The Covenant of David and Jonathan:
An Exegetical Study of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1

by

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The narrative of David and Jonathan in the Hebrew Bible is one of the most beloved stories of friendship and loyalty. This thesis is an exegesis of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 which recounts David and Jonathan’s parting after David discovers, with the help of Jonathan, what were Saul’s true intentions towards him. The primary aim of this study will be to explore the covenant between Jonathan and David by asking questions such as the following: What kind of covenant was it? What did it entail? Why did they make it? To answer these questions, this thesis also investigates the history of interpretation of the passage and the concept of covenant in the Hebrew Bible. It argues that David and Jonathan shared a parity covenant which, while serving their respective political needs, also became a self-giving and self-emptying friendship.
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Abbreviations


LXX  Septuagint

MT  Masoretic Text

NRSV  New Revised Standard Version

NT  New Testament

OT  Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

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INTRODUCTION

The story of David and Jonathan is one of the most beloved in the Hebrew scriptures because of its display of friendship, sacrifice, and loyalty. The narrative also brings out the biblical notion of *covenant* and how the relationship of David and Jonathan fits into this multi-faceted concept. The passage of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 (following the MT verse arrangement) is of particular importance in the overall structure of the books of Samuel because it is a turning point both for David and Jonathan personally, and for Israel as a whole. Situated in the context of the Deuteronomistic History, this passage occurs after a number of significant events in 1 Samuel; examples include the call of Samuel (3:1-18), Israel’s request for a king (8:1-22), the selection and rejection of Saul (9:1-10:8, 13:1-15, 15:10-34), the anointing of David as future king (16:1-13), David’s defeat of the Philistine Goliath (17:1-58), and Jonathan’s covenant with David (18:1-4). One must not consider this passage in isolation, but in the greater context of all these events, for that is how it is a turning point in the story. Stemming from Israel’s demand for a king in order to be like other nations, David and Jonathan’s covenant-making and parting in 20:1-21:1 comes as a result of the rejected king Saul’s increasing hostility towards the one whom he has come to know as his rival for the throne. Thus we arrive at a turning point: What will David do? To whom will Jonathan be loyal? How will their covenant play out? The narrative reveals the answers to these questions as the story progresses; however, there is much more depth to this passage that deserves attention, especially regarding the covenant of David and Jonathan.

This thesis, therefore, is an exegetical exploration of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 and the primary aim is to explore the covenant between Jonathan and David by asking questions such as the following: What kind of covenant was it? What did it entail? Why did they make it?
Ultimately, the thesis will demonstrate that the covenant between David and Jonathan was a parity covenant which served their political needs, but extended beyond that into a self-giving and self-emptying friendship.

Procedure and Methodology

The thesis is organized according to the following procedure and methodology:

- **Chapter One** is my translation of the Hebrew text of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 as found in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. I use the tools listed in the Lexicons and Grammars section of the bibliography to explain my translational choices. Other English translations, especially the *New Revised Standard Version* are consulted when the Hebrew text is particularly difficult or obscure.

- **Chapter Two** concerns the history of interpretation of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1, including the LXX, Josephus, rabbinic and patristic interpretation, and modern/contemporary commentary. The second section of this chapter explores the concept of *covenant* in the Hebrew Bible.

- **Chapter Three** is the main part of the thesis and includes two sections. The first is a literary exegesis of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 using the approach of Keith Bodner which is “a close reading of the text that attends to matters of plot, character, points of view, irony, wordplay, direct speech, ambiguity, spatial and temporal settings, and the role of the narrator.”¹ This is the same kind of approach as that of Robert Alter and Frank Kermode in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. They explain that “the general reader can now be offered a new view of the Bible as a work of great literary force and authority, a work of

which it is entirely credible that it should have shaped the minds and lives of intelligent
men and women for two millennia and more.”

Furthermore, “the Bible, considered as a
book, achieves its effects by means no different from those generally employed by
written language.”

Regardless of how one views the Bible—as an inspired text, a source
for morality, a record of past events, or something else—“unless we have a sound
understanding of what the text is doing and saying, it will not be of much value in other
respects.” Thus the approach of this thesis is not that of higher criticism, but looks at the
text from the perspective of its final form, and takes a literary-exegetical perspective.
This best draws forth the insights and evidence necessary for the main argument which is
put forth in the second section of this chapter, that is, that David and Jonathan shared a
parity covenant that extended into self-giving friendship.

The thesis will conclude by looking at why the argument matters; that is, what it says about God
and the characters themselves, and what it means for the church today.

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2 Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds, *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge,
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. Cf. also Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2
CHAPTER ONE:
TRANSLATION OF 1 SAM 20:1-21:1

1 Then David fled from Naioth\(^1\) in Ramah and he came before Jonathan and said, “What have I done? What is my offence?\(^2\) What\(^3\) is my sin before\(^4\) your father that he is seeking my life?” 2 And he [Jonathan] said to him, “Certainly not!\(^5\) You will not die! Behold, my father does\(^6\) not do anything great or small without informing me.\(^7\) So why should my father hide this matter from me? This would never happen!” 3 But David swore again and said, “Your father surely knows\(^9\) that I have found favour in your eyes; thus your father\(^10\) said, ‘Jonathan must not know

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\(^1\) Following the Qere which reads רָאִית.  
\(^2\) Holladay (A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988], 268) permits the translation of עָוֹן as “sin” or “offence.” רָאִית, which follows, means “my sin” (p. 101). Therefore, to avoid repetition, I have chosen to translate עֲוֹנִי as “my offence.”  
\(^3\) Regarding the use of מַה, GKC explains as follows: “Before gutturals in close connexion, . . . [מַה is] modified to segol, especially before י, ה, and generally before ה (§37d).”  
\(^4\) Williams (Williams’ Hebrew Syntax, 3rd ed, revised and expanded by John C. Beckman [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007]) describes this as a “Viewpoint לִפְנֵי” meaning that it “can indicate that something is being described from the perspective of the object of the preposition. This is also called the mental, perceptual, or referential use of לִפְנֵי” (p. 136, #372). In other words, David is asking Jonathan to explain what Saul believes to be his sins. This is an important nuance because David is not admitting to having committed any sins, but is only asking Jonathan what Saul perceives as his sins against him.  
\(^5\) Holladay (Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, p. 105) describes חָלִילָה as “alw[ays] adversive, negative interj[ection]” as if it means “to the profane.” This might suggest that Jonathan regards David’s question about why Saul is seeking to kill him as offensive; the following statement by Jonathan about how his father reveals everything to him could support this nuance. Indeed, The Rubin Edition’s translation is as follows: “He said to him, ‘It would be a sacrilege; you shall not die!’” (Nosson Scherman, ed, The Prophets: I-II Samuel, The Rubin Edition [Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 2002], 129). The LXX translates חָלִילָה as μηδαμ.  
\(^6\) According to BDAG, “Certainly not!” would be an acceptable rendering.  
\(^7\) Reading with the Qere (לֹא; hence my translation as a negative particle rather than a 3ms suffixed pronoun.  
\(^8\) Literally, “without disclosing it to my ear.”  
\(^9\) GKC points out that the use of the infinitive absolute in this case is to create “a special emphasis on the following verb” (§113o). Hence, I have translated the phrase as “surely know” to emphasize the second verb.
this lest he be grieved.’ Therefore, as the LORD lives, and as you live, there is but a step between me and death.” 4 So Jonathan said to David, “Whatever you say I shall do for you.” 5 And David said to Jonathan, “Behold, tomorrow is the New Moon and I will surely sit with the king to eat. So let me go away and I will hide in the field until the third evening. 6 If your father surely misses me, then you shall say, ‘David implored of me a leave of absence for himself to run to his city Bethlehem for there is a yearly sacrifice for all the family.’ 7 If he says ‘Good,’ then it is well with your servant; but if he becomes very angry, you must know

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10 The Hebrew only has וַיֹּאמֶר. I have added “your father” rather than simply “he said” in order to clarify the speaker of the phrase that follows it.
11 Williams explains that the prefixed כ in כְָפֶשַע is an “asseverative” kaph or “kaph veritatis.” He defines it this way: “When someone earnestly asserts that something is (or will be) something else, the preposition כ may precede that ‘something else’” (Williams’ Hebrew Syntax, p. 103, #261). David wants to convey to Jonathan that, as surely as both Jonathan and the LORD live, with the same certainty David is close to being killed by Saul.
12 Waltke and O’Connor note that this is an “indefinite use” of מַה meaning that it “usually involves a clausal object” (An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990], 325).
13 It is worth noting that this verse ends in a pausal form of the 2ms pronominal suffix; hence we have כ instead of כָ.
14 Concerning כְָפֶשַע, Robert Alter remarks that “[t]he Masoretic Text has ‘the third evening,’ treating hashelishit as an adjective modifying ‘evening,’ though it has the wrong gender suffix. It is more likely a noun meaning the day after tomorrow (the day on which one speaks being day one in the sequence of three).” Thus, he renders this phrase as “the evening of the day after tomorrow.” (The David Story, p. 124)
15 Williams refers to כְָפֶשַע as a “benefactive construction” (or “middle niphal”). He explains that “a verb in the Niphal stem can express an action where the subject acts for its own benefit” (Williams’ Hebrew Syntax, pp. 57-8, #136). Williams even cites 1 Sam 20:6 as an example. Similarly, GKC states that this kind of Niphal is like the Greek middle, having “the meaning of the active, with the addition of to oneself, for oneself” (§51e). Thus, I have translated it accordingly. This is important because it tells us the motive of David’s actions if we had not understood that so far. Waltke and O’Connor note that the “Niphal benefactive is not common” (Biblical Hebrew Syntax, p. 388).
16 It is difficult to express the full sense of שָלוֹם in this passage. If Saul reacts well, then David will have peace, wholeness, intactness, good state of health, and so on. This illustrates some of the semantic range offered by Holladay (Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, p. 371).
17 I have nuanced the translation here by adding “you must” in order to convey better the sense of the imperative (of ידוע) and illustrate the urgency of the situation.
that the evil has fully taken hold of him. 8 Be faithful\(^\text{18}\) to your servant for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you. If there is offence in me, then kill me yourself! Why bring me to your father?” 9 Then Jonathan said, “Never! For if I had any idea that the evil had taken hold in my father to act against you, would I not report it to you?” 10 David said to Jonathan, “Who will report to me if what your father answers you is severe?” 11 And Jonathan said to David, “Come and let us go out to the field.” So the two of them went out to the field.

12 Then Jonathan said to David, “By the LORD, the God of Israel, I will sound out\(^\text{19}\) my father and at this time\(^\text{20}\) the day after tomorrow. Behold, if he is good to David, then will I not send to you and inform you?\(^\text{21}\) 13 Thus will the LORD do to Jonathan and so may he increase it. But if evil for you seems good to my father, then I will inform you\(^\text{22}\) and I will send you away and you will go to safety. May the LORD be with you even as he was with my father. 14 If I am

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\(^{18}\) The Hebrew is חֶסֶד וְעָשִיתָ, literally “So you do faithfulness/loyalty/grace” (and others given by Holladay, *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, p. 111). I have rendered it “Be faithful” in order to convey a sense that David is appealing to their friendship since חֶסֶד, as Holladay says, can also refer to obligations to one’s community, friends, servants, masters, etc. Perhaps David is asking Jonathan to fulfill his obligation of faithfulness and loyalty demanded by their friendship and, as we shall see, their covenant.

