

A Textual Analysis of 1 Samuel 18:1-9.

In this textual analysis the passage *Jonathan's Covenant with David* (1 Sam. 18:1-9) will be explored through the hermeneutic of Queer Theology, considering the implications of this text for a greater understanding of LGBT+¹ concerns within the Bible. The context of the passage within the First Book of Samuel will be considered, then the passage will be analysed from a 'traditional' perspective, drawing on understandings based on historical-social criticism,² to provide a 'baseline' of accepted interpretation. Queer Theology as a distinctive hermeneutic lens will then be explored, in respect of the benefits it can bring to an LGBT+ understanding of biblical texts and also the limitations of its application for LGBT+ readers. Finally, the passage will be analysed using a Queer Theology approach, with the impact of this hermeneutic considered.

The narrative context for this scene is a wider account of the monarchy of Israel under Saul and the King's wars with neighbouring peoples in which he fights alongside his son, Jonathan (1 Sam. 10-17). A successor to Saul, David, is anointed by the prophet Samuel, as God rejects Saul (1 Sam. 16); David enters Saul's service (1 Sam. 16), enjoys military success against the Philistines (1 Sam. 17), and is presented to Saul immediately before the passage under consideration here. The scene is followed by Saul's displeasure with David, who marries one of Saul's daughters, and Saul's persecution of David, who is helped and supported by Jonathan, as he escapes and evades the King. The book ends with the death of Saul and his sons. The narrative continues into the Second Book of Samuel, which opens with David mourning for Jonathan, before David is anointed King of Judah and, later, all of Israel. Literary criticism regards the book as a complete, although complex, integral unit of writing.³ Social-historical critics date the events described in 1 Samuel to c.1,000 BCE, during a time of great political change for the people of Israel, as they transitioned away from tribal groupings towards a unified kingdom.⁴ Bruce Birch recognises the central historical realism related in the book, but acknowledges the use of 'artistic and theological imagination' used to convey the relationships between characters and between the characters and God.⁵

A 'traditional' exegesis of *Jonathan's Covenant with David*

The opening verse of 1 Samuel 18 acts as a bridge to connect this passage with the previous chapter, ending David's conversation with Saul, but also serves to immediately introduce Jonathan into David's story.⁶ The reader is told that 'Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul' (v.1).

¹ 'LGBT+' will be used in this textual analysis as indicative of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and others for whom a cis-heteronormative identity is not applicable. Although there are other possible acronyms or terms which could be used, LGBT+ is intended to be inclusive and, for consistency, will be applied throughout unless there is reason to use a different term. See L.M. TONSTAD *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), pp.3-4.

² Historical-Social Criticism can be defined as: '...a close reading of the text read against the background of information from traditional disciplines such as ancient history, classical studies and archaeology.' D. HOLGATE and R.STARR *Biblical Hermeneutics*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2019), p.74.

³ B.C. BIRCH 'The First and Second Books of Samuel' in *NIB Commentary*, p.313.

⁴ B.C. BIRCH 'The First and Second Books of Samuel', pp.314-315.

⁵ B.C. BIRCH 'The First and Second Books of Samuel', p.315.

⁶ B.C. BIRCH 'The First and Second Books of Samuel', p.438.

Birch notes the personal nature of the bonding of the souls of the two men, observing the use of *nepes* – translated as soul – meaning the ‘essential life of a person or animal’.⁷ David Payne considers that Jonathan ‘fell under David’s spell’, emphasising not only the personal loyalty of Jonathan to David but also the ‘compelling charm’ David exerted upon those around him.⁸ The reader has previously learned that David ‘...was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome’ (1 Sam. 16: 12), and that God was with David when he first entered Saul’s house and played the lyre to drive away an evil spirit (1 Sam. 16:14-23). In verse 2, Saul has David live permanently in his house, which Birch suggests could be seen as a form of ‘adoption into the royal household’ which is later formalised when David marries Saul’s daughter Michal (1 Sam. 18:20-27).⁹

