

Searching For David

By Mary Chen

Abstract

Saul and David are two of the most fascinating biblical characters in the Old Testament. What fascinates many scholars and gives rise to voluminous writings is Saul's dramatic fall and David's enduring favor with God. Why did Saul's sin in 1 Samuel 15 lead to rejection, yet David's sin in 2 Samuel 11 receives forgiveness and redemption? Did Saul's sins cross the point of no return, as opposed to David's sin with Bathsheba? Or, was David simply favored by God? This paper will look at both the positive and negative view of David, and, through it, attempt to gain a clearer understanding of Saul's tragic fall and David's divine favor.

Introductory Remarks

The book of Samuel tells of the historical development of Israel, it details the rise and development of the monarchy, an institution that continued until the Babylonian exile in 586 BC, and even in exile, Israel's hope for a king remained. Samuel is, at the same time, an intriguing book for many scholars, because in it tells the story of Saul's tragic fall and David's enduring favor with God. This has led to an array of speculations and given rise to voluminous writings. Why was David's sin atoned for, yet Saul's sin was not? Why did God choose David and not Saul? This paper will look at both the positive and negative views of David, and, through the search for David, this paper hopes to unlock the mystery of God's choice of David over Saul.

The Positive View of David

Up till the last century, David has been portrayed predominately as perfection incarnate, by both Jewish scholars as well as Christian scholars. 1 Samuel 16:7, above all else, sets the foundation for this positive image of David. Driven by the revelation that he was a man after God's own heart, David was God's chosen king, the standard by which all subsequent kings of Israel were judged, including the Messiah who would come from his lineage. Truly, no other man in the Bible who was "made a little lower than the gods" was crowned as David was crowned with "glory and honor" (Ps 8:5).

In his interpretation of 1 Samuel 16:7, Jewish historian Josephus adds,

Men do not see as God seeth. Thou indeed hast respect to the fine appearance of this youth [Eliab], and thence esteemest him worthy of the kingdom, while I propose the kingdom as a reward, not of the beauty of bodies, but of the virtue of souls, and I inquire after one that is perfectly comely in that respect; I mean one who is beautiful in piety and righteousness, and fortitude and obedience; for in them consists the comeliness of the soul.¹

David was perfect, in righteousness and in obedience, and where there is ambiguity, David's actions are defended and justified, and he is once again restored onto his pedestal of perfection. One of the most

¹ "The Antiquities of the Jews," *Josephus: The Complete Works*, trans. by William Whiston, A.M. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 6.8.1.160.

poignant scenes is 2 Samuel 3:13-16, David's demand for Michal. It is evident from Paltiel's walking after Michal, weeping all the while, that he genuinely loved her. His heartbreak stands in stark contrast to David's relationship with Michal. The text never states that David loved Michal. According to 1 Samuel 18:26, David's motive for marrying Michal was political, the idea of being the king's son-in-law pleased him. And here, his motive for wanting her back also appears to be political, she was his claim as Saul's legitimate successor. A shadow of a doubt is cast, could this man of God be so cold-hearted as to use women for political gain? However, as Henry explains,

There was real generosity both to Michal and to the memory of Saul, in David's receiving the former, remembering probably how once he owed his life to her affection, and knowing that she was separated from him partly by her father's authority. Let no man set his heart on that which he is not entitled to. If any disagreement has separated husband and wife, as they expect the blessing of God, let them be reconciled, and live together in love.²

With such fine interpretations, David's motives are found satisfactory and his perfect image restored. He can do no wrong, and even when he did commit a blatant wrong, there is a defense for that too. In commenting on David's sin of adultery, Rabbinical literature maintains,

David's thoughts were so entirely directed to good that he was among the few pious ones over whom evil inclinations had no power, and his sin with Bath-sheba happened only as an example to show the power of repentance.³

His sin is viewed as a momentary lapse of judgment of an otherwise perfect man.