\(^{19}\) The actual Hebrew construction is כִי־אֶחְקֹּר. I have chosen not to translate the כִי since it does not seem to fit in an English translation without adding, as The Rubin Edition has done, a prefacing phrase “[I swear by] HASHEM the God of Israel that . . .” (p. 131, square brackets in original). Robert Alter deals with this verse in this way: “Witness the LORD, God of Israel, that I will sound out my father. . . .” He explains that, although the Masoretic Text does not have the word “witness,” “it is reflected in Josephus and the Peshitta” (*The David Story*, p. 125).

\(^{20}\) The Hebrew word עֵת also has eschatological connotations, as Holladay points out (pp. 286-7) perhaps parallel to the Greek word καιρος. The idea is that Jonathan and David’s meeting is not something casual or even merely serious, but has greater consequences in the divine plan to establish a Davidic dynasty.

\(^{21}\) Literally, “reveal it to your ear.”

\(^{22}\) Literally, “reveal it to your ear.”
still alive, then keep with me the faithfulness of the LORD; but if I die, then do not cut off your faithfulness from my house forever, not even when the LORD cuts off all the enemies of David from upon the face of the earth.” Then Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David such that the LORD would exact penalty from the hand of the enemies of David. And Jonathan again made David swear by his love for him, for he loved him as he loved himself.

Then Jonathan said to him, “Tomorrow is the New Moon and you will be missed because your seat will remain empty. On the day after tomorrow you shall go down quickly and come to the place where you were hidden earlier, and remain beside the stone of Azel.

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23 As Holladay points out (Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, p. 170), a לֹא . . . לֹא construction, such as in this verse and the next, can mean “And if not...then.” My translation reflects this, although I have not made Jonathan’s first לֹא . . . לֹא statement negative because that would not make sense.

24 Within the semantic range ofעשה (Holladay, Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, pp. 284-5) is “to keep.” I have chosen this word over “to do” or “to make.” Alter does the same (The David Story, p. 126).

25 Literally וַיִּכְרֹּתָיְהוֹנָתָן, “Then Jonathan cut.” The word תֶּכֶר, however, can be used as an idiom meaning “to make a covenant” (see Holladay, Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, p. 165). Williams writes the following: “Some verbs have a specific direct object that is expected to occur with the verb. For example, in the context of a covenant, the verb תֶּכֶר ‘to cut’ is expected to have the direct object בְּרִית ‘covenant’ (e.g., Gen 21:32). Often, however, the direct object בְּרִית ‘covenant’ is omitted, although it is understood from the context” (Williams’ Hebrew Syntax, p. 209, #589). Williams specifically cites 1 Sam 20:16 as an example of this.

26 BDB (p. 135) gives this nuance for השָׁפָה and would make sense given the covenantal context of the passage.

27 Waltke and O’Connor note that “[i]n many situations where other languages use reflexive constructions, Hebrew does not use the Niphal. Sometimes the reflexive relationship is expressed by means of the prepositions י, ז, etc., with a personal pronoun or some circumlocution, such as ישז or לעב” (Biblical Hebrew Syntax, p. 388). This is what is happening in this verse; thus, my translation reflects a reflexive nuance.

28 I translated מְאֹּד as an adverb modifying תָּרֵד, thus “you shall go down quickly.”

29 I have followed the NRSV using “earlier” because Jonathan is referring to the previous occasion when David hid in the field to eavesdrop on the conversation between Saul and Jonathan (1 Sam 19:3).

30 Holladay defines אָזֶל as the name of a territory (Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, pp. 8, 26).
Then I will shoot three arrows at the side like I was shooting at a target. Behold, I will send a boy: ‘Go! Find the arrows!’ If I surely say to the boy, ‘Look, the arrows are here on this side of you,’ then take them and come back because it is well for you and there is no danger, as the LORD lives. But if, thus, I say to the young man, ‘Look, the arrows are past you,’ then go, for the LORD has sent you away!

But of this matter which we spoke, I and you, behold, the LORD is between me and you forever.”

So David hid himself in the field and when the New Moon came, the king sat down to eat bread. The king sat upon his seat like other times, the seat by the wall. Then Jonathan arose and Abner sat down at the side of Saul and David’s place remained empty. But Saul did not say anything on that day for he said, “Something happened so that he is unclean; he is unclean.”

And it came to pass the next day, the second of the New Moon, that the place of David remained empty. So Saul said to Jonathan his son, “Why did the son of Jesse not come either?

BDB (p. 1019) specifically mentions the construct לְשַלַח־לִי in 1 Sam 20:20 as meaning “shoot.”

ןֶפֶל is somewhat difficult to render into English. Based on both the NRSV and The Rubin Edition translating it as “on this side of you,” I have chosen that rendering as well.

I have rendered the final phrase of the verse in the imperative due to צְלֵ being the imperative.

Reading אֶל with the Qere.

Alter translates this as “Jonathan preceded him,” explaining that his “translation reads weyiqdam instead of the Masoretic wayaqom (“and he rose”). The seating arrangement remains a little obscure, but the verb qadam cannot mean “to sit opposite,” as some scholars have claimed” (The David Story, p. 127).

Regarding בִילְתִי, Williams calls this a “Privative בִילְתִי” saying that it “can indicate a lack of something” (Williams’ Hebrew Syntax, pp. 149-50, #421). It is translated as “lacking,” “without,” or “un-” and I have followed this in my translation by saying “unclean” instead of “not clean.”

Williams refers to the גַם as a “גַם for addition” meaning that it “indicates that something is in addition to something else” (Williams’ Hebrew Syntax, p. 138, #378). Therefore, I have translated the two occurrences of גַם as “either . . . or.”
yesterday or today to the meal?” Jonathan answered Saul: “David implored of me a leave of absence for himself to go to Bethlehem. He said, ‘Please send me away because we have a family sacrifice in the city and my brother himself commanded me. So now, if I have found favour in your eyes, please may I go safely that I may see my brothers?’ For this reason he has not come to the table of the king.” Then Saul became very angry at Jonathan and said to him, “O son of a perverse wayward woman! Do I not know that you have entered into a covenant with the son of Jesse to your shame and the shame of your mother’s nakedness? For all the days that the son of Jesse lives upon the earth your royal power will not last, so now send and take him to me because he is as good as dead!” But Jonathan answered Saul his father and he said to him, “Why should he be killed? What has he done?” So Saul threw the spear at him to strike him. Then Jonathan knew that he had determined from within to kill David. So Jonathan arose from the table and was enraged. He did not eat the meal on that

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38 Literally אֶל־הַלָחֶם, “to the bread.” A cultic meal is within the semantic range given by Holladay (p. 175) and would fit the context here.
39 The BHS Critical Apparatus informs us that several manuscripts add אָביו (“his father”).
40 See note #15.
41 I have rendered יהו as an intensifier for “my brother.”
42 The BHS Critical Apparatus informs us that many manuscripts add בני (“his son”).
43 Whereas the NRSV has “perverse, rebellious woman,” I have chosen to follow Alter’s translation of “perverse wayward woman” for the reasons he explains: “All English translations have treated the last Hebrew term here, мърд, as ‘rebellion,’ deriving it from the root r-d, ‘to rebel.’ But this form (With the at suffix of abstraction) would be anomalous in the Hebrew, whereas the vocalization in the received text yields a Hebrew word well known in rabbinic Hebrew and meaning ‘discipline.’ (The verbal root is р-d-h, ‘to rule sternly.’) She is ‘perverse against discipline’—hence ‘wayward’ in this translation [his book]” (The David Story, p. 128).
44 Other translations, such as the NRSV, translate רבר as “to choose,” but I have translated it as “entering into a covenant” based on Holladay (Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, p. 37) where he specifically cites 1 Sam 20:30. This would be consistent with my translational decision discussed in note #25 and with Jonathan’s actions in v. 16. Furthermore, the fact that the LORD is invoked in this narrative adds to covenantal connotations. See also note #30.
45 Literally “For he is a son of death”
second day of the New Moon because he was worried about David and because his father
disgraced him [David].

35 Thus it came to pass in the morning that Jonathan went out to the field at the appointed
time with David, and a young boy was with him. 36 Then Jonathan said to his boy, “Run!” 46
Please find the arrows that I am shooting!” The boy ran and he shot the arrow to pass over him.
37 The boy went to the place of the arrow that Jonathan shot, and Jonathan called after the boy
saying, “Is not the arrow farther from you?” 38 And Jonathan called after the boy: “Hurry! Make
haste! Do not stay!” And Jonathan’s boy gathered the arrows and he came to his master. 39
The boy did not know anything; only Jonathan and David knew the matter. 40 Jonathan gave his
weapons to the boy with him, and he said to him, “Go and bring these to the city.” 41 The boy
went and David arose from the south side and he fell on his face 48 upon the ground and bowed
down three times. They kissed each other and each wept until David gained his composure. 42
And Jonathan said to David, “Go in the peace that we swore, the two of us, even we 49 in the
name of the L ORD saying, ‘The L ORD is between me and you and between my seed and your seed
forever.” 1 And he arose and went. And Jonathan went to the city.

46 The Masorah Parva note explains that ρος is written defectively and it also occurs this
way (according to the Masorah Magna [1645]) in 1 Sam 20:36; Zech 2:8
47 Reading with the Qere (דָּשַׁלַּה).
48 Literally “on his nostrils”
49 Waltke and O’Connor explain: “When an independent personal pronoun stands in
apposition to a suffixed pronoun, it serves an emphatic role.” They cite 1 Sam 20:42 as example
and they use “even” (Biblical Hebrew Syntax, p. 299).
CHAPTER TWO: 
HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF 1 SAM 20:1-21:1 
AND COVENANTS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

A foundational step along the path of our investigation into the David-Jonathan narrative in 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 is to situate it within the history of interpretation. Although it is unlike other OT passages (such as the psalms and prophets, for example) that have attracted a greater amount of attention throughout the centuries, there is a significant and important body of interpretative literature which we will examine in this chapter. Moreover, since we are ultimately discussing the covenant between David and Jonathan, we will consider the concept of covenant in the OT so that we may best interpret their relationship. Thus, in the first section of this chapter, we will take a look at selective differences between the LXX and MT, Josephus’ rendering of the passage, rabbinic and patristic commentary, and finally modern commentary. In the second section, we will conduct an investigation into the meaning of covenant and its different kinds in the OT.

