Analogies between Minor Characters: The Example of Michal

Biblical stories generally feature a single main character, accompanied by several minor characters.[[1]](#footnote-1) Prof. Uriel Simon began his classic article on minor characters with the following statement: “The number of characters who appear in biblical narrative, of every period, is extremely small.” Later he wrote,

In general, then, the actions and feelings of secondary characters are described only when they are required to advance the plot or to shed light on another actor, and not out of a genuine interest in these characters themselves… A primary function of some minor characters is to move the plot forward; others endow the narrative with grater meaning and depth.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

From his statement, it emerges that the Biblical narrative focuses on the main character and his or her development. Simon points out that the secondary characters have two significant roles: advancing (and stopping) the narrative, and furnishing it with meaning. To be more specific, we might say that the second role of minor characters is to cast light on the main character, to draw him or her out and, at times, provide background for understanding a particular situation.

Since Simon’s work was published, there has been more research on minor characters. For example, some scholars have pointed out that there are analogous characterizations that compare and contrast the main character and accompanying minor characters. A famous example of a contrasting characterization is the comparison the Bible draws between the character, actions and temperament of David, as the main character, and the character, actions and temperament of the minor character Uriah the Hittite in the story of David and Bathsheba. This analogy casts a negative light on the behavior of David in this incident.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This article presents a similar literary phenomenon that has not yet been adequately explored: stories designed to create an analogy between two **minor** characters within the narrative.

Just as analogies between minor characters and the main character can be used to cast light on the main character, so too can analogies between minor characters contribute to characterizing and illuminating the main character. However, it would also be interesting to consider if there are any cases in which comparing two minor characters serves to define each of them, beyond casting light on the main character. If we find a case of this type, it will show that the minor characters are significant in and of themselves, not just as a means for casting light on the main character.

I will begin with three short examples of analogies between minor characters, which are based primarily on the plot. I will then present, at greater length, the analogy between Michal and Jonathan, the children of David. All of the examples are drawn from the Books of Samuel.

1. It is agreed that Hannah is the main character in the books’ opening stories (1 Sam 1), accompanied by three minor characters: Elkanah, Peninnah, and Eli. Of these characters, two – Elkanah and Eli – are contrasted, an analogy being made between their responses to the main character’s tears. Hannah cries twice in this chapter, and the two men respond in opposite manners. Elkanah responds to his wife’s tears by attempting to placate her. Conversely, Eli in the Tabernacle reprimands her severely. At this stage it appears that Elkanah’s response is more sensitive and appropriate, but Hannah does not share her inner feelings with Elkanah; rather, she shares her distress and sorrow with the more aloof High Priest. In the end, it is Eli who gives his blessing to Hannah, rather than Elkanah her husband.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this case it seems that the analogy between two minor characters sheds light on the main character, Hannah, and teaches about the turmoil in her soul, her doubts, and inner feelings when facing infertility and isolation.
2. In 1 Sam 26, an analogy of contrast is created between two military commanders, Abishai son of Zeruiah and Abner son of Ner. On the one hand, Abishai is loyal to his master, and is prepared to kill Saul on his behalf, while Abner is unable to protect his master. This instance is a minor chapter in the overall comparison that the Bible draws between David, whose path to the summit is paved, and Saul who is progressively declining. The generals are miniature reflections of their masters: the successful Abishai reflects the image of the successful David; Abner, who cannot protect his master, reflects Saul’s deteriorating fortunes.
3. Second Samuel 9 deals with the meeting of David and Mephibosheth in the wake of the fulfillment of the covenant between the latter’s father Jonathan and David, the main character in the story. In addition to Mephibosheth, another minor character is mentioned: Ziba a servant in the house of Saul, who is in possession of his late master’s property. These minor characters stand in opposition to each other: Mephibosheth suffers from a very poor self-image, three times in verse 9–10 he refers to himself a “the son of your master.” On the other hand, although the biblical narrator indeed refers to Ziba as a “servant” (vv. 2, 9, 12; trans. NSRV; the Hebrew words differ) three times, he actually has great self-confidence. Mephibosheth is indeed the grandson of King Saul, but he is handicapped and destitute. Conversely, although Ziba is a simple servant in Saul’s house, he has great wealth. Mephibosheth has only one child, while Ziba has fifteen sons. These distinguishing details which contrast the minor characters seem to portray Ziba as superior to Mephibosheth. However, David faithfully keeps his promise to Jonathan and exalts Mephibosheth, granting him honor and property, at the expense of Ziba who is humiliated by David, and forced to hand his possessions over to Mephibosheth.[[5]](#footnote-5) The apparent aim of this comparison is to cast a positive light on David, who faithfully keeps his promises, does justice, and returns lost property to its rightful owners. However, the contrasting analogy between Mephibosheth and Ziba presented in this chapter also forms the foundation for their future clash in the story of David’s escape from Absalom (2 Sam 16:1–4). Indeed, David will eventually return half of the property to Ziba, so it is divided equally between them (2 Sam 19:31).

