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David's absence from the New Moon Feast as a test of loyalty and kinship

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Abstract: The story of the New Moon Feast in 1st Samuel 20 forms a crucial juncture in the David narrative as it is here that David makes his final break with Saul, heading into his exile until Saul's death. While most commentaries and articles written on this story acknowledge its significance and rightly note the focus of the story is on the relationship between David and Jonathan, virtually all have missed the key role feasting plays in the narrative. In looking at ethnographic, archaeological, and textual evidence, it will be shown that the description of the New Moon Feast was charged with political and familial meaning. David's refusal to attend sent the message that he was rejecting Saul's kinship and kingship over him. Therefore, Saul's reaction is only natural and expected. Since Saul could not help but see this move by David as a statement of rebellion, it is clear David's purpose in his absence was not to test Saul, but rather to test Jonathan. In publicly rejecting Saul, David first facilitated the inevitable break between himself and the imbalanced king on his own terms. But secondly and perhaps more importantly, by publicly rejecting the king, he force Jonathan to chose between David and Saul, with the conclusion of the story being Jonathan choosing David over the king.

Palavras-chave: New Moon Feast; Ancient Israel; Ethnoarchaeology.

A ausência de Davi na Festa da Lua Nova como um teste de lealdade e parentesco

Resumo: O relato da Festa da Lua Nova em 1 Samuel 20 é um momento decisivo na narrativa de Davi. É aqui que Davi rompe definitivamente com Saul e parte para o exílio, onde permanece até a morte de Saul. A maioria dos comentários e artigos sobre esse relato reconhece sua importância e observa, com razão, que o foco da história é a relação entre Davi e Jônatas. No entanto, praticamente todos deixaram de perceber o papel central que o banquete desempenha na narrativa. Com base em evidências etnográficas, arqueológicas e textuais, será demonstrado que a descrição da Festa da Lua Nova estava carregada de significado político e familiar. Ao se recusar a comparecer, Davi transmitia a mensagem de que rejeitava tanto o parentesco quanto a realeza de Saul sobre ele. Assim, a reação de Saul é natural e esperada. Saul não poderia deixar de ver essa atitude como uma declaração de rebelião. Por isso, fica claro que, com sua ausência, Davi não pretendia testar Saul, e sim Jônatas. Ao rejeitar Saul publicamente, Davi provocou, em seus próprios

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termos, a ruptura inevitável entre ele e o rei desequilibrado. Além disso, e talvez mais importante, essa rejeição pública do rei obrigou Jônatas a escolher entre Davi e Saul. A história termina com Jônatas escolhendo Davi em vez do rei.

Keywords: Festa da Lua Nova; Israel antigo; Etnoarqueologia

La ausencia de David en la Fiesta de la Luna Nueva como prueba de lealtad y de parentesco

Resumen: El relato de la Fiesta de la Luna Nueva en 1 Samuel 20 constituye un momento decisivo en la narrativa de David. Es aquí donde David rompe definitivamente con Saúl y parte hacia el exilio, donde permanece hasta la muerte de Saúl. La mayoría de los comentarios y artículos sobre este relato reconocen su importancia y señalan, con razón, que el foco de la historia es la relación entre David y Jonatán. Sin embargo, prácticamente todos han pasado por alto el papel central que el banquete desempeña en la narrativa. A partir de evidencias etnográficas, arqueológicas y textuales, se demostrará que la descripción de la Fiesta de la Luna Nueva estaba cargada de significado político y familiar. Al negarse a asistir, David transmitía el mensaje de que rechazaba tanto el parentesco como la realeza de Saúl sobre él. Por lo tanto, la reacción de Saúl es natural y esperable. Saúl no podía dejar de ver esta actitud como una declaración de rebelión. Por eso, resulta claro que, con su ausencia, David no pretendía poner a prueba a Saúl, sino a Jonatán. Al rechazar públicamente a Saúl, David provocó, en sus propios términos, la ruptura inevitable entre él y el rey desequilibrado. Además, y quizá más importante, ese rechazo público del rey obligó a Jonatán a elegir entre David y Saúl. La historia concluye con Jonatán eligiendo a David en lugar del rey.