If there are any flaws found in David, these commentators seem to suggest, weigh them on a scale, certainly his good outweighed his bad. Let us recall our introductory question, why was David's sin atoned for, yet Saul's sin was not? Evans concludes,

The relationship between obedience and disobedience and in particular the reason why some sins, such as David's adultery with Bathsheba, can apparently be atoned for and others

² 2 Samuel, Chap 3, Matthew Henry Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible, www.crosswalk.com, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/Commentaries/MatthewHenryConcise/mhc-con.cgi?book=2sa&chapter=003> (21 July 2009).

³ "In Rabbinical Literature – David's Piety," www.jewishencyclopedia.com, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=82&letter=D&search=david#269> (21 July 2009). Such a view is also taken by Josephus, "The Antiquities of the Jews," 7.7.1.130; J.N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. 1, 477-478.

apparently cannot be one of the ongoing interests of the books of Samuel. *Only God knows when in a series of disobedient actions we will reach the point of no return.*⁴

Underlying the belief that God is unwilling to forgive after a certain point is the idea that there exists a scale weighing good and bad deeds. For David, his “series of disobedient actions” were minimal, a few sins versus a heap of righteous deeds, he did not reach “the point of no return.” Whereas Saul disobeyed one time too many, his bad outweighed his good, he reached the “point of no return” and was therefore cut off from God.

Such appears to be the view of David for the past two thousand years, and from that perspective, one can only draw the conclusion that God calculates the sum of good/evil deeds and chooses accordingly. That is to say, God chooses and favors a human being on the basis of good works. However, if God chooses and favors on the basis of good works, what chance do any flawed human beings have? Where is the God of grace and mercy? The positive view of David leaves the Christian hopeless. Let us now explore the negative view of David and its implications.

The Negative View of David

Skeptical of the classic positive portrayal of David, a surge of contemporary scholars have taken a critical look at the person who was David, and from it, they have drawn a very different portrait. Greenberg writes,

[David] was a brutal and cruel tyrant, who routinely slaughtered the innocent in his grab for power. He was unjust and unpopular in his time, widely feared and deeply hated. He betrayed Saul and committed treason against Israel by consorting with and fighting for its enemies. He even volunteered to aid the Philistines in their efforts to destroy the kingdom of Israel. By contrast, Saul was a good and decent man, who provided justice, and brought peace, and had the love of his people. Unfortunately for history, the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., and the praise songs for Saul were heard no more. Judah survived and had the final word. Its lies and distortions and cover-ups were what were passed on for truth. History was not well served by its efforts.⁵

⁴ Mary J. Evans, *The Message of Samuel: Personalities, Potential, Politics and Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 102. Italics mine.

⁵ Gary Greenberg, *The Sins of David: A New History* (Naperville, IL: SourceBooks, Inc., 2002), 259-260. The defense that Saul was a “good and decent man” comes from 1 Sam 8:11-18, the customs of a king. Saul’s reign was non-

Even scholars who do not necessarily find David a “brutal and cruel tyrant,” find the narratives in Samuel biased against Saul. Anderson comments,

It would be interesting if we had a historical narrative written in a circle sympathetic to Saul – for instance, an account written by a member of Saul’s own tribe of Benjamin. But the narratives of 1 Samuel are now dominated by the bias of historians of the southern kingdom of Judah, and Saul is put in an unfavorable light in order to enhance the prestige of David, who founded the dynasty of Judah. We must remember that all the traditions of the monarchy were preserved in and edited by Jerusalem circles, which were sympathetic toward David. From a different point of view, perhaps Saul would emerge as a heroic figure who, like Hamlet, was the victim of baffling, uncontrollable circumstances and the dark depths of his own sensitive and passionate nature.⁶

As Napoleon puts it, “History is but a fable agreed upon.” If David was as these scholars suggests, why then did God choose and favor such an immoral and evil man? One word, charisma. Kirsch explains, “For that reason, no matter how often or how scandalously David sins, the Bible reader, like God himself, is always ready to forgive and even to praise him.”⁷ Bloom expounds,

