

(Re)telling the Fragmented Story of Michal*

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Abstract

Using ideas from the sociology of knowledge, this paper (re)examines the biblical texts in First and Second Samuel that refer to Michal, the first wife of King David. In addition to (re)examining the text, this paper raises questions about the socially constructed reality that shapes the reader of this text. Based on this (re)reading of the text, it raises additional questions about how modern western culture has shaped our way of understanding faith. It also suggests other possible ways of thinking about faith, ways that might reflect contemporary emergent and postmodern influences.

KEYWORDS: King David, Michal, postmodern, emergent, faith, sociological approach

In my first sociology course, the professor asked us to contemplate one of the most important questions in the discipline – how are we as humans shaped, influenced, and constrained by the culture in which we live? Along similar lines, a few years later for a graduate class we read Peter Berger’s text “The Sacred Canopy”, a text that starts by examining the social construction of reality and then challenges the reader to reflect on religion in that context. In both of these classes we were asked to engage in thinking about important questions related to the sociology of knowledge.

Many years after these classes, it is still fascinating to think about the social construction of reality. While it is fascinating, exploring this topic is also potentially unsettling for people of faith. If we take seriously that every aspect of who we are is shaped by our culture, we have to wonder how our culture has shaped our faith, shaped us to believe in culturally specific and socially constructed ways. Furthermore, in a world filled with diverse cultures and different faiths, we might naturally wonder if it is possible to be certain that our beliefs are correct and other beliefs are not.

One of the ways to reflect on these questions related to the sociology of knowledge, is to listen to others from outside of our own cultures, to let these cultural others raise questions about our taken for granted assumptions, to challenge us to rethink what we know, and to challenge us to reflect on faith. Our reflection on these questions also benefits if we take these questions from the theoretical and abstract level to focus on specific examples.

Perhaps many readers are familiar with the following story from the book that we love, found in chapter six of 2nd Samuel. Here we read about a sharp conflict between Michal and King David which occurred when David accompanied the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem.

2 Samuel 6: 16, 20-23 (NRSV)

As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!"

David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me in place of your father, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the LORD, that I have danced before the LORD.

I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor."

And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.

A common interpretation of this story would focus on David's willingness to humble, even humiliate himself in worship. Such interpretations also assert Michal was wrong to challenge David's enthusiastic worship, pointing to Michal's perpetual childlessness as the painful consequence for her despising David's worship. The consequence for Michal could be understood as a somber warning not to critique the humble or enthusiastic worship of others. Such interpretations also suggest that David is one of the heroes of the faith that we should emulate, noting that he was a person after God's own heart while at the same time ignoring or glossing over his many mistakes.

Perhaps such common interpretations of this passage have been affected by how scholars, predominately men in male dominated cultures, have viewed and interpreted this story (Matthew Henry provides an older but relevant example. In his commentaries he has particularly harsh things to say about Michal). Or perhaps such interpretations have not paid critical attention to the many modern assumptions which were made when the text was read, for example, reading the text as an uncomplicated literal historical account. Both of these issues are raised in the book *Fragmented Women: feminist (sub) versions of biblical narratives* by Cheryl Exum. In addition to issues related to gender bias, Exum believes we miss other ways of understanding this story because Michal's story is told in disconnected fragments in the books of First and Second Samuel. To get a different understanding of what is happening in 2 Samuel 6, it is critical to reconnect, reexamine, and retell the fragmented story of Michal.

The character of Michal is introduced into the biblical narrative in the middle of a power struggle, the conflict between Saul and David, which occurred as Saul was losing power and David was becoming more powerful. Thus we cannot understand Michal's story without situating it in this larger context, the narrative context which is structured in part to justify David's replacement of Saul as the king of Israel.

