

The Relationship Between Jonathan and David From the Perspective of the Vulgate

Michael Fieger

Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at the Theological Faculty of Chur, Switzerland.
Editor of the German Tusculum Vulgate and Co-director of the Vulgate Institute.

michael.fieger@thchur.ch  120145340  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8220-3383>

ABSTRACT • In the Vulgate, the famous friendship of Jonathan and David is described in the Vulgate with the verb *diligere* (to love: 1 Sam 18:1,3; 19:1; 20:17,30) and the noun *amor* (love: 2 Sam 1:26). While we do not know anything about the translator's – Jerome's – attitude toward homosexuality, he did not hesitate to use words that may imply a homoerotic relationship.

KEYWORDS • Jonathan, David, *diligere*, love, homosexuality

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG • In der Vulgata wird die berühmte Freundschaft zwischen Jonathan und David mit dem Verb *diligere* (lieben: 1 Sam 18,1,3; 19,1; 20,17,30) und dem Substantiv *amor* (Liebe: 2 Sam 1,26) beschrieben. Obwohl wir nichts über die Einstellung des Übersetzers – Hieronymus – zur Homosexualität wissen, zögerte er nicht, Wörter zu verwenden, die eine homoerotische Beziehung implizieren könnten.

STICHWORTE • Jonatan, David, *diligere*, Liebe, Homosexualität

The interesting story of the relationship between the king's son Jonathan and the shepherd David, which is considered a love affair, is found in First and Second Samuel. The question of whether this relationship is homoerotic or homosexual has often been discussed in secondary literature.¹ Since church father Jerome left no commentary on the books of Samuel, we do not know how he would have commented on the ability of these two male protagonists to have a relationship based on love.

¹ J.E. Harding, „David and Jonathan, Story of.“In: *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*. Vol. 6. Berlin: de Gruyter 2013, 256–270.



To characterize the love relationship between Jonathan and David, Jerome's translation consistently uses the verb *diligere*. According to the famous Latin-German dictionary of Georges, *diligere* has a wide semantic range – "to take apart, to divide, to pick out," also "to choose"; hence "to esteem, to cherish, to hold dear and worthy, to love out of respect."² David's lament for Jonathan, after the latter was killed by the Philistines, contains the adjective *amabilis* ("amiable") and the noun *amor* ("love out of passion"). It is worth taking a closer look at this and other significant passages referring the love between Jonathan and David, and analyze how they agree with, or differ from, the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX). Origen's Hexapla, as far as its text is available, offers no significant differences. The standard English translation of the Vulgate, the Douay-Rheims Bible (1609–1610), is also consulted for further clarification.

Finally, we will briefly consider the historical question of how homosexual relationships were judged in Jerome's day.

1 Samuel 18:1

Vulgate	et factum est cum conplesset loqui ad Saul anima Ionathan conligata est animae David et dilexit eum Ionathan quasi animam suam
MT	וַיְהִי כְּכַלְתּוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֶל-שָׂאוּל וַיִּנָּשׁ יְהוֹנָתָן נִקְשָׁרָה בְּנִפְשׁ דָּוִד וַיֵּאָהֲבוּ [וַיֵּאָהֲבֵהוּ] יְהוֹנָתָן בְּנִפְשׁוֹ:
Douay-Rheims Bible (1609-1610)	And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.

In 1 Samuel 18:1, the theme of love between the two men is introduced. Jonathan, Saul's son, clearly expresses his love (*diligere*) for David. It is noticeable that the love comes from Jonathan. Love and soul (*anima*) are linked in this verse. The word *anima*, which occurs three times in this verse, refers to the core of the person, his essence, his identity.

The Masoretic Text contains the root אהב (*ahab*). It should be noted that the vocabulary of biblical Hebrew does not allow for making a distinction between "love" and "friendship."

1 Sam 18:1–6 is missing from the Septuagint which provides a much shorter text than the MT.

² *Der neue Georges. Ausführliches lateinisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch.* Hrsg. von Thomas Baier u.a. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2013, 2 vols.

1 Samuel 18:3

Vulgate	inierunt autem Ionathan et David foedus diligebat enim eum quasi animam suam
MT	וַיִּכְרֹת יְהוֹנָתָן וְדָוִד בְּרִית בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֹתוֹ כְּנַפְשׁוֹ׃
Douay-Rheims Bible (1609-1610)	And David and Jonathan made a covenant, for he loved him as his own soul

1 Samuel 18:3 has two aspects: On the one hand, as in 1 Sam 18:1, Jonathan loves (*diligere* / אָהַב) David as his own soul and, on the other hand, Jonathan and David enter into a covenant (*foedus* / בְּרִית). With *foedus*, Jerome chooses a legal term that, like the terms *pactum* and *testamentum*, was familiar to his audience from everyday life. Jerome also refers to God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses as *foedus*.

