



David's Fame: Rooted in Favour with God (1 Sam 18-19)

Commentary: Week Ten

New American Commentary¹

(3) The House of Saul Honors and Elevates David [18:1-5](#)

[18:1-5](#) Immediately after David's conversation with the king, his relationship with the royal family changed forever. For one thing, Saul's firstborn son found in David a soul mate, and "Jonathan's soul was tied to David's soul" (NIV, "Jonathan became one in spirit with David"; v. [1](#)). This was understandable because David and Jonathan had much in common; they were both courageous and capable young warriors who possessed profound faith in the Lord. Both had initiated faith-motivated attacks against militarily superior Philistines that had resulted in great victories for Israel.

Jonathan, like his father Saul ([16:21](#)), "loved" (Hb. *'āhab*; v. [3](#)) David. That love inspired him to make a covenant with David, one that was expressed with extravagant gifts to the new celebrity. In a single day David had acquired the finest sword in the Philistine army as well as one of the finest swords in Israel's armory; he had been permitted to wear the king's clothing in the time of conflict and was given princely clothing in times of peace. The fact that Jonathan gave David the garb and armaments originally reserved for the heir to Saul's throne clearly possesses symbolic and thematic significance. In an apologetic vein, it also provides an explanation of how David came to possess these coveted tokens of power.

Not only did David's relationship with Jonathan evolve that day, but so did his relationship with the king. He became a member of the royal household and as such did not prove disappointing.

The term translated "caused to prosper/did successfully" (a form of *śākal*) is theologically significant; according to the Torah ([Deut 29:8](#) [Eng., [29:9](#)]), those who would keep the words of the Sinai covenant would "prosper in everything" they did. The author's employment of language that brings this Torah promise to mind is not accidental. The comment in v. [5](#) underscores the claim made elsewhere ([16:13](#)) that David was a man under the control and direction of the Lord's Spirit—the same Spirit who had brought into being the Sinai covenant and rewarded its adherents with prosperity.

In a manner reminiscent of Joseph, another man who prospered because the Spirit of God was in him (cf. [Gen 41:38-40](#)), David was rewarded with a position of great responsibility: "a high rank in the army." Saul's action was met by the approval of "all the people and Saul's officers as well."

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 198-210.

(4) Saul Begins to Perceive David as a Threat [18:6-9](#)

[18:6-9](#) David's—and thus Saul's—phenomenal success was celebrated by all. After the Philistine campaign was concluded and the army was returning, grateful mothers, wives, and daughters met them with expressions of appreciation. The triumphant soldiers were treated to the sights and sounds of women “singing and dancing.” The word “lutes” (Hb. *šališîm*), used only here in a context of revelry, is a derivative of the word for “three”; it may refer to a three-sided or three-stringed musical instrument, or it may be a musical term for a kind of poetry.

In accordance with an ancient Israelite custom (cf. [Exod 15:21](#); [Judg 5:1-31](#)), the women composed songs with lyrics that memorialized the men's military successes. Five words (in Hebrew)—two lines—of the poem celebrating the present triumph are preserved. The poetry possesses characteristics typical of ancient Near Eastern poetry: parallelism and the use of a fixed word pair, “thousand” (*'elep*) and “ten thousand” (*rěbābā*).

Saul's reaction to this couplet was predictable and intense. Even more than angry, it “was evil in his eyes” (“galled him”) because he connected the mention of David with Samuel's prophecy of a previously anonymous “neighbor” of Saul to whom the Lord had given the kingdom of Israel (cf. [15:28](#)). As a result, Saul watched David with jealousy.

The writer's use of the verb translated “kept a jealous eye” (Hb. *'ōyēn*) probably is intended as a double entendre involving a similar-sounding word meaning “transgressed” (Hb. *'wn*). The effect of this subtle wordplay is to inform the reader that from this point on Saul would carefully observe David for the purpose of committing sins against him.

(5) Saul Attempts Unsuccessfully to Murder David [18:10-12](#)

[18:10-12](#) Saul wasted no time in attempting to eliminate David as Israel's next king. At the royal quarters in Gibeah, during an apparently tranquil scene, an “evil/tormenting spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul.” The narrator's portrayal of Saul prophesying under the influence of an evil/troubling spirit identifies Saul as a false prophet (cf. [1 Kgs 22:21-23](#)) and therefore one who was not to be feared ([Deut 18:22](#)). Like Goliath (cf. [1 Sam 17:7](#)), a previous adversary of David, “Saul had a spear in his hand.”