Verse 3 resumes the formation of a covenant between Jonathan and David, which, as John Bergsma and Brant Pitre observe, is the first of two covenants which David will form with Saul’s children (the other being when he marries Michal); they note that this covenantal relationship is a ‘deep friendship’ with oaths of confidence and reciprocal love.¹⁰ Jonathan strips his armour and gives it to David (v.4). Payne notes the significance of this action as the ‘crown prince’ acknowledging David as the true successor to his father;¹¹ Birch affirms that the robe is a recognised symbol for the kingdom (1 Sam. 15:28), which Jonathan is passing to David in a statement authorising David to take his place as Saul’s heir.¹² Gwilym Jones concurs that the handing over of Jonathan’s armour sealed a political pact between the two, reflecting that the covenant was a political, as much as a personal, one.¹³

Verse 5 informs the reader that David was successful in the military engagements to which Saul sent him, and so Saul put him in command of the army, to the approval of all the people. This, as Bergsma and Pitre note, actually served to David’s detriment, as Saul became jealous of David’s military success which he viewed as a threat, undermining his kingship.¹⁴ This becomes evident in verses 6 to 8, when David accompanies Saul returning from a battle; the women of the towns sang, ‘Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.’ (v.7). Jones observes that the message Saul would have taken from this was that David would become superior to him, and indeed would take his place as king.¹⁵ It is little surprise, therefore, that Saul ‘eyed David from that day on.’

Birch considers, and dismisses, the suggestion by scholars that this passage should be split, with vv.1-5 forming the ending of chapter 17, the account of David’s victory over Goliath and the Philistines; instead, he argues, this section forms the opening of a new narrative which portrays David growing in love within Saul’s

⁷ B.C. BIRCH ‘The First and Second Books of Samuel’, p.438.

⁸ D.F. PAYNE, *Samuel* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1982), p.95.

⁹ B.C. BIRCH ‘The First and Second Books of Samuel’, pp.438-439.

¹⁰ J. BERGSMA and B. PITRE *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), p.360.

¹¹ D.F. PAYNE *Samuel*, p.95.

¹² B.C. BIRCH ‘The First and Second Books of Samuel’, p.439.

¹³ G.H. JONES ‘1 and 2 Samuel’ in *OBC*, p.209.

¹⁴ J. BERGSMA and B. PITRE, p.360.

¹⁵ G.H. JONES ‘1 and 2 Samuel’, p.209.

household and then more widely into the whole nation – a contrast to Saul falling out of favour with his household, the nation and, indeed, God.¹⁶

The overall sense from these commentators of the purpose of this passage is that it describes the formation of a political pact of friendship between Jonathan and David, with Jonathan acknowledging David's position as the heir to Saul, followed by the establishment of a growing jealousy and suspicion between Saul and David, who continues to enjoy military success and becomes ever more popular in the kingdom.

Queer Theology as a hermeneutical approach

Patrick Cheng writes extensively about Queer Theory, and its application by theologians to generate Queer Theology. He provides a helpful definition of Queer Theory: 'a critical approach to sexuality and gender that challenges what is 'normal' or 'natural'.¹⁷ This is elaborated into four 'strands' of Queer Theology. In the first strand, Cheng suggests that to be *queer* is to challenge cis-heteronormative identities and relationships. Further, God can be argued to be outside 'normal' identities and relationships since we cannot adequately define or categorise God according to our limited human understandings; this draws on apophatic (negative) theology, which maintains that we only know God by knowing what God is not: God can therefore be seen as an 'identity without essence' and so Queer Theology can be a valid hermeneutical approach to the study of God.¹⁸ 'Transgression' concerns opposing an accepted norm or a dominant position, for which *queer* should be deployed as a verb rather than a noun; this enables queerness to be seen as actively subversive in its challenge to societal and cultural paradigms. On this basis, Jesus can be seen as *queering* the religious and cultural standards and expectations of his time through his teaching, ministry, choice of associates and, ultimately through his crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus subverts expectations and so can be identified as queer.¹⁹ The third strand is a resistance to established binary classifications, the most significant of which for this discussion is the binary of male and female: a person born with a biologically-determined male body is expected to have a male gender identity and, by default, a sexual and romantic attraction to females (and vice versa).²⁰ Queer Theory recognises the varied lived experiences of LGBT+ people and acknowledges contributions from social sciences and biology to challenge such binaries: biological sex, gender identity and sexual orientation are significantly more complex than the established paradigm would permit and vary between individuals and, it can be argued, can be fluid over time. Queerness, then, can be seen as challenging to binary systems for categorisation. Cheng uses the person of Jesus as an example: being 'both fully human and fully divine', as Christian doctrine insists, means that the incarnation of Jesus resists a binary classification; he adds that God as a Trinity (understood as co-equal Father, Son and Holy Spirit) also

