

# **Gay or Nay, Modern Readings of the David and Jonathan Narrative**

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I came out as gay during my junior year of high school. I write this because it helps explain my fascination with the narrative of the relationship between David and Jonathan found in 1 and 2 Samuel. As a modern, liberal, religious individual the idea of a potential homosexual relationship in the Bible is something I personally could find inspiring. However, as scholars have come to find, who David and Jonathan are to each other is not quite that clear. Ideas of homosexuality and the term “gay” are not the same concepts for the contemporary of Samuel as they are for the reader of this paper. As one scholar, James Harding, writes, ““The term “homosexual,” meaning someone who has an emotional as well as a sexual identity with members of the same sex, was not coined until 1869. The use of the term “gay” to signify the homosexual’s chosen form of identity has only come into widespread use in the West in the last fifteen or twenty years.”<sup>1</sup> Despite this, modern religious thinkers and biblical readers find homoerotic undertones in the narrative. In this paper, I will address how modern religious thinkers and practitioners read the narrative of David and Jonathan, and how they use it to support their own pre-determined agenda regardless of historical accuracy or scholarly understanding.

Before I begin this argument, it is essential to be familiar with what exactly is within the David and Jonathan narrative and what about these verses could lead to a homoerotic reading. There are a variety of examples from story that people look towards when analyzing the relationship between these two men, four of which I will present here. First is 1 Sam. 18 1-4 which reads:

<sup>1</sup>And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. <sup>2</sup>And Saul took him that day, and would let him go no more home to his father's house. <sup>3</sup>Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. <sup>4</sup>And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his apparel, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harding, James E. *Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* pg. 22

<sup>2</sup>JPS Translation

There are a couple key ideas to take focus on with these verses. One is the use of the word “love” as a means of describing both David’s feelings for Jonathan in verse 1 and vice versa in verse 3. The other is Jonathan giving David his possessions in verse 4.

The next set of verses is about the last time David and Jonathan actually see each other in 1 Sam. 20. The entire chapter is about them and a plan they construe to see if Saul is against David or not. The two of them set up a plan to meet later in the field, and what occurs during in this meeting are the key verses. They read:

<sup>40</sup>And Jonathan gave his weapons unto his lad, and said unto him: 'Go, carry them to the city.' <sup>41</sup>And as soon as the lad was gone, David arose out of a place toward the South, and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed down three times; and they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded. <sup>42</sup>Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of HaShem, saying: 'HaShem shall be between me and thee, and between my seed and thy seed, for ever.'<sup>3</sup> [1 Sam. 20:40-42]

The important components from these verses include the kissing and the wording in verse 42 that is often taken to be a reminder of the covenant they see as being between them (also mentioned in 1 Sam. 18:3). There is another verse from this chapter that is more minor, but in my research it did come up as a section modern thinkers look towards. This is verse 30, which states:

Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan, and he said unto him: 'Thou son of perverse rebellion, do not I know that thou hast chosen the son of Jesse to thine own shame, and unto the shame of thy mother's nakedness?'<sup>4</sup>

Here, it is the nature of Saul’s rebuke that readers find relevant. I will go into further detail on this particular verse later in my analysis of the modern writings.

The final set of verses to mention is arguably the most important. This is the statement made by David in 2 Samuel 1 known as “David’s Lament”. The ending of this address proclaims:

<sup>22</sup>From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, and the sword of Saul returned not empty. <sup>23</sup>Saul and Jonathan, the lovely and the pleasant in their lives, even in

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their death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. <sup>24</sup>Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights, who put ornaments of gold upon your apparel. <sup>25</sup>How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan upon thy high places is slain! <sup>26</sup>I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant hast thou been unto me; wonderful was thy love to me, passing the love of women. <sup>27</sup>How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished! [2 Sam. 1:22-27]

In this passage, the explanation of Jonathan by David as lovely is worth noting, but the real key component is verse 26, “wonderful was they love to me, passing the love of women.” This particular phrase is the main reason why people read into this relationship homoeroticism.