1. History of Interpretation of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1

The LXX and MT

An appropriate place to start in the history of interpretation of this passage is the LXX. Although it is a more literal translation of the MT, it is a monumental work that permitted Greek-speaking Jews to have access to their own scriptures. Of interest to us regarding our passage are three things: first, the few places where it differs from the MT; second, its rendering of difficult Hebrew words; and third, its lack of covenantal language compared to the MT. Regarding its differences, in v. 3 the MT has the Hebrew root עצב in the phrase I have translated as “Jonathan must not know this lest he be grieved.” In this instance, the LXX employs the Greek word βουληται (the lexical form of which is βουλομαι). The word עצב has the sense of “to be
grieved”; however, βουλομαι connotes something more like “will,” “determine,” “desire,” or “intend.”¹ The New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS) translates it as “Do not let Jonathan know this; he may not consent.”² Therefore the LXX may be read “Jonathan must not know this lest he be determined/may not consent.” What Jonathan might be determined to do, or not consent to, is not clear. Is the LXX providing an insight into David’s perception of Saul? Is this translational choice an attempt to show the reader that David already knows what Saul intends, and wants Jonathan to realize it too? If so, this would fit in with a perspective we will soon encounter. The LXX also differs from the MT in v. 9 which I translated as, “Then Jonathan said, ‘Never! For if I had any idea that the evil had taken hold in my father to act against you, would I not report it to you?’” The LXX adds the phrase και ἐὰν μὴ ἐὶς τας πολεις σου which means “but not upon your cities.” The full verse in the LXX, therefore, is: “Then Jonathan said, ‘Far be it from you! For if I knew that the evil of my father was determined to come upon you, but not upon your cities, I would tell it to you.’” This addition creates a sense of wonder about the “cities of David.” Given the previous accolades showered upon David by the multitudes after defeating Goliath (1 Sam 18:6-7), were there places in Israel where loyalty was to David as a future king, and not to Saul as the present king?

In some places, the LXX seems to misunderstand the Hebrew text. For example, in v. 30 Saul reacts with anger against Jonathan and tells him that he is, as I have translated it, a “son of a perverse wayward woman.” The LXX renders it as “son of traitorous girls” (NETS) which does not make much sense. How is Jonathan the son of traitorous girls? This would seem like a

¹ BDAG, 182.
mistake in translation; is Jonathan the son of multiple women? Perhaps in this case the LXX translator mistook the unpointed Hebrew suffix –ut for the feminine plural –ot.

Another point of interest regarding the LXX’s rendering of this passage is how it translates the Hebrew word חֶסֶד. As noted in the first chapter, חֶסֶד can mean faithfulness, loyalty, and grace. It appears three times in the MT of our passage in vv. 8, 14, and 15. In each of these cases, I translated it as “faithful” or “faithfulness.” The LXX uses the Greek word ἐλεος which BDAG defines as “kindness or concern expressed for someone in need” and “mercy, compassion, pity, clemency.” This makes it a good translational choice, albeit not a difficult one, because David is not only asking Jonathan to be faithful, but to show mercy and compassion by doing what he asks.

Finally, the LXX appears to lack the covenant language of the MT in certain places. An important example of this occurs in v. 3. Whereas the MT states, and as I have translated, that David “swore” to Jonathan, the LXX merely says that David “answered” (ἀπεκριθη) Jonathan. We can find another example in v. 16 where the MT uses the Hebrew idiom for making a covenant (כָרַתָבְרִית), but the LXX does not use the Greek word for covenant (διαθηκη) that it has been consistently using. It would seem that, unfortunately, the full meaning of certain parts of the MT has been lost in the LXX translation.

**Josephus**

Flavius Josephus, a “Jewish historian, politician, and soldier” of the first century CE, made important apologetic and literary contributions concerning Judaism and Jewish practice “against

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3 See chapter 1, note 18.
4 BDAG, 316. Italics in original.
5 For a small sample of where other occurrences of חֶסֶד are rendered in the LXX as ἐλεος, see: Gen 39:21 (NRSV: “steadfast love”); 2 Sam 16:17 (NRSV: “loyalty); Neh 13:14 (LXX Ezra 23:14 [NRSV: “good deeds”]); Psalm 118:1-4 (LXX Psalm 117 [NRSV: “steadfast love”]).

His *Jewish Antiquities* is “an account of Jewish history from the Creation to the Jewish War,” and it is in this work that we find his rendering of the David-Jonathan narrative. As an apologetic written in Greek for a non-Jewish audience, his recounting manifests some significant divergences compared to the MT and LXX. Even a cursory reading of his narrative reveals one such example, namely, that the speeches he includes go well beyond the confines of the MT. However, it is important to note that this style of historiography would not have been out of the ordinary for the method of his day. As Michael Avioz comments, the speeches were used to “explain the significance of the events and of those involved.”

One such speech is Jonathan’s argument to Saul on behalf of David. Likely as an expansion of 1 Sam 19:1-7, Jonathan approaches his father and pleads David’s cause. His argument in the MT is only twofold: Saul should not kill David because David has committed no offense against Saul, and because David has performed well for the king, especially in slaying Goliath and making Israel victorious that day. Josephus includes these two points, but also places three more in the mouth of Jonathan: first, David’s death would bring about great sorrow to both Jonathan and Saul; second, it would cause great harm to Saul’s daughter (and Jonathan’s sister) Michal whom David had taken in marriage; killing David would make her a widow; and third, Jonathan appeals to an earlier event when David soothed Saul from an evil spirit by playing the lyre. It is interesting that Josephus does not invent any of these events, but adds

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7 Ibid., 475.
them to the resumé of reasons for which Saul should not kill David. Jonathan seems to do a much better job in Josephus’ account of keeping his covenant with David and protecting him!

Two further nuances that Josephus gives to the David-Jonathan story concern his terminology for “sacrifice” and the nature of David and Jonathan’s relationship. First, whereas the MT uses the term פָּרָה (“sacrifice”) in v. 6 and 29, Josephus renders it as ἑορτήν (“festival”). There has been some speculation that Josephus wanted to downplay the fact that, in the days of David and Jonathan, sacrifices were taking place in multiple locations and not only in Jerusalem as later Jewish practice came to be. However, as Avioz explains, this is without merit because Josephus elsewhere speaks without hesitation of past figures offering sacrifices in numerous places; therefore, “Josephus’ understanding that [David’s invented sacrifice] is a family celebration is reasonable and exegetically justified.” In addition, Josephus’ audience was Greek and would not have been concerned with early Jewish practice. Second, Josephus cites David’s “virtue” as the reason for which Jonathan loved David. We know that the Greco-dominated world in which Josephus lived contained expressions of male homosexuality. Therefore, given his apologetic purpose in his writings, Josephus would have wanted to avoid any appearance that David and Jonathan shared an erotic relationship. The nature of David and Jonathan’s relationship is also a question which has been taken up by some modern commentators, and we will very briefly address this shortly.

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10 Avioz, *Josephus’ Interpretation*, 68.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid. Avioz cites Ant. 5.343; 6.19-22, 66; 6.158; and 6.242 as occasions where Josephus speaks of past sacrifices.
Rabbinic and Patristic Commentary

Rabbinic commentary, both ancient and medieval, has highlighted certain aspects of the narrative that, although not directly affecting our view of the covenant of David and Jonathan, nonetheless provides insight into the story and how it has been interpreted. Different rabbis have noted that the David-Jonathan-Saul story brings out two stark opposite emotions of jealously and love, and that David and Jonathan’s relationship is “the epitome of friendship” that is based not on self-interest but on selflessness. The medieval interpreter Moshe Alshich comments on the Hebrew letter ה (hē) in Jonathan’s Hebrew name as a reflection of the tetragrammaton (YHWH), thus marking Jonathan’s holiness in his selflessness for David. One rabbi even refers to David and Jonathan as “soul brothers” and another remarks that, although Jonathan never became king, his good name endures throughout history, and this is “the greatest of all crowns.” Clearly the name of Jonathan has come to symbolize holiness and selflessness in rabbinic tradition.

There are two final brief rabbinic comments that shed light upon the 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 story in general. First, some commentators have taken note of the specific number of arrows of which Jonathan speaks in v. 20. His three arrows could be symbolic for the three days David spent in hiding, or they could symbolize the “three pillars of the universe: Torah, service of God, and kind deeds.” Moreover, the fact that Jonathan did not shoot all three arrows could symbolize that David’s time to reign had not yet arrived. The rabbi known as Malbim speculates that the arrows themselves are “metaphor[s] for evil speech, which [harms] its victims from afar.” The triplet of arrows symbolizes that evil speech harms three people: the speaker,

16 Ibid., 119.
17 Ibid., 119, 131.
18 Ibid., 133.
19 Ibid.
the listener, and the victim.\textsuperscript{20} Second, the medieval rabbi Radak, when speaking of Saul’s angry
outburst and use of vulgarities in v. 30, explains that Saul may have been expressing his horror
that when people saw that Jonathan had chosen loyalty to David, they would assume that he was
not really Saul’s son, but was born of adultery.\textsuperscript{21} We can interpret this last comment as another
aspect of Saul’s malicious character that the narrator is building. Were his true concerns for the
good of the kingdom, or for himself? It seems that, in this situation, Saul’s immediate reaction to
Jonathan and David’s concocted story displays his selfishness in stark contrast to Jonathan’s
selflessness. Saul is worried about what people will think; Jonathan is worried about his friend’s
welfare.

Patristic commentary on our passage is not very extensive. The early fathers, however, do make some remarks that the David-Jonathan friendship is a type of the Christ-Church
relationship, and maintain that Jonathan symbolizes the early martyrs who sacrificed
themselves.\textsuperscript{22} Ambrose comments, furthermore, that possessing friendship and virtue, like we
see in Jonathan, is more commendable than wealth, riches, or the honour of this world.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Modern Commentary}

Modern commentary generally focuses on one of two subjects: a possible erotic relationship
shared by David and Jonathan, and the political nature of their relationship.\textsuperscript{24} Regarding the
former, Saul Olyan states that David’s lament over Jonathan in 2 Sam 1:26 shows him

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
    \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 137.
    \item \textsuperscript{22} John R. Franke, ed, \textit{Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel}, Ancient Christian Commentary
        on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 276-77.
    \item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 291.
    \item \textsuperscript{24} For a more general treatment of homosexuality and the Hebrew Bible, see Rabbi
        Steven Greenberg, \textit{Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition}
\end{itemize}
comparing Jonathan’s love to the love of women, which is sexual and/or emotional love, and saying that Jonathan’s love was far greater.  

He further explains that “Jonathan’s love for David is compared not to another love type that is characterized by fidelity, but apparently to the experience of sexual or sexual-emotional love with women as a class.” Therefore, Olyan posits a potential sexual relationship between David and Jonathan, and then carries his argument, obviously set forth quite briefly here, to the logical conclusion for the modern debate concerning the definition of marriage. Other scholars have written on this debate, but one key insight to keep in mind comes from Anthony Heacock, who rightly cautions that we must be wary of applying contemporary sexual categories to a distant era that did not necessarily have them.

Not all contemporary interpretation, however, revolves around the question of a possible sexual relationship between David and Jonathan; others view the relationship primarily in a political light. For example, Michael Kolarcik comments that the author of 1 Samuel highlights their covenant and friendship in terms of love in order to bring together the political traditions of the northern tribes of Israel and the southern tribes of Judah. “The personal friendship between David and Jonathan symbolizes the unity between the north and the south,” he explains. “In the


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 16.


emergence of David as the one recognized even by Jonathan to be truly leader we have the reflection of Judah emerging as the centre of leadership for both the north and the south.”