Not once, but twice Saul hurled the spear at David with the intention of pinning him to the wall (v. [11](#)). David's willingness to remain in the room long enough for Saul to retrieve the spear after the failed first attempt and then take a second shot at him portrays the incredible depth of David's loyalty to the king and his commitment to helping Saul overcome his torments.

Ironically, the spear episode incited fear—not in David, but in Saul. Saul reasoned correctly that the only way the young man was able to evade the point of his spear at such close range was that “the LORD was with David but had left Saul” (v. [12](#)).

(6) David Becomes Saul's Son-in-Law [18:13–30](#)

[18:13–16](#) His first attempt at killing David having failed, Saul tried a different tactic. David was removed from the protected confines of the royal residence and was sent to lead Saul's troops in battle. These circumstances clearly posed risks for both David's reputation and his well-being. Failure to perform his duties successfully even once on the battlefield would reduce or erase David's prestige and popularity and perhaps even end his life. However, David was successful in carrying out every assignment "because the LORD was with him." David's divinely assisted success in these military campaigns had two effects on others: it added to Saul's fears, and it increased the people's love for David.

[18:17–19](#) Knowing that David's chances of being killed increased in proportion to the amount of time spent on the battlefield, Saul cunningly honored his offer to give his daughter in marriage to the one who slew Goliath (cf. [17:25](#)). However, Saul's offer was subtly nuanced; David was to be given Saul's "older daughter Merab" (v. [17](#)), but not as a reward for past accomplishments as had been implied in the original proposal. Instead she would be acquired with the dual currencies of ongoing military service and zeal for the Lord. Though David might not be motivated to risk his life in order to gain the hand of the king's daughter in marriage, perhaps he could be persuaded to do so as a demonstration of his commitment to the Lord. If David accepted the offer, Saul could passively "let the Philistines" destroy his most feared adversary. Thus, David's love for God could be used to destroy God's youthful anointed one.

A historical precedent existed for David to accept the conditions set by Saul for gaining entrance into the royal family: Jacob had once used work as an alternative to paying the customary bride price for a wife (cf. [Gen 29:15–19](#)); so could David. David, who was indeed a gifted and enthusiastic warrior for the Lord, was not troubled by the stipulations in the king's agreement; he would fight in behalf of his God with or without the opportunity to win a royal bride. Yet David refused the offer because of another consideration: David possessed an undistinguished genealogy, so that he felt unqualified to "become the king's son-in-law" (v. [18](#)). Saul was from a wealthy family; David was not. Saul was king of Israel; David was a rural shepherd who possessed Moabite blood (cf. [Ruth 4:13–17](#)).

David could not be dissuaded in the matter, so Merab "was given in marriage to Adriel of Meholah" (v. [19](#)). This union produced five sons who were later killed by the Gibeonites ([2 Sam 21:8–9](#)) as a lingering result of Saul's sin.

[18:20–25](#) Not to be stymied, Saul saw in his "daughter Michal" (v. [20](#)) a third means of destroying David. Saul learned to his delight (lit., "it was straight in his eyes") that this daughter "was in love with David." David had previously eluded the king's spear and the Philistines' weapons, but perhaps he could be ensnared and ruined by a woman. As Saul envisioned it, David would be facing a double threat: "the hand of the Philistines" (v. [21](#)) and Michal herself, who would be a "snare to him." Michal could be a snare in two ways: first, she could motivate David to place his life at extreme risk in battle with the Philistines; second, she could corrupt David spiritually.

The term translated as "snare" (Hb. *môqēš*) is a theologically significant one, used three times in the Torah to describe the dangers of idols and idol worshipers ([Exod 23:33](#); [34:12](#); [Deut 7:16](#)). Perhaps Saul was spiritually astute enough to recognize that in marriage his daughter's idolatrous inclinations (cf. [19:13](#)) could easily lead David astray, in which case David would become the Lord's enemy and come to a disastrous end. Thus Saul was especially eager to provide David with "a second opportunity" to become a "son-in-law" to the king and spoke to David directly about it.