A common motif in these passages is the use of the word “love.” As 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, when this word appears it can invoke a variety of ideas. We are familiar with different kinds of love: familial love, erotic love, and friendly love. Modern readers, therefore, want to put these ideas onto the stories they find in their Bibles. As Harding writes:

The meaning of the text in question is not simply a matter of the dispassionate, objective exegesis of an ancient document, but is profoundly influenced by the ideological assumptions brought by the modern reader to the act of producing meaning... The David and Jonathan narrative, then, is very much a bone of contention between readers from conflicting ideological positions. The controversy, moreover, is not simply an academic one, but one which has spilled over into the public square.<sup>5</sup>

However, scholastically and historically, this is not always the most accurate practice. There has been much work done by scholars on the idea of love in biblical times, particularly in relation to homosexuality. As Susan Ackerman writes, “the Bible, rooted as it is in an era long ago and a location far away, is simply not in a position to address the phenomenon we in the Euro-American West speak of today as homosexuality.”<sup>6</sup> However, she continues, “this is not to claim...that erotic and sexual acts involving same-sex partners were not found in the societies of the biblical world.”<sup>7</sup> What Ackerman is saying here is that while men likely engaged in sexual intercourse with other men (including potentially David and Jonathan), homosexuality as an identity was simply not an idea during the biblical era.

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<sup>5</sup> Harding, James E. *Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* pg. 3

<sup>6</sup> Ackerman, Susan. *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* pg. 3

<sup>7</sup> Ackerman, Susan. *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* pg. 3

Scholar Saul M. Olyan offers another way to view this dichotomy between what scholars find to be within the text and what modern theologians read into it. Olyan divides these groups of people into two categories he calls “specialists” and “nonspecialists,” with specialists meaning scholars and “nonspecialists” being everyone else.<sup>8</sup> He sums up the key difference between their modes of view when he writes:

Many nonspecialists, and some biblical scholars, have claimed that texts such as 1 Sam. 18:1–3 and 2 Sam. 1:26 suggest that David and Jonathan shared a homoerotic love, with some arguing that this love was expressed sexually. At the same time, most specialists addressing these texts have ignored or dismissed both sexual and nonsexual homoerotic interpretations. Instead, biblical scholars have often argued that the relationship of Jonathan and David is best understood as a close friendship, with a number of commentators underscoring the political dimensions of the love of Jonathan for David. According to these scholars, the rhetoric of love found in the biblical materials describing the relationship of Jonathan and David is clearly a manifestation of ancient West Asian covenant discourse, in which loyal partners in a political relationship—whether equal or unequal in status—are said to love one another, and refer to one another using the terminology of kinship.<sup>9</sup>

This quote from Olyan portrays how he views scholarship approaches these verses. He sees scholarship as seeing the “love” as a covenantal, close connection rather than a homoerotic love the way love between gay men is understood today. Unlike Ackerman, however, Olyan does not believe there is any sexual undertone to the text, nor does he think scholarship can find one. Regardless, from these scholars we can see there is a consensus that modern readers bring to the text an agenda and understanding of homosexuality that is an inaccurate viewpoint for attempting to understand what their genuine relationship between these two men is. But, this understanding that there is no “gay” but happy in the Bible does not stop “nonspecialists” from reading the narrative in this way.

There are a great many ways I could analyze modern readings and understandings of the narrative of David and Jonathan. In Harding’s book, he devotes a good portion of his introduction to providing examples of how this story has popped up in pop culture. He references a 2007 British film *Death at the Funeral* that he claims alludes quite explicitly to

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<sup>8</sup> Olyan, Saul E. "Surpassing the Love of Women" *Authorizing Marriage* pg. 7

<sup>9</sup> Olyan, Saul E. "Surpassing the Love of Women" *Authorizing Marriage* pg. 7

David and Jonathan, as well mentioning other cinematic representations such as the movie *King David* and the TV drama, *Kings*.<sup>10</sup> However, for the purpose of this paper, I have decided to focus on even more explicit examples of “nonspecialist” readings. I am interested in how modern day religious thinkers directly read these earlier discussed passages. I want to know how they approach these controversial, non-clear verses. Do their readings attempt to completely forgo scholarship and instead look solely at how the verses can be understood within our modern day ideas of love and homosexuality? Or, do they see their interpretations as having historical merit? Do they recognize the scholarly understanding of disparaging viewpoints on the concepts of “gay?”

From my research, I have discovered more so the latter of those questions.

“Nonspecialist” readers appear to both bring modern understandings of homosexuality and a want for historical accuracy to the text. The conclusions they draw from the text, on the other hand, are not as uniform. I have uncovered two main camps that these thinkers fall into: the viewpoint that without a doubt David and Jonathan are gay lovers, and the counterargument to this view of David and Jonathan’s relationship being solely one of friendship, but a friendship higher and better than most. Both of these arguments bring with them pre-determined agendas by the reader. In most cases, I have found those who see the two men as gay also are looking for evidence within the Bible to support homosexuality, while those who view them as solely friends believe the Bible strictly condemns the modern idea of homosexuality and anyone who identifies as such.