According to this view, David and Jonathan’s relationship has nothing to do with sexual expression, but rather is connected to political manoeuvring. The narrative of chapter 20, therefore, is part of the story of power moving from Jonathan to David. Similarly, Orly Keren comments that Jonathan’s covenant with David was dually motivated with both an emotional aspect and a political aspect. However, in her view, Jonathan took the inferior role in the covenant and acted like the vassal: “[Jonathan] behaves as if he were the vassal and anchors his fealty to [David] in a pact.” We will soon see that Jonathan was not a vassal in this covenant relationship, but Keren’s point is well taken.

2. Covenant in the Old Testament

One cannot downplay the role of covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures nor deny its key place in the history of interpretation. Comments in this regard range from seeing covenant as a “valuable lens through which one can recognize and appreciate the biblical idea of religious community” to labeling it the “master-theme of the Bible.” According to Dennis McCarthy, “the very unity of the Israelite people and its relationship with God was founded on covenant.”

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31 Ibid., 11.
33 Ibid., 10.
36 Dennis J. McCarthy, Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions (Atlanta: JohnKnox Press, 1972), 10. For a further discussion of the debate whether the twelve tribes of
Kolarcik states that it is “without a doubt one of the richest images of the Scriptures through which Israel experienced and expressed their relationship to God.” At the same time, however, there exists no single “univocal notion” of covenant that can capture all its nuances and occurrences in the OT. It is possible to define it broadly, and such definitions range from a simple “binding relationship” to “[a] solemn promise made binding by an oath” to “an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.” As we will soon discover, the inclusion of an oath is an important factor in any definition of OT covenant and we will also see how this plays out in the narrative of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1. In this section we will investigate the etymology of the Hebrew word for covenant, how it is distinguished from a contract, and how the LXX and NT have interpreted it. Finally, we will look at different types of covenants in the OT and what differentiates secular covenants from divine covenants.

_**Etymology of בְּרִית**_

The etymology of בְּרִית (bĕrît) is not entirely clear. Steven L. McKenzie offers a summary of five possibilities. First, בְּרִית may be a derivation of the root brh which means “to eat.” The Israel actually descended from the sons of Jacob and were related by blood, or whether what became the tribes of Israel were originally separate tribes that unified via kinship covenants, see Steven L. McKenzie, *Covenant*, Understanding Biblical Themes (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 11-15. Using the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) and Gen 29:31-30:24, McCarthy argues that these passages “indicate that the tribes that constituted Israel were not united by blood but by some social mechanism” (15).

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
41 Mendenhall and Herion, “Covenant,” 1179.
connection between the two is that covenants were often sealed with a meal.\textsuperscript{42} If this is the origin of בְּרִית, it would shed light upon the expression קָרַת בְּרִית (kārat bērît), “cut a covenant.” In this phrase, בְּרִית would be food, and the expression would literally mean “cut off food.”\textsuperscript{43} To cut off food would be a way of saying “to make a covenant” because this was how covenants were made between partners. A second possible etymology of בְּרִית is that is comes from a parallel root brh (in this instance meaning “to see”) and means, as a noun, “decision,” “decree,” or “obligation.” A third possibility is that it comes from the Akkadian preposition birit which means “between.” Fourth, it could have been derived from birtu, which in Akkadian means “clasp,” “fetter,” and “bond.” Finally, it may have come from a root br meaning to “set apart,’ so that a covenant is specifically designated or set-apart favor or benefit.\textsuperscript{44} Regardless of its exact etymological origin, it is clear that covenants in the OT were sacred alliances taken by oath before God as “a cultural, legal, and religious device for uniting distinct kinship groups.”\textsuperscript{45} Since covenant-making in the ancient Near East was also a way of establishing kinship with outsiders,\textsuperscript{46} this may have been one of the reasons God was so adamant about the Israelites not intermingling with foreign nations, since kinship was of such a familial nature that foreign religion could threaten the purity of the covenant of YHWH.

\textsuperscript{44} McKenzie, *Covenant*, 3, note 2.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 11-12.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 12. As an example of this in practice, one can consider the story of Solomon and all his foreign wives and concubines.
Contracts vs. Covenants

As mentioned above, an oath is a constitutive part of a covenant, and its presence is one element that distinguishes a covenant from a contract. It is crucial that we do not conflate “contract” and “covenant” in our study of the OT. As Gene M. Tucker explains, contracts are “private legal and economic agreements . . . [that] for the most part . . . deal with matters which could have come before the Israelite court.” If we want to make a comparison to the modern world, we might suggest that contracts belong to the realm of civil law, such as, for example, the exchange of goods and services, housing deeds, and the like. Covenants, by contrast, contained oaths, and even this was not unique to ancient Israel. The oath was so important that “covenant” and “oath” were seen as identical. Examples of this include Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:22-34), Joshua and the Gibeonites (Josh 9:15), and, as we will soon discover, David and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:1-4; 20:3, 42). Therefore, when we read in the OT that someone is swearing an oath, we can be sure that this is covenant-making language. A particular element of the oath, moreover, was a self-curse that would take effect if one failed to uphold the conditions and stipulations of the covenant. Again, as we will see, this was also constitutive of the covenant between David and Jonathan, for David even called upon Jonathan to kill him himself if he thought David was breaking the covenant they had previously made. In 1 Sam 20:8 David exclaims: “Be faithful to your servant for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the LORD with you. If there is offence in me, then kill me yourself! Why bring me to your

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48 Ibid., 488.
49 Ibid., 489.
50 Ibid., 488.
51 Ibid., 491.
David was trying to convince Jonathan, his covenant partner, that Jonathan’s father Saul harboured homicidal intentions towards David. Jonathan was reluctant to see this for himself, but so serious was David’s invocation of their covenant oath—and David’s self-curse—that Jonathan immediately agreed to David’s request and they went out to the field to concoct their plan against Saul.

Another manner by which contract and covenant are distinguished is that covenants establish kinship relations. Frank Moore Cross explains as follows: “Kinship relations defined the rights and obligations, the duties, status, and privileges of tribal members, and kinship terminology provided the only language for expressing legal, political, and religious institutions.” In other words, kinship is a relational term outlining how different parties are to interact with each other in a variety of settings. It is important to remember here that, unlike in the North American context, legal and political matters were not separate from religious ones. Kinship also included the “obligation to protect one’s kindred,” “uphold the welfare of his fellow kinsman,” and the duty “to love one’s kinsman as [one]self, as [one’s] own soul.” Indeed, “the language of love is kinship language, the bond that holds together those in intimate relationships, the relationships of family and kindred.” This is a complex statement since the concept of love in ancient Israel is itself an issue, but the main point Cross makes for our discussion is that kinship is all about relationships and goes behind mere legal requirements. Kinship covenants

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52 My translation from chapter 1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 are my own.
54 Ibid., 4. It is noteworthy that here Cross specifically refers to the covenant between David and Jonathan in his footnote.
55 Ibid., 5. Cross also mentions how חֶסֶד is kinship language.
also had another raison d’être: they served to promote internal stability in a unstable environment. Cross explains that ancient Israel was a “tribal league” that was a fragile social entity, dependent on so-called sodalities, that is, kinship, religious, and military associations, to give it stability and unity. If this is so, the tribal federation is even more fragile, coming into being when tribal societies are threatened by external and internal pressures that threaten their security and peace. Not least of the internal pressures is the need to restrain the terror and ravages of the blood feud. External threat in the chaotic age in which the Israelite league came into being included the armies of highly organized city states as well as opposing tribal leagues of the southeast.\textsuperscript{56}

In other words, without a stable centralized authority to govern social, political, and religious matters, ancient Israel was a fragile grouping of tribes in an unstable geographical region, and kinship covenants served to protect the security and stability of the grouping. Thus, this is an important step in our investigation into the interpretation of “covenant” in the OT and ancient Near Eastern world. Although the terms may be conflated today, it is crucial that we understand that a covenant is distinct from a contract, and establishes, via sacred oath before God or the gods, kinship relations.

**LXX and NT Interpretation of Covenant**

In terms of how the LXX and NT interpret the Hebrew meaning of covenant, the Greek word they employ is διαθήκη (diathēkē). This is the word found in the LXX translation of 1 Sam 20:8 as well as numerous NT passages. For example, the Last Supper narrative contains the inflected version of διαθήκη in both Matt 26:28 and Mark 14:24. Romans 9:4 and 11:27, which are part of an important section on NT theology of Judaism, use the word διαθήκη.\textsuperscript{57} According to BDAG, διαθήκη connotes a “last will” or “testament.” The lexicon states that it is also a “legal

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 11.

disposition of personal goods while omitting that of the anticipated death of a testator.”^58

Although this may sound rather confusing, the lexicon is trying to explain that διαθήκη describes an agreement whereby the initiator’s death is not foreseen. Thus, “[a] Hellenistic reader would experience no confusion, for it was a foregone conclusion that gods were immortal. Hence a [διαθήκη] decreed by God cannot require the death of the testator to make it operative.”^59 Since God cannot die, this word fits because it can describe the kind of agreement being made. Furthermore, “another essential characteristic of a testament is retained, namely that it is the declaration of one person’s initiative, not the result of an agreement between two parties, like a compact or a contract. This is likely one of the main reasons why the LXX rendered bērît by [διαθήκη].”^60 In relation to the David-Jonathan covenant, this Greek word is appropriate because it is clear from the narrative that Jonathan’s death at the end of 1 Samuel did not nullify their covenant. David swore to protect the house of Jonathan, and he later did so by bringing Jonathan’s descendant into the royal court in 2 Sam 9:1-13.

**Types of Covenants**

The final section of this chapter will explore the different kinds of covenants found in the OT. One of the principle categorical divisions is between divine and secular covenants. This difference is not complex—divine covenants involve God as one of the covenant partners, and secular covenants do not. In other words, whereas a divine covenant is between God and people/a person, a secular covenant is only between people or individual persons (such as the covenant between David and Jonathan). This is not to say, however, that God is not involved in secular covenants—quite to the contrary. God was invoked as a witness and guarantor that each

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58 BDAG, 228.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
party would uphold his or her commitments, and possibly inflict the self-curse that was sworn if one of the parties violated the oath.61

Another important distinction among OT covenants is between “assertory” and “promissory.” An assertory covenant or oath, as Tucker explains, “is an asseveration bound by a conditional self-curse.” A promissory covenant is an “oath to do something in the future.”62 Assertory oaths “were used in both criminal and civil procedure, by defendants to establish their innocence or by witnesses to support their testimony.”63 In other words, assertory covenants were made to reflect a solemn vow concerning a present matter, or as a testimony to a disputed past event. A modern example, as Tucker alludes to, would be a trial in a courtroom. When a witness makes an oath to speak only the truth, he or she is vowing to do something in the present time. By contrast, promissory covenants are oaths concerning what will happen in the future and do not necessarily establish relationships.64

Mendenhall, apart from the promissory, identifies three further types of secular covenants, although the first type, as we will see, mirrors divine covenants in the OT. Suzerainty covenants involve a superior and an inferior party whereby the “superior binds an inferior to obligations defined by the superior.”65 This, however, was not some sort of dictatorship because, as Mendenhall also points out, “the superior nevertheless gave up some degree of freedom of action. His relationship to the vassal was not based on force alone, once a covenant had been established; he had stipulated what he required of the vassal, and further arbitrary exercise of his