David and Saul first met because Saul had a huge problem with a man named Goliath. Most people likely know the story of how David delivered Israel by stoning and then beheading Goliath. Undoubtedly, from that moment on it was only a matter of time before things between David and Saul came to a head. However, just before David dealt with Goliath, there was something that happened that is often overlooked but quite relevant for Michal's story. When David first saw Goliath, he heard that Saul would "greatly enrich the man who kills [Goliath], and will give him his daughter, and make his family free in Israel." (1 Sam 17: 25, NRSV, underling added) Apparently this reward must have intrigued David, because he repeatedly asked others to verify if it was true.

After killing Goliath, David rose in popularity as he continued to win further battles against the Philistines. This worried Saul, and he began to see David as a real threat to his power. So Saul offered to make good on the promised reward and let David marry Merab, Saul's eldest daughter. The catch was David had to engage in additional battles with the Philistines. Saul apparently hoped that David would be enticed by the offer of marriage but would end up dying in battle. Unfortunately for Saul the Philistines did not cooperate by killing David. In spite of this, Saul reneged on the offer of marriage to Merab, instead giving Merab to another man to marry.

It is at this point that we are introduced to Michal for the first time.

1 Sam 18: 20-21 (NRSV)

Now Saul's daughter Michal loved David. Saul was told, and the thing pleased him. Saul thought, "Let me give her to him that she may be a snare for him and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him." Therefore Saul said to David a second time "You shall be my son-in-law." (underling added)

Saul offered a different daughter to David in hopes that this time the Philistines would get the job done. Unfortunately for Saul, David was once again successful in avoiding death at the hand of the Philistines. As the story continues:

1 Sam 18: 26-28 (NRSV)

...David was well pleased to be the King's son in law... ...Saul gave him his daughter Michal as a wife. But when Saul realized that the LORD was with David, and that Saul's daughter Michal loved him, Saul was still more afraid of David. (underlining added)

This passage again states that Michal loved David. Yet it is critical to note that there is no indication David entered this marriage because of any affection for Michal. Instead, David was motivated to marry Michal because he desired to become Saul's son-in-law. As the passage states, he was pleased to establish a kinship connection to Saul. What we have recorded here is a marriage alliance, a political arrangement.

Note also the underlined phrases in the above two passages. These are underlined to call attention to the fact that Michal did not act on her own. In every passage where Michal is mentioned, Michal is almost always referred to in terms of her relationship to Saul or David. Michal may have loved David, but the marriage took place because Saul wanted to use his daughter to ensnare David and because David wanted to be the king's son-in-law. In a very real sense Michal is treated as property and not as an independent person, not only by Saul and David, but also in the written text, as the reader is constantly reminded to whom Michal belongs.

After the marriage of Michal and David, the conflict between Saul and David escalated. Fearing David, Saul planned to take direct action against David and kill him. Michal learned of the threat and responded:

1 Sam: 19: 11-17 (NRSV)

...David's wife Michal told him, "If you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed." So Michal let David down through the window; he fled away and escaped. So 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. When Saul sent messengers to take David, she said "He is sick"... [Skipping ahead a bit to when Saul literally uncovers this deception] 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?'"

Michal, quite literally, idolized her husband and saved his life, for which we might assume he should have been at least somewhat grateful. But later, when David had a chance to secretly visit members of Saul's family, he only chose to visit with Jonathan, Saul's son. During this visit both David and Jonathan declared their love for each other and David pledged to protect and preserve the life of Jonathan's children. However, we do not read that David made any effort to try and visit Michal, nor that he even thought about the woman who loved him and saved his life.

Instead, while on the run from Saul, David began to collect additional wives. The first two are mentioned in this passage:

1 Sam 25:42-44 (NRSV)

Abigail got up hurriedly and rode away on a donkey ... She went after David and became his wife. David also married Ahinoam of Jezreel; both of them became his wives. Saul had given his daughter Michal, David's wife, to Palti son of Laish, who was from Gallim.