In a preliminary Google search of “Are David and Jonathan Gay?” one can quickly find two clear, contrasting articles on the subject. One is from the website “wouldjesusdiscriminate.-org,”<sup>i</sup> the other an article by a conservative Christian writer for Charisma Magazine entitled

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<sup>10</sup> Harding, James E. *Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* pg. 3-10

“How I Know David and Jonathan Weren’t Gay.”<sup>ii</sup> Before delving into the content of the writings, we can already see these articles are bringing their own pre-chosen agendas to these verses. They are both on a mission, to prove or disprove the presence of homosexuality in the narrative. We can also see that while they are looking at the exact same text they are likely drawing different conclusions.

The article from “wouldjesusdiscriminate.org”<sup>i</sup> is taken from a book entitled *The Children Are Free: Reexamining the Biblical Evidence on Same-sex Relationships*. The excerpt begins by discussing the narrative of the two characters as a whole. It states:

If your pastor preached about it, the sermon probably talked about the “friendship” of Jonathan and David. Some Christians point to Jonathan and David as an example of idealized male bonding — a type of “brotherly love” not “stained” by the romantic entanglements of male-female relationships. The biblical text, however, is completely inconsistent with this strained interpretation.<sup>i</sup>

There is a lot within their broad description of the narrative. One point to note is the use of the idea of friendship and “brotherly love”. I will discuss this more in the analysis of the counter article, but the wording is significant. The other comment that stands out is their assertion on what the Bible says. As seen in this quote and others I will present, the authors of this article clearly believe that they are undergoing an act of accurate understanding. They are approaching this text with the mindset that they know and understand fully what is written in the narrative. However, as discussed previously, scholars do not find there to be a “gay” relationship reflected in the verses. What then do these authors read into the text to come to this conclusion?

After this introduction, the authors then lay out the articles main points into “exhibits,” verses that the authors feel show that David and Jonathan were in a gay relationship. “Exhibit A” includes 1 Sam. 18 where the article translates the verses as stating “Jonathan loves David, because he loved him as his own soul”<sup>i</sup> and, “Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was

wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.”<sup>1</sup> The interpretation of these verses is what is particularly interesting. The authors explain:

If 1 Samuel 18:1-4 were about Jonathan’s first encounter with a woman, theologians everywhere would be writing about this as one of the greatest love stories of all time. The story of Jonathan and his love would be the source of dozens of Hollywood films. But because the object of Jonathan’s affection is a man, our cultural prejudice kicks in and we insist (notwithstanding the biblical evidence) that this could not have been more than deep friendship.<sup>1</sup>

The authors use of “biblical evidence” following a claim about “our cultural prejudice” illustrates the curious way they are reading the text and the components that they bring with them to biblical narratives. To explain how our cultural prejudices prevent a reading of these verses as homosexual is at such odds with the scholastic understanding of the story. Nonetheless the authors are convinced that the Bible is trying to teach provide for its readers an example of gay relationship.

This conviction is only furthered in their extended analysis of the verses. The authors continue stating:

This “culturally correct” reading will not withstand scrutiny. It asks us to put an interpretation on the story that is completely at odds with our own experience of human behavior. When was the last time you saw a heterosexual man, swept away by brotherly love, offer another man his most precious possessions in their first encounter?...Wouldn’t this strike you as more than just a little “queer”? Let’s face it, the author of 1 Samuel is describing a classic love-at-first-sight encounter that happens to involve two men.<sup>1</sup>

There is so much in this quote that reflects the authors modern approach to the text. For one, the use of the word “queer” as meaning gay is not something David and Jonathan would have been familiar with. Furthermore, the use of “classic” I find quite ironic. The authors are projecting onto this narrative an idea that, in comparison to the era of the Bible, is extremely new, but for them, reflects a sort of nostalgic feeling in the story. Even the question of “when was the last time you saw...?” is one that if truly attempting to perform an act of remotely authentic, historical analysis would be inappropriate and irrelevant by scholarly understanding, but for these “nonspecialist” readers, they find this angle not just appropriate but persuasive. They see

all the modern viewpoints that they bring as evidence in convincing their reader that David and Jonathan have a gay relationship.