1 Samuel 19:1

Vulgate	locutus est autem Saul ad Ionathan filium suum et ad omnes servos suos ut occiderent David porro Ionathan filius Saul diligebat David valde
MT	וַיִּדְבֹּר שָׁאוּל אֶל-יוֹנָתָן בְּנוֹ וְאֶל-כָּל-עֲבָדָיו לְהַחֲמִית אֶת-דָּוִד וַיְהוֹנָתָן בֶּן-שָׁאוּל חָפֵץ בְּדָוִד מְאֹד׃
LXX	Καὶ ἐλάλησεν Σαουλ πρὸς Ἰωνᾶθαν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ πρὸς πάντας τοὺς παῖδας αὐτοῦ θανατῶσαι τὸν Δαυίδ. καὶ Ἰωνᾶθαν υἱὸς Σαουλ ἠρεῖτο τὸν Δαυίδ σφόδρα
Douay-Rheims Bible (1609-1610)	And Saul spoke to Jonathan, his son, and to all his servants, that they should kill David. But Jonathan, the son of Saul, loved David exceedingly.

The Masoretic Text describes Jonathan's feelings toward David in 1 Samuel 19:1 with the verb חָפֵץ (*hefets*, to delight), and the Septuagint with the verb αἰρέω (to choose). The Vulgate conspicuously sticks to the verb *diligere* (to love). The Vulgate, like the MT and LXX, could also have used other terms to describe Jonathan's feelings toward David.

As already mentioned, the basic meaning of *diligere* is "to take apart, to divide," also "to select, to choose," and therefore "to esteem, to value," further "to hold dear and worthy, to love." Among the things or people we have in front of us, we choose those we like, cherish or love.

The Liddell-Scott Greek-English dictionary³ determines the basic meaning of αἰρέω as “to take with the hand, to grasp, to seize,” hence “take to oneself, to choose.” This explains why Jerome equates αἰρέω with *diligo*. Jerome, the interpreter, remains consistent and has no trouble seeing the friendship between the two men or their ability to relate to each other as a love affair.

1 Samuel 20:17

Vulgate	et addidit Ionathan deierare David eo quod diligeret illum sicut animam enim suam ita diligebat eum
MT	וַיֹּסֶף יְהוֹנָתָן לְהַשְׁבִּיעַ אֶת-דָּוִד בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֹתוֹ כִּי-אַהֲבַת נַפְשׁוֹ אֶהְבֹּ:
LXX	Καὶ προσέθετο ἔτι Ἰωνᾶθαν ὁμόσαι τῷ Δαυίδ, ὅτι ἠγάπησεν ψυχὴν ἀγαπώντος αὐτόν.
Douay-Rheims Bible (1609-1610)	And Jonathan swore again to David, because he loved him: for he loved him as his own soul.

As in the Septuagint, so also in the Vulgate, Jonathan swears to David. This prompts the question: what exactly does Jonathan swear to David? The Masoretic Text offers a causative formulation using the hiphil infinitive (לְהַשְׁבִּיעַ to cause to swear), which is not clear. Obviously, Jonathan swears by his love. In Hebrew, the root אהב (love, to love) is used three times in 1 Samuel 20:17.

1 Samuel 20:30

Vulgate	iratus autem Saul adversus Ionathan dixit ei fili mulieris virum ultro rapientis numquid ignoro quia diligis filium Isai in confusionem tuam et in confusionem ignominiosae matris tuae
MT	וַיַּחַר-אַף שָׁאוּל בְּיֶהוֹנָתָן וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ בֶן-נִצְוֹת הַמְרִדוֹת הֲלוֹא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-בָחַר אֶתָּה לְבֶן-יִשְׂי לְבָשְׁתָּךְ וּלְבָשְׁתָּ עֲרֹת אִמִּי:
LXX	Καὶ ἐθυμώθη ὀργῇ Σαουλ ἐπὶ Ἰωνᾶθαν σφόδρα καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ Υἱὲ κορασίων αὐτομολούντων, οὐ γὰρ οἶδα ὅτι μέτοχος εἶ σὺ τῷ υἱῷ Ἰεσσαί εἰς αἰσχύνην σου καὶ εἰς αἰσχύνην ἀποκαλύψεως μητρός σου;
Douay-Rheims Bible (1609-1610)	Then Saul being angry against Jonathan, said to him: Thou son of a woman that is the ravisher of a man, do I not know that thou lovest the son of Jesse to thy own confusion, and to the confusion of thy shameless mother?

³ H.G. Liddell – R. Scott – H.J. Jones: *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. Oxford: Clarendon 1996.