Palabras clave: Fiesta de la Luna Nueva; Antiguo Israel; Etnoarqueología.

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INTRODUCTION

First Samuel 20 marks a watershed moment in the Saul-David narrative, the culmination of tensions between the current and future monarchs. The result is David's final break from Saul. After the events of 1 Samuel 20, David permanently leaves Saul's service, beginning his career as a fugitive while his former master maniacally pursues David all over the Judean wilderness.

The catalyst of the break centers around David's absence from the New Moon feast. In what appears to be a test to determine Saul's attitude towards David, David proposes to Jonathan that he skip the New Moon feast that he is expected to attend, using the excuse of a yearly family sacrifice (Bergen, 1996, p. 123). If Saul does not mind the absence, then David and Jonathan can rest easy, knowing all is well. However, if Saul objects, then the pair know that Saul intends David harm.

To say that Saul does not take the news well would be an understatement. In a rage, he declares the "son Jesse" to be a usurper to his, and by extension Jonathan's throne, placing David under a death sentence. When Jonathan dares to defend his friend, Saul grabs the nearest spear and attempts to pin his son and heir to the wall.

On the surface, Saul's response seems to be, as Walter Brueggemann (1990, p. 146-152) put it, "madness" and a tremendous overreaction to an "innocent request" (Klein, 1998, p. 209). But was it? As is often in the case with the Bible, a book separated from the modern reader by thousands of years and kilometers of time and space, what may seem to be innocent and harmless on the surface in truth carries a great deal more meaning and weight. A parallel example from the Bible would be Bathsheba's request to Solomon on the behalf of his half-brother and rival Adonijah for the hand of Abishag in 1 Kings 2:19–25. Solomon's reaction is not that different than Saul's, declaring Adonijah's goal of wresting the kingdom from him and has his half-brother executed immediately.

To the modern reader, Adonijah's request seems innocuous enough: he simply wanted to marry a beautiful young woman. Several commentators have noted that Bathsheba may have felt the same way; a story of young love that she naively helps facilitate (House, 1995, p. 100). Yet Adonijah's request to marry the former king's concubine is loaded with political meaning and potential. As Paul House notes, "whoever possessed the harem controlled the kingdom" (House, 1995, p. 99). Solomon saw through the ploy and ordered his rival immediately struck down.

Similarly, the story of the New Moon feast of 1 Samuel 20 has layers of intrigue that the modern reader may not get at first brush. The most central of these is the relational and political dynamics embedded in the New Moon feast. Feasting is not simply the consumption of food or even a celebration for the sake of celebrating. As Peter Altmann and Jangling Fu write, "feasts function to bond people together in the broader context of commensality" (Fu; Altmann, 2014, p. 12). Michael Dietler adds that "feasts are inherently political" and that "they constitute a fundamental instrument and theater of political relations" (Dietler, 2001, p. 66).

This nature of feasting will be unpacked more below but for now, suffice it to say that in interpreting the events described, commentators and exegetes have largely missed a key facet of the story and thus painted the scene as one of an innocent and helpless David suffering the wrath of an unhinged Saul.[2] Yet, given how politically significant attending, or not attending a feast was, it is David who is the unreasonable one. It will be argued that David's "test" was an intentional and significant slight to Saul, and thus Saul's reaction was entirely understandable. Therefore, I suggest that the real subject of David's test was not Saul at all, but Jonathan to reveal his loyalty and character.

FEASTING

In ancient contexts, it might be argued that food was the least significant part of a feast. Feasts were more about politics and power than simply eating,[3] as noted above. Until recently, however, the significance of feasting has been largely ignored (Fu and Altmann, 2014, p. 2; Hayden, 2001, p. 23). Thankfully with the work of Dietler and Hayden, as well as the recent work of Altmann and Fu, the socio-political significance of feasting has become a part of the of the interpretive lens. That said, an emphasis on the nature of feasting is conspicuously absent in the commentaries on 1 Samuel 20.