Saul reinforced his offer to David with a covert disinformation campaign. Previously David had heard from unnamed servants of Saul about the offer regarding Goliath; now from similar sources he would be

informed of important particulars regarding the marriage offer. Of greatest priority, David was to be told that “the king is pleased with you” (v. [22](#)); David would surely interpret this to mean that Saul was willing to overlook David’s undistinguished background, thus clearing the way for David to “become [Saul’s] son-in-law.”

When David heard these words, however, he balked. Saul may be willing to disregard social proprieties, but David could not; he was “a poor man and little known” (v. [22](#)). So for a second time he refused the offer to join the royal family.

Saul extended the offer to David a third time, this time providing David with an honorable means of overcoming all other shortcomings. David’s “price for the bride” (v. [25](#))—and thus for the right to become the king’s son-in-law—was “a hundred Philistine foreskins,” implying one hundred Philistine deaths. As an added inducement, the offer was presented to David as a patriotic duty; David must fight the Philistines to help the king “take revenge on his enemies.”

[18:26–30](#) David’s mind was changed; he was now “pleased to become the king’s son-in-law” (v. [26](#); lit., “the matter was straight[ened out] in his eyes”). A deadline was set for David to meet the challenge, but before it came, David had succeeded abundantly (v. [27](#)). Then in a macabre ceremony David “presented the full number” of severed portions of Philistine genitals to the king “so that he might become the king’s son-in-law.” The fact that David exceeded by a hundred the required number of deaths underscores David’s commitment to the king and his eagerness to join the royal family. Saul had no choice but to give David “his daughter Michal in marriage.”

Because Saul was an eyewitness to David’s prodigious success, he “realized [knew] that the LORD was with David” (v. [28](#)). That, added to the fact that two of his own children were now bonded to David in friendship and love, rekindled Saul’s anxieties concerning David. Michal’s love for David had not eliminated him as a menace as had been hoped; instead, it had brought him into the inner circle of legitimate contenders for the throne. As Saul viewed things, David had now become the most serious threat to the Saulide dynasty, and so “he remained his enemy the rest of his days” (v. [29](#)).

Saul’s efforts against the Philistines, including those involving David, were not sufficient to stem the tide of Philistine aggression against Israel. But David continued to go out to battle, even though he had already gained the coveted marital status. And when he went, he exceeded all others in victories. As a result, David’s name “was highly acclaimed” (NIV “became well known”).

(7) Saul Attempts to Have Jonathan Murder David [19:1–7](#)

[19:1–5](#) With great deliberateness and exactness the writer chronicles Saul’s growing efforts to eliminate David. Although he initially loved David ([16:21](#)), Saul came to fear him ([18:12](#)) and then to seek his death. Saul’s attempts began with a murderous thought ([18:11](#)), then progressed to awkward homicidal acts hidden from public view ([18:11](#)). Saul then crafted a wider and more artful plan that involved public lies ([18:22](#)) and a small circle of people, including servants and a daughter. The circle of involvement widened when this effort failed. Dropping all ruses, Saul now explicitly ordered Jonathan and all his servants to “kill David” ([19:1](#)).

When Jonathan heard his father's words, an internal collision occurred between the young man's love for David and his desire to please his father. Jonathan had known his father to issue poorly conceived commands in the past (cf. [14:29](#)). He had also had his own life spared when others stood up against his father's rash words ([14:39–45](#)). Now, when he sensed that a heroic young life like his own was at risk, Jonathan acted to spare David's life.

First, he "warned" (v. [2](#)) David by revealing Saul's intentions and timetable for murder. Next, he formulated a plan of escape for David. Finally, he proposed a plan to gather further information from the king and pass it along to David.

Jonathan fulfilled his part in the plan as he "spoke well of David to Saul" (v. [4](#)). He urged the king to reconsider his plans for David and provided Saul with several reasons for doing so. The first reason was David's innocence; that is, he had committed no crime against the crown that would require his death. Second, on the positive side David had been of great help to Saul by killing a dreaded enemy. Third, Saul should spare David's life to avoid committing a serious sin, that of shedding innocent blood.

[19:6–7](#) Jonathan's impeccable reasoning achieved—for the time being—the desired result: Saul "listened to Jonathan" (v. [6](#)). The king took a solemn oath "by the life of Yahweh" (NIV, "as surely as the LORD lives") to underscore his decision that "David will not be put to death."

