

Unveiling the Meaning of Love אהב: Between Politics and Romance in the Story of David and Jonathan

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Digital Object Identifier (DOI): DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33856/didaskalia.v7i1.331>

Article history

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
27 October 2023	05 Desember 2023	24 April 2024	30 April 2024

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the evolving interpretation of the relationship between David and Jonathan in the book of Samuel. Recent scholarship has sparked controversy by suggesting a possible homosexual connection between the two figures. This research challenges such interpretations by revisiting the concept of love (אהב) within ancient Near Eastern and biblical covenants, drawing on the foundational work of William Moran. Employing textual criticism and exegesis, the analysis focuses on the Hebrew terms יָפִי and נָעִם used in 1 Samuel 19:1 and 2 Samuel 1:23, 26. By examining these terms alongside supporting evidence from the Hebrew Bible and ancient Aramaic texts, the study argues that these words carry primarily political connotations, signifying "delight" or "pleasantness" (יָפִי) and "loveliness" or "beauty" (נָעִם), rather than romantic love. This novel interpretation reframes the understanding of David and Jonathan's bond, emphasizing its political significance within the broader narrative.

Keywords: homosexual, love, politics, Moran

Citation Style (APA): Pardede, H. (2024). Unveiling the Meaning of Love אהב: Between Politics and Romance in the Story of David and Jonathan. *Journal Didaskalia*, 7(1), 27-35. <https://doi.org/10.33856/didaskalia.v7i1.331>

INTRODUCTION

In the story of David and Jonathan, it is evident that Jonathan harbored deep feelings of love and admiration towards David. This is evident from his submissive and unresisting attitude when the throne of the kingdom, which should have been inherited by Saul's son Jonathan, was instead given to David (Yaron Peleg, 2005). The relationship between David and Jonathan, as depicted in the narratives and poetry of 1-2 Samuel, has recently been a subject of debate. Jonathan, the son of King Saul, played a significant role in the early rise of David's fame, as recounted in the book of Samuel. Jonathan twice acted as an intermediary with his father on David's behalf when Saul sought to kill him (1 Samuel 19:1-7; 20), helped David escape from Saul unharmed (1 Samuel 20), and encouraged David as he wandered through the wilderness of Judea as a fugitive from Saul (1 Samuel 23:16-18).

The use of the word "love" by Jonathan towards David is interpreted differently by scholars: some believe it to be an expression of Eros love (Zehnder, 2007), others believe it to be love related to commitment or contract between two individuals (Zender, 2007), and still others believe Jonathan's expression of love to be both personal and political (Keith Bodner, 2009). Specifically, **אָהַב** may denote an individual's preference or favoritism in existing political relationships, while **נָעַם** may denote the graciousness or favor of a Kingdom figure. Overall, the terms **אָהַב**, **אָהַב**, and **נָעַם** underscore the political aspect of the relationship between David and Jonathan as literally depicted in the book of Samuel (Peter Ackroyd, 1975).

Details and vocabulary used to describe the interaction between David and Jonathan have been utilized to support both political and erotic interpretations of the relationship between these two biblical figures. Views on the nature of the relationship between David and Jonathan are varied, but most interpretations generally fall into three groups. Some view the affiliation between David and Jonathan primarily as a political alliance and find no trace of eroticism in the text (J A Thompson, 1974). At the other end of this spectrum are those who advocate for an erotic and/or sexual interpretation of David and Jonathan's relationship (Markus Zehnder, 2007). The author argues that Jonathan's interests should be viewed from both a political and personal perspective. That is, Jonathan's admiration for David is closely related to Israel and Judah's admiration for David's successive victories and his political character. The narrator employs this comparison to demonstrate David's worthiness as the next king, fit to lead not only Jonathan and the entire palace circle but also all the people of Israel and Judah (the outer circle of the palace).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs textual criticism and exegesis methods to analyze texts containing the story of David and Jonathan. Supporting evidence for understanding the politically nuanced **אָהַב** and **נָעַם** is sourced from the Hebrew Bible as well as Ancient Aramaic texts. The author aims to elucidate the meanings of the words **אָהַב** and **נָעַם** found in the Old Testament, specifically in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, which contain numerous instances of **אָהַב** (love) and dialogues among Saul, David, and Jonathan. Through textual analysis and comparison, the author examines that there are groups interpreting the David–Jonathan narrative as one depicting a homosexual relationship between them. Conversely, others interpret the narrative about David and Jonathan using language and imagery that are homosexual in nature but believe there is no mutual love, only political discourse of the Kingdom (Zehnder, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The term "Love Politics"