While the definitions of what exactly constitutes a feast as opposed to simply a meal can be remarkably varied depending on the author (Dietler and Hayden, 2001, p. 3), for the sake of simplicity, I will adopt the definition offered by Altmann and Fu (2014 p.

[2] While Killian McAleese (2011, p. 24-38) has touched on the role feasting played, this will be a much more in-depth analysis of the socio-political dynamics and consequences of David's decision.
[3] The political significance of feasting can still be seen today from the grand international scene to family dynamics.

15), "A *feast*, then, is a central social event oriented toward abundant displays and communal consumption with ritualizing tendencies." Although the "abundant display" part of the definition might be debatable given the lack of description in the text, the other two aspects of the New Moon feast certainly apply. Perhaps more basically, a feast can be defined as an event where people come together to eat for a primary purpose other than eating.

That such meals exist can be demonstrated simply anecdotally. In the United States, people come together to share extravagant meals on national holidays such as the Fourth of July or Memorial Day, or more religious holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter. Even unofficial holidays such as the Super Bowl or birthdays bring people and food together. While eating may serve a central *function* of these events, eating is not the *purpose* of the gathering. Although there are certainly nuances to the purpose of feasting, most feasts "revolve around *the creation or maintenance of important social relationships*" (Hayden, 2001, p. 30). To use the anecdotal example of the birthday party, who is and is not invited to child's party speaks volumes to that child's social relationships. An invitation is a statement of friendship, either real or desired. Conversely, the lack of an invitation is a statement of non-friendship, even if it is known the invited cannot attend. The oft-repeated sentiment is, "I would like to have been asked." Similarly, barring external circumstances, the refusal to attend is also a social and relational statement. The sad image that pops to mind is that of the child sitting alone at a table, surrounded by balloons and decorations but not friends.

This creation and maintenance of relationships can take many forms. In his participation in a feast in Papua New Guinea, Aren Maeir observed that the meal was ordered along hierarchical and political lines, reinforcing them (Maeir, 2015, p. 27). The Akha of southeast Asia use feasting to form family alliances, garner labor, and build support as protection against disaster, as well as opportunities to increase power and wealth (Clarke, 2001, p. 144-167). The Enga big men, also of Papua New Guinea, used feasting to control the market and exert their power and influence, as well as establishing trade alliances (Wiessner, 2001, p. 115-143; Wiessner, 2001, p. 115-143). Before industrial European steel, the Samia of Kenya would use work feasts to mobilize laborers to mine iron ore that would eventually become a hoe (Dietler; Herbich, 2001, p. 249-250). While the list could certainly go on, my purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive

catalog of feasting habits but rather to illustrate that feasting is used as a political and social tool in a multitude of practices.

Ancient Near Eastern Feasting

As demonstrated, feasting historically has been one of the main venues of political and social relationships. It should come as no surprise that feasting in the ancient Near East was a political event. Feasting, both religious and secular, public and private, and its political and social implications has been remarkably well-documented textually, iconographically, and archaeologically. To do a thorough analysis of ancient Near Eastern feasting in all its facets would require a book's worth of work and indeed such volumes do exist. For the purpose of setting the stage and providing proper context, I will explore a handful of relevant examples.

On both ends of the geographic spectrum, we find feasting taking center stage in political and social machinations in both Mesopotamia and Egypt. Perhaps the most striking iconographic feasting displays come from the Early Dynastic period in Sumer. Although greatly separated from the immediate context of this study, late Iron I southern Levant, by time and space, the copious depictions of feasting do provide insight into what feasting said and how it was used to communicate power and relationships.

The political backdrop of third millennium Sumer was not dissimilar to that of late Iron I/IIa Israel, although on a much larger scale. While sharing a largely unified culture, Sumer was fractured into city states, often coming into conflict with each other. As the millennium waned, an ideology of kingship was solidified, eventually resulting in the world's first empire as Sargon of Akkad conquered southern Mesopotamia (Renette, 2014, p. 63-68). Similarly, Israel went from a collection of tribes loosely connected by culture and religion to a unified and centralized state under David and Solomon. As in Sumer, feasting was one of the means by which this was accomplished.