63 Ibid.
64 Mendenhall, “Covenant,” 717.
65 Ibid., 716.
superior power was not expected of him.” The most well known form of suzerainty treaties was that of the Hittites, and it is speculated that this form had a significant influence on biblical divine covenants, such as the one at Sinai. Not everyone agrees with this statement, however, as McCarthy warns. He notes that Mendenhall has received criticism for his “amphictyony” view which has been challenged, that is, the idea that “the tribes were originally united only by their covenanted relation to Yahweh.” In other words, the relationship of Israel to its God may not be as perfectly parallel with a suzerain and vassal as once thought. However, since Mendenhall’s analysis is important in the history of interpretation, in the following table we will use the corresponding passages in Deuteronomy that he offers to illustrate the biblical parallels with the typical form of a Hittite suzerainty treaty:

66 Ibid.
69 For a deeper discussion of this topic, see: J. A. Thompson, “The Near Eastern Suzerain-Vassal Concept in the Religion of Israel,” *The Journal of Religious History* 3 (1964): 1-19. A key comment by Thompson in this article occurs in the conclusion: “The suzerain-vassal concept is thus only one of very many pictures that were used in the religious thinking of ancient Israel. Its particular value was to give concrete expression to the doctrine of election. For a reason that was never clear to Israel YHWH had chosen her to co-operate with him in the fulfillment of his purposes in the world. He had offered his covenant to Israel and she on her part had accepted it freely. But in so doing she had placed herself under obligation to obey YHWH her King and to observe his law as the constitution of her society. Only in such a setting could she fulfill the purposes of YHWH as his divinely elected servant. Out of that setting she would be like the nations round about. *The metaphor of the suzerain-vassal relationship gave his expression to this relationship in a most vivid and concrete way* (16, italics mine).
Table 2.1: Form of a Suzerainty Covenant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preamble</th>
<th>Identification of the suzerain or king with titles and genealogy</th>
<th>Deut 5:6a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical Prologue</td>
<td>Description of previous relationship with vassal, especially acts of benevolence</td>
<td>Deut 5:6b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stipulations</td>
<td>Obligations by which the vassal must abide</td>
<td>Deut 5:7-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposit and Public Reading</td>
<td>Place of safe-keeping for the treaty and requirements concerning frequency of public reading</td>
<td>Deut 10:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnesses</td>
<td>Usually the gods of both parties, but also may include parts of the natural world like hills, mountains, seas, and rivers</td>
<td>Deut 32:1 (Compare Isa 1:2; Mic 6:1-2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blessings and Curses</td>
<td>List of blessings bestowed by the gods if the covenant is kept, and a list of curses inflicted by the gods if it is broken</td>
<td>Deut 27:11-29:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As one can tell by the passage citations above or by turning to the book of Deuteronomy, the preamble and historical prologue, albeit very brief, are clearly present and follow the form outlined in the table. It is striking to note that, just as in other ancient Near Eastern suzerainty covenant forms, the Sinai covenant includes a stipulation to refrain from “relationships [with] other sovereign powers.” In this case, “other sovereign powers” would be other gods, which YHWH expressly forbids. A final note about suzerainty covenants, and their parallels to the Sinai covenant, regards the list of witnesses. Clearly YHWH couldn’t call “other gods” to

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71 Ibid., 719.
witness to the covenant, whether for himself or for the people of Israel since YHWH had just excluded any other gods. Therefore, we see appeals to great things in creation such as mountains and rivers to act as witnesses to the covenant.\textsuperscript{72}

Second, Mendenhall identifies the parity covenant in which “both parties are bound by oath,”\textsuperscript{73} and, as Scott W. Hahn explains, they are “usually—but not always—themselves of equal status.”\textsuperscript{74} Moreover, both parties share the covenant obligations, which, as we will see, certainly was the case in the David-Jonathan covenant.\textsuperscript{75} Examples of parity covenants in the OT include Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:22-34), Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:26-33), and Jacob and Laban (Gen 31:43-54). Each of these covenants includes dual oaths, a shared meal, or both.\textsuperscript{76}

Third, Mendenhall describes the patron covenant in which “the party in superior position binds himself to some obligation for the benefit of an inferior.”\textsuperscript{77} He explains that the only real examples of this in the OT are actually divine covenants, such as that made between God and Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17:1-14. In Gen 17:6-8 we read:

\begin{quote}
I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God. (NRSV)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 720.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 716.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 43-44.
\textsuperscript{77} Mendenhall, “Covenant,” 717.
God was under no obligation to initiate this covenant with Abraham, and did so for the pure benefit of this human being and the world through him. These three types of covenants can be summarized in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Covenant Type</th>
<th>Relationship of Partners</th>
<th>Obligations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suzerainty</td>
<td>Superior and inferior</td>
<td>Superior binds inferior to superior’s obligations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parity</td>
<td>Equal status</td>
<td>Obligations are shared; dual oath is sworn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patron</td>
<td>Superior and inferior</td>
<td>Superior takes on some obligation for benefit of inferior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2: Summary of OT Covenants

Therefore, having explored the history of the interpretation of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 throughout ancient and modern times, and after investigating covenants in the OT and ancient Near East traditions, we will proceed to examine the David-Jonathan narrative itself in detail, and look at the nature of their covenant and what that says about them and about God.
CHAPTER THREE:
EXEGESIS OF 1 SAM 20:1-21:1
AND THE COVENANT OF DAVID AND JONATHAN

David, the divinely anointed future king of Israel, who would unite the tribes and bring about an unprecedented period of national stability, is, at this point in the narrative in 1 Samuel 20, fresh from his most recent escape from the deranged and homicidal king Saul. David turns to his friend Jonathan, with whom he had previously entered into covenant (1 Sam 18:1-4), for answers and clarity. From a literary perspective, this is “a turning point in David’s career” because now he must choose which path to follow: either continue in Saul’s service or flee for his life. David must learn “once and for all what Saul’s intentions towards him really [are].”¹ Since his anointing at the hands of the prophet Samuel, David initially enjoyed Saul’s favour before falling from grace in the eyes of the king. He then set out on a continuous pilgrimage of evasion from Saul’s attempts on his life. First Samuel 20:1-21:1, which I have divided into four units below, recounts what happens next in the story.² In this chapter we will begin with an exegetical-literary analysis of the passage as a whole, and then we will take a deeper look into the nature of the covenant between David and Jonathan by applying what we learned about OT covenants in the previous chapter.

1. Exegesis of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1

David comes before Jonathan (20:1-4)

Having fled from Naioth in Ramah as a result of Saul’s murderous attempts on his life, David approaches Jonathan, Saul’s son, and asks: “What have I done? What is my offence? What is

² My rationale for dividing this narrative into four units is based on the location of the action: 1) David comes before Jonathan; 2) David and Jonathan go out to the field; 3) Jonathan and Saul at the New Moon feast; 4) Jonathan goes back to the field to send David away.
my sin before your father that he is seeking my life?” Keith Bodner explains that, by not identifying Jonathan’s location, the narrative creates suspense and a “sense of secrecy.”³ Robert Alter remarks: “Quite strikingly, these are David’s first reported words to Jonathan, though Jonathan’s devotion to David and one speech to David have been duly recorded.”⁴ Alter is, of course, referring to 1 Sam 19:2-5 when Jonathan interceded for David before Saul to ask for David’s safety. In response to David’s “triple-barreled barrage of rhetorical questions,”⁵ Jonathan denies any ill will of his father towards David and claims that, indeed, Jonathan’s father reveals all to Jonathan (lit. “to my ear”). Jonathan’s manner of reply to David (חָלִילָה), as my translational notes indicated, shows a bit of offence taken on Jonathan’s part because David likely spoke to his friend in a “reproachful manner in order to elicit a truthful and immediate response.”⁶ As Mary J. Evans points out, however, Jonathan probably does not know about Saul’s most recent attempt on David’s life in 1 Sam 19:8-17.⁷ This displays, borrowingAlter’s terminology, a certain naïveté on the part of Jonathan because he appears detached from the reality of the situation. The contrast between these two characters is striking: Jonathan is “well meaning and naïve” and David is “wary [and] calculating.”⁸ Perhaps Jonathan, out of an understandable desire to keep family loyalty, simply did not want to consider the possibility that his father had betrayed his earlier commitment in 1 Sam 19:6 to cease his homicidal tirade

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⁵ Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 213.
⁶ Ibid.
⁸ Alter, *The David Story*, 123.
against David.\textsuperscript{9} As that verse states, “Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan; Saul swore, ‘As the Lord lives, [David] shall not be put to death’” (NRSV). However, David—only after swearing (שָבַע) an oath—is able to convince Jonathan of the possibility that Saul does pose a grave threat to his life—indeed he is only one step (or transgression) away from death.\textsuperscript{10} Jonathan comes to agree with David, and in a quick about-face, once David invokes an oath, Jonathan accepts at least the possibility that his father has been keeping something from him, and that he has not revealed all “to his ear” (perhaps out of not wanting to grieve Jonathan).\textsuperscript{11} As Evans also notes, “Jonathan’s willingness to take whatever action David considers necessary is an implicit statement that his loyalty would go to David rather than to Saul.”\textsuperscript{12} This is a key point that will come up again later in the meaning of the passage.

\textit{The Plan of David and Jonathan (20:5-23)}

The two covenant friends, therefore, concoct a plan that will bring to light Saul’s true intentions regarding the fate of David. This plan revolves around the feast of the New Moon, which David would ordinarily be expected to attend given his place at court. David will be absent and hide himself, and Jonathan will give a pre-arranged excuse; then judging by Saul’s reaction, they will both know the character of Saul’s heart and his intentions towards David. Bodner notes an interesting word-play here on “hide” (סתר): whereas Jonathan previously argued that his father

\textsuperscript{9} Evans, \textit{1 and 2 Samuel}, 93.

\textsuperscript{10} A. Graeme Auld, \textit{I & II Samuel: A Commentary}, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 231. Auld writes: “There are two rhetorical masterstrokes in [David’s] short response. The first is to give this word for ‘step’ its sole outing here in the [Hebrew Bible] . . . for it looks identical in Hebrew script and sounds quite similar to \textit{peša’}, which belongs to the same semantic family as ‘guilt’ and ‘sin.’ Death is but a ‘step’ (hardly distinguishable from ‘transgression’) away. The double oath that opens his few words implies that Yahweh’s life, and Jonathan’s too, can be relied on—he, by contrast, is but a step away from death” (231).

\textsuperscript{11} Evans, \textit{1 and 2 Samuel}, 93.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
hid nothing from him, now he will be hiding David from his father.\textsuperscript{13} Regarding the New Moon festival, David Toshio Tsumura explains that it “was a joyous occasion like other festivals, when people offered burnt offerings. It is the day of the new appearance of the moon in the western sky at sunset. For the royal family, the new moon festival was seemingly presided over by the king as the clan head. As the king’s son-in-law, David was expected to celebrate it with the king and his crown prince.”\textsuperscript{14} Alter adds that, in addition to sacrifices and feasts, “ordinary business was not transacted.”\textsuperscript{15} We can already begin to feel a sense of foreboding given both Tsumura’s comment that this is a feast for which David would be expected to be present (since he was still part of the court, despite Saul’s previous antagonism towards him)\textsuperscript{16} and our knowledge of Saul’s temper. The narrator creates this sense of dramatic irony by revealing David and Jonathan’s plan to the reader while Saul remains unaware.