In the Vulgate, Saul says that his son Jonathan loves the son of Jesse (*diligere*). The Masoretic Text and the Septuagint differ. The Masoretic Text uses the participle of the root בחר (*bahar*, to choose), and the Septuagint has μέτοχος εἶ σὺ – you are a partner. As in 1 Samuel 19:1, Jerome remains consistent in emphasizing the love relationship between Jonathan and David. Actually, the rendering of the root בחר (*bahar*) by *diligere* is understandable, since *diligere* essentially means “to choose,” as indicated above.

1 Samuel 20:41

Vulgate	cumque abisset puer surrexit David de loco qui vergebat ad austrum et cadens pronus in terram adoravit tertio et osculantes alterutrum fleverunt pariter David autem amplius
MT	הַנֶּעַר בָּא וַיִּדָּו קָם מֵאַחַל הַנֶּגֶב וַיִּפֹּל לְאַפָּיו אַרְצָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים וַיִּשָּׁקוּ אִישׁ אֶת-רֵעֵהוּ וַיִּבְכוּ אִישׁ אֶת-רֵעֵהוּ עַד-דִּוּד הַגָּדִיל:
LXX	Καὶ ὡς εἰσῆλθεν τὸ παιδάριον, καὶ Δαυὶδ ἀνέστη ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐργαβ καὶ ἔπεσεν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ καὶ προσεκύνησεν αὐτῷ τρίς, καὶ κατεφίλησεν ἕκαστος τὸν πλησίον αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἔκλαυσεν ἕκαστος τῷ πλησίον αὐτοῦ ἕως συντελείας μεγάλης.
Douay-Rheims Bible (1609-1610)	And when the boy was gone, David rose out of his place, which was toward the south, and falling on his face to the ground, adored thrice: and kissing one another, they wept together; but David more.

The farewell scene between Jonathan and David in 1 Samuel 20:41, which seems to belong to a secondary textual layer, is presented emotionally. The two friends who love each other kiss each other goodbye and cry. The question therefore arises: What impression would this scene have made on the Latin-speaking audience?

2 Samuel 1:26

Vulgate	doleo super te frater mi Ionathan decere nimis et amabilis super amorem mulierum
MT	צָר-לִּי עָלֶיךָ אָחִי יְהוֹנָתָן נִעְמָתָ לִּי מָאֵד נִפְלְאַתָּה אֲהַבְתָּךְ לִּי מֵאַהֲבַת נָשִׁים:

LXX	<p>ἀ λγῶ ἐπὶ σοί, ἄδελφέ μου Ἰωνᾶθαν – ὠραιώθης μοι σφόδρα, ἔθαυμαστῶθι ἡ ἀγάπησίς σου ἐμοὶ ὑπὲρ ἀγάπησιν γυναικῶν.</p>
Douay-Rheims Bible (1609-1610)	<p>I grieve for thee, my brother Jonathan: exceeding beautiful, and amiable to me above the love of women.</p>

Here David looks back on his love affair with Jonathan. It is striking that Jerome uses the adjective *amabilis* rather than the noun *amor*, love out of passion, in David's lament for the loss of his friend. Of course, the adjective *diligens* and the differently connoted noun *diligentia* from the verb *diligere*, which Jerome used in the preceding passages about the love affair between Jonathan and David, would not have been appropriate for him. The noun *amor* best expresses what unites the two protagonists. After Jonathan's death, the love between the two men takes on an even more intense meaning from Jerome's perspective. The Masoretic Text sticks with the root אהב (*ahab*), and Septuagint with the noun ἀγάπησις.

For Jerome, *amare* and *diligere* are interchangeable. In Genesis 25:28 we read: *Isaac amabat Esau ... et Rebecca diligebat Iacob*. The Masoretic Text uses the verb אהב (*ahab*) twice, and the Septuagint also uses ἀγαπάω twice, while Jerome prefers the variation for stylistic elegance.

Conclusion

Was the love affair between Jonathan and David a homoerotic, homosexual relationship? Although no specific sexual acts are described in the biblical text, this modern question would hardly have arisen for Jerome who lived an ascetic life. He lived between 348/349 and 420, i.e., in late antiquity on the threshold between pagan and Christian society. Historian Jens-Uwe Krause answers the question of how homosexuality was viewed in Jerome's time as follows:

"The general condemnation of homosexuality, as expressed in Justinian's legislation, can only be explained by Christian influence. In pagan antiquity, homosexuality was never considered 'unnatural.' At most, those who took the passive part in a homosexual partnership were ridiculed – and ostracized with infamy."⁴

We do not know Jerome's personal attitude toward homosexuality. In any case, he describes the intense love affair between Jonathan and David several times with the verb *diligere* and once with the noun *amor*, apparently without hesitation.

⁴ J.-U. Krause, *Kriminalgeschichte der Antike*. Munich: Beck 2004, 184.