Early Dynastic feasting scenes are found in three media: cylinder seals, votive plaques, and the "Standard of Ur" (Renette, 2014, p. 77-83). Additionally, provisions for feasts are described in texts (Schmandt-Besserat, 2001, p. 397-399). While the scenes are highly formalized, they do also display a wide range of feasting activities. Most show the feasters seated, drinking from a goblet, sometimes sharing a beverage with straws. Dancing and music are also depicted occasionally, as well as male and female attendants,

although in most cases gender is difficult to distinguish (Pollock, 2003, p. 22-24). Cylinder seals generally focused solely on the feasting scene itself due to size, although in the Early Dynastic II period, some did portray feast preparation. On the larger votive plaques, as well as the Standard of Ur, feast prep such as bringing of animals, food, and drink is also shown (Renette, 2014, p. 77-84).

Denise Schmandt-Besserat (2001, p. 401-402) points out that the massive religious festivals were how the burgeoning monarchies gained control over the city's resources, which were gathered through peer pressure to celebrate the gods and then redistributed to the people. Focusing on the artifacts, Susan Pollock notes that feasts were more likely reserved for the social elites because the implements, such as metal bowls, goblets, and straws; the media, such as seals and votive plaques; and the formal and ritual settings would only be accessible to a few. Thus participating in feasts, and then being able to display that participation, was symbolic of who was "in" and who was "out". Pollock (2004, p. 24-25) also theorizes that further distinctions could be made between the "in" crowds, i.. who was in with whom. Steve Renette focuses more on the diachronic development of feasting scenes during the Early Dynastic period, observing that in Early Dynastic I and II, the scenes are more varied, vibrant, and populated but by Early Dynastic III, the banquet scenes have become canonized down to only a few people, reducing further to just one or two in clearly cultic settings. Finally, by the age of empires, such scenes disappear completely. Renette (2014, p. 68) suggests this reflects the centralization of power as the various elite power struggles sifted out until only the king and his "immediate entourage" remained.

Despite apparent differences in nuance, these views are not necessarily competing as they reflect different facets of the same fundamental idea: feasts were a central arena in which relationships were forged and social stratification happened. Feasts defined who was who and where people stood. Those in power displayed that power by throwing feasts, demonstrating the ability to induce people to surrender resources and then controlling those resources. They built bonds by feasting with other powerful people, these bonds developing into alliances and factions in and between cities. Participating was a key avenue to joining an inner circle, and who one feasted with indicated to which circle that person belonged or wished to belong. As Renette (2014, p. 80) reasonably suggests,

key families increasingly tightened their control over these circles, elevating their own power, through feasting.

At the other end of the Fertile Crescent, Egyptian feasting scenes display a similar connection to power and relationship. Like at Sumer, Egypt had both grand public feasts, as well as private banquets. The former naturally showed off power, particularly that of the pharaoh, while the latter demonstrated social relationships. However, Egyptian art makes these internal social distinctions clear, with tomb paintings suggesting that one's social status was reflected in how close one was seated to the host. The closer, the higher status, in the eyes of the host, while the farther back, the lower status one had (Smith, 2003, p. 47). Again, we see feasting directly connected with the idea of who was important to who.

Shifting back to Mesopotamia, again the same idea of social connection and feasting is on display in a context temporally closer. A Neo-Assyrian banquet "manual" describes strict protocol and procedure for royal banquets, thereby treating royal banquets as an opportunity to reinforce the hierarchy between the king and his officials, particularly the royal magnates. As Gojko Barjamovic (2011, p. 40-44) notes, a core part of these royal feasts was a "physical re-enactment" of the hierarchy through prostration or surrendering of symbols of office.

A further way in which social relationships were displayed and reinforced was in physical proximity to the king during feasts. In his analysis of the North-West Palace at Kalhu, Barjamovic (2011, p. 37) has observed three sets of reception suites. Although using Greek accounts of Persian feast, Barjamovic (2011, p. 45-46) reasonably posits that the most important guests would be seated closest to the king in one of the inner reception suites, while lower ranking guests would occupy suites further out. Depending on the size of the banquet, lowest ranking guests would be seated in the outer courtyard of the palace, as evidenced by tent postholes unearthed there. In the case of Aššurnarisipal II's massive inaugural feast, featuring just under 70,000 guests, the entire city would have been utilized.