William Moran indicates that the language of love is part of the rhetoric of covenant and political alliances (Moran, 1963). However, many who interpret these texts from a political perspective also acknowledge that the language used to describe the relationship between David and Jonathan has a personal dimension. Ancient Near Eastern political alliances often relied on kinship and employed familial rhetoric; thus, emotionally charged terms can have politicized nuances in certain contexts (Moore Cross, 1998). Building on Moran's argument, the author contends that two other terms associated with David and Jonathan, **אָהַב**, meaning "delight" or "desire," and **נָעַם**, meaning "pleasant" or "beautiful," can also have political connotations in specific contexts. Specifically, the author argues that

both terms can indicate preference or favoritism in established political relationships. A politicized understanding of **אהב** and **נעם** significantly influences the interpretation of the relationship between David and Jonathan as presented in 1–2 Samuel. Moran's argument focuses on the terminology of love used in relation to the covenantal relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel in the book of Deuteronomy, which differs from modern understandings of love as deep psychological and emotional attachment. This love, he argues, is "commanded love," as in Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (**בכל-לבבך**) (**אלהיך יהוה את ואהבתו בכל-מאדך ובכל-נפשך**).

Moran demonstrates that the language of love is part of the rhetoric of covenant and political alliances, citing numerous examples from ancient Near Eastern political documents spanning the second and first millennia BCE. For instance, in the 18th-century BC Mari letters to King Yasmah-Addu, the author refers to himself as "the one who loves you" (*rā'imka*), indicating his loyalty to the king (Georges Dossin, 1952). In the 14th century BC Amarna letters to Pharaoh Amenhotep III and IV from their allies and vassals. In one letter, King Tushratta of Mitanni writes about the alliance between his father and the Pharaoh by saying (EA 17:24–28), "My father loves you and you also love my father. According to this love, my father gives you my sister" (*abūya irāmka u attā appūnama abūya tarāmšu u abūya kī rāmi aḥātī ana kāša [it]tanakku*) William L Moran, 1992. Mutual love not only bound kings in parity alliances but also rulers with their followers. The vassal letters to the Pharaoh, which constitute the majority of the Amarna correspondence, speak of the "love" (*rāmu*) of the followers to the Pharaoh (EA 53:40–44, 114:59–69) and also Pharaoh's love, as a king, to endure his subjects (EA 121:61–63; 123:23). In each of these examples, the term love refers to political loyalty, which is the obligation of both subordinates and the Pharaoh as a result of their covenant relationship.

Moran discusses several examples of politicized language of love in the Hebrew Bible, all involving King David. In 1 Kings 5:15, King Hiram of Tyre is called "beloved" **אֲהָבָה** (David, meaning there is a partnership between these two kings, which continued between Hiram and Solomon. In 2 Samuel 19:7, General Yoab, a general of King David, rebukes David for grieving over the death of his rebellious son Absalom, who wanted to kill him. Instead of rejoicing that the rebellion had ended and been quelled, he accuses David of "hating those who love [him] and loving those who hate [him]" From Yoab's perspective, David reverses the actual situation, and he prioritizes the grief from the paternal side because of his son Absalom, without appreciating the victory of those loyal to him. Lastly, 1 Samuel 18:16 states, "all Israel and Judah loved **אֲהָבָה** David because he led all their campaigns.

It means that Israel and Judah gave political support to David because David successfully led them in warfare. Moran compares Jonathan's language of loving **אֲהָבָה** David "as himself" **כְּנַפְשׁוֹ** (in 1 Samuel 18:1, 3 and 20:17) with the language in Neo-Assyrian succession treaties under Esarhaddon (681–669 BC). In these documents, the followers of the Assyrian king are instructed to "love" Esarhaddon's son and successor Assurbanipal "as themselves" (*šumma attunu ana mAššur-bani-apli mār-šarri rabû ša bīt redūte mār mAššur-aḥy -iddina šarru KURaššur bēlkunu kī tar'amāni*). The striking parallel language, as well as the context of the treaties in both cases, leads Moran to cite the relationship between David and Jonathan as an example of covenant love that "can be defined in terms of loyalty, service, and obedience (Moran, 1963)."

The dominant action in Jonathan's expression of love for David is actually loyalty from someone in a higher position (as the king's son and his potential successor) to someone in a lower position. Jonathan's attitude clearly contrasts and differs from the norm. Generally, those in high positions demand respect, dedication, and loyalty from

those in lower positions. However, Jonathan's actions, though rare and unusual, are clearly not emotional. These actions are based on the acknowledgment that he does not have to be the next king because there is someone more suitable (Joyce G Baldwin, 1988).

