

# Mother's curse at the court of King Saul in 1 Sam 20:30

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**ABSTRACT** • Jerome polarises or polemicises in verse 1 Sam 20:30 in two directions. He has King Saul superficially describe the relationship between his son Jonathan and the shepherd's son David as love using the verb *diligo*. A choice of words that is not compelling from the Hebrew or Greek original. At the same time, however, the mother is cursed in strong, unique formulations. Thus, set in an inner tension, this verse raises the question: what impression of Jerome's image of man does his formulation leave here? The father curses the mother for the son's behaviour. This astonishing conclusion allows us to draw further conclusions about the Hebrew and Greek texts and thus to interpret these verses as well. An exegetical track is thus laid via the clarification of semantic image fields. The relationship between the two men is interpreted as love and the mother is cursed for it, and both situations remain in unresolved tension.

**KEYWORDS** • Jonathan, Saul, mother, relationship, Jerome, Vulgate

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG** • Hieronymus polarisiert oder polemisiert in Vers 1 Sam 20:30 in zwei Richtungen. Er lässt König Saul die Beziehung zwischen seinem Sohn Jonathan und dem Sohn des Hirten David oberflächlich als Liebe beschreiben, indem er das Wort *diligo* verwendet. Eine Wortwahl, die vom hebräischen oder griechischen Original nicht überzeugend ist. Gleichzeitig wird die Mutter jedoch in starken, einzigartigen Formulierungen verflucht. In einer inneren Spannung wirft dieser Vers also die Frage auf: Welchen Eindruck vom Menschenbild des Hieronymus hinterlässt seine Formulierung hier? Der Vater verflucht die Mutter für das Verhalten des Sohnes. Diese erstaunliche Schlussfolgerung erlaubt uns, weitere Rückschlüsse auf den hebräischen und griechischen Text zu ziehen und somit auch diese Verse zu interpretieren. Über die Klärung semantischer Bildfelder wird somit eine exegetische Spur gelegt. Die Beziehung zwischen den beiden Männern wird als Liebe interpretiert und die Mutter dafür verflucht, und beide Situationen bleiben in ungelöster Spannung.

**SCHLAGWORTE** • Jonathan, Saul, Mutter, Beziehung, Hieronymus, Vulgata

## How to work in the Vulgate Institute<sup>1</sup>

- Main target of the work at the Vulgate Institute: focus on contrastive linguistics with the main intra-linguistic aim of linking to language typological properties and possible extra-linguistic aims on a case-by-case basis;
- Methodological procedure: synchronic linguistic analysis of Jerome's *Vulgata sacra* and a diachronic contrastive analyse with the other main ancient languages Hebrew and Greek.

We work at the Vulgate Institute with a special focus on contrastive linguistics (as a field of comparative linguistics) with the main intra-linguistic aim of linking to language typological properties, but also possible extra-linguistic aims, which may vary on a case-by-case basis. The object of study extends to the entire language system, or also to concrete language use on the basis of exemplary individual verses. And this is what I have come here with today.

The methodological procedure extends to the synchronic linguistic analysis in the Latin of Jerome's *Vulgata sacra* from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This investigation is brought into a diachronic dialogue with the other main ancient languages Hebrew and Greek and their cultural systems.

As a result of these investigations, linguistic phenomena show up as commonalities, similarities and differences, which in turn can provide information for exegesis and the historical development of languages. As a basis for assessing various transmissions, new — adapted — present-day transmissions and not least to get further, new impulses from this for exegesis; to make the text, which is itself an interpretation from late antiquity, productive for exegesis in the present days.

## Basic Question

1 Samuel 20:30 is a speech of King Saul addressed to his son Jonathan as an eloquent picture of Saul's anger toward him. It includes the question "Whom does this curse affect?"

### Concrete Question to the Verse:

In connection with the speech of King Saul addressed to his son Jonathan in verse 1 Samuel 20:30 the latent question of Jerome's hostility towards women or gays is questioned via the comparative semantic findings. The basic question is: Who does this curse affect?

The whole verse is an eloquent picture of Saul's anger towards his son Jonathan: this is also how the verse is introduced.

<sup>1</sup> The method used within the Vulgate Institute is also described in the article of our colleague, Brigitta Schmid Pfändler, "Isaiah 53:3: The 'novissimum virorum' — a whole profile in just one verse", published in the present special issue (93-97).

## Vulgate

Vulgate 1 Sam 20:30

Translation

Iratus autem Saul adversus Ionathan dixit ei fili mulieris virum ultro rapiantis numquid ignoro quia diligis filium Isai in confusionem tuam et in confusionem ignominiosae matris tuae

Then Saul being angry against Jonathan, said to him: You son of a woman that is snatching away a man, do I not know that you love the son of Isai to your own confusion, and to the confusion of your disgraceful mother?

Saul, in his extraordinary rage, refers to his son Jonathan as *fili mulieris virum ultro rapiantis* as "son of a woman that is snatching away a man".