Since David’s attendance at the New Moon festival would be expected, this seemed like an opportune time to put Saul to the test and judge his reaction to David’s absence. Evans puts it this way: “If his temporary absence is acceptable, then it is likely that Saul has calmed down and David will be safe, at least for a while. But if Saul is angered it will indicate that the failed attempt to capture David at Ramah had not brought Saul back to rationality.”\textsuperscript{17} Although this seems like an intelligent plan, one wonders whether David is truly and honestly investing his safety and well-being in this one-time reaction of the king who had previously shown him violence. Given such earlier encounters with Saul and his attempts at David’s assassination,

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{13}] Bodner, \textit{I Samuel}, 215.
\item[\textsuperscript{15}] Alter, \textit{The David Story}, 124.
\item[\textsuperscript{16}] Evans, \textit{1 and 2 Samuel}, 93.
\item[\textsuperscript{17}] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
“can David really believe that any statement by the king of favorable disposition means it will be well with him?”

Perhaps David’s real hidden intention is to drive Saul to enough anger so that Jonathan can finally witness for himself the reality of the situation and come to accept what David already knows to be true about Saul. This would speak to Alter’s earlier speculation that David is “calculating”; a surface reading of the text would tend towards the scenario of David pleading with his friend to find out what Saul thinks. A deeper reading reveals the opposite: David wants Jonathan finally to discover who his father really is, and he is willing to ask Jonathan to lie in order to make it happen. This is the last time David speaks in this part of the narrative, and it is Jonathan who carries the story forward; perhaps this is a hint given by the narrator that this story’s protagonist is actually Jonathan.

The next question concerns how David will receive the information about Saul’s reaction at the feast. To answer this question, David and Jonathan escape to an empty field. Their friendship was well known and privacy was crucial because Jonathan’s actions might be “border[ing] on treason.” Privacy was also important because, as Antony F. Campbell observes, the trail to David could be traveled via Jonathan by Saul if he really wanted to cause him harm. From a literary standpoint, the change in venue also served to slow the narrative and increase the literary element of suspense.

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19 Ibid. As Bodner notes, “In the light of the larger storyline, some of the terms (e.g. Bethlehem, clan, and sacrifice) in David’s stratagem are incendiary: Saul knows about a ‘neighbor’, he knows David is from Bethlehem, and he has been twice rejected in the context of sacrifice” (*1 Samuel*, 215).
20 Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 216.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
eavesdroppers, Jonathan “exposed his genuine appreciation of the situation” that there was a real
danger to David’s life.25 “It is close to becoming a battle to the death for the kingship, between
Saul and David,” Francesca Aran Murphy explains. “Jonathan perhaps recognizes this for the
first time, when he articulates the thought in renewing his covenant with David.”26 Murphy is
alluding to v. 12 when Jonathan swears “by the LORD, the God of Israel” that he will “sound
out” his father. This oath is clear covenant language that we will soon explore further.
Moreover, in v. 16 we read: “Then Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David such that
the LORD would exact penalty from the hand of the enemies of David.” This is very striking
because Jonathan knows that he will not be king even though he is the heir apparent to his
father’s throne. He simply wishes protection for himself, his family, and his descendants.27
Jonathan is well aware of how business operates: when a new king ascends to the throne, all
potential threats and enemies, such as anyone associated with the previous monarch, are
eliminated.28 Furthermore, the covenant oath that David and Jonathan swear to each other shows
their common hope for the future of Israel.29 By putting national loyalties above familial ones,
both Jonathan and David are “symbolically creating the basis for genuine, stable political culture,
a monarchy. That cannot happen until people recognize that public law, founded in the Lord, has
more authority than the private loyalties of the family.”30 Another key aspect is that Jonathan is
portrayed for a second time by the narrator (in v. 17; compare 1 Sam 18:3) as regarding David’s

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25 Francesca Aran Murphy, 1 Samuel, Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand
Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 203.
26 Ibid.
27 Evans, 1 and 2 Samuel, 94.
28 Jonathan Y. Rowe, Sons or Lovers: An Interpretation of David and Jonathan’s
29 Evans, 1 and 2 Samuel, 94.
30 Murphy, 1 Samuel, 204.
life as equal to his own. This will play a significant role in determining the nature of their covenant.

Concerning the method by which Jonathan plans to relay the message of Saul’s reaction to David, the biblical text states:

Then Jonathan said to him, “Tomorrow is the New Moon and you will be missed because your seat will remain empty. On the day after tomorrow you shall go down quickly and come to the place where you were hidden earlier, and remain beside the stone of Azel. Then I will shoot three arrows at the side like I was shooting at a target. Behold, I will send a boy: ‘Go! Find the arrows!’ If I surely say to the boy, ‘Look, the arrows are here on this side of you,’ then take them and come back because it is well for you and there is no danger, as the LORD lives. But if, thus, I say to the young man, ‘Look, the arrows are past you,’ then go, for the LORD has sent you away! (vv. 18-22)

As Evans notes, this was how Jonathan planned to tell David what happened at the feast in case they were not able to meet face-to-face. Since David will be in hiding, once Jonathan is able to “sound out” his father, he will deliver the verdict to David via a “sham archery session.” As P. Kyle McCarter observes, this method of delivering the message is Jonathan’s own idea—“his own contribution to the scheme.”

The Festival and Saul’s Violent Reaction (20:24-34)

On the first day of the feast David’s seat remained empty, but Saul thought nothing of it. Saul, whose own seat against the wall is perhaps both ironic and foreshadowing his own fate (since Saul had previously launched weapons at walls to kill David), surmised that perhaps David’s absence was due to a ritual impurity since anyone partaking in this feast would have to be in a

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31 Evans, 1 and 2 Samuel, 94.
33 Ibid.
34 Bodner, I Samuel, 219.
pure state.\textsuperscript{35} Since most impurities lasted until evening, Saul’s inner dialogue was reasonable, and also explains why he would have anticipated David’s arrival the following day. However, when David’s place remained empty on the second day of the feast, Saul demanded to know why he was not in attendance because, as we saw earlier, his presence was expected. He asked Jonathan, “Why did the son of Jesse not come either yesterday or today to the meal?” (v. 27). Jonathan responded as follows: “David implored of me a leave of absence for himself to go to Bethlehem. He said, ‘Please send me away because we have a family sacrifice in the city and my brother himself commanded me. So now, if I have found favour in your eyes, please may I go safely that I may see my brothers?’ For this reason he has not come to the table of the king.” (vv. 28-29). There are four significant items to note in these verses. First, the cover story of a sacrifice is not new thus far in the 1 Samuel narrative. This is precisely the same sort of story that God gave to Samuel to protect him from Saul when he was sent to anoint David in 1 Sam 16:2.\textsuperscript{36} Bodner calls this literary device a “type-scene.” It (and others like it) possesses repetitive features that prepare the reader for what to expect.\textsuperscript{37} Second, there is parallel vocabulary (שלח and זבח) with Exod 5:1-3, 8:4, and 8:24-25. It is possible that the narrator is attempting to re-cast Saul as the pharaoh of Moses’ day who enslaved the Israelites. Jonathan’s modification of David’s words is also striking: whereas David (in v. 6) said that he had to “run” to Bethlehem (רוּץ), Jonathan (in v. 29) uses a word (מלט) meaning “to flee.” Perhaps David and Jonathan are “sounding out” Saul to find out if the evil that had been with him (see 1 Sam 18:10

\textsuperscript{35} Alter, \textit{The David Story}, 127.
\textsuperscript{36} Auld, \textit{I & II Samuel}, 233.
and 19:9) had fully taken him over. Third, the manner by which Saul refers to David is striking. As Alter explains, “At the end of the Goliath episode, Saul wanted to know whose son David was. Now he refers to him repeatedly only by patronymic, which is dismissive, rather like our using a person’s last name only.” Put differently, Saul did not ask, “Where is David?” but, rather dismissively, “Where is the son of Jesse?” Fourth, Jonathan adds to the explanation previously planned by himself and David. He says that David’s absence is due to his family’s request that he be present with them for a sacrifice. Alter comments in this way: “[Jonathan’s] evident intention is to provide a palliative to David’s absence: he had to go to Bethlehem because of family pressure.” After all, David is the youngest son in his family. If Alter is correct, then Jonathan’s addition to the story proves monumentally unsuccessful. Although, based on Jonathan’s (or the narrator’s) choice of vocabulary discussed above, perhaps Jonathan was attempting to provoke Saul to get a clear and definitive answer. If this is the case, then Jonathan was very successful. Saul gets very angry and says to Jonathan, “O son of a perverse wayward woman! Do I not know that you have entered into a covenant with the son of Jesse to your shame and the shame of your mother’s nakedness? For all the days that the son of Jesse lives upon the earth your royal power will not last, so now send and take him to me so that he may be killed” (vv. 30-31). When Jonathan protested, “Saul threw the spear at him to strike him. Then Jonathan knew that he had determined from within to kill David” (v. 33). Saul clearly saw through the ruse that his son and David concocted because, if the story of the sacrifice was true, Jonathan could have told Saul on the first day. Yet Jonathan also got the clear answer he needed

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38 I am indebted to Brian Irwin for this suggestion (personal communication, July 5, 2015).
40 Ibid., 128.
41 I am indebted to Brian Irwin for this suggestion (personal communication, July 5, 2015).
about Saul’s intentions. Thus, Jonathan left the feast in anger, indeed feeling that his father had disgraced David and that he himself was now likely in danger.

