

**FAITH
PRIDE**

Jonathan Loved David

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DAVID was a character from the Old Testament. He started out life as a shepherd, was an occasional musician at the court of King Saul, and rose to prominence after single-handedly slaying the giant Goliath. David had a complex relationship with Saul. After he killed Goliath, David was welcome and honoured at court, but Saul was jealous, and he often threatened David's life, and David had to flee. After Saul's death, David became king of Israel – in fact he became the greatest king Israel ever saw. During his life, David wrote many of the Psalms, and Christians today believe he was one of the ancestors of Jesus Christ.

Jonathan was the son of King Saul. He was a friend of David, and Jonathan features prominently in the story of the early days of the Kingdom of Israel.

Of course, as you will have gathered from my title this evening, I believe there was more to David and Jonathan than friendship. I believe that not only did they love each other, but they were *in love* with each other. I believe that David and Jonathan were a couple. I believe that they were in a relationship. That's what I want to show tonight.

Before I launch into a discussion of the story of David and Jonathan, there is an important question that I want to ask first. How do we know that any two people in the Bible are in a relationship?

The Four Signs of a Relationship

The first sign we can look for is children. Obviously if we know that if a man and a woman have a child together (or are *trying* to have a child together) then there must be some sort of relationship going on between them. However, no matter how much two men love each other, they can't conceive together, so that isn't much help here.

A second sign we can look for is when two people share their lives with each other, including looking after each other in a way that goes beyond what you would normally expect from friends. Essentially do the two people behave like a couple? Of course, on its own, this isn't a fully reliable sign, because two people could simply be very close platonic friends without being in a relationship.

So a third sign we can look for is the statement that love exists between two people. A statement of love is actually a much more useful sign than evidence of reproduction. After all, reproduction could just be about sex, but love is love.

The fourth sign is closely related to the third: a covenant of love between two people – marriage. If two people get formally bound together in some way, and that binding has to do with love, then you can be absolutely certain that they are in a relationship.

David and Michal

Before we consider David and Jonathan, let's consider David and Michal. Michal was one of Saul's daughters (making her Jonathan's sister).

We first hear of David and Michal in 1 Sam. 18: 20: 'Now Saul's daughter Michal was in love with David, and when they told Saul about it, he was pleased.'

The underlying Hebrew word for "love" here is *âhab*. That's going to become important in a moment, so remember that. By the way, this evening, unless otherwise stated, I'm using *Today's New International Version* for Bible quotations.

Then we read,

When Saul realized that the LORD was with David and that his daughter Michal loved David, Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy the rest of his days.

1 Sam. 18: 28–29

Once again we have love, *âhab*, between David and Michal.

So, right away we have the third sign of a relationship: a statement of love.

Also in 1 Samuel 18, we have the fourth sign, the covenant between them. For David and Michal, this is easy,

Then Saul gave [David] his daughter Michal in marriage.

1 Sam. 18: 27

As I said, David didn't always have a good relationship with Saul. In 1 Sam. 19: 11–16, when Saul's troops were searching for David, Michal risked her own life by helping him to escape. That's sign number two: behaving like a couple. On its own, that particular incident isn't fully convincing, because if David and Michal had just been very good friends then she may well have helped him in the same way, but when you remember that signs three and four are there, then sign two helps support the theory that David and Michal were in a relationship.

We have signs two, three, and four. What about sign one? Did Michal and David have any children together? No they didn't. We know, from 2 Sam. 6: 23, that Michal died childless. However, just because Michal and David never had any children together doesn't mean that they didn't have a relationship. We already have enough evidence from other parts of their lives for that.

David and Jonathan

What about David and Jonathan? How does their relationship compare to David's relationship with Michal? Can we see the signs of a relationship between them? There are five key passages I want to look at.¹

Love and a Covenant

In 1 Samuel 17 David was just a young shepherd. His older brothers were soldiers, and his father sent David to visit them at the front. When he got to the front he found that Goliath was taunting Saul's army, and nobody was brave enough to fight him. What did David do? David offered to fight Goliath. Saul was reluctant to let him, saying he was 'little more than a boy.'² David persisted, and eventually he fought Goliath and killed him. If you grew up going to a Sunday school you know the story well. David evidently had a great impact on Jonathan, and the first key passage says this,

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, *and he loved him* as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because *he loved him* as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.³

1 Sam. 18: 1–4

¹ My thinking on these passages, and on David and Jonathan generally, is deeply influenced by Miner and Connoley, *The Children are Free*, pp. 33 to 39; and by Horner, *Jonathan Loved David*.

² 1 Sam. 17: 33

³ Emphasis mine

Jonathan loved David. There can't be any doubt about that. It says so, right there in the text. The Hebrew word for love in this passage is *âhab* – that's the same word used to describe how Michal loved David. So right away we have sign three for David and Jonathan: a statement of love.

What happened because of that love? Jonathan made a covenant with David because of that love, so that is sign number four: a covenant of love. As soon as David and Jonathan appear together in the Bible we can see two of the four signs of a relationship.