It is difficult to locate in Western literature and history a more charismatic figure than David. The Achilles of the *Iliad* scarcely yields his aesthetic supremacy to the David of 2 Samuel, but Achilles remains a child compared to David, compared even to the child David. One could juxtapose David to the charismatic complexity of Hamlet, except that David, unlike Hamlet, is the beloved of God. ... David most simply is the object of Yahweh’s election-love ... Like everyone else, from Samuel, Saul and Jonathan down to the present, Yahweh is charmed by David.⁸

David was one of God’s favorites, and for the advancement of his favorites, innocent people like Saul, Michal, Paltiel, anyone who gets in the way suffers; and when David sinned, his death sentence and punishments are transferred to the unnamed son of David’s affair, to Tamar, Amnon, Absalom, and so

bureaucratic; he was still struggling to raise a standing army; he did not engage in offensive wars, only defensive wars; he did not have a harem (a harem is indicative of foreign treaties; thereby the power and diplomatic stature of the kingdom); in Greenberg’s own words, “Nothing in Samuel’s speech applied to Saul ... Samuel’s speech, then, can be seen as an attack on the horrible excesses of the Judean family,” 24-25.

Other commentators who hold a negative view of David are: Jack Cargill, “David in History: A Secular Approach”; John Goldingay, *Men Behaving Badly*; Baruch Halpern, “David’s Secret Demon: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King”; Jonathan Kirsch, *King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel*; Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*; etc.

⁶ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986), 215.

⁷ Jonathan Kirsch, *King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2000), 7.

⁸ Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg, *The Book of J* (New York, NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 41-42.

forth. No wonder Saul was paranoid. What could he possibly do when everything he did was doomed to failure, because God had already chosen his favorite? The negative view of David is even more horrific than the positive view of David. There is absolutely no hope. If one is not God's favorite, then one is doomed. Which begs the question, if God chooses and favors arbitrarily according to his whims, does any human being have a chance? Where is the God of goodness and justice? In summary, both the positive and the negative view of David leave the Christian hopeless and wanting. Is there an alternative?

אלהיך "Your God" and אלהי "My God": A New Perspective on David

Both the positive and negative view of David have spliced David into two different personalities, however, this dichotomy is unwarranted. The person who was David is both good and evil: There are moments when David shone as a faith-filled man of God (1 Sam 17:45-47; 24; 26), there are moments when he was manipulative and deceptive (1 Sam 10-13; 25, 27:5-12; 2 Sam 3:14-16), and there are moments when he acted foolishly (2 Sam 13:1-21; 19:25-31). Surely no amount of apology can excuse David's adulterous behavior and murder. David was not perfectly virtuous and pious, as portrayed by the positive view, he was a very flawed human being, somewhat accurately depicted by the negative view, though some of the negative views border on extreme. Simply, David was a human being, and it is in the nature of humanity to be both good and evil. So, why did God choose David over Saul? The answer lies not with who David was, but what David did. Both the positive and negative view get it wrong by centering on the person and not the choice the person makes. David's choice can be seen through the deliberate placement and use of the pronominal suffix אלהיך "your God" and אלהי "my God."

Let us examine the text. Towards the conclusion of 1 Samuel, when David was in trouble, he "strengthened himself in the Lord *his* God" (30:6, italics mine). And at the end of 2 Samuel in a dialogue exchange between Araunah and David (24:23-24, italics mine), we read:

“Everything, O king, Araunah gives to the king.” And Araunah said to the king, “May the Lord your God accept you.”

However, the king said to Araunah, no, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord *my* God which cost me nothing.” So David bought the threshing floor and oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

By David’s own declaration, the Lord is אלהי “my God.” At the end of both chapters, God was David’s God. The placement is deliberate: No matter what kind of person David was, at the end of the day, David’s reliance was not on himself or anyone else, but on God alone. No matter what David did 29 chapters prior, in the end, he chose God. The emphasis is deliberate: David’s faith was in no one but God alone. More importantly, David transitioned from a God of genealogy to a God through faith. God was not only the God of Israel, the God of his fathers, but David’s God. This is in stark contrast to Saul.