Saul now believed that David’s real loyalty was not to him as the reigning monarch, but to David’s own family, and that he might even conscript his family into a battle for the throne.\textsuperscript{42} Saul’s reference to Jonathan’s mother is both particularly striking and vulgar. Murphy explains it this way: “Saul recalls him to his blood ties and tells him he disgraces the mother who gave birth to him by preferring a member of another family to his own clan.”\textsuperscript{43} While there is a rupture in the kinship ties within Saul’s family, they are replaced—with respect to Jonathan—by his covenant with David. Yet despite his rage, or perhaps because of it, Saul makes a true statement, and from a literary standpoint, this is a climactic moment in the story. Saul is quite right in saying that, as long as David lives, Jonathan will never be the successor to the throne of Israel. No longer does David merely threaten Saul’s kingship, but also Jonathan’s, and, by extension, the establishment of a dynasty after Saul and Jonathan.\textsuperscript{44} There are other reasons for Saul’s rage, as John Mauchline notes: in addition to Jonathan’s choice of David over his own family, Jonathan’s “attachment . . . to David was becoming like subversive activity within the kingdom and was bound to do harm.”\textsuperscript{45} Perhaps this fact served as further fuel on the fire of Saul’s fury that caused him to attempt to kill Jonathan. This latter part of the narrative is, of course, highly ironic because Saul had just expressed his remorse that Jonathan would not succeed him if David lived, but then within moments he attempted to take Jonathan’s life as he

\textsuperscript{42} Alter, \textit{The David Story}, 128.
\textsuperscript{43} Murphy, \textit{1 Samuel}, 206.
\textsuperscript{44} McCarter, \textit{1 Samuel}, 345.
had attempted to take David’s in 1 Sam 19:10, thus identifying him with David.\textsuperscript{46} Walter Brueggemann explains that it was a “profound humiliation” for Saul that his own son had not chosen familial loyalty. Despite the fact that God had rejected him, Saul still felt as though his own son owed him his fidelity. Brueggeman writes: “The rejecting and choosing of God, however, is not as awesome and as shameful as the choosing and rejecting now being done by Saul’s own son and heir. A father has a right to expect loyalty from his son, even if he can no longer have it from God.”\textsuperscript{47} It is furthermore more devastating for Saul that his own son rejected him in favour of his rival and enemy with whom, Saul knew, he had “entered into a covenant” (v. 30).\textsuperscript{48}

Above we considered the idea that David was “calculating.” On its face, the narrative so far unfolds as if David wants to know what Saul really thinks about him and whether it is safe to return to the court. He enlists Jonathan to find out, and the resulting answer is unequivocally negative. Francesca Aran Murphy turns this on its head: rather than being a story about “Jonathan helping David to escape his father, . . . it is really about David helping Jonathan to escape his father.”\textsuperscript{49} From a literary perspective, this is very striking because the narrator’s presentation of David is less as an innocent and helpless lad, but as an intelligent, calculating, and politically astute man. Murphy continues: “Saul himself is causing the family as tribal culture understood it to fragment, destroying it by not rising above it. David is wise to this: but is Jonathan?” Therefore, “When David asks Jonathan, ‘What is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?’ , in one way, he may be asking for information, but in another way he’s trying

\textsuperscript{46} Alter, \textit{The David Story}, 129.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.,152.
\textsuperscript{49} Murphy, \textit{1 Samuel}, 200, emphasis mine.
to put the situation as it is before Jonathan’s eyes. His friend refuses point blank to see it that way” up to that point in the story. Jonathan is either in denial about his father’s true character or is actually ignorant, and David wants to remove the blinders from his friend’s eyes. As Murphy puts it, “David wants to get his friend to do what most men avoid: to accept that some people, even beloved family members, are evil, and he needs to arrange that fast, because he is inches [or a step] from death.” If this is David’s true intention in this whole episode, then he is successful when Saul reacts in fury because “[t]his is [Jonathan’s] moment of recognition of what his father is, a lunger with a javelin.” Furthermore, instead of seeing Jonathan’s addition to their concocted story as a negative, it actually fits in with David’s hope that Jonathan might understand the situation as he does. Thus when Jonathan sees his father clearly as David does, he leaves the feast in anger and is “worried about David” (v. 34).

The Parting of David and Jonathan (20:35-21:1)

The final section of the passage is a direct result of Jonathan’s recognition of Saul’s true intentions for David. The biblical narrator writes: “So Jonathan arose from the table and was enraged. He did not eat the meal on that second day of the New Moon because he was worried about David and because his father disgraced him [David]” (v. 34). The last part of this verse is important; apparently Jonathan was so upset that he considered his father to have disgraced his friend. This is strong language indeed, and if we follow the literary perspective of Murphy that this story is really about Jonathan’s epiphany about his father, then the language makes sense. Jonathan was forced in a very blunt and almost deadly way to shed his blinders. As Murphy remarks, “Jonathan’s grief at the shame brought upon him by his father’s actions suggests that he

50 Ibid., 201.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 207.
has not been open with himself and has repressed his own awareness of his father’s evil. The emergence of this recognition in the form of grief forces him to take the final step, out of his family.”

Jonathan carries out his plan with David to help him escape safely from his homicidal father by taking a young boy with him for a “game” of archery. He shoots the arrows, sends the boy to fetch them, and then tells the boy, “Is not the arrow past you?” (v. 37). This was the signal that David should depart for his safety. The fact that Jonathan encouraged the boy to be quick “indicates the state of excitement and anxiety in which Jonathan now was.”

When Jonathan sends the boy back to the city—presumably to keep him from being implicated in the ruse and potentially face questioning by Saul—David comes out from hiding, prostrates himself before his friend and they both weep. As John Mauchline comments, “That David bowed three times may mean a combination of emotion and reverence before the king’s son.”

The text reads: “And Jonathan said to David, ‘Go in the peace that we swore, the two of us, even we in the name of the LORD saying, ‘The LORD is between me and you and between my seed and your seed forever.’ And he arose and went. And Jonathan went to the city” (20:42-21:1).

There are additional noteworthy points about this passage. First, “Jonathan is a pious Israelite,” as Murphy explains. “The Lord is the same truth that David and Jonathan share. It is because he puts the one Lord above king and kin that Jonathan is able to put his friend before his father.”

This is why we find David “weeping with gratitude that his friend has shown himself capable of preferring their covenant to the authority of his father.” Second, the game of archery that Jonathan contributed to the plan might seem like an odd or random method to

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53 Ibid.
54 Mauchline, 1 and 2 Samuel, 148.
55 Ibid.
56 Murphy, 1 Samuel, 203.
57 Ibid., 207.
deliver the news to David, but it is not. It allowed David and Jonathan to communicate in such a way that the boy would not understand the situation.

Finally, the last part of this passage states that Jonathan left and returned to the city. Even though Saul had essentially dismissed him from the family by his outburst in v. 30 and his attempt to kill him in v. 33, Jonathan returned to the city to continue carrying out his responsibilities and duties in the kingdom.\(^{58}\) Is Jonathan’s action here opposed to his support for David? His love for David is beyond doubt; therefore, one can only conclude that Jonathan’s return to the city is not a betrayal of David, but rather is in support of David and the continuing needs of the Israelites. Despite his father’s madness, Jonathan still has a job in the court which he cannot abandon without detriment to the people he serves. Jonathan is a righteous man. Unlike the sons of Eli or Samuel, for example, the behaviour of the son of Saul is not the reason why Saul was removed from power.\(^ {59}\)

Without doubt this is a well-crafted narrative in the sequence of events leading to David’s ascent to the throne of Israel. However, there is a significant other layer in this story that deserves further attention. In the translation and in the exegesis above, the covenant made between David and Jonathan has been mentioned, but we have not mined the layers of its detail. We will proceed in the next section with the hope of answering questions concerning the nature, content, and purpose of this covenant based on what we previously discovered about OT covenants and covenants in the Ancient Near East.

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\(^{58}\) Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 95.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.
2. The Covenant of David and Jonathan

So far we have investigated how the 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 narrative has been interpreted throughout certain centuries, including our own. We have also looked into the meaning of covenant in the OT, and the various types there. By examining the narrative from an exegetical-literary perspective as above, we can place the covenant of David and Jonathan firmly within this overall scheme and come to see that the covenant they shared was not a suzerain or patron covenant, but a parity covenant. A parity covenant, as we saw above, is a secular covenant (i.e., between two persons) that establishes kinship relations (including duties and obligations) and contains a dual oath (including a self-curse). This was the type of covenant David and Jonathan had, and, while serving their political needs, it also extended beyond that into a self-giving and self-emptying friendship.

The place to start to make this case is to investigate the social relationship of David and Jonathan. Clearly, Jonathan—as a prince and son of the reigning monarch—was David’s social superior. However, the important question to consider is how the narrator presents Jonathan's own perception of his status to David. In other words, did Jonathan see himself as socially superior, inferior, or equal to David? The answer to this question is a crucial key in determining the nature of their covenant. On the one hand, one could argue that Jonathan saw David as his social inferior: after all, when David and Jonathan first made their covenant in 1 Sam 18:1-4, David was not yet part of the royal family. Moreover, he is the youngest of Jesse’s sons whom Jesse did not even bother to summon when Samuel arrived to anoint a new king (1 Sam 16:11), and he is clearly the enemy of Jonathan’s father, who is the king. So for these reasons one could argue that David is Jonathan’s social inferior, and that would render their covenant either a suzerainty covenant or a patron covenant whereby Jonathan, as the superior, either imposed
some obligation on David, or took upon himself an obligation for the benefit of David. Positing a suzerainty covenant would be difficult, however, since we have no evidence that Jonathan imposed any sort of obligations on David when they first made their covenant in 1 Sam 18:1-4. Thus, a patron covenant remains within the realm of possibility; perhaps Jonathan saw David’s skillful qualities as a warrior (David had just defeated Goliath), and/or perhaps he knew of David’s ability to soothe Saul by playing the harp (1 Sam 16:14-23). These examples could be considered “meritorious qualities” that may have provoked Jonathan to seek a patron covenant with David.\(^{60}\) However, the evidence presented below leads us to discard this as an option.

It is, thus, more probable that Jonathan regarded David as his social equal. We can make this case by first looking at 1 Sam 18:1-4 in its narrative context. The NRSV reads as follows:

> When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

This short passage occurs immediately after David has defeated Goliath in spectacular fashion.\(^{61}\) A key element of context here is that, as Jonathan Rowe points out, “it would have been entirely natural for Saul to seek an alliance with someone like ‘Jesse the Bethlehemite.’” To judge from the size of his family Jesse was the head of a significant household in a strategic Israelite border

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\(^{61}\) An interesting side question would be to ask why Jonathan himself was not the one to step forward and challenge Goliath. He was, after all, a known warrior and, by defeating Goliath, would have bolstered the legitimacy of the monarchy as he was the heir apparent to the only king Israel ever had. See Joel Baden, *The Historical David: The Real Life of an Invented Hero* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 70.
region and, further, one that had already provided Saul with military assistance (1 Sam 17:13).”

In other words, Jesse likely was not some unknown Israelite with nothing to offer the king; on the other hand, he was a man with power and influence. Therefore, we can see why, after one of Jesse’s sons (who was already known by the court) accomplishes a significant military (and one might add, a moral victory) against one of Israel’s chief enemies, the son of Saul would want to enter into covenant with David. Indeed as Rowe explains, Jonathan, as the son of the king, “is in the privileged position of being first to seek [David’s] friendship.” Furthermore, Jonathan makes a covenant with David by giving him his royal attire, thus signaling that what belongs to him also belongs to David; they are equals. This act demonstrates how Jonathan perceives David—and that is what truly matters. Also, from a literary perspective, it is particularly striking because, whereas David accepts Jonathan’s royal attire, he rejects Saul’s when he sets out to challenge Goliath (1 Sam 17:38-39). As Rowe puts it, “This is one reason why David’s rejection of Saul’s suit of armour is important. Not only does it not encumber him in the duel with Goliath, but it also means David is not subsequently obligated to Saul.”

David becomes obligated to Jonathan according to their covenant, but likewise is Jonathan obligated to David—and we see this clearly in 1 Sam 20:3-4 when, as discussed above, Jonathan acquiesces to David’s request when David invokes their covenant.