More direct archaeological evidence for this kind of social stratification comes from Iron IIC Ramat Raḥel, at end of the seventh century BC through the beginning of the sixth century BC. Two *favissae* were uncovered dating to the same period, one in the central courtyard of the palace and one inside what appears to be a reception chamber of

the palace (Fulton *et al*., 2015, p. 31 and 39). Since the latter *favissa* was excavated at the end of the 1950s, animal bones were not recorded. However, the pottery assemblage was essentially the same as that of the *favissa* of the central courtyard, strongly suggesting they served the same function. The pottery assemblage for both pits was predominantly of the type used for eating, chalices and bowls (Fulton *et al*., 2015, p. 39–40).Meanwhile, the 540 bones analyzed from the central courtyard pit revealed butchered animals that were not typically part of the Judean highland diet, such as birds (completely absent from the previous phase) and fish which had to be imported from either the Jordan or the Mediterranean, clearly remnants of a feasting event (Fulton *et al*., 2015, p. 31–39).

What is particularly interesting concerning these two pits is that one is in the central courtyard while the other is inside the palace. While it is possible that these are remains from two separate feasts, I find this unlikely as the pits are found in two separate spaces, a courtyard and inside a building, as opposed to reusing the same space such as at Tel Dan and Iron I Tel es-Safi (Greer, 2014, p. 120-21; Hitchcock *et al*., 2015, p. 21). The types of spaces is significant: one is a relatively large, open area capable of accommodating a large number of people, while the other is a small, enclosed space only a few could occupy. This speaks to a feast where there are the important guests in the courtyard and the very important, inner circle guests inside the palace itself, which matches the data from Egypt and Assyria regarding expressions of social stratification. Just as *who* was invited to the feast spoke about an individual's social standing, *where* that person was invited to sit spoke volumes about their place in society.

To summarize thus far, participation in feasts in the ancient Near East were expressions of power and standing. Being invited to a feast not only established one's standing as at the least an important person but also spoke to who that person was important to. Furthermore, where that person was physically placed in the feast spoke to just *how* important they were. However, if an invitation and placement to a feast was a statement of an individual's status and station, it must be asked what would a *refusal* to attend say about the invitee's attitude towards the host?

The New Moon

When it comes to the New Moon feast, the Hebrew Bible is simultaneously descriptive and vague. It is mentioned as actually being *practiced* more than any other

prescribed festival in the Torah, except the Sabbath.[4] However, any sort of New Moon ritual is only *prescribed* once (Num 28:11–15). While this is interpreted as the prescription of the New Moon festival, the interpretation of a New Moon *feast* being prescribed at all must be called into question (Cole, 2000, 473; Phillip, 1998, p. 316; Wenham, 1981, p. 224).

Numbers 28:1–15 is a list of ascending, time-keeping offerings for the day, week, and month (the New Moon).[5] These are not feasts or even festivals, but offerings to be made to God to mark the basic units of time, except the year. No instructions for the people are given: they are not commanded to gather anywhere, no proscription from work is given,[6] nor are they told what to eat or wear. Aside from the offering made, likely only by the priests, it is business as usual. This is very different than the subsequent instructions for the feast days, starting with Passover and going through the calendar until the Feast of Tabernacles. In addition to a detailed list, each feast is set apart with instructions to gather together, what to eat (or not eat, in the case of Atonement), and a proscription of work.[7] This suggests that the first three offerings in the list are of a different type than the following five. That they each mark three of the four main temporal markers in ascending order—day, week, and month, but not year—suggests that these were offerings to be made to mark the passages of time, and not actually festival days. Certainly, the Israelites were not having a feast every single day, so it is unlikely that the following offerings marking key points in time with no proscription of work were feast days either.

