



A delightfull readable yet profound survey of the way stories inform our faith and values, and are essential to our Christian witness. Ralph Milton at his best.

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Jonathan
...the measure of a man
based on 1 Samuel 13:1-2
by **Ralph Milton**
from [Is This Your Idea of a Good Time, God?](#)
Wood Lake Publications

Jonathan is one of the thoroughly likable people in the Bible. He is exuberant and loyal in a way that few biblical men are.

In the story as it is told in the Bible, David and Jonathan had a very special and deep relationship, a fact which has made a lot of people nervous. Could it be that Jonathan and David were gay?

They probably were. They would not have admitted it to anyone, even to themselves. Homophobia was deep and powerful in Hebrew culture. But sometimes old men realize things they've never known until they see death staring at them. So I imagined this story as told by Solomon, the son born to David and Bathsheba, and who became King when David died.

Some things are only known when people die.

He lay there on his bed, shivering, trying to instruct me in the art of kingship. My mother was there too. She loved him in his dying as she had never loved him in his living.

"Have I apologized for what I did to you, Bathsheba? Have I?"

"Yes, David. Many times in the last few weeks. And you are forgiven."

"I never apologized to Jonathan. I let him die there, slaughtered by the Philistines. 'How are the mighty fallen....how are the mighty fallen.' Did I ever tell you about Jonathan, Solomon? He was a fine man. If you think of yourself as a king, Solomon, you could do worse than look up to Jonathan. Did I tell you about him?"

"Yes, father."

But I knew father would tell me once again. The matter of Jonathan seemed to be on his mind, persistent, unresolved, painful and beautiful.

"Let him talk," my mother whispered. "Let him talk."

"Be sure to have the scribes write down the story of the battle at Gibeah, Solomon. And all the battles Jonathan fought. Write down how the King Saul tried to have his own son killed because of some silly rule he made. 'No one eats till after the battle!' old Saul said. Jonathan never heard the order. He ate a tiny bit of honey and Saul would have killed him for that. 'We all took a vow and you broke it,' he said. When the boys in the army heard about it, well they almost staged a revolt. I would love to have seen Saul back off, humiliated--ha!"

Father tried to laugh, but choked instead and sputtered. Mother offered him some wine but he refused.

"And have the scribes write about the battle of Michmash, where Jonathan and his armor bearer climbed up through those ugly hills, and single handedly killed twenty Philistines. All by themselves. That spooked the Philistines so much they turned and ran. They turned and ran because they thought my Jonathan was a giant. Well he was. Not outside of course. But inside he was big and strong – and warm and tender. Very tender."

Father fell silent for awhile. There was softness in his eyes. And a tear. His hand trembled as he fingered the hem of his blanket.

"If only Saul..." and his voice broke. "If only Saul hadn't been so jealous...so sick. He was jealous of Jonathan, his own son. He was jealous of me because he thought I wanted his throne. I didn't want his throne. God had anointed him to rule, and I would never, never try to take that from him. Never.

"He tried to kill us. That business of eating the honey I told you about? It was a setup. I think he was jealous of Jonathan even then because Jon was such a good fighter. He tried to kill me several times. If it hadn't been for Saul's jealousy, it might not all have ended quite so soon.

"I could have killed him easily. So easily. Hey Solomon...your mother doesn't like it when I tell this story, but once when I was on the run, I was hiding in a cave. Saul and his men were right outside the cave, and Saul came in to the cave take a leak. I was two feet from him and he didn't know. Did I ever tell you that story before, Solomon?"

"Yes, father."

"Hmmmmp. That's the trouble with being old, Solomon. I've told all my stories to everyone I know and nobody wants to listen to an old man's ramblings."

"That's not true, father. I like to hear you talk. Even if I've heard the story before, you sometimes add something new, a detail you hadn't mentioned before. There's something new each time. So please, keep telling me your stories."

Well, that wasn't all true, but I needed to keep on father's good side. He hadn't yet said officially who would succeed him as the king. My mother and I were determined to stay right there beside him till he made it official. I would be the king!

"Bathsheba? Do you know why I did that to you? Why I hauled you over to the palace here and raped you?"

"Don't keep punishing yourself, David," she said. "That is all in the past. You paid the price with grief and pain. Nathan saw to that."

"I almost forgot. Call Nathan," father said. "Send a message to Nathan to come here. Now." I left the room to send the message. When I came back, mother was crying and father was holding her hand.

"We both paid the price, Bathsheba, and it was all my fault. It started when Abner suggested I stay home from the war. I didn't like the smirk in his eyes when he said that. And so I raped your mother, Solomon, just to prove myself a man."

"You are very much a man, David," mother said in her most motherly tones. "You are the greatest king in all of Israel, the greatest king in all the world."

"Saul could have been a great king if he hadn't been so jealous. If he hadn't been so sick. Jonathan would have been a great king too. We could have ruled together, he and I. What a great team we could have been. We'd have done it too, if Saul had let us. We had a pact, Jonathan and I. A covenant. I took his hand and he took mine, and we promised to love and respect and care for each other, till death do us part."

Father's eyes took on that softness once again. "Does that shock you, Solomon. It shocked old Saul. He called Jonathan some awful things. Awful things. But our love was good and beautiful and whole, Solomon. A man is measured by the way he loves, Solomon, not by how he fights."

Father began to weep. I had never seen him weep before. I don't know what to do with weeping men and so I moved away toward the window. Mother took his hand and stroked his hair with tenderness that grew through years of pain. Then in a cracked and tiny voice, my father sang:

"The beauty of Israel is slain upon the hills:
How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!
O Jonathan, you were slain on that hill.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan:
very pleasant have you been to me:
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.
How are the mighty fallen,
and the weapons of war perished!"

I had heard the song before, of course. Many times. Father insisted that it be sung as a regular part of our Sabbath worship. And I knew father wrote the song when Jonathan and Saul were killed 40 years before. But I had never heard it sung with such intensity – such power. Even in his old and squeaky voice my father sang with power.

"Solomon." Father broke into my thoughts. "Solomon, you will be king when I die. I have sent for the prophet Nathan who can look after the formalities. You will be a good king, Solomon. You will be a good king if you find a way to rule without the sword. It is possible for kings to love you know, Jonathan and I discovered that. If you understand the wisdom of love, Solomon, you might find a better way to be a king."

Father took my hand and looked deep into my eyes. And then I knew my father loved me. He had never said it. I had never known it before. I didn't know that men could love each other – even fathers and their sons..

"Leave me now," he said. "I want to sleep." He looked so small and frail and weak. I knew his time was short.

My mother took my hand as we left the royal chambers. "Your father loves you, Solomon. I think he loves me too. At least a little.

" But he's never loved anyone the way he loved Jonathan. Anyone."
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