¹⁶ B.C. BIRCH 'The First and Second Books of Samuel', p.436.

¹⁷ P.S. CHENG 'Contributions from Queer Theory' in A. Thatcher (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.153.

¹⁸ P.S. CHENG 'Contributions from Queer Theory', pp.155-156, 160.

¹⁹ P.S. CHENG 'Contributions from Queer Theory', pp.156, 161.

²⁰ P.S. CHENG 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.157.

challenges a binary understanding of paired and hierarchical relationships.²¹ Christian doctrine can therefore be understood as inherently queer. In Cheng's fourth strand, he argues that all fixed understandings of categories of gender and sexuality are unnatural and exist as a result of 'social construction' through power and control.²² Cheng cites the work of Michael Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1990) in recognising that many of the binary classifications in use today originate in the nineteenth century, particularly with the emergence of the homosexual identity from medical science.²³ Charlie Bell points out, however, that 'same-sex attraction' is not a defining feature for gay men and lesbians (and much less all LGBT+ people), and so would resist the classification drawn from Victorian scientific endeavours as invalid.²⁴ For Queer Theologians, the underlying point here is that earthly identities are not fixed or stable and are not of any eternal significance: gender and sexual identities – and our identities in God – do not, and need not, conform to a universal, socially-constructed binary.²⁵ Cheng's understanding of Queer Theology might therefore be summarised as challenging and seeking to subvert established paradigms of socially-constructed binary identities and hierarchies based on dominance and cultural expectations, using a Christian understanding of God and God's relationship with the world as a basis for valid exploration and queering of accepted norms.

An important point is emphasised by Linn Tonstad: although Queer Theology is concerned with issues of sexuality and gender, it is not simply a group of apologetic strategies to affirm the identities and relationships of LGBT+ people, albeit that this is a primary reason for many queer theologians to become involved.²⁶ Indeed, this student's interest in Queer Theology is motivated by an ongoing need to affirm the place of LGBT+ people within the church community where he serves as a curate. Cheng reflects that Queer Theology relies upon four sources: Scripture, tradition (Church doctrine), reason and experience;²⁷ this positions the Bible as an authoritative source, although not the only source, of Christian understanding about God, and hence it is only reasonable that LGBT+ students of Queer Theology will seek to use the Bible to explore the questions posed by Queer Theology, but, as Tonstad states, this is not its primary purpose. It is also notable that the Bible is taken to be one among four equal sources of authority, and the interpretation of biblical texts must deploy appropriate hermeneutics to allow for reason and experience alongside Church tradition.²⁸

So what are the advantages to LGBT+ people of using Queer Theology as a hermeneutic through which to understand the Bible? Bell maintains that the authority of the Bible should not be challenged by Queer Theology, but instead the interpretation of scripture to affirm an inclusive response is the aim, although this is a challenge to our human need for certainty,²⁹ perhaps a further binary to which Bell might be referring: absolute truth versus heresy. Queer Theology gives permission to read the Bible freed from the assumptions

²¹ P.S. CHENG 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.162.

²² P.S. CHENG 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.158.