In the brief examples presented above, the comparisons between the minor characters serve to illuminate the character of the protagonist.

I now proceed to 1 Sam 18–20 where I believe a broader comparison is constructed between two minor figures, both children of Saul, Jonathan, and Michal. Michal has been the subject of extensive research.[[6]](#footnote-6) Jonathan, too, has received more than a little attention,[[7]](#footnote-7) yet it seems to me that the analogy between these minor characters can add new perspectives for understanding not only Michal and Jonathan, but also the main character in these chapters, David.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It should be noted that the Midrash already proposed an elementary analogy between these characters: “Michal, the daughter of Saul, and Jonathan, both loved David; Michal helped escape inside the house, and Jonathan outdoors” (*Midr.* Ps 32:1).

We shall begin with 1 Sam 18, where the foundation for an analogy between Jonathan and Michal is laid: Of Jonathan it says, “And the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (v. 1)[[9]](#footnote-9) while of Michal it is written, “Now Saul’s daughter Michal loved David,” (v. 20). Jonathan makes a covenant with David, “Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul” (v. 3). Michal also enters in to a covenant with David, a covenant of marriage, “Saul gave him his daughter Michal as a wife” (v. 27). In this chapter, the analogy between the siblings is direct, and sheds light on both the overall love David enjoyed from all segments of the population, and the fact that Saul is exceptional in his hatred and envy of David.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In 1 Sam 19, the narrator continues to augment the analogy between the two minor characters. Careful reading of the chapter reveals two efforts to rescue David from Saul: Jonathan attempts to save David by achieving a temporary reconciliation between him and Saul (vv. 1–7), but this attempt fails (vv. 8–10); Michal’s effort to save David by smuggling him out of the house results in the final separation between David and Saul (vv. 11–17).

From a literary standpoint, the two rescue attempts have the same form, with four stages: Saul’s intentions to kill David immediately, “in the morning” (vv. 1–2, 11); the child talks to David, and informs him about the father’s intentions (vv. 2, 11),[[11]](#footnote-11) and then acts to counter the father’s intentions (Jonathan, by way of reconciliation; Michal, by separation); and Saul’s reaction to his children’s actions. It should be emphasized that in neither case does Saul mention David’s name (vv. 6, 17).

The following table shows the stylistic affinities between the portrayals describing the actions of each minor character:

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|  | **Jonathan and David  (1 Sam 19: 1-7)** | **Michal and David  (1 Sam 19: 11-17)** |
| Saul’s intention to kill David | 1 Saul spoke with his son Jonathan and with all his servants about **killing David**. But Saul’s son Jonathan took great delight in David. | 11 Saul sent messengers to David’s house to keep watch over him, planning **to kill him in the morning**. |
| The children inform David | 2 **Jonathan told David**, “My father Saul is trying to kill you; therefore be on guard **tomorrow morning**; stay in a secret place and hide yourself. 3 I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak to my father about you; if I learn anything I will tell you.” | 11 **David’s wife Michal told him**, “If you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed.” |
| The children act for David’s welfare | 4 **Jonathan spoke well of David to his father Saul**, saying to him, “The king should not sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you, and because his deeds have been of good service to you; 5 for he took his life in his hand when he attacked the Philistine, and the Lord brought about a great victory for all Israel. You saw it, and rejoiced; why then will you sin against an innocent person by killing David without cause?” | 12 So **Michal let David down** through the window; he fled away and escaped. 13 Michal took an idol and laid it on the bed; she put a net of goats’ hair on its head, and covered it with the clothes. 14 When Saul sent messengers to take David, she said, “He is sick.” 15 Then Saul sent the messengers to see David for themselves. He said, “Bring him up to me in the bed, that I may kill him.” 16 When the messengers came in, the idol was in the bed, with the covering of goats’ hair on its head. |
| Saul’s response to his children’s actions | 6 **Saul heeded the voice of Jonathan**; Saul swore, “As the Lord lives, he shall not be put to death.” 7 So Jonathan called David and related all these things to him. Jonathan then brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as before. | 17 **Saul said to Michal**, “Why have you deceived me like this, and let my enemy go, so that he has escaped?” Michal answered Saul, “He said to me, ‘Let me go; why should I kill you?’” |

Jonathan works by persuasion and reconciliation. Michal, however, does makes not attempts to appease; she takes the drastic steps of exclusion and separation. What drives them to act differently?

It should be noted that at the beginning of the narrative Jonathan is referred ‎ to as “the son of Saul” (v. 1). Conversely, Michal is called “David’s wife” (v. 11).[[12]](#footnote-12) This emphasis indicates a possible difference between the two children: Jonathan remained loyal to his father while still maintaining his love for David. Michal, however, transferred her full loyalty to David. In vv. 1-7, Saul presents his hatred of David explicitly, unlike the previous chapter where he tried to rid himself of David clandestinely. It seems that Saul intends to kill David immediately, so Jonathan tells David to hide in the morning until he is able to calm his father. The filial relationship is emphasized with two mentions in v. 1 “his son Jonathan”; “Saul’s son Jonathan.” Jonathan retains loyalty to his father, and therefore acts to reconcile them. Indeed, Jonathan says “my father” (vv. 2–3) three times, which indicates the great difficulty he faces when he is torn between loyalty to his father and his love for David.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Michal is referred to as David’s “wife” (v. 11), and she evinces no signs of struggle or hesitation. She helps David flee, and uses a trick, placing idols in David’s bed, to buy time so David can gain some distance (vv. 13–14). Michal does not attempt to compromise or mediate. In v. 17, the last word is indeed given to Michal, thereby expressing father’s helplessness in the face of his daughter’s actions.[[14]](#footnote-14) The sevenfold use of the Leitwort “kill” (vv. 1, 2, 5, 11, 15–17) also helps to shape Michal’s character as being willing to risk her life for her husband: six times, “kill” refers to David, but the seventh time, it refers to Michal, symbolizing her devotion to her husband. The bottom line is that Jonathan’s method for saving David failed, while Michal’s method succeeded.

1 Sam 18, presents the analogy between Jonathan and Michal: both of them love David, and both of them make a covenant with him (a covenant of love or a covenant of marriage); ch. 19 presents the siblings’ actions to save David, each one in a unique way. It has been suggested that Jonathan acted as he did because of his dual loyalty, while Michal’s loyalty was fully given to her husband David. Michal is not explicitly mentioned in ch. 20, but it seems to me that the Bible shapes the character of Jonathan in this chapter in a way that is analogous way to Michal’s actions in ch. 19.[[15]](#footnote-15)

David flees from Saul, then returns to Jonathan and asks him to ascertain Saul’s intentions. In my opinion, David himself is well-aware of Saul’s decision to cause him harm; his purpose is not to determine the king’s plans, but rather to convince Jonathan that there is no chance of reconciliation between Saul and David. Jonathan agrees to cooperate, and in order to clarify matters David asks Jonathan to deceive his father—to tell him that David has gone to his family instead of dining at the king’s table.