Moran's argument about political love in the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible has convinced the majority of scholars over the past half-century. The author intends to apply Moran's idea of thinking about David and Jonathan without emphasizing solely on the covenant issue. Although Moran's significant understanding of political love is something that can be commanded, the term love appears in the story of David as something offered willingly yet still politically nuanced, as seen in the example of all Israel and Judah "loving" David in response to his military successes. While Jonathan's affection for David arises in the context of the covenant between David and Jonathan represented as a decision made by Jonathan himself because the alliance angered King Saul. In fact, a significant theme during David's time in Saul's court is that the people of Saul's kingdom willingly loved David. The people of Saul, his nobles, his sons, and even Saul himself are said to have willingly loved David as part of the narrative effort to justify David's reign over Israel (1 Samuel 16:21; 18:1, 3, 16, 20, 22, 28; 20:17; 2 Sam 1:26). As a narrative composition, the material of David and Jonathan uses political rhetoric in a more fluid manner than what is seen in formal conventions of political documents such as treaties or letters. Based on Moran's thinking on the use of the term "political love" in the ancient Near East, the author now turns to examine the potential political connotations of **יָפַח** and **נָעַם** as they appear in 1–2 Samuel and how these politicized nuances can influence our understanding of the loving relationship between David and Jonathan.

יָפַח (chaphets)

The root of the word **יָפַח** can generally be translated as "to enjoy," "to desire," or "to delight in" (biblehub.com, 2024). It is used in 1 Samuel 19:1, where Jonathan acts as an intermediary on David's behalf to King Saul, who wants David killed. There are biblical examples where the term **יָפַח** with someone as the object appears to have sexual connotations, and these examples are used to support erotic interpretations of the relationship between David and Jonathan. This relates to Jonathan's determination to love David, as they have similarities, though there are undeniable differences between them. Considering their attitude towards making a covenant between them and their descendants, it should be reiterated that this is not one-sided love from Jonathan alone. Regarding the concept of covenant, Olyan cites Moran's classical understanding of the nature of covenantal love, which is mutually beneficial: The lord loves his subordinate, and therefore the subordinate also loves his lord (Saul M Olyan, 1996). What Jonathan did is evidence of sacrifice to David, as if exchanging his position as the king's son to become David's subordinate.

For example, in Esther 2:14: "In the evening she went, and in the morning, she returned to the second harem in the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name" (biblehub.com, 2024). Although the word **יָפַח** (delight) carries sexual connotations as in Esther 2:14, its nearly identical usage in 1 Samuel 18:22 by Saul, which has political implications, supports the concept that Jonathan's expression of delight also carries political intentions (Erin E Fleming, 2016).

Furthermore, in Genesis 34:19, after Shechem rapes Dinah, Jacob's daughter, he seeks reconciliation in order to marry her, not only to maintain peace with Jacob's family but because he "delights **יָפֵץ** in Jacob's daughter." The story's context suggests that Shechem was motivated by sexual desire as well as emotional attachment.

However, there are biblical examples of **יָפֵץ**, particularly in the Book of Samuel, where its meaning clearly has political implications. First, in 1 Samuel 18:22, King Saul is said to "delight" **יָפֵץ** in David in language nearly identical to Jonathan's description in 1 Samuel 19:1. But according to Fewell and Gunn, who directly conclude that Saul likes David's music, not David himself; the people of Israel admire David's military prowess and are not infatuated with David (Danna Nolan, 1993). Additionally, Saul has also offered his daughter, Michal, to David for marriage with the hidden motive that David would die in the process of obtaining the bride-price he demanded, which was a hundred Philistine foreskins. To ensure that David would accept the marriage proposal, Saul ordered his court officials to inform David personally that "the king delights **יָפֵץ** in you, and all his servants love you." So, in this case, **יָפֵץ** has political significance, indicating Saul's "liking" or "favor" towards David. Although dishonest, Saul intended to persuade David to engage in marriage negotiations by telling him that he had the king's support as well as political backing.

The term **יָפֵץ** also has clear political connotations in 2 Samuel 20:11.13. While on a journey to suppress a rebellion, David's old general, Joab, stabs David's newly appointed military commander, Amasa, in front of the entire military force (2 Samuel 20:9–10) biblehub.com, 2024. In an effort to keep the soldiers moving forward, one of Joab's aides stands beside Amasa's body and calls out to the troops as they pass, "Whoever delights **יָפֵץ** in Joab, and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab!" (**מִי אֲשֶׁר יָפֵץ בְּיוֹאָב וּמִי אֲשֶׁר לְדָוִד אַחֲרַי יֵאָבֵב**). In this case, **יָפֵץ** clearly indicates political support, particularly military support, rather than sexual desire towards Joab. Joab sought to maintain his control over David's military force and to garner political support after committing open murder. In fact, Joab's call for support did not immediately receive a positive response. The soldiers initially stood still by Amasa's corpse, and followed Joab only after the corpse was moved and hidden from view (2 Samuel 20:12).