Four times in 1 Samuel 15, Saul referred to God as Samuel’s God, ליהוה אלהיך “to the Lord *your* God” (v15, 21, 25⁹ and 30, italics mine). Saul had a choice: To listen to God, utterly destroying the Amalekites, or to the people, saving the best of the sheep and oxen. Between God and the people, Saul chose the people. At the heart of Saul’s rejection of God is the problem of idolatry. Idols are anything that competes with choosing God, physically, emotionally or spiritually, and Saul had made the crown his idol. At the end of the day, Saul’s choice was the crown. Saul loved the crown more than God. He loved it so much that he fought against God in order to keep it. In his worship of the crown, he became blindsided and forgot the unchangeable truth that the Lord gives and takes away, it is God’s prerogative. Four times Saul referred to God as Samuel’s God, ליהוה אלהיך “the Lord *your* God.” אלהיך “Your God” is a telling declaration that Saul did not transition from a God of genealogy to a God through faith. God, to Saul, was the God of Israel, the God of Samuel, but not Saul’s God. The crown was Saul’s God.

Returning to the text, biblical data reveals that Saul was chosen and even favored by God. 1 Samuel 13:13b-14a states, “For the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But

⁹ The BHS footnotes that the LXX as well as two medieval Bible manuscripts adds the suffix ךְ “your God” at the end of v25.

now your kingdom shall not endure.” Samuel revealed that God wanted to establish Saul’s descendants as successors forever; but because of his sins, God gave the kingdom to someone else. The verse is clear, God genuinely wanted to bless Saul and establish his line. The reason Saul was rejected is because he did not choose God in return. Between the crown and God, Saul chose the crown. His choice sealed his fate. Saul’s tragic fall resulted from his choice.

אלהיך “Your God” and אלהי “My God” in the Book of Samuel

The use of אלהיך “your God” and אלהי “my God” is intentional in the text of Samuel. The pronominal suffix reflects the choice a person makes; the rejection or acceptance of God. Let us examine its first noteworthy appearance.

In 1 Samuel 10:19, then again in 12:12, 14 and 19, יהוה אלהיכם “your God” (precluding its use in 12:19) reflects not Samuel’s rejection of God, but rather Samuel’s poignant accusation of Israel’s rejection of God by demanding a human king. In both chapters, Samuel calls attention to God’s choosing of Israel. God has chosen them, he has brought them out of Egypt and made a covenant with them. They were his people and he was their king. Yet in spite of God’s favor and faithfulness toward them, the people of Israel choose a human king over God; 12:12, NASV, “When you saw that Nahash the king of the sons of Ammon came against you, you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ although the Lord your God was your king.” Samuel charges them, ויהוה אלהיכם מלככם “Your God was your king.” But the people’s response was “no,” God will not be “my king”; he is not “my God,” he is “your God” (12:19). By their own words, התפלל בעד־עבדיך אלי־יהוה אלהיך “pray for your servants to the Lord your God,” they rejected God. While chosen by God, they did not choose God in return.

At the heart of their rejection is their lack of faith in God. The setting was tumultuous and uncertain, during this time in Israel’s history, Israel was facing immense pressure: The internal pressure of the lack of competent leadership (1 Sam 8:1-5), and the external pressure of the Philistines (1 Sam 4-

8, 14:52a), Ammonites (1 Sam 11), and Amalekites (1 Sam 15). In the face of pressure, between the comforts of security, a centralized and continuous form of government in the institute of the monarchy, and God, Israel chose the monarchy. 1 Samuel 8:7 repeats: “And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.’”

Through the usage אלהיך “your God” and אלהי “my God,” the text highlights the people’s and Saul’s idolatrous behavior and warns against it. Idols are not mere golden statues, but exist in the form of desiring a human king or a crown. The pronominal suffix אלהיך “your God” and אלהי “my God” are deliberate because the text of Samuel calls Israel to choose, as David chose, God as אלהי “my God.” While the difference is only a pronominal suffix, its implications are revelatory and critical in the book of Samuel. It is a matter of allegiance to God or an idol, someone or something else. It is a matter of salvation. It indicates that all Israel are chosen, but not all are saved.