The Bible makes stylistic and substantive connections between the two stories in which Saul’s children deceive him. In both cases, the word “escape” is used to describe David’s departure but its use in ch. 20 is artificial; and I think this usage is intended to strengthen the analogy between the two figures.[[16]](#footnote-16) In both cases, the children of Saul claim that David asked or demanded that they “send him”; in both cases, Saul is angry at the child who deceived him, and claims that his children are cooperating with his enemy David.

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| **Michal’s deception (1 Sam 19)** | **Jonathan’s deception (1 Sam 20)** |
| ‎11 David’s wife Michal told him, “If you ‎do not **save** your life tonight, tomorrow you ‎will be killed.”‎ | 29 My brother has commanded me to be there. So now, if I have found favor in your sight, **let me get away**, and see my brothers. |
| 17 Michal answered Saul, “He said to me, ‘**Let me go**; why should I kill you?’ | 28 –29 Jonathan answered Saul, “David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem; he said, ‘**Let me go** for our family is holding a sacrifice in the city. |
| ‎17 Saul said to Michal, “Why have you ‎deceived me like this, and **let my enemy go**, ‎so that he has escaped?” | 30 Then Saul’s anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, “You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that **you have chosen the son of Jesse** to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother’s nakedness |

There is indeed a similarity between the actions of Jonathan and Michal, but the difference between them is also evident: Jonathan deceives his father with the thought of, and perhaps hope for, reconciliation between Saul and David. Michal, on the other hand, deceives her father with the understanding that there will be no reconciliation, and with the intention of separating her father from her husband.

In conclusion, it seems that Jonathan remains, to the best of his ability, loyal to both sides, to his father and to David, and tries his best to persuade Saul not to harm David.[[17]](#footnote-17) Conversely, Michal is loyal only to David. Jonathan’s action to save David fail, while Michal’s action to save David succeed.

I have shown that the analogy between the minor characters, Michal and Jonathan, illuminates their characters by contrasting them. However, in the final analysis it seems that the purpose of the analogy is to teach us something about the main character, about David. Initially, we saw that Jonathan and Michal sought to save David in opposing ways. Yet in the second stage, Jonathan follows his sister’s example, and uses deceitful tactics, similar to the tricks that Michal against Saul. If we compare the parting of David from each of the siblings, we find that David separated from Jonathan with great warmth (1 Sam 20:41). As we know, there is no such separation from Michal (1 Sam 19:12). How can David’s behavior be understood?[[18]](#footnote-18)

Much has been written about David’s relationship to Jonathan.[[19]](#footnote-19) I would like to add an additional layer to the subject, focusing on the analogy suggested above. As mentioned, Jonathan tries to remain loyal to both Saul and David. Michal, on the other hand, is extreme in her love for David, and therefore rebels against her father and abandons him for David’s sake. But David himself is more like Jonathan than Michal: David maintains his allegiance to the kingdom, and as long as Saul is the legitimate king, David demands respect for him, from both himself and his men. In the parallel stories in 1 Sam 24 and 2 Sam 26, David prevents his men from hurting Saul, and defines Saul as the Lord’s anointed: “The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord’s anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord’s anointed” (1 Sam 24:6); “But David said to Abishai, ‘Do not destroy him; for who can raise his hand against the Lord’s anointed, and be guiltless?’” (1 Sam 26: 9). On this basis, I would like to suggest that David’s attitude toward Jonathan is more sympathetic than his attitude toward Michal. David respects Jonathan’s dual loyalty while deeming Michal’s blind loyalty to himself unacceptable. From a personal perspective, Michal is distanced from her father because of her love of David; but Michal is actually rebelling against the Lord’s anointed, an approach to kingship which David is unwilling to accept.

It should be remembered that the Bible contains no explicit censure of David’s behavior toward Michal (as opposed to the Batsheba story, for example, where the Bible explicitly criticizes David’s behavior). However, David’s estrangement from Michal suits his overall image as someone who remains loyal to the monarchy and reigning king, as long as he remains on the throne.

We have thus learned that the analogy of contrast between Jonathan and Michal might shed further light on the behavior and character of the protagonist of the Book of Samuel, David.

