

“A Man after God’s Own Heart”: David and the Rhetoric of Election to Kingship

GEORGE ATHAS

Moore Theological College
George.Athas@moore.edu.au

The anticipation of David as a “man after Yahweh’s own heart” in 1 Sam 13:14 is to be understood as a statement about Yahweh’s election of David to kingship, rather than about David’s own moral qualities. Comparison of similar phrases in Akkadian texts shows that the phrase is part of the rhetoric of divine election to kingship. The focus on divine election does not mean David has no positive attributes. On the contrary, he is depicted as a man with clear leadership qualities. The phrase serves the Davidic apologia in distinguishing David from Saul as Yahweh’s personal choice for king.

KEYWORDS: *King David, 1 Sam 13, election, kingship, Akkadian, Davidic apologia, Saul, divine favor, ancient rhetoric, moral qualities.*

King David is often described as “a man after God’s own heart.” This now popular expression is derived from 1 Sam 13:14, where the prophet Samuel condemns David’s predecessor, King Saul, for his disobedience to Yahweh’s command. The text of 1 Sam 13:13–14 reads as follows:

ויאמר שמואל אלי־שׂאול נסכלת לא שמרת את־מצות יהוה אלהיך אשר צוך כי עתה הכין יהוה את־ממלכתך אלי־ישראל עד־עולם: ועתה ממלכתך לא־תקום בקש יהוה לו איש כלבבו ויצוהו יהוה לנגיד עלי־עמו כי לא שמרת את אשר־צוך יהוה:

Samuel said to Saul, “You fool! You didn’t keep the command that Yahweh your God issued you. If you had, Yahweh would have established your kingship in Israel permanently. But now your kingship will not last. Yahweh has sought out a man in accordance with his own heart, to command him as leader over

his people, since you did not observe what Yahweh commanded you.”¹

The key word here is *כלבבו* (“in accordance with his own heart”). The antecedent of the pronominal suffix on this word is Yahweh, so it is clearly Yahweh’s heart in view. The immediate juxtaposition of *כלבבו* with the preceding noun *איש* (“man”) may initially give the impression that the man being alluded to is someone who is inclined towards Yahweh’s heart. In such a reading, the preposition *כ* would be taken to imply the conformity of the man towards Yahweh’s heart, and be seen as a modifier of the object in the clause (“man”). Indeed, such seems to be the view taken in *HALOT*.² However, *כלבבו* is better seen as an adverbial modifier of the subject phrase *בקש יהוה* (“Yahweh has sought out”). In that case, Yahweh is depicted as conducting a search according to the disposition of his own heart. That is, Yahweh has used his own heart to guide him on the search for a man to replace Saul as the new leader of Israel.

Contemporary commentators now generally follow this line of interpretation for the expression.³ Only a small number still follow the older understanding that it is a statement about David’s inner character. Paul Borgman, for example, assumes 1 Sam 13:14 is about David’s disposition.⁴ Unfortunately, he does not provide any detailed analysis that might give a rationale for this position. Mark George, on the other hand, does attempt to give a rationale.⁵ In his study of 1 Sam 16–31, George argues that the extended overlap between Saul’s demise and David’s rise is for the purpose of comparing their respective characters. Within his analysis, George assumes that 1 Sam 13:13–14 asserts

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author’s.

2. See *HALOT*, s.v. *כ*.

3. See, for example P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (AB 8; New York: Doubleday, 1980), 229; Robert P. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1986), 134; Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 175; John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Preaching the Word; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 235–6; David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic, 2009), 156.

4. Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5, 35, 39, 51, 216, 237.

5. Mark K. George, “Yhwh’s Own Heart,” *CBQ* 64 (2002): 442–59.

something about David's heart. He states, "while saying that Yhwh favors David is important, since it makes Yhwh a character whose motives can be examined, such a statement pushes aside consideration of David and the question of what the nature of his heart is (other than saying it is a heart after Yhwh's own heart)."⁶ A significant problem with this, though, is that the verse does not actually refer to David's heart at all, but only to Yahweh's heart. George rightly picks up on the wider narrative's intention to show David as a better man than Saul. He argues that this is not so much a contrast as an outshining: "David does what Saul does, and more."⁷ It is understandable, then, that when Yahweh sends Samuel to anoint Saul's replacement, he tells the prophet to ignore external appearances, for Yahweh looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7). David evidently has the internal qualities that make him fit for leadership. However, George seems to transfer the import of 1 Sam 16:7 directly onto 1 Sam 13:14. One can understand why he does this, since both verses talk about hearts, and it is right to see the two verses informing each other within the wider narrative, as they both help to fashion the Davidic *apologia*. Nonetheless, 1 Sam 13:14 is most certainly not talking about David's heart, but Yahweh's. As we will see, 1 Sam 13:14 employs standard ancient rhetoric for the election of a king. What is in particular focus in 1 Sam 13:14 is not David's suitability for kingship *per se*, but Yahweh's personal prerogative in choosing him over Saul. Thus, while George's point about David's heart is well made from other parts of the narrative, it is not the primary focus of 1 Sam 13:14. Rather, this verse ensures that the Davidic *apologia* is not just armed with David's inner qualities, but also with divine favor.

