kings v 15 <sup>2</sup>) Hiram King of Tyre is described as having always *loved* David, *kî 'ohēb hāyāh hīrām lēdāwid kol hayyāmim*. It is clear from the total context in verses 15 to 26 that Hiram and David were involved in some kind of diplomatic and commercial arrangement as rulers of two neighbouring independent states. Further evidence of such a treaty comes from 2 Samuel v 11 which refers to the dispatch of messengers, cedar trees, carpenters and masons by Hiram to David for the building of a *house*. That Hiram should greet Solomon, David's son, after the death of David was entirely in keeping with current political practice according to which, on the death of one treaty partner and on the enthronement of his successor, the other party to the treaty would send an embassy <sup>3</sup>).

The root *'-b-b* occurs a number of times in the David-Jonathan narratives. It is not difficult to discern in the whole movement of the drama as it has been recorded by the narrator, a series of steps on David's way to the throne of Israel. The whole story is a complex texture of agreements between various parties as David made his progress towards the throne. The covenant or agreement (*berit*) between David and Jonathan was only one of many covenants of one kind and another which were made over the years till David was finally securely established on the throne <sup>4</sup>). It is possible therefore

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<sup>1</sup>) William L. MORAN, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy", *CBQ* 25 (1963) pp. 77-87.

<sup>2</sup>) Hebrew Text. English Text 1 Ki. v 1.

<sup>3</sup>) See William L. MORAN, *op. cit.*, p. 80 where examples are given.

<sup>4</sup>) 1 Sam. xi 1, xviii 3, xxiii 18; 2 Sam. iii 13, 21; v 3.

that the occurrence of derivatives of the root *’-b-b* in such a context may have political overtones.

After Saul’s act of disobedience (1 Sam. xv) the hint is given that his kingdom would be given to a fellow-countryman (1 Ki. xv 28). The particular fellow-countryman is revealed almost at once in the narrative as David, son of Jesse of Bethlehem (1 Sam. xvi 13). He would need to display prowess in war and ability to lead the nation and to be accepted by the people. All these he was eventually to achieve. The narrator is careful to notice that David was ‘skilful in playing, a man of valour, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the Lord is with him’ (1 Sam. xvi 18). At this point in the narrative the verb *loved* is first met.

Saul loved (*’āhēb*) him greatly and he became his armour-bearer (1 Sam. xvi 21). It is arguable that the verb *’āhēb* was carefully introduced at this point because of a certain ambiguity of meaning. It is the proper term to denote genuine affection between human beings, husband and wife, parent and child, friend and friend. But since the verb can also have political implications and since, as we shall argue, it is used in such a sense elsewhere in the narrative, we may suspect that already in 1 Samuel xvi 21 the narrator is preparing us for the later political use of the term.

There may be another subtle feature in this story, namely the fact that Saul divested himself of his armour, his helmet of bronze and his coat of mail and clothed the youthful David with these (1 Sam. xvii 38, 39). Saul’s son Jonathan was to do a similar thing after the battle with Goliath (1 Sam. xviii 4). And David himself after he had struck Goliath down with a stone ‘stood over the Philistine and took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him and cut off his head’ (1 Sam. xvii 51). Further, David ‘put his armour in his tent’ (1 Sam. xvii 54). The passing of arms from the lesser to the greater so carefully described by the narrator, seems to have had political implications in the Ancient Near East <sup>1</sup>).

If the significance of David’s success in slaying the Philistine was not clear to Saul whose task it was as king to overthrow Israel’s enemies, and if the deeper implications of David’s charismatic endowments also escaped him, both were clear to his son Jonathan who discerned in these facts the pattern of the future. In 1 Samuel xviii

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<sup>1</sup>) J. B. PRITCHARD (Ed.), *ANET* (Princeton, 1955), pp. 276, 281. Cf. 2 Ki. xi 10; 2 Sam. viii 7, 11 12.

1-4 the narrator sets the stage for David's first major advance in his progress to the throne. Here the *love* of Jonathan for David is declared. The narrator uses the ambiguous word *love* 'āhēh because it denoted more than natural affection however deep and genuine this may have been. Sensing the certainties of the future Jonathan was ready even then to acknowledge David's sovereignty over himself and over the nation. The opening sentences of 1 Samuel xviii stand in a relationship of parallelism in which the second emphasizes and explains the first:

*nepeš y<sup>e</sup>hōnātān niqš<sup>e</sup>rāh benepeš dāwid*  
*wayye 'ehābēu y<sup>e</sup>hōnātān kenapšō*

In further explication of the bond between the two friends the narrator adds (vs. 3):

*wayyikroṭ y<sup>e</sup>hōnātān we dāwid berit be'abābātō 'otō kenapšō*

In isolation these statements may be interpreted on a purely personal level but the bestowal of Jonathan's weapons on David (vs. 4), the success of David in discharging his responsibilities against Israel's enemies and the wide acceptance of David among the people who recognized his charismatic gifts (vv. 5-7) seem to carry deeper significance. Saul himself declared:

*What more can he have but the kingdom?*

This concentration of ideas and vocabulary which in some other settings carry political significance, would seem to be part of the careful design of the narrator to provide the reader with a hint of how events would eventually work out

The covenant established between David and Jonathan was soon to be bested. When David escaped from Saul with Michal's assistance and arranged a secret meeting with Jonathan to discover how matters lay between himself and the King, he drew Jonathan's attention to the covenant so recently entered into and urged Jonathan to display loyalty ('āsah *hesed*) towards him. At that stage David acknowledged himself to be Jonathan's *servant* ('ebed) because Jonathan had brought him into a *sacred covenant*.

*biberit YHWH hēbē'tā 'et 'abdēkā 'immaḱ (1 Sam. xx 8)*

In the context of that covenant Jonathan called on Yahweh to witness his oath (1 Sam. xx 12). It is clear, however, that Jonathan recognized that David's status as his *servant* was only temporary and he sent David away with the significant words: *May the Lord be with you, as he*

has been with my father. If I am still alive, show me the loyal love of the Lord, (*’āsāh ḥesed YHWH ’mmādī*) that I may not die; and do not cut off your loyalty from my house for ever. When the Lord cuts off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth, let not the name of Jonathan be cut off from the house of David. And may the Lord take vengeance on David’s enemies (1 Sam. xx 13-16).

We sense here Jonathan’s concern for the future. David would eventually be king. The narrator makes the point that Jonathan made David swear again in view of his (Jonathan’s) love for him —

*wayyōsep yehōnātān leḥasbi’a ’eṭ dāwīd be’abāḥātō ’otō kī  
’abāḥaṭ napšō ’a ḥēbō* (1 Sam. xx 17).

It is not difficult to sense a political aspect to the derivatives of the ambiguous root *’-b-b*.

That the verb *’ābēb* has these political overtones is clear from a number of other statements in the whole narrative. Saul was deeply concerned at the import of the songs of the women when he and David returned from battle with the Philistines —

Saul has slain his thousands

And David his ten thousands (1 Sam. xviii 7).

It seemed to him that David had all but attained to the kingdom, ‘What more can he have but the kingdom?’ (1 Sam. xviii 9). It became clear to Saul that *all Israel and Judah loved (’ohēb) David; for he went out and came in before them* (1 Sam. xviii 16) The latter phrase in this verse was normally used of a king who led Israel in war <sup>1</sup>.

In this context, the verb *love* expresses more than natural affection. It denotes rather the kind of attachment people had to a king who could fight their battles for them.

When Saul eventually decided to give Michal to David as his wife, the reward of his victory over Goliath (1 Sam. xvii 25), his servant came to David with the message —

Behold, the king has delight in you, and all his servants *love (’ābēb) you* (1 Sam. xviii 22)

David responded to the king’s test by returning two hundred Philistine foreskins rather than the required hundred and Saul understood

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Deut. viii 44; Josh. xiv 11; 1 Ki. iii 7; 2 Chr. i 10. The expression *go out* by itself is more common, e.g. Jdg. ix 38; xvi 20; xx 28; 1 Sam. viii 20; 2 Sam. xxi 17; 1 Ki. vi 44 etc.

that *the Lord was with David and that all Israel loved ('āhēb) him* (1 Sam. xviii 28).

It became increasingly clear to Saul that his own dynasty would not continue and he chided Jonathan when David failed to appear at his table *You son of a perverse, rebellious woman, do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established* (1 Sam. xx 30 f.).

Later Saul complained to the Benjaminites *Will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds that you have conspired against me? No one of you discloses to me when my son makes a league (kārāt 'im) with the sons of Jesse . . .* (1 Sam. xxii 7, 8). There are significant implications in this statement of Saul. It was common practice at Ugarit for kings to establish families of notables by grants of land taken from dissident citizens<sup>1)</sup>, and Saul's words seem to betray his fear that David would distribute fields and vineyards and make chosen citizens commanders in his army.

The end of the drama was that David became king. Saul's worst fears were fulfilled. But David honoured his promise to Jonathan and spared his son Mephibosheth (2 Sam. ix 1-8). In the skilful unfolding of this complex political drama the ambiguous verb 'āhēb is used at several critical points, all of which are pregnant with political significance<sup>2)</sup>. It seems clear that the verb 'āhēb is used in these passages in a similar sense to that in 1 Kings v 15 and that its use in all these passages compares with the use of its semantic equivalent in Near Eastern Akkadian documents.

<sup>1)</sup> Jean NOUGAYROL, *Le Palais Royal d'Ugarit* III, pp. 78 ff. Tablets 16.254D, 16.239, 16.143, 16.157, 16.250.

<sup>2)</sup> 1 Sam. xviii 1, 16, 22, 28; xx 17.