

1 Samuel 16-18
Saul's "evil" spirit

A few years ago I was teaching through a series on the Three Kings of Israel: Saul, David and Solomon.

In reading through the texts I came to this one in 1 Sam 16:14:

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Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an **evil spirit** from the Lord tormented him.

This text has always bothered me. How...and Why, would God send an ***evil spirit*** on Saul to torment him?

In v23 the text says,

Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would pick up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

I wrestled with this text and decided that I needed to do some exegesis. So...I started asking questions beginning with the assumption that something is going on that is NOT clear in the text as we have it.

So I read the story again...focusing on the verses where Saul has this "evil spirit."

v14 - Some translations say a "harmful" spirit...others say, a "tormenting" spirit...

So I decided to look more closely into the actual Hebrew word.

I also decided to look closely at the context in the story.

The text about the spirit of the Lord leaving Saul occurs just after David has been [*secretly*] anointed by Samuel to be the King of Israel.

The next thing that happens in the text is David going out to meet Goliath...and he kills him.

In this lengthy passage a few interesting things happen:

1. David kills Goliath, cuts off his head.
2. Saul watches this feat and asks Abner, his commander:
"Whose son is this?"

3. Abner does not know, but brings David to meet Saul (he is carrying the head of Goliath when he meet Saul) [that was certainly something Saul would never forget...]

4. Next: Jonathan shows his deep devotion and commits his loyalty to the young David

5. The women are singing:
"Saul has killed thousands...and David has killed ten thousands!"

This is the context the writer gives us and it is here that the writer gives us the first glimpse of *the evil spirit* :

And Saul was **very angry**...

"...what more can David have but to rule the entire kingdom?"

Saul looked at David with **suspicion and jealousy** from that day forward.

1 Sam 18:8-9

So that is the exegetical context of this "evil" spirit on Saul.

And context is a very important part of good exegesis.

Then we get the first crazy act:

While David is playing the lyre the "evil spirit" comes on Saul and he

throws his spear at David, trying to kill him. 18:10-11

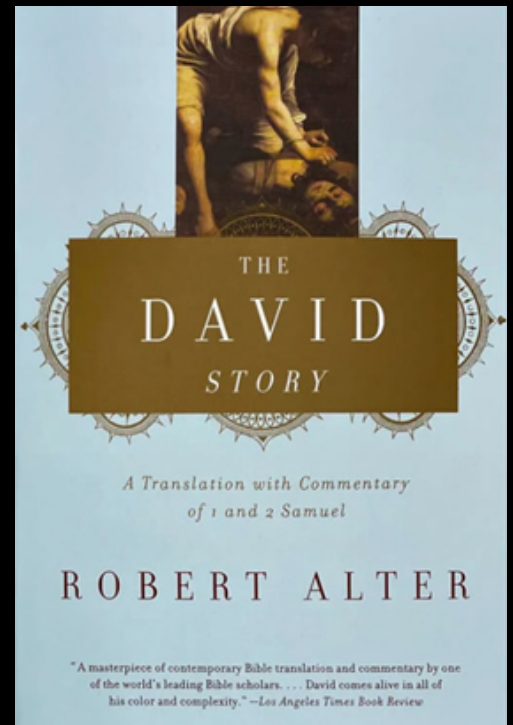
It was at this point where I decided to look at what other scholars say about this "evil" spirit.

I had started developing my own idea of what was happening...

But I must be honest...I have never taken Hebrew...and this study is beyond my scope of knowledge.

I have never studied Hebrew...but once upon a time I was pretty good with Greek.

So I looked it up in the LXX: the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT. The word used here is not always translated as "evil."



Then I found Robert Alter...

Robert Alter is an American Jewish scholar...trained at Columbia and then at Harvard. He is now retired after teaching at the Univ of California in Berkley.

These are now mostly ruined academies IMO, but back when he was trained they were world-class.

Alter is most known for his translation of the Hebrew Bible into English.

His translation has been hailed by Jewish rabbis around the world.

Alter tells us,

[In the Hebrew there is a play on words here...it makes the text not as easy to translate, but makes it a bit more clear.]

1 Samuel 16

v15 Saul's attendants said to him, "An evil spirit from God is **tormenting** you.

16 Let us find someone who can play soothing music for you.

He will play when the evil spirit from God comes on you, and you will feel better."

This is interesting because the word translated *tormenting* you can also mean to "choke" or "strangle."

So they brought David into Saul's court and...

v23 Whenever the spirit from God came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

Here is the pun in Hebrew:
When the text says,
"relief would come" to Saul...

This is a verb in Hebrew that sounds
exactly like the word for "spirit."

And what does the word "spirit"
derive from? "breath" or "breathing"
in both Hebrew and the Greek.