Whether intended as a feast day or not, that the Israelites were celebrating a feast on the New Moon is beyond dispute. As already mentioned, aside from the Sabbath, it is the most mentioned celebration as actually being practiced, although typically the celebration is referenced in a complaint by Yahweh. Since it does not seem to be a prescribed feast, however, the exact significance of the New Moon feast practiced in ancient Israel is not clear from the text.

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[4] 1 Sam 20; Isa 1:13,14; 47:13; Hos 2:13; Amos 8:5; 1 Chr 23:31; indirectly 2 Kgs 4:23. Notably, most of these references are *negative* assessments of the New Moon festival.

[5] Although the text does not specify, it should be assumed that these were offerings to be made at the tabernacle or temple by the priests, not necessarily by each family.

[6] While work proscriptions are given for the Sabbath elsewhere, none is given here.

[7] For Passover, Num 28:16, 25; for Weeks, Num 29:7; for Trumpets, Num 29:1; for Atonement, Num 29:7; for Tabernacles, Num 29:12, 35.

The Egyptian calendar aside, all ancient Near Eastern calendars were lunar, although as the lunar and solar years do not match up, some calendars incorporated intercalculation and leap years to keep the calendar on track (Rochberg-Halton, 1992, v. 1, p. 813; Cohen, 2015, p. 3). Months were reckoned on the appearance of the new moon, which was the first sliver of the moon following its disappearance at the end of the previous month (Rochberg-Halton, 1992, p. 810).

In Mesopotamia, the monthly *eššušu*-festival was celebrated three times a month, including on the new moon to the moon god Sin (Postgate, 1994, p. 123), although by the first millennium, these were down to twice a month (Hrůša, 2015, p. 91). However, how or if connected Sin worship was with Israelite practiced religion is unknown; the text makes no reference to the Israelites worshiping Sin.

However, at Mari, feasts with the dead LUGAL.MEŠ, the *kispum* and *maliku*, were held on the new moon (Lange, 2014, p. 107).[8] Similar feasts with the dead were held at Ugarit during the Late Bronze Age as well, although no specific date is given for these feasts. Interestingly, in the dramatic funerary ceremony conducted by King Niqmaddu IV, it is Šapšu, the sun goddess, who guides the deceased into the netherworld (Lange, 2014, p. 100-106). But a mortuary temple with evidence of feasting found at Hazor also had lunar symbols of a crescent, the symbol of the new moon, and the disk for the full moon (Ornan, 2012, p. 12). This hearkens back to the Mari *kispum*-ceremony that was performed both at the new and full moons, once again connecting funeral cults with lunar worship.

Mark Smith (2002, p. 162-71) argues that possible cults of the dead were part and parcel of Israelite religion prior to the seventh century, including *kispum*-like feeding the dead. Similarly, Karel van der Toorn argues for a pervasive funerary cult in the pre-Deuteronomic Israel, i.. pre-seventh century BC. Van der Toorn (1996, p. 211-212) goes a step further than Smith, however, and suggests that the New Moon feast is a feeding of the dead, or *kispum*-like monthly service, which is a likely conclusion given connections at Hazor and Mari between funerary cult and the new moon.

While there is possible evidence for feasting in tombs at Qatna, most evidence suggests that most feasting with the dead was done in front of either statues, as at Qatna

[8] It should be noted that the *kispum* was also held at the full moon.

and Hazor. Furthermore, textual evidence from both the Bible and Ugarit, such as in the case of Absalom and Dan'ilu, demonstrate how stelae or statues would be used as proxies for the deceased (Lange, 2014, p. 112 98; Ornan, 2012, p. 12; Smith, 2002, p. 167; Bordreuil Pardee, 2009, p. 173). These proxies are key because they bring the funerary cult into the home in the form of *terapim*, as both van der Toorn and Richard Hess (2007, p. 267) argue.

Ritual feasting in the Israelite home is well-attested archaeologically. Cynthia Shafer-Elliot (2014, p. 208), citing a study done by Rainer Albertz and Rüdiger Schmitt found that of 29 Iron I houses, 79% contained clearly cultic artifacts and clearly food preparation and consumption artifacts in the same room. This number drops to 33% in the Iron IIA and then jumps 80% in Iron IIB and drops to 40% in the Iron IIC. Clearly religious household feasting was a major part of Israelite culture, especially during the time of Saul (Iron I).