Jerome uses the common word *mulier* for woman in the singular and thus describes a concrete female behaviour: she is dragging away a man. In doing so, he is probably transposing an image he is familiar with from his own perception of brothels of his time.

Secondly, he describes the relationship of Jonathan to the *filium Isai* (David) with the verb *diligo* ('to love') and not with the common word *amo* ('to love') that one would expect in this situation and / or with the *eros* emphasising attraction. He takes the verb *diligo* ('to love'), which is also used in the Scripture for the fatherly and God relationship.

This verb Jerome uses in the entire book of 1 Samuel for the description of the relationship between the men Saul (1 Sam 16:21) and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:1.3) to David, as well as broadly for the turning to David — of the whole nation (1 Sam 18:16) or also of Michal (1 Sam 18:20).

And thus, he remains with this choice of words entirely in the linguistic field which he uses in the preceding verses for the turning to David.

It is noticeable, that looking at 2 Sam 1:26, a lamentation on the deceased Jonathan, in which David explicitly comes to speak, the relationship with Jonathan is described with the adjective *amabilis*.

The third striking word field is opened up around the direct accusation against Jonathan. Jerome chooses the word *confusio*, which primarily means confusion and is unique in the Books of Samuel.

He also attributes this confusion to Jonathan's mother with the genitive construction *confusionem ignominiosae matris tuae*. Striking about this formulation is the negatively reinforcing adjective *ignominiosus* — which conveys to the mother behaviour in a broad negative spectrum of meaning from notorious to shameful / ignominious.

## Hebrew

Hebrew 1 Sam 20:30

Translation

<p>וַיִּחַר־אַף שְׂאוֹל בְּיִהוֹנָתָן וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ בֶן־נִפְעוֹת הַמְרֻדוֹת הֲלוֹא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־בָחַר אֶתְּךָ לְכֹן־ יְשִׁי לְכָשְׁתְּךָ וּלְכָשֶׁת עֲרֹת אִמְךָ:</p>	<p>And the nose of Saul was kindled against Jonathan, and he said to him, Son [of] the deviant [and] of the rebellious/unruly: not I know that you prefer to the son of Isai and to your shame, and to the shame of [the] shame / nakedness of your mother.</p>
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Saul, in his extraordinarily great anger, calls his son Jonathan a “son of the deviant and of the rebellious/unruly”. This first construction is composed of two participial forms. The first is a *nifal* participle in the female Singular of the root עוה with the basic meaning ‘to act wrongly, to deviate, to commit sin’, in the Qal-stem ‘to sin’. The Nifal stem carries the component of ‘being bent, bowed’; a durative with middle voice character with the meaning ‘something happens to the subject’. This rare participle occurs only twice in the MT, in the Book of Samuel: 1 Sam 1:13; 1 Sam 20:30. By specifying the feminine form, an indirect reference to the mother can be established. Gesenius names after Paul de Lagarde: “The son of a woman who has departed from breeding”, “the lewd woman”.

The second word of this construction מְרֻדוֹת is unique in the OT and the root itself is also rare and used only once in the Book of Samuel. This substantivised feminine participle from the radicals מרד is durative and determinative with the definite article *ha* and carries with this root the meaning ‘to be rebellious’, ‘to be indignant’ (against the king, other people). Without naming any woman specifically, the text creates a self-reinforcing image field for Jonathan’s mother with these rare parallel feminine participles with the process from deviation to resistance. An image of a strong woman who acts in a self-determined way without direct sexual connotations. In contrast to this finding is the transmission according to the sexual orientation of the mother according to Paul de Lagarde.

The direct address to Jonathan concerns the participle of the root בחר followed by the autonomous personal pronoun in the second masculine person singular and a double dative construction with the broad significance ‘to put together’; ‘to choose’, ‘to select’, ‘to be tested’. This construction describes the relationship of Jonathan to the Son of Isai. Strikingly, David’s name is not mentioned. It is introduced indirectly through the naming of the father in double dative.

Saul evaluates this relationship as “shame” with the meaning of the root שבו to be translated as shame or ignominiousity. Via the preposition *lamed* and a dative object clearly attributed to the son Jonathan and in a second mention also clearly attributed to his mother. With 16 (of a total of 44 mentions in the OT) mentions in the books of Samuel, this theme can be regarded as a basic theme of Saul.

In the last word field, the mother’s shame is further concretised via a state of the root ערה. According to Lagarde (Gesenius) this root means ‘to expose oneself’, but it can also mean ‘to empty’, ‘to pour out’. It occurs about 41 times in the entire OT, of which about 30 times in the

body of the law in the Book of Leviticus. Thus, like the Latin translation the Hebrew text conveys in the end a clear sexual connotation.

## Septuagint

Septuagint 1 Sam 20:30

NETS (English translation of the LXX)

καὶ ἐθυμώθη ὀργῇ Σαουλ ἐπὶ Ἰωναθαν σφόδρα καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ Ὑιὲ κορασίων αὐτομολούντων, οὐ γὰρ οἶδα ὅτι μέτοχος εἶ σὺ τῷ υἱῷ Ἰεσσαὶ εἰς αἰσχύνην σου καὶ εἰς αἰσχύνην ἀποκαλύψεως μητρός σου;

And Saoul was greatly seething with anger against Jonathan, and he said to him, you son of traitorous girls! For do I not know that you are an accomplice of the son of Issai to your shame and to the shame of your mother's uncovering?