However, a potential problem with the theory that Jonathan saw David as his social equal arises from the manner by which David swears his oath. In v. 3 we read: “But David swore

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62 Rowe, Sons or Lovers, 95.
64 Rowe, Sons or Lovers, 94.
65 Jonathan’s anger towards Saul in 1 Sam 20:34 also demonstrates how Jonathan perceived David. Jonathan would not have been enraged if Saul had disgraced someone of a lower social status.
66 Rowe, Sons or Lovers, 94. Emphasis in original.
again and said, ‘Your father surely knows that I have found favour in your eyes; thus your father said, “Jonathan must not know this lest he be grieved.”’ Therefore, as the LORD lives, and as you live [lit. your soul lives], there is but a step between me and death.” As Moshe Greenberg points out, “One of the ways in which the Israelite was accustomed to validate his oath was to join it to the mention of the name of God, or to some sacred and powerful substitute.” By doing so, the person swearing an oath would call down upon him or herself the punishment of God if he or she broke the oath.67 The latter part of this verse contains a “double oath” of sorts because David swears by both the LORD and the soul of Jonathan. In her discussion of this verse, Yael Ziegler comments that “this phrase appears only when an inferior takes an oath before someone of superior status.”68 This might seem problematic, but Ziegler also offers a solution: ‘Perhaps the dual oath formula is not automatically employed when speaking to authority, but only when one wishes to consciously express deference.’69 In other words, even though they might be social equals, Jonathan is still the son of the king and David recognizes this and pays him appropriate respect.70 David is a loyal son of Israel and, even though he himself has been anointed by Samuel to take over the throne, and even though he knows that God has rejected Saul as king, he will still show deference to the king and his entourage as long as they remain in power.71 As Ziegler puts it, “David’s unequivocal expression of deference at this point in the

69 Ibid., 121.
70 A modern parallel might be personal friends of a political leader, such as the prime minister, who call him or her by a first name but use titles or give more reverence in public or solemn occasions to honour the office he or she holds.
71 This is also supported by how David acted when he refused to kill Saul when he had the opportunity, continuing to refer to the king as “The LORD’s anointed”: See 1 Sam 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23.
narrative displays a decisive approach to this matter: for as long as the house of Saul remains in a position of rule, David will continue to express deference to its members.”³² Concerning Jonathan, J. A. Thompson notes that he had already “[s]ensed the certainties of the future . . . [and] was ready even then to acknowledge David's sovereignty over himself and over the nation.³³ Jonathan was well aware that David would soon become his superior.³⁴

Therefore, when we consider matters such as the kind of covenant David and Jonathan had, what it entailed, and their reason for making it, we can suggest the following answers: If, as the narrator seems to present, Jonathan perceived David as his social equal, then they had a parity covenant. Their covenant was secular, contained both dual oaths and self-curses (see 1 Sam 20:3, 8, 13, 16-17), and had kinship duties and obligations—a major one of which was the duty to protect each other’s descendants (1 Sam 20:42). David fulfilled this obligation when he protected Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 9. Whether or not Jonathan knew in 1 Samuel 18 that David had already been anointed by Samuel as Saul’s replacement is not clear; however, given the events of Goliath’s defeat at the hands of David, Jonathan might have read into these events and detected something going on that was greater than just an unexpected youth protecting the welfare of Israel. From a political perspective, Jonathan’s initiative in making a kinship covenant with David could have been self-preservation for him and his descendants. In addition, another motivation may have also been at play. As we discussed above, covenants were made in order to secure the internal security of a kingdom. Therefore, Jonathan, along with wanting to secure future self-preservation (even though David had shown no malicious intent towards him or the king), may have also sought a covenant with David, his social equal but

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³² Ziegler, ““As the Lord Lives and as Your Soul Lives,”” 121.
³⁴ Ibid., 336-37
potential rival, in order to maintain the peace within Israel in the greater context of unstable geopolitics with many threats from without.

All this might suggest that Jonathan was nothing more than a shrewd politician who knew how to work the system to his advantage so that when a rival inevitably ousted his father from the throne, and thus himself as the successor and heir apparent, he would remain safe. If this was Jonathan’s true intent, it clearly did not end well as he was killed in 1 Sam 31:6 in the midst of battle. Yet this picture of Jonathan does not really fit the sense of the text, for Jonathan loved David as he loved himself (v. 17). If Jonathan’s actual intent was self-preservation, then it would make no sense for him to put his own life at risk, especially using provocative overtones of Egypt and slavery, during the New Moon festival with his father. Not only does Saul ironically attempt to kill him after Saul realizes his true loyalty (v. 33), but, instead of assuring Saul that he would obligate David to attend the feast, he continues to defy his father by helping David escape. In other words, Jonathan is self-giving to David: Jonathan knew by his father’s actions at the meal that his own life, let alone the life of David, was potentially in danger, but he did not change his course of action. If he really intended to succeed Saul as king of Israel, a sure way to accomplish this would have been to lie to David (rather than to his father) and bring him before Saul for certain death. Yet this is not what he does; in fact, he does the opposite and protects his “rival,” thus relinquishing any hope of one day becoming king himself. We often think of David as the hero of this story—an innocent man anointed by God who continually must fight off a raging lunatic named Saul—however, perhaps Jonathan is the hero. He makes a covenant for the protection of his descendants and the inner security of the nation, takes tremendous steps to protect David even when he knows it might result in his own death, and essentially relinquishes the throne in favour of the one God has chosen. As earlier rabbinic
commentary stated, for these reasons Jonathan possesses a good name—“the greatest of all crowns.”

A final reason to support the claim that Jonathan’s covenant with David went far beyond their political concerns is a Hebrew word used in David’s lament over Jonathan in 2 Sam 1:26. The NRSV translates this passage as follows: “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.” This verse has sometimes been used to bolster the argument, as discussed earlier, that David and Jonathan shared an erotic relationship. However, the Hebrew word used for “wonderful” is very important because it reveals the kind of love they actually shared. The MT for “your love to me was wonderful” is as follows: נִפְלְאַתָּאַהֲבָָֽתךָָלִי. They key root is פָּלַש, occurring here in the Niphal stem. BDB informs us that this root in the Niphal stem means “surpassing,” “extraordinary,” and “wonderful.” This should not be surprising because the NRSV has already translated it as such. However, the other biblical references cited by BDB where this root appears in the Niphal stem (with this definition) deserve our attention. They are Psalm 118:23, 119:18, 139:14; Job 37:5, 14; and Dan 8:24, 11:36. With the exception of Dan 8:24, each of these passages uses פָּלַש to describe something about God or something that God has done. The root פָּלַש in the

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76 I am indebted to Keith Bodner for this suggestion (personal communication, May 5, 2015).
77 BDB, 810.
78 Ibid. The NRSV translations are as follows: Psalm 118:23: “This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes”; Psalm 119:18: “Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law”; Psalm 139:14b: “Wonderful are your works; that I know very well”; Job 37:5: God thunders wondrously with his voice; he does great things that we cannot comprehend”; Job 37:14: “Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God.”; Dan 8:24a: “He shall grow strong in power, shall cause fearful destruction, and shall succeed in what he does”; Dan 11:36a: “The king shall act as he pleases. He shall exalt himself and consider himself greater than any god, and shall speak horrendous things against the God of gods.”
Niphal stem, therefore, denotes something divinely wonderful or marvellous, and as these texts are written in poetry, so is the lament of David (where this root is used) in 2 Sam 1:17–27. Therefore, the love of Jonathan that David describes as “wonderful” must have some sort of divine character—not that Jonathan is divine, but that his love for David was of a supernatural sort. It surpassed natural love which, as we know in the OT, is often political. Several times in the 1 Samuel 18-20 narrative many characters are said to “love” David, but only Jonathan loved him with a “divine” love—the kind of love characteristic of God. In other words, Jonathan’s love for David was selfless and self-giving; he did not do it for self-promotion or self-protection. Jonathan’s love surpassed the love of women, according to David’s lament. David had multiple wives and knew that, as king, he could have any woman he wanted (as the Bathsheba affair affirms), but only the love of Jonathan surpassed natural love, and for this reason David lamented as he did.

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80 An important grammatical point is the use of the ה- prefix which indicates a contrast or distinction. Jonathan’s love, therefore, was not “like” the love of women; it was greater and categorically different from sexual love.
CONCLUSION

As we conclude our study, I wish to offer some resulting implications for how we can now perceive the three main characters in this story, namely, David, Jonathan, and YHWH.

David

The image of David presented at his anointing by Samuel (in 1 Sam 16:1-13) is one of an unassuming youth who does not even speak, and who is seemingly forgotten by his father and brothers. Based on our present study, this image can no longer hold. Perhaps (ironically) after spending time in Saul’s court, David learned the art of politics and how to achieve his goals. We clearly witness this in the narrative of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 especially when David first approaches Jonathan. According to Williams’ grammar, the narrator employs a Hebrew phraseology that suggests David knows he is not guilty of any charge against Saul, but wants Jonathan to tell him what Saul thinks are his sins. Moreover, when Jonathan is offended by David’s questions, David knows how to invoke their covenant so that Jonathan will follow his wishes. David’s image as a calculating individual can further be inferred in 1 Sam 20:5-8 when, ironically, he asks Jonathan to be faithful to him by lying to his father. As it is David’s real plan to get Jonathan to see reality for himself, he puts Jonathan in a dangerous situation and almost gets him killed. This image of David is a long way from the innocent boy pictured four chapters previous.

Jonathan

The first time we encounter Jonathan and David together is when Jonathan makes a covenant with him and gives him his royal garb (1 Sam 18:1-4). Clearly he saw something in David which led him to these actions. Perhaps he had political motivations since, as we discovered,

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David’s family wielded military influence. However, just as our perception of David was reversed, by the end of 1 Samuel 20 Jonathan is seen much more as a loyal friend who willingly sacrificed his own opportunity to be king. Even so, Jonathan was not a passive participant in this drama. It is true that he listened to David’s request and “sounded out” his father, and discovered—much to his dismay—that Saul retained antagonism towards David. However, Jonathan’s role in his own abdication of the throne continued even after these events. When he had full knowledge of Saul’s intentions and the fact that David’s continued existence would prevent him from ascending Israel’s throne, he actively worked—despite his father’s warning—to ensure that David would succeed and his father would not. He could have betrayed his friend for his own benefit, but did the complete opposite. Our image of Jonathan should be of a loyal, self-giving, and self-sacrificing covenant friend who is the actual hero of this narrative.

**YHWH**

In what way can we say that God/YHWH is a character in this story? He never speaks nor is said to be actively doing anything. However, the simple fact that David and Jonathan invoke his name when swearing their oaths/covenants is enough of a reason to posit his involvement in this story. Jonathan’s final reported words to David in the narrative are his invocation that the LORD would be between them and between their descendants forever. As Francesca Aran Murphy noted above, “The Lord is the same truth that David and Jonathan share.” It is this fact that makes Jonathan ultimately loyal to God’s chosen one over his own family. ² Although God may be “passive” in this story, we can perceive a divine trait, namely, that he is active through human characters.

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² Francesca Aran Murphy, *1 Samuel*, Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 203, 207.
Our study of the narrative of 1 Sam 20:1-21:1 has focused on the linguistic nuances of the Hebrew MT, the history of the passage’s interpretation throughout the centuries, the larger concept of *covenant* in the OT, and how these different elements, including a literary exegesis, have led us to the conclusion that the covenant shared by David and Jonathan was a parity covenant established not only to serve their respective political needs in the face of political uncertainty, but also as a covenant of friendship which was self-giving, self-emptying, and ultimately centred on the LORD, the shared truth of Israel.
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