I have heard it said that this was political manoeuvring and that Jonathan knew which way the wind was blowing. He knew that his family were in descent and David was in the ascent. That theory doesn't make any sense. First of all, we know that Saul was an insanely jealous man. If David was, at that time, a rising star in the political arena, why would Saul have taken him into his house? Who was David at this time? He was a shepherd, someone who was, in Saul's words, 'little more than a boy'. Why would a prince make a political covenant with a shepherd? It can only be that Jonathan loved David in the same way that Michal loved David. The covenant that they made between them, because of that love? Well, if a man and a woman make a covenant between each other because of love, everyone knows it is marriage.⁴

A Fifth Sign

What does Saul think of all this? Saul doesn't like it. We find out in the second key passage, 1 Sam. 20: 27–30. One day there was a banquet in Saul's house. Saul expected David to be there, but he wasn't, so he asks Jonathan where he is

But the next day, the second day of the month, David's place was empty again. Then Saul said to his son Jonathan, "Why hasn't [David] come to the meal, either yesterday or today?" Jonathan answered, "David earnestly asked me for permission to go to Bethlehem."

1 Sam. 20: 27–28

While it isn't proof that David and Jonathan were seen as a couple, isn't it interesting that they shared so much of their lives that when Saul wanted to know where David was he asked Jonathan?⁵ I know myself that when my mother-in-law wants to find her son, very often she phones me rather than phoning him herself.

Jonathan's answer infuriated Saul

Saul's anger flared up at Jonathan and he said to him, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of the mother who bore you? As long as the son of Jesse lives on this earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established.

1 Sam. 20: 30

Saul is saying to Jonathan that his relationship with David is bringing shame to him and to his mother. Why would he say that if he saw David and Jonathan as just friends? By this point, David was a respected military leader. He was senior enough that he could expect a seat at the King's table. He is exactly the kind of man that a King would want his son to be friends with. If Saul saw David and Jonathan as friends then he wouldn't see the relationship as shameful. This looks like an additional sign, number five, that two people are in a relationship: when the

⁴ 'Love', *âhab* is used in a completely asexual way in 1 Sam. 18: 22, but there is no covenant or sense of commitment that comes out of this love, and it is clearly not between two individuals.

⁵ I am indebted to Mandy Mullin for this observation.

people around them treat them as if they are in a relationship, then that suggests they are in a relationship.

A tearful Reunion

The third key passage is

After the boy had gone, David got up from the south side of the stone and bowed down before Jonathan three times, with his face to the ground. Then they kissed each other and wept together—but David wept the most.

Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.’” Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town.

1 Sam. 20: 41–42

Things weren’t going well between David and Saul. In fear for his life, David was on the run. Jonathan and David had arranged to meet, and what an emotional meeting it was. Verse 41, with its kissing and weeping is another verse that, if it described a man and a woman together, we would have no difficulty seeing their relationship as romantic. I don’t want to draw too much on my own experiences here, but if I’m separated from my husband for any length of time, there is kissing and weeping together when we are reunited. But let’s say that it would be perfectly normal for two friends to behave this way, and we will have a look at verse 42.

‘We have sworn friendship with each other’. Is that not proof that they were friends, and not lovers?

No, it is not. ‘Friendship’ is a word introduced by the translators. In the King James Version of the Bible that verse is:

And Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, The LORD be between me and thee, and between my seed and thy seed for ever.

In the English Standard Version it is:

Then Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, because we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, 'The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my offspring and your offspring, forever.'" (ESV)

This isn’t about friendship. It is about an oath that the two of them swore that unites them and their offspring. It is an oath that they are united and their children are united. At the very least, that is much much closer to marriage than it is to friendship. In this passage the emotional nature of the reunion is an example of how they behaved like a couple, which is sign two, and of sign four: the marriage-like covenant between them that unites their offspring as well as just them.

Second in Israel

David and Jonathan did meet up again, and that meeting is described in the fourth key passage,

And Saul’s son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this.”

1 Sam. 23: 15–17

Maybe you are thinking that this is all still about politics. Jonathan knew which way the wind was blowing, and he aligned himself with David. Unfortunately if that was the case, then this passage wouldn’t make any sense. ‘You, my father’s rival, will be king over Israel and I will be second to you.’ If the royal line was going to pass from the house of Saul to the house of

David, why on earth would David be content to have the heir to the house of Saul as his second? Surely if this was about mere politics David would not have wanted Jonathan anywhere on the scene, let alone as the second in Israel.

Come with me in your minds to the England of 1513. Henry VIII is on the throne, but he is out of the country on a military campaign. Who does he leave in charge? His wife, Catherine of Aragon. Jumping back to Old Testament times we have Esther, the wife of the King of Persia. She had immense influence because of her role as queen.

If you are the monarch, who is second to you in your kingdom? It is your spouse. If Jonathan was David's partner, David's spouse, then his statement 'You will be king over Israel and I will be second to you; makes perfect sense. Again, sign two. They are behaving like a couple.

Let's recap at this point. For the relationship between David and Jonathan, we have evidence of sign two (behaving like a couple) sign three (a statement of love) and sign four (a covenant of love). As well as that, we also have sign five (others treat them as a couple). There is no evidence of sign one (children) but we didn't have any evidence of that for David and Michal. At this point the case for David and Jonathan being in a relationship is at least as strong as the evidence for David and Michal being in a relationship.