²³ P.S. CHENG 'Contributions from Queer Theory', p.158.

²⁴ C. BELL *Queer Holiness: The Gift of LGBTQI People to the Church* (London: DLT, 2022), p.14.

²⁵ P.S. CHENG 'Contributions from Queer Theory', pp.163-164.

²⁶ L.M. TONSTAD *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), p.3.

²⁷ P.S. CHENG *Radical Love: An Introduction to QUEER Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), p.11.

²⁸ S. CORNWALL *Controversies in Queer Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2011), p.138.

²⁹ C. BELL *Queer Holiness*, pp.36-37.

of cis-heteronormative understandings of gender and sexual identity, and to acknowledge the male-dominated power structures which will have played a part in the composition of the biblical texts; in this respect, Queer Theology has points of intersection with other contemporary approaches to the Bible, particularly Feminist, Womanist and Black theologies, where challenging exclusionary, misogynistic and oppressive readings of Scripture is important. In the removal of these established lenses through a Queer Theology approach, LGBT+ readers of the Bible can seek affirmation of their lives and experiences in Scripture, through encountering characters, relationships and stories in the texts which might otherwise be overlooked, or interpreted differently using cis-heteronormative binary categories and assumptions.

There are, of course, limitations in the approach of Queer Theology for LGBT+ readers of the Bible. For example, gay men and lesbians in particular might be seeking to find affirmation of same-sex relationships and family lives, which is what Susannah Cornwall might describe as a 'specificity' within Queer Theology; 'Gay Theology' is a strand within Queer Theology and, Cornwall acknowledges, an important one, but Queer Theology goes beyond this particular locus of interest.³⁰ If Queer Theology challenges established positions, it must surely also critique the desire and need of some LGBT+ people to form pair-bonded relationships and family units in the manner of heterosexual relationships; if this is the case, then whilst Queer Theology can support readings of the Bible which affirm same-sex relationships for example, it might also question their validity. Liberation theologian Ivan Petrella uses the lens of Queer Theology to discuss and critique capitalism, challenging neoliberal market forces operating within the global order which has arisen since the 1990s with the fall of Communism;³¹ this reveals an important aspect of Queer Theology: its application is far wider than specific LGBT+ questions. Cornwall asserts that the significant overlap between Queer Theology and specific LGBT+ concerns will drift apart over time as the 'suspicion of regulatory identity' embedded with Queer Theology comes to greater prominence:³² if, as Cheng has posited, Queer Theology is concerned with challenging all forms of socially-constructed identities and relationships, particularly in respect of binaries and hierarchies, then this does seem likely to be the case in the longer term.

An exegesis of *Jonathan's Covenant with David* using a Queer Theology hermeneutical approach

The following is an attempt by this student to apply the principles of a Queer Theology hermeneutical approach, as explored above, to the story of *Jonathan's Covenant with David* (1 Sam. 18:9).

The passage opens as David is finishing a conversation with King Saul (v.1) after he has defeated the Philistines' military champion, Goliath (1 Sam. 17); this has been a subversion of the expected military campaign and its outcome, as David was unable to wear the armour and use the sword Saul provided for

³⁰ S. CORNWALL *Controversies in Queer Theology*, pp.50-52.

³¹ I. PETRELLA 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy: The Making Over of Liberation Theology, a Queer Discursive Approach' in M. Althaus-Reid (ed.) *Liberation Theology and Sexuality*. 2nd edn. (London: SCM Press, 2009), pp.33-34.

³² S. CORNWALL *Controversies in Queer Theology*, pp.51-52.

him because he was a gentle young man. Yet David wins by using a slingshot to defeat the much more powerful Goliath, hence winning the battle for Saul. David has challenged the cultural expectations and, in doing so, further impresses Saul who was already fond of David, having had this ruddy, handsome young man, with beautiful eyes (1 Sam. 16:12), to serve him privately, bearing his armour and playing soothing music to him whenever he was troubled by an evil spirit (1 Sam. 16:14-23). Saul has been developing an affectionate relationship with David, whose company he has found to be desirable, and whom he 'loved greatly' (1 Sam. 16:21). Following his military success, Saul took David and insisted that David lived in his house from then on (v.2).