In conclusion, this article presents an instance in which the biblical narrator creates an analogy between minor characters in the narrative. Biblical analogies between secondary characters usually contribute to a deeper understanding of the motives and character of its protagonist, but sometimes also contribute to understanding the character of the minor characters themselves.

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1. It is not always easy to ascertain who is the main character, and which characters are minor. Some scholars claim that the main character is the one who is “onstage” during the entire narrative, while the minor characters enter and exit as necessary. Others claim that the main character is rounder, and develops while the minor characters are superficial and unidimensional. In many cases, these definitions indeed help us identify the major and minor characters. But there are always borderline cases. Therefore, it is better not to speak of clearly differentiated categories but rather of a scale with clear endpoints and range of intermediary possibilities. For more on this see, Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, pp. 67–78; Wimsatt, *Verbal Icon*; Even, *Character in Narrative*, pp. 33–44, and regarding biblical narratives, Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, pp. 86–92‎‏.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Simon, *Reading Prophetic*, pp. 263, 266, 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, pp. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For this analogy, see Alter, *The Art*, pp. 81–86. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For this analogy, see Bar-Efrat, *I Samuel*, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See for example, Alter, *The Art*, pp. 114–125; Clines, “Michal Observed”; Exum, “Michal”; Ben-Ayun, *David’s Wives*, pp. 21–85; White, “Michal.” Other articles may be found in Clines, *Telling Queen Michal’s Story.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lauton, “Saul, Jonathan”; Keren, “Saul’s Son”; Jobling, “Jonathan,” Additional articles will be mentioned below. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. From the comparison between the siblings, Berlin learns that Jonathan has feminine characteristics, while Michal has masculine traits, see Berlin, “Characterization,” pp. 70–72, and compare with Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, p. 195. Exum, “Michal,” p. 52 expresses doubts about Berlin’s approach. Ben-Ayun also disagrees, and suggests that the comparison between the siblings teaches that Jonathan acts out of warmth and loyalty, while Michal uses sophistication and guile, see Ben-Ayun, *David’s Wives*, pp. 72–73. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In this context I will not discuss the nature of the relationship between David and Jonathan. For a survey of the various opinions found in the scholarly literature, see Avraham, “David and Jonathan,” pp. 215–216 and n. 1–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Klein, *Samuel*, p. 191; Birch, *Samuel*, p. 1118; McCarter, *1 Samuel*, p. 317–318. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On the similarities in the second stage, the reports to David, see Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, pp. 262–263; Polzin, *Samuel*, p. 185; Edelman, *King Saul*, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Clines has exmained all references to Michal, and has shown that when she acts for David’s good, she is called “David’s wife,” and whenever she criticizes David, she is “Saul’s daughter.” See, Clines, “Personal Names,” pp. 269–272; see also Seeman, “The Watcher,” p. 22; Garsiel, “David and Michal,” pp. 119–120. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For Jonathan’s considerations see also, Klein, *Samuel*, p. 210. I disagree with the scholars who claim that Jonathan conspired with David against Saul, see for example, Gunn, *The Fate*, p. 81; Baldwin, *Samuel*, p. 131;Brueggemann, *Samuel*, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, for example, Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, pp. 264–270. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Grossman (*Text and Subtext*, p. 65) briefly discusses some aspects of this analogy. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Other scholars think putting the word “escape” in Jonathan’s mouth is intended to hint that David did not go to brothers for an ordinary visit, but rather to get away from Saul. See, for example, 193; Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, p. 332; Edelman, *King Saul*, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Here I disagree with the few scholars who believe that Jonathan had made his peace with the divine plan that chose David, and was entirely on David’s side. See, for example, Edelman, *King Saul*, pp. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Exum claims that the difference in the siblings’ fate is the result of gendered preference for the male, see Exum, “Michal,” pp. 51–59. Ben-Ayun contends that their fates differ because Jonathan is loyal and does not express any criticism while Michal gets and angry at David and provokes him, see Ben-Ayun, *David’s Wives*, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See fn. 6. above [↑](#footnote-ref-19)