In “Exhibit B,” there is a similar modern day comparison drawn as evidentiary proof. There is only one verse that they reference in this “exhibit:” 1 Sam. 20:30 (the verse where Jonathan is chastised by his father Saul for supporting David). In their analysis of the verse, the authors write:

Many gay men have experienced dinner conversations that sounded very similar to this one. They made the mistake of talking about their lover at the table, and their father became furious. More often than not, the blame goes first to the mother, who was “too soft,” or “too harsh,” or who “perverted” her son somehow. Then the father turns his anger toward the son: “Can’t you see how you’re shaming the whole family? Do you even care what this will do to your career? You’ll never amount to anything until you give up this foolishness! In the biblical text, the arguments are the same. And, even more significantly, Saul’s reference to shaming Jonathan’s mother’s nakedness carries a sexual connotation.<sup>i</sup>

The explanation of Saul’s rebuke of Jonathan as being comparable to a 21<sup>st</sup> century talk at the dinner table further elaborates on the nature of the authors arguments. As “nonspecialists” they bring to the text their own experiences and understandings. This approach would be less problematic had it been phrased as a means of contextualizing the verse. Why the authors believe that Jonathan is a gay man with like experiences to some people today I do not understand, but this avenue of thought appears to be one they find both personally meaningful and one that will be meaningful for their audience.

“Exhibit C” describes the two men’s last encounter. Their argument in this section has little to take note of; however, “Exhibit D” they describe as being, “the smoking gun,”<sup>ii</sup> and addresses arguably the most controversial verse for this topic. In this “exhibit” the authors analyze David’s Lament and the critical phrase, “your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.”<sup>iii</sup> Their explanation of this verse furthers their modern yet historical angle that they are bringing to the text. They write:

Here it is in black and white. David states the love he shared with Jonathan was greater than what he had experienced with women. Have you ever heard a heterosexual man say he loved his male friend more than

his wife? This goes well beyond deep friendship between two heterosexual men. In this story, we have a direct biblical answer to our question: Can two people of the same sex live in a loving, committed relationship with God's favor? The answer is "yes," because Jonathan and David did, and the Bible celebrates their relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the authors have an agenda in this article. They want to find evidence of a homosexual relationship comparable to relationships of today. For them, these verses from 1 and 2 Sam. depict a loving, homoerotic, intimate connection between David and Jonathan. They believe their reading of the text is a genuine, accurate one, but rather, they read the Bible in a way that validates an experience they already personally connect with, replacing known scholarship for modern, personal understanding.

This approach to reading the narrative with a personal bias and agenda I have found to not only apply for those seeking affirming gay relationships. Opponents to the growing acceptance of the modern idea of homosexuality in society also bring this same lens to the text, but instead of finding evidence of homosexuality, they see David and Jonathan as having a different kind of "intimate" relationship.<sup>ii</sup> In J. Lee Grady's article "How I Know David and Jonathan aren't Gay,"<sup>12</sup> Grady analyzes many of the same verses as the authors of "David Loved Jonathan More than Women."<sup>11</sup> Grady lays out his argument into three main sections: "Old Testament morality has not changed," "David and Jonathan had a model friendship," and "We should encourage healthy male friendships instead of sexualizing them."<sup>ii</sup>

In section one, Grady's is somewhat in common with scholarship on this subject. He realizes that our modern understand of sexuality is not cohesive with that of biblical times. Grady states, "Our culture today is redefining sexuality... It's silly to make the Bible imply something it never said."<sup>iii</sup> Grady is right that, by scholarly understanding, the Bible does not specifically mention the kind of homosexual relationship some people find in the text. However, right after this statement, his historical accuracy falters. He writes, "it's laughable to suggest that

David, the author of many of the psalms—and the biblical figure who best represents a true worshipper of the one true God—would be recast as being in a gay relationship.”<sup>ii</sup> This statement lacks full understanding of the character of David in a couple ways by suggesting that he is the author of psalms (it is unlikely that David knew how to write) and an entire paper could be written on what makes someone the “best representation of a true worshipper.” Beyond that, though, the last phrase of this quote shows that Grady’s reading of the narrative does not find evidence of a gay relationship because he sees being gay as appalling and that someone of the caliber at which he views David could never be, not because of scholarly understanding. Here, once again personal agenda is showing through in interpretation. This becomes more evident in the following sections.

In the second part of his argument, Grady comments on 1 Sam. 18:3, the verse that describes how Jonathan had some kind of love of David. He explains:

Scripture says Jonathan loved David “as himself” (1 Sam. 18:3). Jonathan’s love was selfless and heroic. Even though he was in line to be the next king of Israel, he recognized David would step into that role—and Jonathan not only celebrated his friend as the rightful king but also protected him from his father’s spear-throwing tantrums Jonathan’s love was not lust. It was the ultimate in sacrifice...Jonathan showed us all how to be a true friend.<sup>ii</sup>

While Grady does not find David and Jonathan’s relationship to be one of a sexual nature, he does find it to be special in a different way. He sees the “love” of Jonathan to be one of strong friendship rather than lust. This interpretation holds true with scholarship in suggesting there was nothing gay about the relationship, however its complete denial of any sexual behavior between the two men is not. Scholars believe and admit that sexual acts did occur between men (see footnote 7) however, these acts did not translate into “homosexuality” the way it is thought of today.