We may find support for this suggestion by comparing 1 Sam 13:14 to similar expressions found in other ancient Near Eastern texts. These comparisons demonstrate that expressions of this sort were standard rhetoric for portraying a king (or even a city) as favored and chosen from above.

The first such expression associates divine choice with "steadfastness of heart" (Akk: *kūn libbi*). One prime example is found in the Weidner Chronicle, which is putatively set in the 19th century B.C. In this text, the writer, Damiq-ilišu, king of Isin, writes to Apil-sin, king of Babylon, recounting the fate of previous kings relative to their devotion to Marduk. In line 20 of the version preserved on the Sippar tablet, Damiq-ilišu depicts Marduk approaching his father, Ea, and saying:

6. Ibid., 446.

7. Ibid., 447.

[X X TIN.] TIR(KI) URU *i-tu-ut ku-un lib-bi-ia ina(?) kul-lat da-ád-me [lu-ú] šá-qat*

Let Babylon, the city selected in the steadfastness of my heart, be exalted in all lands. . .⁸

Marduk's words specifically single out Babylon as the city of divine choice. The heart is viewed as the seat of the will, according to which Marduk has chosen Babylon, and now seeks its exaltation.

The same expression can also be observed on Shalmaneser III's Monolith Inscription from Kurkh. In line 12, the Assyrian king states:

*e-nu-ma Aš-šur EN GAL-ú ina ku-un lib-bi-šú ina IGI.II.MEŠ-šú KÙ.MEŠ ud-da-ni-ma*⁹

When Aššur, the great lord, designated me in the steadfastness of his heart, with his holy eyes. . .

Once again we see here a reference to divine election. In this particular case, it is not a city that is elected, but Shalmaneser himself as king. The choice is attributed to the deity Aššur in line with "the steadfastness of his heart." Just as Shalmaneser is chosen within the heart of Aššur, so the author of Samuel sees David chosen within the heart of Yahweh.

Another similar expression also refers to the heart (Akk: *libbu*), but simply associates the heart itself, rather than steadfastness of heart, with election. This action can be attributed either to a deity or to a human monarch. For example, in column 5, lines 21–22 of the East India House Inscription, Nebuchadnezzar II describes himself in reference to Marduk as:

*ia-ti apal-šú ri-e-eš-ta-a na-ra-am libbi- šú*¹⁰

I, his eldest son, the chosen of his heart. . .

Once again, election to kingship is on view.

8. Transliteration taken from F. N. H. Al-Rawi, "Tablets from the Sippar Library. I. The 'Weidner Chronicle': A Supposititious Royal Letter Concerning a Vision," *Iraq* 52 (1990): 1–13. Al-Rawi translates this phrase "Let Babylon, the city chosen in my heart, be exalted in all lands" (p. 9).

9. Transliteration taken from Shigeo Yamada, *The Construction of the Assyrian Empire: A Historical Study of the Inscriptions of Shalmaneser III (859–824 B.C.) Relating to His Campaigns to the West* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 345–46.

10. Transliteration taken from "Nebukadnezar Nr 15" in Stephen Langdon, *Die Neubabylonischen Königsinschriften* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1912), 132.

A similar sentiment is found in the Babylonian Chronicle, again pertaining to Nebuchadnezzar II, though this time as the one who chooses rather than the one who is chosen. In Tablet 5 (reverse), lines 11–13, we read how Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem ("the city of Judah") during the seventh year of his reign (i.e. 598/7 B.C.), capturing it and deposing its king (i.e. Jehoiachin). The entry then makes the following statement in line 13:

*šarra šá libbi-šú ina lib-bi ip-te-qid*¹¹
He appointed therein a king of his own heart.