Having negotiated the reconciliation, Jonathan went at once to David to inform him of his success and accompany David back to the royal household. As a result, "David was with Saul as before" (v. [7](#)). For the time being, at least, David was spared by the efforts of Jonathan, the man who had perhaps the most to gain from David's death.

(8) David Continues to Defeat the Philistines [19:8](#)

[19:8](#) Philistine attacks on Israel punctuated the eleventh century B.C. as these two peoples fought for undisputed control of Palestine's southern coastal plain and Shephelah region. When the Philistines once again went on the offensive, Israel's youthful commander David, as before (cf. [18:5](#), [14](#), [27](#), [30](#)), (lit.) "dealt them a great blow" so that "they fled before him."

(9) Saul Again Attempts to Murder David [19:9–10](#)

[19:9–10](#) David's return to Gibeah and the royal residence following battle did not mean a lessening of dangers for David, for a tormenting/evil "spirit from the LORD" (v. [9](#)) had once again come upon Saul. The "spear in his hand" served as a clear indication that Saul was having problems; only a deeply troubled individual would sit armed for war inside the safest house in Israel! As was the custom during these difficult times in Saul's life (cf. [16:23](#)), "David was playing the harp" in the king's presence.

David was keenly aware of Saul's threatening behavior in the past (cf. [18:10–11](#)); accordingly, he surely had prepared himself for any irrational acts that might ensue. Thus, when "Saul tried to pin him to the wall with his spear" (v. [10](#)), David escaped. Unlike the previous similar incident, however, David did not remain in Saul's presence to provide him with a second opportunity to take his life; he returned to his own residence and later that night would even depart the city (cf. v. [12](#)).

(10) Michal Rescues David from Saul [19:11-17](#)

19:11-13 In his demonic passion Saul “sent men” (v. [11](#)) to kill David when he left his house the next morning. But Michal was aware of her father’s plan and, like her brother, “warned” David of the danger and urged him to flee before morning (cf. v. [2](#)). She even facilitated his escape by letting David down through an unguarded window. Then in an act that revealed as much about her spiritual condition as it did about her commitment to her husband, Michal “took a teraphim” (“idol”) and used it to deceive Saul’s cohorts.

The reference here to a teraphim, apparently a large anthropomorphic idol, is the second one in 1 Samuel. Ominously, the prophet Samuel previously had suggested that Saul’s rebellious acts were equitable to the “evil of teraphim” ([15:23](#)). Through the present compelling scene and without the intrusion of didactic commentary, the writer suggests that Michal was as much a spiritual rebel as her father. This observation foreshadows an outcome for Michal’s life that is the feminine counterpart to Saul’s. Michal’s father lost his opportunity to establish a dynasty; Michal lost her opportunity to establish a family ([2 Sam 6:23](#)). When read in connection with [Psalm 59](#), Michal’s action creates a strong contrast with those of her husband; whereas Michal trusted in a teraphim to save David, David trusted in the Lord (cf. [Ps 59:9-10](#), [16-17](#)).

In spite of the negative implications of the teraphim, the sequence of actions performed by Michal creates links between her and those of previous biblical heroines. In each case these allusions identify David in particularly favorable comparisons. Jacob too was saved by a woman who had possession of teraphim and deceived her father during a desperate search (cf. [Gen 31:19-35](#)). Moses also was saved through the efforts of the daughter of a wicked ruler (cf. [Exod 2:6-10](#)). Furthermore, David’s escape echoed that of the spies saved by Rahab, who were let down through a window at night by a woman who lied to a king ([Josh 2:2-15](#)).

In both this instance and the one involving Jonathan earlier in the chapter, members of Saul’s own family took the lead in scheming to protect David’s life. In both instances David was portrayed as the passive conspirator in the attempts to undermine Saul’s will. Saul’s own children were the ones who initiated and executed plans in David’s behalf to derail their father’s purposes.

The author’s careful description of the circumstances surrounding David’s deliverances are not without purpose; they reinforce the claim that David did not usurp the throne from Saul. Leading members of Saul’s own family loved and supported David throughout his rise to power and even played leading roles in David’s ascent.

19:14-17 The next morning Saul’s messengers entered David’s residence. However, the socially powerful daughter of the king refused to grant the men access to David’s room, claiming he was ill. Being understandably hesitant to act against the objections of a royal family member, they returned to Saul empty-handed.