In the meantime, however, the soul of Saul's eldest son, Jonathan, 'was bound to the soul of David' (v.1). Jonathan loved David 'as his own soul' and formed a covenantal relationship with David (v.3). Jonathan strips himself of his robe, and gives this and his armour to David, submitting to him as the superior warrior and recognising David as the heir to his father's kingdom in his own place (v.4).

Saul places his favourite in charge of his army, and David continues to enjoy great success and a growing popularity among the people (v.5). David, the youngest son of his own family, and a shepherd boy by trade (1 Sam. 16:11), has taken the place of the powerful son of the king, subverting the expected power dynamic. Further than this, David is praised more highly even than Saul by the townspeople who come out to sing, 'Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands' (vv.6-7). The hierarchy is at risk of being destabilised, making Saul angry; he undertook to keep a jealous eye on David from then on (vv.8-9).

In removing the cis-heteronormative filter which might usually be applied to a reading of scripture, a Queer Theology-based exegesis of the passage has recognised the loving relationship between first Saul and David and then between Jonathan and David; Saul loves David, whose beauty is recognised several times in the wider narrative, but David is drawn into a covenantal relationship with Saul's eldest son just at the moment that Saul brings David into his own royal household. Jonathan is now enjoying David's presence in the way in which his father had perhaps intended himself. Saul becomes jealous of David, and David falls out of Saul's favour – ostensibly because of the additional popularity David is gaining in the kingdom due this military success, but it is difficult to see how David's covenantal relationship with Jonathan is not a factor, perhaps even the principal factor, at play here. Indeed, Saul sends David out into battle in the hope that he will be killed and, when this is unsuccessful, he arranges for David to marry one of his daughters, which David questions on the basis of his lowly status (1 Sam. 18:10-23). The narrative continues further, with Jonathan interceding with the king to prevent him killing David (1 Sam. 19) and then a story in which the closeness of the relationship with Jonathan – even after David's marriage to Michal – is explored (1 Sam. 20). Later, when Saul and Jonathan are killed in battle, and before David is anointed as king, David sings a song of lament for the loss of his beloved Jonathan: '...greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women' (2 Sam. 1:26). When this extended narrative is taken into account this adds significant weight to the idea of the deep loving nature of the bond between David and Jonathan. This is, it would seem

clear, a story of a queer relationship: David and Jonathan are in a formal, loving relationship with each other, but each is also married to a woman with whom they have children; indeed, after Jonathan's death, David took in Jonathan's son Mephibosheth as his own son (2 Sam. 9), and had several children of his own with multiple women. David can be seen to have created a blended family with the inclusion of his 'stepson'.³³

In addition to this, being alert to the subversion of power and hierarchy when reading through the lens of Queer Theology, it can be seen as remarkable that the kingdom has passed not to a powerful man but to a lowly shepherd boy who, through his reported trust in God, was able to use his lover's armour to become successful in battles and to evade the jealous rage of the king. The reporting of military campaigns has been queered in this story, with the lowly, inexperienced, unarmed, gentle boy gaining a stunning victory and thence the love of the king.

It would appear therefore that a Queer Theology hermeneutic opens up this text to reveal a queer love story set within a queered power dynamic, in which David will eventually lose his male lover but gain the kingdom. This is quite different from the 'traditional' exegesis undertaken earlier which led to the synopsis that this is story of a politically-motivated pact between two friends in which the change in succession to the king is emphasised and the king is jealous of David's military success and plots revenge on him. In both instances, it is necessary to read the selected passage within its wider narrative context in order to glean deeper levels of understanding. John Collins, who adopts a traditional stance, acknowledges that 'homosexual attraction' might well have been a factor in the relationship between Jonathan and David, and indeed in similar male-male relationships in the Bible, but, as any sexual activity between them is not reported explicitly, it is to be discounted.³⁴ So how can this queer interpretation be supported?