Although the Chronicle does not name this new king, we know him to be Zedekiah, son of Josiah, the final king of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar's choice of Zedekiah is described as an appointment of his heart. Just as Nebuchadnezzar had described himself in the East India House Inscription as a king of Marduk's heart, so now Zedekiah, in his appointment to kingship in Jerusalem, is described as a king of Nebuchadnezzar's heart. In both these instances, the heart of the superior party is the seat of the will making the appointment of the subject king.¹²

A similar phrase is found in a Babylonian liver omen, where the following interpretation is given to finding a groove (literally a "presence") in the liver in a particular configuration:

šumma manzāzu abik Illil šarra ša libbišu išakkan
If the Presence is turned upside down: Enlil will install a king of his own heart.¹³

Once again, the heart is involved in the appointment of a new king. This time Enlil is the divine elector acting in accordance with his own heart.

These few Akkadian examples confirm that the Hebrew phrase *בְּקֶשׁ יְהוָה לֹא אִישׁ כְּלָבְבוֹ* in 1 Sam 13:14 is actually part of a wider ancient Near Eastern rhetoric of appointment to kingship. It is Yahweh's

11. Transliteration taken from Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Winona Lake, IA: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 102.

12. This particular text is also noted with reference to 1 Sam 13:14 in Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary*, 342, n. 11.

13. Transliteration and translation taken from Ulla Koch-Westenholz, *Babylonian Liver Omens: The Chapters Manzāzu, Padānu and Pān Tākalti of the Babylonian Extispicy Series Mainly from Aššurbanipal's Library* (Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies 25; Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000), 146.

personal election of David to the kingship in Israel that is on view in this verse. It is not a statement about the moral quality of David per se, but rather about Yahweh's attitude towards David.

We must not, however, conclude from this that the character of David is somehow morally deficient, such that the phrase in question implies that Yahweh overlooks his failings in order to appoint him as king. David does experience a moral demise in the narrative of Samuel, but it does not occur until after his anointing as king. As already mentioned, George points out that David is clearly depicted as having traits that qualify him for leadership in Israel.¹⁴ For example, in 1 Sam 15:28 Samuel tells Saul that Yahweh has ripped the kingdom away from Saul and given it to his neighbor who is a better man than him. Also, when David puts himself forward to fight Goliath, he gives a brief résumé of his experience as a shepherd, foreshadowing not just his bravery in facing the Philistine champion, but also his leadership capabilities (1 Sam 17:34–37; cf. 2 Sam 7:8–9). Beyond Samuel, in the books of Kings, David is continuously held up as the paradigm against which kings are evaluated. The narrative claims, therefore, that there are many good qualities in David that make him suitable for leadership and, indeed, to be the model king.

Johnson argues on the basis of such observations that the use of *כלבבו* in 1 Sam 13:14 is actually ambiguous, and may, in fact, imply something good within David's heart.¹⁵ However, we must be careful not to confuse peripheral concerns with the specific rhetorical force of the phrase itself. Yahweh's preference of David is not completely random. On the contrary, David's positive characteristics make him a fitting king for Israel, and it is presumably for this reason that he is Yahweh's preferred king. However, the use of *כלבבו* in 1 Sam 13:14 does not focus primarily on David's positive traits, but nor does it deny them. Rather, it simply focuses attention on Yahweh's preference, which is for David over Saul.

The rhetorical force of the statement "Yahweh has sought a man in accordance with his own heart," therefore, lies in the way it differentiates David from Saul with regard to divine disposition and election. Although the narrative of Samuel makes clear that the choice of Saul as king lay with Yahweh (e.g. 1 Sam 10:24), he is never said to have been a choice of Yahweh's heart. This means that Yahweh is never said to approve of Saul's appointment, even though he reluctantly

14. George, 442–59.

15. Benjamin J. M. Johnson, "The Heart of Yhwh's Chosen One in 1 Samuel," *JBL* 131 (2012): 455–66.

sanctions it and specifically picks him as the first king. Samuel's words in 1 Sam 12:13 capture these ideas succinctly.

ועתה הגה המלך אשר בחרתם אשר שאלתם והנה נתן יהוה עליכם מלך

So now, here is the king whom you have chosen, whom you requested. See, Yahweh has put a king over you.

Here we see that while Yahweh holds the prerogative in Saul's appointment, Saul is actually the king of Israel's choice. To borrow the phrase we have been investigating, we might say that Saul is a man in accordance with Israel's heart. Israel requested a king like Saul, and Yahweh gave him to them. By contrast, David is Yahweh's personal choice for king—a man in accordance with Yahweh's heart. Thus, when 1 Sam 13:14 uses the phrase to anticipate David, we understand it to be part of the Davidic *apologia* that argues for the legitimacy of David's claim to the throne of Israel—a claim that undermines that of Saul.