Michal does appear here, but more as a footnote to this part of the story. We find that Saul once again used Michal for his own purposes, specifically to establish a different marriage alliance while breaking the one with David. And David's response to this? Nothing. At least nothing is recorded in the text. Later in the narrative, it recounts how David's second two wives were taken captive and how David risked a serious battle to recover them. Yet David appeared to do nothing when Michal was given to another man. In fact, other than in this brief mention, Michal will remain absent from the biblical narrative for some time. Instead, the story continues to focus on the rise of David's power and the decline and end of the reign of Saul.

After Saul's death, David is anointed king over the tribe of Judah. The northern tribes, however, remain under the rule of Saul's son Ishbaal. With Saul's death, David and Ishbaal continue the conflict for leadership of all of Israel. For seven and a half years the conflict dragged on, with Ishbaal losing power and David gaining power. Then in a dramatic turn of events, Ishbaal's main general Abner, switched sides and promised David that he could help put the northern tribes under David's rule.

In the midst of this tribal intrigue and shifting military alliance, Michal once again appears in the biblical narrative.

2 Sam 3:12-16 (NRSV)

... "But one thing I require of you [Abner]; you shall never appear in my presence unless you bring Saul's daughter Michal when you come to see me." Then David sent messengers to Saul's son Ishbaal, saying, Give me my wife Michal,..."

Ishbaal sent and took her from her husband Paltiel the son of Laish. But her husband went with her, weeping as he walked behind her all the way to Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, "Go back home!" So he went back.

For at least seven and a half years, if not much longer, David had done nothing about his first wife. But when Abner provided a chance to overcome Ishbaal's power, David now sought to reclaim Michal. More importantly, by demanding Saul's daughter and his wife back, he was in essence claiming to be the legitimate heir to Saul's power.

When Michal returned to David, she found things very different than when she last saw David, the night she saved his life. By this time, David had at least six wives. Moreover, as David became king over all of Israel, he took even more wives and concubines, so many wives and concubines that the text no longer provides their individual names or even a precise number.

Thus, Michal returned to the man she once loved, man who gave no indication that he ever had any affection for her. A man who repeatedly acted in ways that demonstrated to her and others that she was wanted only for her political value. She was taken away from her second husband, a man who wept over her loss, to become just one wife among a whole harem of women. One wife among many married to a man whose apparent lust for women would lead him in the future to commit adultery with Bathsheba and have Bathsheba's husband murdered.

This is Michal's story, a story which begins to look very different when we piece together the scattered fragments. Once we put together those scattered fragments of her story, this significantly changes the context for the reading of the passage in 2nd Samuel 6: 16-23.

The events recorded in this passage occur at a high point for David. He is finally king over all of Israel. He has successfully captured the city of Jerusalem to make it the new capital of his kingdom. In bringing the Ark of the Covenant into his new capital he was in essence uniting both religious and political power as he began his reign over the entire nation. At his moment of triumph, Michal again appears in the narrative:

2 Samuel 6: 16, 20-23 (NRSV)

As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

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David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me in place of your father, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the LORD, that I have danced before the LORD.

I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor."

And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.

Does retelling Michal's fragmented story give us a different perspective on this part of the story? Is it possible that when Michal despised David it had nothing to do with his worship? Perhaps she now despised a man she once loved, her love turned to bitterness at the way she had been treated as an object. Maybe she despised David because now he has everything he has

dreamed of with his kingdom united, but she is now only one among many wives and concubines that serve the king. When she attacked David for uncovering himself in front of the maids of Israel, does this hint at her anger that David had been actively recruiting such maids to share the marriage bed that once belonged exclusively to Michal and David?

We read how David defends himself by attacking her father and asserting that he is rightfully the LORD's chosen king, a defense not about worship but about political legitimacy. We could consider if David's parting comment about the maids of Israel is his way of saying that he intends to marry even more women, as indeed he does. We could wonder if the final statement about Michal's childlessness is not about any sort of divine punishment for Michal. Rather, it could be the final commentary which indicates Michal and David remained estranged from each other, and their marriage remained a marriage in name only. This final statement could be a heartbreaking commentary, revealing how Michal's love ended in bitterness and futility.