In the context of biblical same-sex relationships, Theodore Jennings discusses the concept of 'Warrior Love'; warriors, including David, Jonathan and Saul, are reported to have men/boys who travelled with them as their 'armour bearers' (Judg.; 1 Sam.), a notion of intimate relationships between two males engaged in lives lived on the battlefield. Jennings notes that this type of relationship is reported elsewhere, in ancient Greece as well as the traditions of Korea and Japan, with King David's being the most extensive account.³⁵ What makes the story of David unusual, in this context one might say queer, is that David is the lover of two men more powerful than he is himself, chosen because of his beauty; Jennings observes that the notion of David taking this (assumed) passive role in the relationships would have been considered as an abomination by the later priestly authors who would classify such sexual behaviour as an abomination in Leviticus (for example, Lev. 20:13), particularly given the important place of King David in the national identity of the Jewish people.³⁶ Michael Harvey, a Reform Judaism Rabbi, is of the clear opinion that David and Jonathan were not only

³³ T.W. JENNINGS 'Same-Sex Relations in the Biblical World' in A. Thatcher (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.212.

³⁴ J.J. COLLINS *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. 3rd edn. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), p.152.

³⁵ T.W. JENNINGS 'Same-Sex Relations in the Biblical World', p.211.

³⁶ T.W. JENNINGS 'Same-Sex Relations in the Biblical World', pp.211-212.

lovers but indeed married, according to the customs of their own time. Harvey points first to the use of *nefesh* (soul) in verses 1 and 3, which indicates the love of ‘soulmates’ and not, as others suggest, ‘loving one’s countryman/fellow/neighbour’. Secondly, he reports that in the Ancient Near East, a marriage involved three parts: the moving of one spouse from one family’s home to the other; the forming of a covenantal vow; and, the giving of a significant gift. These three stages can be seen explicitly in verses 2 to 4.³⁷ This relationship of eternal love is supported by gay Orthodox Rabbi Steven Greenberg who suggests that the one-directional nature of the reported covenant might suggest that Jonathan was gay and David, who also married women, was bisexual.³⁸ Caution is needed here, as it would be incorrect to state that David and Jonathan were homosexual, or even bisexual, according to our modern understandings of those concepts which were not recognised at the time³⁹ – but a less binary, more fluid attitude to sexual and romantic behaviours might well have been prevalent than the understandings later imposed by Christian traditions. What this does suggest is that the covenant between Jonathan and David as reported in the passage might have been sufficiently acceptable to their contemporaries that there was no embarrassment about its deliberate inclusion in the narrative.

Conclusion

Having compared a ‘traditional’ exegesis with one using a Queer Theology-based approach, it is clear that there are significant differences which can be observed, and these could certainly be helpful for LGBT+ readers seeking affirmation from biblical sources. This is primarily achieved through challenging accepted binary understandings and socially-constructed norms, which, in this case, encourages the removal of a cis-heteronormative lens. While Tonstad argues that the application of Queer Theology should not be limited to apologetics, in this instance, it has proved to be a useful hermeneutic for identifying, and thereby affirming, the presence of a loving same-sex relationship in the covenant between Jonathan and David.

Word count: 3,849 words excluding footnotes.

³⁷ M. HARVEY ‘David/Jonathan thread’ [Twitter], <<https://twitter.com/RabbiHarvey/status/1635482041654427648>> 14 March 2023 [Accessed 14 March 2023].

³⁸ S. GREENBERG *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p.104.

³⁹ The modern classifications of homosexuality and bisexuality (and indeed heterosexuality) cannot be used accurately to describe the sexual behaviours of those living in the Ancient Near East in the 10th Century BCE. For further details, see J. TALLON *Affirmative: Why you can say yes to the Bible and yes to people who are LGBTQI+* (London: Richardson Jones Press, 2023), pp.9-16.

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