In Shafer-Elliot's own site of Tel Halif, a cult corner was found in one of the houses complete with small standing stones, a pillared figurine, and a fenestrated stand (Schafer-Elliot, 2014, p. 205–06). Furthermore, eating utensils were found with the cultic items, as well as cooking installations in the room adjacent, indicating that food prep for cultic activities took place (Schafer-Elliot, 2014, p. 209–10). As Shafer-Elliot (2014, p. 215-219) notes, not all, or even most of the prescribed Israelite religious functions meant trips to the tabernacle or temple. Oft-repeated events such as the Sabbath or New Moon, or other life-cycle events such as birth, circumcision, puberty, marriage, death, etc. were events that could be and indeed were celebrated in the home, among family.

Pulling the strands of evidence together, the picture of the New Moon feast is a family-centric celebration. While Israelite New Moon feasts might not have been full-blown ancestor worship, the veneration of ancestors at the New Moon was practiced by Canaanite cultures. Given Scriptures description of syncretism between the Canaanite religions and Israelite practiced religion, it is more than reasonable to conclude that the practice of celebrating ancestors at the New Moon was carried on by the Israelites to some degree. This is buttressed by the numerous standing stones found in homes such as those at Tel Halif (Schafer-Elliot, 2014, p. 205), similar to the stela found in the Hazor Temple (Ornan, 2012, p. 12), or at the Qatna Tombs (Lange, 2014, p. 98).This religious feast, whether worshiping ancestral spirits or simply remembering them, as van der Toorn

(1996, p. 214) suggests, was held in private homes, among family, as evidenced by the archaeology of Iron Age Israel.

The narratives of 1 Samuel 19 and 20 add further support to this. First, in 1 Samuel 19:13, Michal uses a תְּרָפִים in the house to substitute as David. Secondly, the guest list for the New Moon feast in 1 Samuel 20:25 must be considered. While undoubtedly more people attended, the given list is Saul; Jonathan, Saul's son and heir; Abner, Saul's chief military commander and cousin; and David, one of Saul's military commanders and his son-in-law. All are members of Saul's family. Third, the feast takes place in Saul's home at Gibeah.

Therefore, the New Moon feast was most likely a family-centric event in which the dead ancestors were at the very least honored, if not worshiped. The social significance of this was for the living family members to reaffirm and solidify their place as a family in the world. As Sarah Lange puts it, "with this meal and the invoking of the deceased family members, the bereaved drew upon and identified with their heritage and origin, legitimizing their position in society" (Lange, 2014, p. 115).

THE NEW MOON FEAST OF 1 SAMUEL 20

With all this background in mind, we return to the immediate subject of this study: the events of the New Moon feast as described in 1 Samuel 20. By this point in the narrative, Saul has tried to kill David at least four times. In fact, David has not yet returned to Saul's court after the latest attempt in 1 Samuel 19 that sent David to Samuel's house in Ramah. David is at his absolute wits end, feeling there is essentially only one way this will end: Saul finally succeeding. When David tells Jonathan this, however, the prince replies essentially that all is well, and David can come home. David is absolutely not buying it, at which point he proposes the test to Jonathan.

Considering the question posed at the end of the discussion on feasting in the ancient Near East, it must be considered what it meant for David to have not just a standing invitation to Saul's New Moon feast but the expectation that he will attend. In the narrative, Saul is presented as something between the highest-ranking war chief and full king, which deems him the elite of the elite. As feasting is a demonstration and reaffirmation of connections, David has been invited to be part of the elite, specifically Saul's elite. Furthermore, judging by the seating chart that puts David in close proximity

to Saul, he is expected to be part of Saul's inner circle. Finally, he is expected to attend a *family* banquet when familial relationships are reaffirmed. David, being part of this feast places himself as an intimate member of Saul's family. David is granted the honors, privileges, and the responsibilities of a prince of Saul's house. As David points out in 1 Samuel 18:23, this is no small thing.