Also in section two, Grady address the most controversial verse, 2 Sam. 27. He states, “David’s comment that his friend’s love was “more wonderful than the love of women” was not

sexual; he was praising Jonathan's loyalty and brotherly devotion."<sup>ii</sup> Once again, Grady is emphasizing how he sees the relationship as one of ultimate friendship. He uses terms that scholars also use such as "loyalty and devotion" in describing the relationship, but for scholars these terms are much more political in nature, while for Grady they are amicable and friendly.

This understanding of the relationship as one of friendship is fleshed out further in section three. Grady attacks those who read homosexuality into this narrative and provides a brief analysis on today's culture and its pitfalls. He writes:

In our fatherless culture, men are starved for affirmation and encouragement. God wired men to need close friends, but few of us are willing to build those kinds of relationships because of insecurity, inferiority or pride. Many guys are lonely, isolated and afraid to admit they need help...The church today should do everything possible to encourage male friendships. It is incredibly perverse—not to mention blasphemous—to suggest that anything sexual was going on between David and Jonathan. Yet I suspect that leaders in the gay-affirming church movement will continue to come up with more bizarre examples of Scripture-twisting in order to promote their agenda. We can't allow them to hijack the purity of the gospel.

Grady recognizes how readers who have a "gay" reading of the narrative bring their own agenda to the text, but he fails to realize he is doing the same. He is undergoing a similar act to the readers he dislikes, arguing the genuine way to understand the text is through a modern-day view of relationships. For Grady, rather than homosexual, the relationship comparable to an ideal male bond, the ultimate way for two men to be friends.

In this paper, I have provided two examples of how modern "nonspecialists" have read the narrative of David and Jonathan. I have shown how there exist at least two sides to this argument, and that these two sides purposely juxtapose themselves as opposites. But, the way they are reading the text is not that different from one another. They both bring an agenda of what they want to find in the story, and they both approach it with a lens of modern understandings of relationships rather than seeing the text solely for what it is: a story about two men living in 1000 BCE, unaware of modern ideas of friendship, homosexuality, and gay.

There is much more research to be done here. This paper has only looked at two examples of “nonspecialist” readings. While it has been thorough, it is also a bit shallow to be able to make any large claims on modern readings as a whole. It has also narrowed in onto a solely Christian perspective. There is a great deal worth analyzing beyond both these examples and Christianity. In Chabad’s Internet summary of the narrative, the organization decides to completely leave out the phrase in David’s Lament about Jonathan’s love being greater than that of a woman.<sup>iii</sup> Also, in a written discussion about Jewish Law, Conservative Rabbi Joel Roth has a reading of there being a gay relationship between David and Jonathan, which he argues therefore supports homosexuality as moral, but he yet still finds it to not be acceptable religiously.<sup>iv</sup> Both of these examples could and should be analyzed to help give a Jewish perspective to what I have found in this paper.

Despite this paper being too shallow to make broad remarks on the nature of how modern religious thinkers and practitioners, or “nonspecialists,” read the narrative of David and Jonathan, there are conclusions that can be drawn. These readers, rather than looking at 1 and 2 Sam. as a text that exists within a certain time and with its own contemporary, culturally relevant for 10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> BCE understandings of love and relationships, bring to the text a pre-determined agenda, looking to find (or specifically not find) a particular kind of relationship. What comes from their analysis is an interpretation of how a modern reader can connect to these characters, as either relating to the marginalized nature of homosexuality, or the want and need of deep male friendship. However, in the end, both of these approaches are, from a scholarly perspective, irrelevant to an attempt at as-close-to an accurate, genuine, historical reading of the narrative as possible. Put simply, the question of “gay or nay” is not the right question to be asking. But, this does not stop modern thinkers and practitioners of doing just that.

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<sup>i</sup> "David Loved Jonathan More than Women." *Would Jesus Discriminate?*

<sup>ii</sup> Grady, J. Lee. "How I Know David and Jonathan Weren't Gay."

<sup>iii</sup> "Death of King Saul - Jewish History." Chabad.org

<sup>iv</sup> Rabbi Roth, Jonah. "Homosexuality Revisited" Rabbinical Assembly Tehsuvot pg. 4

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