My Brother Jonathan

And now onto the last of the five key passages: Israel is at war with the Philistines. In the course of that war, Saul and Jonathan are killed. These are David's words when he hears the news,

Saul and Jonathan—
 in life they were loved and admired,
 and in death they were not parted.
 They were swifter than eagles,
 they were stronger than lions.

"Daughters of Israel,
 weep for Saul,
 who clothed you in scarlet and finery,
 who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.

"How the mighty have fallen in battle!
 Jonathan lies slain on your heights.
 I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
 you were very dear to me.
 Your love for me was wonderful,
 more wonderful than that of women.

"How the mighty have fallen!
 The weapons of war have perished!"

2. Sam. 1: 23-27

As an aside, you will have noticed that David expressed his grief for Saul. Throughout much of 1 Samuel, Saul wants David dead. Even so, David was grieved when Saul died.

'I grieve for you, Jonathan, my brother.' Surely that is proof that David and Jonathan were close friends, and David loved Jonathan as if he were his brother, and everything I have said so far has been complete nonsense. Well, that sort of 'brotherly love' is a New Testament concept. In the Old Testament, you called someone your brother for different reasons.

First and foremost, you called someone your brother if he was, literally, your brother.⁶ You could also call someone your brother if he was your cousin, or if he was in the same tribe as you.⁷

David and Jonathan weren't literal brothers. They weren't cousins. They weren't in the same tribe. So why did David describe Jonathan as his brother? First of all, remember that David's lament for Saul and Jonathan was poetry.

The Song of Solomon is an interesting book. It is poetry about the love that exists between a man and a woman, a husband and wife. It is roughly contemporary with the life of Solomon, who was David's son. Here is a passage,

You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;
 you have stolen my heart
 with one glance of your eyes,
 with one jewel of your necklace.
 How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!
 How much more pleasing is your love than wine,
 and the fragrance of your perfume
 more than any spice!
 Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride;
 milk and honey are under your tongue.
 The fragrance of your garments
 is like the fragrance of Lebanon.
 You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;
 you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.

S. of S. 4: 9-12

My sister, my bride, or 'my sister my spouse' as it is in the King James Version.

In the poetic language of the Old Testament at the time of David, you could refer to your spouse as your sibling.⁸ The male voice in the Song of Solomon called his spouse his sister. You can see why that metaphor makes sense, can't you? Your siblings are close family members who are, roughly speaking, the same generation as you. They are your next of kin. And who is your spouse but the next of kin that you chose?

David and Jonathan weren't literal brothers. They weren't cousins. They weren't in the same tribe. So why did David describe Jonathan as his brother? *Because Jonathan was his spouse.* In the Song of Solomon, the husband can call his spouse his sister. In David's lament for Saul and Jonathan, David can call his spouse his brother. As if that isn't a clear enough indication, David describes Jonathan's love for him as 'passing the love of women'. Can you imagine a straight man saying that about the way he loved a friend?

Summary and Conclusion

Let's review the evidence.

- It is stated that Jonathan loved David, using the same word that describes the love that one of David's wives felt for him.

⁶ cf. Gen. 45: 12 and 1 Sam. 17: 28

⁷ e.g. Lev. 25: 47

⁸ The brother/husband and sister/wife metaphor is also used in the Apocrypha. "I therefore entrust your sister to you. From now on you are her brother and she is your sister. She is given to you from today for ever. The Lord of heaven favour you tonight, my child, and grant you his grace and peace." Raguel called for his daughter Sarah, took her by the hand and gave her to Tobias with these words, 'I entrust her to you; the law and the ruling recorded in the Book of Moses assign her to you as your wife. Take her; bring her home safe and sound to your father's house.' Tob. 7: 11-12, (NJB)

- David and Jonathan had a covenant between them because of their love.
- Saul treats David and Jonathan as if they were a couple, and he considers their relationship to be shameful, despite David's respectability.
- After being parted, David and Jonathan had an emotional reunion, and they reminded themselves that they had sworn an oath that united them and their offspring.
- Jonathan expected David would be become king, and he that he would be the second in the kingdom, a place that the spouse of the king could reasonably expect to have.
- And finally, David spoke about Jonathan as if he were his spouse.

The evidence is, to my mind, overwhelming. If we could say all of that about a relationship between a man and a woman, we would have no trouble seeing them as a married couple.

Jonathan loved David. They were a couple. David was not a minor Biblical character. He was the greatest king of Israel, a man after God's own heart⁹ who wrote many of the Psalms. And he was in a relationship with another man. What greater affirmation of same-sex relationships could you want?

Further Reading

- Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978). ISBN 0-664-24185-9
- Rev. Jeff Miner & John Tyler Connoley, *The Children are Free: Reexamining the Biblical Evidence on Same-sex Relationships*, (Indianapolis: Jesus Metropolitan Community Church, 2002). ISBN 0-9719296-0-2

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⁹ 1 Sam. 13: 14

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