With all those dynamics at play, what does David's refusal to attend mean? It is no less than a flat-out rejection of Saul's patronage and family. David may not have explicitly declared himself a rebel or put himself forward for the crown, but his refusal to attend the feast was no less a throwing down of the gauntlet, a message Saul received loud and clear. With the context in mind, Saul's explosive reaction makes perfect sense: this, after all, had confirmed his darkest suspicions that David had his eye on the throne. It would have been an astonishing and dramatically out of character response for Saul to shrug off David's absence as of little significance. Indeed, it is remarkable that Saul did not explode the first day and gave David a pass.

But this raises the question of why did David construct a test that Saul was almost certain to fail? In part, David was already thoroughly convinced that Saul was not going to stop trying to kill him until either he succeeded or died trying (Bergen, 1996, p. 213). As a result, David likely trying to facilitate his break with Saul on his own terms, rather than the king's, which meant being on the wrong end of a spear.

However, if that were the case, why have the test at all? Why not simply disappear into the Judean wilderness as he does at the end of the story?

The answer is that Jonathan, not Saul, was the one being tested. During the Saul-David conflict of chapters 18–20, Jonathan finds himself trying to mediate between his friend and his father. In 18:1–5, Jonathan and David become fast friends, a fact that is immediately countered by Saul's jealousy and suspicion in 18:6–16. As tensions escalate, Jonathan is forced to play peacemaker in 19:1–7, mainly talking his father off the proverbial ledge. Then, in 20:1–4, Jonathan is now trying to coax David to come home, trying to assure him all is well.

Given the repeated attempts by Saul on David's life, Jonathan's insistence that David is safe from Saul seems a bit naïve and to a degree, perhaps it is. However, as Ralph Klein and Robert Bergen both point out, Jonathan is convinced that he knows his father better than anyone and so he would know if Saul truly intended to kill David (Klein, 1998

206; Bergen, 1996, p. 213). Furthermore, when last seen, Saul was having a conversion experience at Ramah, consumed by the Spirit of God. This intense conversion experience seems to have convinced Jonathan that Saul was a changed man regarding David and therefore, all would be well. Indeed, given Saul's patience regarding David's absence, there might have been some truth to that.

David, however, was clearly convinced that sooner or later Saul's conversion was temporary, and he would try to kill him again. Eventually, Saul was going to succeed. What David was not certain of was where Jonathan stood. Jonathan's own words suggest he still trusted and respected his father, despite ample reason not to. Furthermore, as Saul would astutely point out, it was Jonathan's, not Saul's throne that was on the line. Combing those two points, the key narrative question at this point is where would Jonathan stand when push came to shove?

So David's test was to draw a clear line in the sand between himself and Saul and see which side Jonathan would choose. Interestingly, even before the test takes place, as Ralph Klein notes, Jonathan indirectly surrenders the throne to David via his covenant (Klein, 1998, p. 207). However, that means nothing until put to the test. Yet, when Saul spells out the situation, Jonathan defends David, in that moment choosing to surrender the throne, something Saul understood, which might explain why he tried to kill Jonathan. Jonathan had thrown his lot in with David and thus ought to share his fate.

Thus Jonathan, not David or Saul, is the main character of this episode. It revolves around his choice to hang on to a throne Yahweh had already given to another or to trust Yahweh and let it go. As a result, this episode is the climax of Jonathan's narrative. After this point, he appears only twice more, once to verbally declare David as the next king in 1 Samuel 23:15–18 and then listed among the casualties of Gilboa in 1 Samuel 31:2.

With this graceful surrendering of the kingship, Jonathan finishes his role as Saul's foil. From the beginning of Jonathan's story, he serves as the anti-Saul. When Saul wants to rest on his laurels, Jonathan is actively moving forward. While Saul dithers about in a panic, Jonathan is decisive and fearless. Where Saul sees David as competition, Jonathan sees a man like himself. As Saul becomes more combative and hostile, Jonathan becomes diplomatic. Finally, when Saul obsessively grasps a throne that is no longer his, Jonathan graciously lets it go.

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