In the Septuagint Saul refers to his son Jonathan in his extraordinarily great anger as «you son of traitorous girls». This vocative amazingly introduces a plural female group who does something that is reprehensible. The girls are harming themselves by doing so.

Saul refers to Jonathan in his relationship with the son of Jesse in the Septuagint as μέτοχος, with the connotation 'accomplice', 'partner'. This is in any case a relationship based on mutuality. It is complementary as opposed to the one-sidedness (from subject to object) in the Hebrew text.

Also in the curse word, which Saul addresses to Jonathan as well as to his mother, the Septuagint remains with αἰσχύνην with the meaning of "shame or disgrace" close to the Hebrew.

At the very end of the verse, it is reinforced for the disclosure of the mother's shame by the last noun ἀποκαλύψεως with the meaning 'disclosure' / 'uncovering', 'revelation'. The connotation of this word is not in the semantic word field of the Hebrew 'nakedness', 'shame', but it is possible that this is a euphemism of the nudeness and exposedness of the mother.

## Conclusion — unique focus

- Vulgate: emphasises on the relationship of Jonathan to the son of Issai as love and a portray of the mother as a sexualised, shameless person
- Hebrew text: shows an open relationship of Jonathan to the son of Issai, which can even be read as a contractual relationship. The image of women is more generally and independently cast.
- Septuagint: describes the relationship of Jonathan to the son of Issai as complicity. The image of women is negatively connoted with a badly behaving group of women in the first part and the exposure of the sexual organs of the mother at the end of the verse.

Only Jerome sets the narrative of David and Jonathan in this verse as love in a constancy of the book of 1 Samuel and in this verse, Saul expresses his displeasure of it in strong words.

To come back to the central question: "Whom does this curse affect?"

All three versions express the anger of Saul in which he curses his son, also over his son's mother, exclaiming shame over him and her.

In the Vulgate the curse affects Jonathan as well as his mother. Surprisingly the mother is more in focus than the son. What Saul is thinking about Jonathan's supposedly being gay cannot be concluded in this verse.

In the Hebrew verse, Jonathan's cursing is more central, and the women's and any gay questions take a back seat. In the first part of the verse, there are feminine participles with a wide range of meanings, and in the second part, there is a relatively open formulation that seems weaker in contrast to the Latin or Greek expression.

The verse from the Septuagint pointedly evaluates the behaviour of the mother and the son through the curse. The group of girls at the beginning, the mother's exposure at the end and the contouring of a relationship via the word *metochos* are striking.

The verse structure into the five main semantic parts is also found in all three versions. Interestingly, the mother is explicitly only mentioned at the end of the verse and David is not mentioned by name in any verse version: he always appears as "son of Jesse".

Major differences are found in the presentation of the relationship between Jonathan and David, which each version puts different emphasis on. Only Jerome evaluates the relationship between Jonathan and David as a love relationship.

Jerome introduces the mother as a woman who hooks up with men. The Hebrew version rather assumes a strong, independent figure, drawn as a deviant and rebellious woman. Recognizable as female only in the genus of the participle. The Septuagint here brings a very unique accent of a female, girl group in the plural with bad qualities, which is astonishing.

In the second mention of the mother, Jerome describes her as a shameful person, the Hebrew emphasises her nakedness and the Septuagint calls the revelation of the mother's shame, which is ambiguous and has its effect on both, the figurative and real word-meaning levels. The Vulgate and the Hebrew Version both emphasise the cursing of the mother in a parallelised construction, only the LXX leaves the misbehaving group of girls and the strong image of the revelation of the mother in an unresolved tension.

This contrastive comparison has shown that neither the depiction of Jonathan's relationship with the Son of Issai nor the image of women or mothers in these three text versions are undisputedly coherent. They each show their own emphases on the main themes:

Only the Vulgate emphasises the relationship of Jonathan to David as love. In tension with this it portrays the mother in both passages as a sexualised, shameless person.

The Hebrew shows an open relationship of Jonathan to the son of Issai, which in this verse can even be read as a contractual relationship. The image of women is more generally and independently cast.

The LXX also broadly describes the relationship of Jonathan to David as complicity. In complete contrast to this is the inconclusive and also negatively connoted image of women, which retains a clearly sexist connotation with a badly behaving group of women in the first part and the exposure of the sexual organs of the mother at the end of the verse.

Finally, it can be said that only Jerome indicates the relationship of Jonathan to the son of Issai as a love relationship with the verb *diligo*, which is also consistently used by him in the other passages from the Book of Samuel. The narrative of David and Jonathan is continued in this verse in the constancy of the book of 1 Samuel as love and Saul's displeasure with it is expressed in strong words.