But Saul was still under the malignant influence of the tormenting spirit and would not be dissuaded by circumstances of health. If David was too sick to walk to his death, then he must be brought to Saul “in his bed” (v. [15](#))! It might also be that David was only pretending to be ill. Returning to David’s house, therefore, the men who entered did not find in the bed one who was about to die; instead, they found one who had never lived.

Saul, of course, demanded an explanation. Michal was therefore called upon to answer for her role in the teraphim deception and David's escape. Her response was convenient, if not convincing; she acted as she did because David threatened her with death. Her defense could not be tested, for there were no witnesses. Besides, it was useful for Saul to accept her claim—if David had threatened a member of the royal household, he was doubly worthy of death.

(11) God's Spirit Rescues David from Saul and His Troops [19:18–24](#)

[19:18–21](#) When David fled from the king, he did not return to his home; perhaps he feared betrayal there. Instead, he went three miles away to seek help from Samuel at Ramah. Samuel was able to provide David with empathy, since Samuel had also known the possibility of death at the hands of Saul (cf. [16:2](#)). He also could supply spiritual encouragement, since he was the prophet who had received the revelation of David's selection as Israel's next king.

The two of them apparently left Samuel's house to take up temporary residency at "Naioth." The term translated by the NIV here as a geographic name literally means "dwellings/habitations" and may refer to a religious compound within Ramah, perhaps even the one mentioned in [9:22](#).

Accurate reports regarding David's whereabouts soon reached the king, and he immediately "sent men to capture" his fugitive son-in-law ([19:19](#)). Saul's servants entered Naioth, yet no indication is given that they located David. Instead, they saw Samuel and a group of prophets prophesying, perhaps the same group Saul had encountered earlier (cf. [10:5](#)).

Before they could initiate a search for David within the group, however, they were captured by God's Spirit and compelled to join the prophets. This activity so absorbed the men that they were unable to continue with their royal mission. God's Spirit, which had previously marked David for kingship over Israel, now acted to preserve David for that task.

But Saul was not to be deterred from his goal of eradicating David. As a second group entered that stronghold of the Spirit, they too were overcome and failed to apprehend David. Increasingly more desperate, Saul sent a third group of men into this mismatched clash between flesh and Spirit, with identical results. The Spirit of God was gently invincible; those who had entered into Naioth under the influence of the ruler of Israel now found themselves under the infinitely greater influence of the ruler of the universe.

[19:22–24](#) As a last resort Saul "himself left for Ramah" (v. [22](#)), ordinarily about a ninety-minute journey. On the road he passed by a major regional water source, "the great cistern at Secu." He asked people who had come there to fill their water jars, some of whom probably were from Ramah (cf. [9:11](#)), where he might find Samuel and David. Having received the answer, he proceeded to Naioth (v. [23](#)).

But in a climactic tour de force, the Spirit of God made a mockery of the most ardent efforts of David's opponent. Saul's first servants had not begun prophesying until they arrived at Naioth; however, Saul began prophesying as "he walked along" some distance from Naioth. Then when he actually arrived at his destination, the Spirit of God so overwhelmed him that "he stripped off his robes" (v. [24](#)) as he continued to prophesy "in Samuel's presence." The triple employment of the Hebrew phrase *gam hû'* (lit., "even he"; not fully noted in the NIV) in vv. [23–24](#) emphasizes the fact that Israel's most powerful citizen was subjugated by the power of God.

Saul's loss of royal attire in the presence of God's Spirit presented a powerful image confirming the prophetic judgments Samuel made earlier (cf. [15:23](#), [28](#)). God had rejected Saul as king, so in God's presence Saul would not be permitted to wear the clothing of royalty. Saul had "rejected the word of the LORD" ([15:23](#)), so now in an ironic twist he would be condemned to be a mouthpiece for that word.

Saul remained "naked" (Hb. *'ārōm*; NIV, "that way"; a grave shame in the ancient Near East) and in a prophetic trance "all that day and night." His actions, so out of keeping with his background and character, gave new life to the proverb coined when Saul was first anointed king over Israel (cf. [10:11](#)), "Is Saul also among the prophets?" As Youngblood points out, the proverb now also distances Saul from the royal office.