“Your God”/“My God”: All Israel are Chosen, Not all are Saved

For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: “Through Isaac your descendants will be named.” That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants (Roms 9:6b-8).

Both Isaac and Ishmael were Abraham’s descendants, why was Isaac chosen and not Ishmael? Both Jacob and Esau were Isaac’s descendants, why Jacob and not Esau? Paul writes, “Not all Israel are descended from Israel,” that is to say, all Israel are chosen, but not all are saved. This is the radical truth that Paul realized, and it is the radical and despised theology that he preached to the Jews. Genealogy and the Mosaic Law are only identity markers; they alone are not salvific. It was and is never about genealogy and the Mosaic Law; it was and is always about faith. Salvation is through faith alone, and

faith in God must be a choice made by every individual Israelite.¹⁰ The transition from a God of genealogy to a God through faith is demonstrated by Jacob/Israel.

In Genesis 28:20-21, Jacob made a vow to the God of his fathers (*italics mine*), “*If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God.*” Several chapters later (in Gen 33:20, when God fulfilled the vow), Jacob/Israel kept his promise. He erected an altar and named the place, אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, God, the God of Israel. God was no longer “the God of my fathers,” but “the God of Israel.” This was a momentous declaration, because God was no longer “your God” or “his God,” but “my God.”

And what happened when Jacob declared God as “my God”? He put away his idols (Gen 35:2-4). This is remarkable, considering that the Second Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol,” does not come along till centuries later. When Jacob/Israel called God “my God,” he was declaring his faith in God alone. When he put away his idols, he was demonstrating his faith. Jacob was chosen, but he needed to choose God in return. And his choice is exposed by the pronominal suffix, “my God.” Jacob/Israel moved from “the God of my fathers,” a God through genealogy, to “my God,” a God through faith. This was the choice that Jacob made, and this was the choice that David made. As it was in Genesis, so it was in Samuel, and in the New Testament. Salvation was/is/will be through faith alone.

Concluding Thoughts

All of Israel know of God through genealogy and the Mosaic Law, but that alone is not enough. After all, even the Pharaoh of Egypt knew of God (cf. Ex 8:25, 28; 10:8, 16, 17). King Nebuchadnezzar declared God as “your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings” (Dan 2:47). King Darius made a similar confession (Dan 6:16, 20). All know of God, but all do not know God. Each, the Pharaoh of

¹⁰ See Gal 3:7-13.

Egypt, King Nebuchadnezzar and King Darius, acknowledged the existence of God, even the omnipotence of God, but none accepted God as his own God. Simply to know of someone and to know someone speak to two very different types of knowledge. All Israel know of God, but all do not know God. To know God is to choose God as “my God.”

The view that God chooses on the basis of good works neglects his grace and mercy, God does not calculate the sum of good/bad deeds. And the view that God chooses arbitrarily overlooks his goodness and justice, God does not have favorites. God is good and just, gracious and merciful. Both the positive and negative view of David get it wrong by centering on who David was, rather than what David did. Both Saul and David were chosen, but only David chose God in return. At the end of his day, Saul’s choice was the crown; if he had the crown, everything would turn out okay. Saul never transitioned from a God of genealogy/Mosaic Law to a God through faith. But, at the end of his day, David’s choice was God; all he needed was God. David transitioned from a God of genealogy/Mosaic Law to a God through faith. It is this crucial distinction that solidified their fate. David was not a better man than Saul. No amount of apology can change the fact that David had moments of undeniable ugliness. The only difference between David and Saul was their choice as exposed by the pronominal suffix אלהיך “your God” and אלהי “my God.” God is not an inheritance. God is a choice made by an individual that God is אלהי “my God.” אלהי “My God” is a declaration that each Israelite must make in order to move from a God through genealogy/Mosaic Law to a God through faith.

Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: Whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; *but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*

The people answered and said, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for the Lord *our* God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did these great signs in our sight and preserved us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. The Lord drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. We also will serve the Lord, for He is *our* God.” (Josh 24:15-18, italics mine)

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