In addition to royal support and popular backing, **יָפֵץ** can indicate divine favor without any sexual connotation. YHWH is said to "delight" (**יָפֵץ**) in humans, both individually and collectively (Numbers 14:8, 2 Samuel 22:20, Psalms 18:20, 1 Kings 10:9, Psalms 16:3, 22:9, 41:12), and one example, 2 Samuel 15:25–26, also involves David. When David fled from Jerusalem during Absalom's rebellion, he sent the ark of YHWH back to the city, saying, "If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, he will bring me back and let me see both it and his dwelling place. But if he says, 'I have no pleasure in you' (**יָפֵץ**), behold, here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him." In this passage, the word **יָפֵץ** is parallel or synonymous with **חָן** in the same verse, both carrying the meaning of favor or grace. In this context, **יָפֵץ** is directly related to YHWH's favor, David's divine sovereignty. David understands that he can only be reinstated as king if he receives support from YHWH.

Similar examples can be found in 2 Chronicles 9:8. When the queen of Sheba made a diplomatic visit to King Solomon, she exclaimed, "Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted (**יָפֵץ**) in you and set you on his throne as king for the LORD your God!" (**יְהִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָרוּךְ אֲשֶׁר אָפֵץ בְּךָ לְתַתֶּנָּךְ עַל-כִּסְאוֹ לְמַלְכָּךָ לַיהוָה**)

אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה). In this text, it is strongly emphasized that the human office of king depends on divine protection—gods in ancient times were believed to support the king who sat on the throne. This divine support is translated as אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה.

Both אהב and אהב are terms that primarily have emotional meanings but can have political nuances in certain contexts. In political rhetoric like this, "love" refers to the loyalty held by both members of a political alliance, whereas אהב appears to indicate individual preferences within established political relationships. The term אהב is a term that primarily has emotional meanings but can have political nuances in certain contexts (James Harding, 2014). In such political rhetoric, "love" refers to the loyalty held by both members of a political alliance, while אהב is another term found in the David and Jonathan material that can have political nuances, primarily referring to "beautiful" or "pleasant" in Hebrew.

The author views Jonathan's interest from a perspective that combines both political and personal viewpoints. This means that Jonathan's admiration for David parallels the admiration of the people of Israel and Judah for David's successive victories and their political nature. The narrator uses this comparison to affirm David's suitability as the next king, worthy of leading Jonathan and all the palace's inhabitants (the inner circle) and even the entire people of Israel and Judah (the outer circle). However, it cannot be denied that Jonathan's interest may also be personal.

The term אהב appears twice in David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:19–27). The first example depicts a father and son: seemingly indicating individual preferences within established political relationships. Thus, אהב signifies a political bias that can flow either from the higher to the lower party, indicating support or preference, or from the lower to the higher party, indicating choice or selection. However, regardless of the direction in which אהב flows, the element of choice is its key component. Overall, examples from 1–2 Samuel suggest that Jonathan's "delight" in David in 1 Samuel 19:1 should primarily be understood as political support rather than erotic desire. In fact, although sex is a significant theme in the David narrative, the term אהב never appears in an erotic context throughout the Samuel books. In 1 Samuel 19:1–7, Jonathan uses his position as the king's son to prevent David's murder. A political interpretation of אהב, compared to an erotic interpretation, is more compelling. In this context, Jonathan's preference for David, acting as his intermediary, warning him, and reintroducing him to Saul's palace, are all political actions, not erotic ones.

Therefore, a better translation of the phrase in 1 Samuel 19:1 would be, "Jonathan son of Saul greatly delighted in David." In 1 Samuel 19, David was clearly not favored by King Saul as Saul wanted David killed. However, Jonathan, the king's son, had a fondness for David, and he showed his political favoritism by acting as an intermediary on David's behalf to his father. Jonathan not only persuaded Saul not to kill David, but he also made David pleasing to Saul again, at least for a while.