Alter says:

This is play on words...and how they
sound when read aloud. It can sound
the same, but it means something
different.

So if we were to translate this sequence of events using this word play it would go something like this.

"...the spirit of the Lord gripped David from that day forward." 16:13

"...Now the spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and he would experience **choked breathing** from the Lord which struck terror in him...." 16:14

When the **choked breathing** would come on Saul, David would play music. And Saul could breathe again; he would feel better, and the **choked breathing** would leave him.

The NIV says

"Saul would feel better."

Other translations say Saul was

"refreshed"

one says "revived"

another says "relieved"

What does this sound like to you?

I had already started thinking..."this sounds like a **panic attack**."

"The Hebrew employs an

untranslatable pun: the verb "would find relief" ...[sounds like and derives]

from "spirit." Alter, p.100n23

When I read about this word play I began to think that a "panic attack" made sense.

I think Saul is "feeling" the reality that God has taken him out of service as the King.

He is technically still the King, but we know that David has already been anointed.

Saul is like the President of the USA who just lost the election, but stays in the White House from November to February as a "lame duck."

Saul is finished...

and he knows it...

I think he knows that David has
already been anointed.

His attendants...

I think they heard through the
grapevine about the anointing of
David.

It seems too big of a coincidence
that they say...

"We need to find someone who can
play the lyre...hey, I know a young
man named David!"

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Saul is depressed.

He is feeling the lonely sense of his catastrophic failure.

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Discouragement > Depression

Depression > Self-Pity

Self-Pity > Hatred

Here are some quotes from Robert Alter's text that speaks to the reading that I am suggesting:

p.98n14: Alter comments,

"Saul's psychosis...fits of depression later accompanied by paranoia..."

When one of Saul's counselors suggests David to play the lyre, Alter says of this:

"Is it possible that word of David's [secret anointing] has circulated...and that the anonymous "lad" may be a kind of pro-David mole in the court of Saul?" p.98n18

In 1 Sam 18:10 the text reads, "an evil spirit...seized Saul and he went into a frenzy..." p.114

"the verb here is the same one that refers to "speaking in ecstasy" [like when the spirit came on Saul and he prophesied with the prophets.] p.114n10

Alter points out the contrast between Saul with "his spear in his hand" and David "playing [his lyre] by hand" ...then Alter states, "Saul's mental disturbance involves compulsive [actions]." p.119n9

As Saul watched David approach Goliath, he asked Abner the Commander,

"Whose son is this?"

He was impressed...dumbstruck, and I think watching David kill the giant...

and all the men celebrating the
victory...then the women singing that
Saul has killed 1,000's
David has killed 10,000's...

This gives Saul the sinking feeling
that his day is past.

At the end of Ch 17 Abner brings
David before Saul.

The text says that David was still
holding the head of Goliath.

I think it is safe to say that deep
down in his soul...Saul gets a vision
of who will replace him.

It is here, at the beginning of Ch 18
that the text says,

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"Jonathan became one in spirit with
David, and he loved him as he loved
himself."

This is the beginning of a legendary
story: two young men are becoming
lifetime friends.

[Slide]

Jonathan made a covenant with
David:

4 He took off his robe and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, and his bow and his belt.

Saul had to know this...even his son loves this newcomer.

With the killing of Goliath...
the celebration of the troops...

and the beginning of the relationship
between Jonathan and David...

We see a shift beginning.

In the words of John the Baptist
about Jesus:

"He must increase, but

I must decrease."

Sadly, Saul is missing the depth of character to accept the shifting of power.

And it leads to more failure.

Discouragement > Depression

Depression > Self-Pity

Self-Pity > Hatred

Hatred > Psychotic Fear

Fear > Panic Attacks

Saul is losing his grip on reality.

He cannot accept that God has turned His back on Saul.

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PRAYER

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Servant leadership is very different from ego-driven leadership.

A good leader, a servant-leader doesn't hold his/her authority tightly.

A good leader is ALWAYS looking for their replacement.

A good leader wants God...

(now we moving into the realm of the church)

A good leader wants God to replace them.

...is always looking for God to bring future leaders into the picture.

And a servant-leader does not grab leadership and clutch onto it,

a good leader gives leadership away.

Paul famously tells Timothy in

[Slide]

2 Tim 2:

"The things you have heard me say
in front of many witnesses,

you need to entrust those things to
others,

who will turn around and teach
others the same principles."

This is the language of
transgenerational leadership.

Paul is telling one of his most
significant leaders...

to find others who will be leaders...

And give them a chance to lead.

This should be standard procedure
in the church.

A simple way to apply the account of
Saul's life is:

"Whatever Saul does, do the
opposite."

What have you seen today in the
text?

What comes to your mind?

PRAYER