

MICHAL, CONTRADICTING VALUES  
UNDERSTANDING THE MORAL DILEMMA FACED BY SAUL'S  
DAUGHTER<sup>1</sup>

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Value conflicts owing to cultural differences are an increasingly pressing issue in many societies. Because Old Testament texts hail from a very different milieu to our own they may provide new perspectives upon contemporary conflicts. *Michal, Contradicting Values* is an interdisciplinary investigation of the value clash in 1 Samuel 19:10-18a that employs insights from Old Testament studies, ethics and anthropology.

Studies of Old Testament ethics have attended to narrative only relatively recently. Although social-scientific interpretation has a longer pedigree, there are important debates about how to employ the fruits of anthropology in biblical studies. For these reasons the first part of the thesis (chapters 1-4) attends to methodological issues.

Chapter 1 considers whether the Old Testament itself provides sufficient resources to address cases of conflicting moral values. A discussion of moral norms, moral goods and moral motivations concludes that neither laws nor motivations are foundational but that moral goods are basic. Legal stipulations or sapiential aphorisms, for example, are statements about configurations of particular goods.

Chapter 2 examines the nature of 'the good' and the ways in which it has been related to 'the right'. Because the study is not an investigation in moral philosophy the aim is simply to show the contested nature of 'the good' and 'goods', and the implications of choosing a particular interpretation when seeking to comprehend Old Testament ethics. Via a critique of Martha Nussbaum's call to attend to what narrative may contribute to ethics the thesis briefly considers the relationship of moral goods to the moral order, and then the question of

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incommensurability, that is, whether there are insoluble moral dilemmas. The final part of the chapter discusses how Erhard Gerstenberger and Waldemar Janzen conceive the family to be a key nexus of moral goods within the Old Testament.

The ‘family’ has been a traditional focus of anthropology. Chapter 3, therefore, examines anthropological approaches to kinship and the ethics of kinship. A key conclusion is that ‘the family’ is not essentially a matter of descent, marriage alliance, nor even cultural understandings of gender, but rather a constellation of practices. The analysis of practice has typically been undertaken in terms of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’. Starting from Pierre Bourdieu’s seminal work on ‘Practice Theory’ the dissertation discusses these categories, paying particular attention to the importance of accounting for ambiguity in interpersonal interaction. Three features of the relationship between goods and practices are highlighted. First, the context for practice includes the existence of multiple, contradicting and potentially mutually exclusive moral goods. Second, in any particular situation there will be a variety of perspectives upon both the goods in question and their relative priorities. Third, all practice is necessarily personal, and thus open, although it can exhibit regularity.

The accounts of practice found in the Old Testament are to be *read*. Chapter 4 investigates how a modified version of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossic voices enables readers to appreciate how authors present a moral vision by approving some characters’ narrative voices whilst undermining others. The final element of the methodological discussion examines the use of anthropological resources, especially the vexed question of the utilization of ‘models’ in exegesis.

Chapter 5 comprises an ‘interpretative understanding’ of the moral conundrum facing Michal as she lies to save her husband against her father, King Saul. The discussion starts from Saul’s question ‘why have you let my enemy go?’ (1 Sam. 19:17). Since both Saul *and* Michal seem to accept that she should not have acted as she did—Michal lies again to defend her action—the thesis asks after the ethical mores that might lie behind their supposition.

In order to understand the logic of Saul’s classification of David as ‘my enemy’ the thesis examines violence against enemies in the Old Testament, anthropological theory and selected ethnographies. Contrary to the view that correct moral behaviour towards enemies is

that sanctioned by the modern state, it is argued that both Saul's actions towards David and the performative inscription of his power in the messengers as they do his bidding would have been acceptable conduct for a leader in the very different society of ancient Israel.

Michal's excuse in verse 17 ingeniously presents David not only as a violent husband but, much more importantly, as *her* enemy. This rings hollow for modern Western readers, who usually assume that Michal's natural loyalty would have been to her husband. The thesis adduces anthropological resources to demonstrate that implied readers would have viewed Michal more as Saul's daughter than David's wife, and that the moral good of family loyalty would have been taken to mean fidelity to Saul.

The Old Testament's view of lying is both clear and ambiguous. *Michal, Contradicting Values* broaches the issues by recognising the social consequences of lying along with the role of warrants to confirm intentions to interlocutors. In 1 Samuel 19 Michal lies twice, warranting her first assertion explicitly with the *teraphim* and the second implicitly by appeal to her status as Saul's daughter. It is noteworthy that Saul does not challenge Michal's deception, but only what it reveals, that is, her change of loyalties.

Reading the Samuel narratives using anthropology demonstrates the multifaceted nature of Michal's dilemma. It also shows that the truth of her utterances is not the text's central concern, since implied readers would have identified family loyalty as being the most important moral good. Furthermore, the thesis explains how habitual constructions of moral goods are not simply accepted but used by both Michal and Saul to justify their choices—cultural 'norms' are manipulated for individuals' own ends in ambiguous situations.

All the characters in the selected narrative do something: faced with a moral conundrum they decide upon a particular course of action in order to 'resolve' the value clashes they perceive. Michal tells David his life is in danger, lets him down through the window, prepares a dummy with the *teraphim*, and dissembles to both Saul and his messengers. Saul's narrative voice, however, is consistent in its attempt to resolve the situation according to cultural norms of family loyalty. How does the author evaluate these choices? It is important that he does in fact construct a conflict of values rather than simply asserting the hegemonic schema. But Saul's voice, which coheres with what implied readers would have accepted, is then discredited. First, the

author sets the events ‘in a house, in the night’, with clearly negative connotations given the parallels with Genesis 19 (Saul’s messengers occupy the same structural position as the townsmen of Sodom) and Judges 19. Second, Saul attempts a series of decreasingly efficacious sendings, which are contrasted with Michal and David’s successful sending. And third, the reference to the *teraphim* links Michal’s deception to Saul’s rejection in 1 Samuel 15:23, where the object receives its only other mention in the books of Samuel. Michal’s unexpected perspective, however, is approved by her presentation as being (at this stage in the story) on God’s side. If the moral dilemma that faces Michal is conceived in terms of contradicting voices that conflict then *her* voice, which speaks into this situation, contradicts societal norms unexpectedly to assert fidelity to David.

The incidents involving Michal fit into the apology for David by showing how power comes to him: David does not grasp it. While his marriage to Michal does not confer the kingship upon David, her choice to facilitate his escape speaks of loyalty to *this* king, with the implication that if Michal chose David so too should readers. The other side of the coin is a negative assertion concerning the validity of societal norms when these conflict with loyalty to David’s house. Just as Michal in preferring David also rejected not only Saul but also the dominant moral schema that prioritised family loyalty and filial obedience, so readers should remember that loyalty to YHWH’s anointed—and his successors—is paramount.