נעים (na'iym)

Another term found in the narrative of David and Jonathan that can have political connotations is נעים, which primarily refers to "beautiful," "charming," or "pleasant" in Hebrew. The term נעים appears twice in David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:19–27). In 2 Samuel 1:23, it is said, "Saul and Jonathan, beloved and

pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions." In 2 Samuel 1:23, the royal father-son pair, Saul and Jonathan, are eloquently praised for their prowess as warriors. The adjective **הַנְּעִימָה** in this verse has been translated in various ways as "pleasant," "friendly," "beloved," "attractive," "pleasing," "cherished," "desired," and "beautiful." Second Samuel 1:26 is specifically addressed to Jonathan, and his poetic voice shifts to the first person, representing an increasingly personal sense of grief and loss. The term **נְעִימָה** is particularly significant for understanding the nature of the relationship between David and Jonathan. It is typically translated as "you were very pleasant to me"; "you were very dear to me"; "you were very pleasing to me"; "I have greatly loved you"; and "you were very pleasant" (NKJ, NAS).

Like **הַנְּעִימָה**, the term **נְעִימָה** can denote certain political connotations in a broader sense to signify support or favor from superiors. The lament for Saul and Jonathan certainly implies strong emotions, yet this does not preclude the possibility of political elements within the lament. The Hebrew term **נְעִימָה** often carries aesthetic meanings. For example, in the Song of Solomon 1:16, the maiden says to the lover, "How handsome you are, my beloved, oh, how charming!" And in Song of Solomon 7:7, the male speaker, having elaborately described the beauty of his beloved, exclaims, "How beautiful you are, how beautiful!" So in these examples, **נְעִימָה** seems to refer to an attractive outward appearance. According to Mark Smith, the root word **נְעִימָה** when applied to warriors "indicates physical attractiveness, both for women and men" and, in the context of the lament for Saul and Jonathan, "might express physical allure and the appeal of the male warrior (Mark S Smith, 2014)." Using examples from the Song of Solomon, Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli argue that **נְעִימָה** conveys an erotic tone in David's lament; however, their argument goes beyond bounds because aesthetics do not necessarily encompass eroticism. For instance, Genesis 49:15 and Psalm 141:6 each refer to inanimate objects, earth, and words, as **נְעִימָה**. Though **נְעִימָה** often denotes physical attractiveness, regardless of whether it carries erotic connotations, there is evidence that the term can have broader meanings (Silvia Schroer, 2000).

The term **נְעִימָה** can carry political nuances to denote the benevolence of God or royal generosity. Compared to **נְעִימָה**, which can signify political preferences either from superiors or subordinates of a political alliance, **נְעִימָה** typically originates from the senior party in that relationship, either from the king to his subjects or from the gods to the king. **נְעִימָה** is an apt designation for royal positions or for honest conduct. Therefore, a more specific translation for 2 Samuel 1:23 and 26 might be: "Saul and Jonathan, beloved and generous"; and "you have been very kind to me." Note that **נְעִימָה** and **אהב** appear together in 2 Samuel 1:23, and, as discussed above, in this context **אהב** denotes the politicized love given by the people of Israel to their king and his son. Therefore, if one reads **אהב** as politicized love for royal figures, it is also fitting to read **נְעִימָה** with a similar political nuance, indicating the kind of generosity worthy of praise from the royal family. Moreover, as the king's son, Jonathan has certainly shown great generosity to David, akin to examples of **נְעִימָה** in Ugaritic and Phoenician applied to a royal figure. Understanding of this **נְעִימָה** is directly related to the narrative tradition in Samuel, which states that Jonathan greatly loved David and made a covenant with him (1 Samuel 18:1–4, 20:12–16, 23:18) and acted as an intermediary for Saul twice (1 Sam 19:1–7, 20:17–34), aiding his escape (1 Samuel 20:35–42).

CONCLUSION

This research indicates that the Hebrew terms **אָהַב** and **נָעַם** in 1 Samuel 19:1 and 2 Samuel 1:23, 26 should primarily be understood with political nuances. In the narrative portrayal of David and Jonathan, **אָהַב** and **נָעַם** bear certain similarities to the political usage of the term "love" as demonstrated by William Moran over fifty years ago. All three terms have broader semantic ranges but can carry specialized political meanings: signifying the loyalty or expected support from political alliances; **אָהַב** denotes the liking or preference of individuals in existing political relationships; and **נָעַם** indicates the generosity of a royal figure. These three roots emerge in relation to David, especially before he became king. This suggests that this vocabulary is an integral component in justifying David's position as king, particularly when the approval of Saul's family is considered the primary argument supporting his legitimacy. The terms **אָהַב** and **נָעַם** underscore the political aspects of the relationship between David and Jonathan as literally depicted in the book of Samuel. It is in this political affiliation that Jonathan shows favoritism towards David, and this favoritism saves David's life more than once after he loses support from King Saul. Interpretations of the nature of the relationship between David and Jonathan are likely to continue to vary; however, the political dimension evident in the vocabulary of the text remains fundamental in ongoing analyses of these biblical figures.

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