This paper started by indicating how the social construction of reality and the sociology of knowledge challenge us to rethink issues of faith and belief. If we take seriously that every aspect of who we are is shaped by our culture, we have to wonder how our culture has shaped our faith, shaped us to believe in culturally specific and socially constructed ways. This challenge is illustrated by a feminist rereading of the story, a (re)reading which raises questions about how our culture shapes the way we have often interpreted Michal's story and the passage in 2nd Samuel. It raises questions not only about the text, but about those who read the text. It raises questions about the reading communities to which we belong and the ways in which these reading communities shape our understanding of the text (see Barton, 1995: 73).

Using the sociology of knowledge to think more critically about ourselves as part of reading communities will inherently raise even more difficult questions. As one writer suggests:

We have, in effect, admitted that knowledge, even religious knowledge, is situationally relative and can be interpreted in terms of its social location. This admission is so pricey because we cannot exempt ourselves from it. ... *we can also expect to become suspicious of ourselves and so to experience potentially painful self-doubt.* We will be led to suspect that if our own beliefs were subjected to a sociology of knowledge analysis, they might not test entirely free of ideological bias ... The benefits that accrue to us from the use of the sociology of knowledge come at the cost of having to admit that truth is, at least as far as we are concerned, situational and relative. [*emphasis added*] (Gay, 1996: 108-109)

Note that this writer is not saying that truth itself is necessarily relative, but rather any human understanding of truth is situational and relative. As this author so candidly notes, we will likely experience potentially painful self-doubt, because we cannot be free from our culture and the way

it shapes us and our ways of understanding. Indeed we cannot be completely certain of our beliefs, interpretations, and understandings.

Actually, a quest for certainty could well be a product of our modern, western culture. The quest for certainty and for the one correct interpretation of a biblical text, a text often read as literally as possible, seems to reflect a modern western worldview where logical positivism and rigorous scientific analysis have become dominant cultural ideals, ideals which permeate every aspect of western society, including religion.

It is in the context of considering these modern ideals that it is thought-provoking to consider the growing influence of postmodern, emergent church thinkers, and the challenges they raise to the quest for certainty and modern ways of doing faith. Without spending an inordinate amount of time exploring the various ways in which postmodern or emergent church thinkers are raising challenges for modern people of faith, we might wonder how those who are postmodern or emergent would approach interpreting this text. Rollins (2008) provided some insight into this question when he retold the following parable:

Is this not the wisdom that is contained in the Jewish parable that speaks of a heated debate taking place in a park between two old and learned rabbis? The conversation in question revolves around a particularly complex and obscure verse in the Torah. It is not the first time that these two intellectual giants have crossed swords over this verse; in fact they have debated it for years, sometimes changing their opinions but never finding a consensus. God is, of course, known to have the patience of a saint, but even God begins to tire of the endless discussion. So finally God decides to visit the two men and tell them once and for all what the parable means. God reaches down, pulls the clouds apart, and begins to speak: "You have been debating this verse endlessly for years; I will now tell you what it means. . . ." But before God can continue, the two rabbis look up and say, in a rare moment of unity, "Who are you to tell us what the verse means? You have given us the words, now leave us in peace to wrestle with it. (p. 155)

Commenting on this provocative parable Rollins suggests:

"In this parable we are reminded that a religious approach to the text is not one in which we attempt to find out its definitive meaning, but rather where we wrestle with it and are transformed by it... For the problem resides not in having an interpretation but rather in the place that we give to our interpretation. No matter how wonderful our interpretation is, if it occupies an authoritative place then it undermines its own status. For the rabbis in this story the truth of the verses is not discovered after some long, drawn-out process of debate and discussion, but rather is evidenced within the process of debate and discussion itself." (p. 156)

Here, Rollins is making a case that a postmodern or emergent approach to the text could reject the quest for certainty in any one interpretation of a text. Rather a postmodern or emergent approach opens up and invites people to engage in a sustained dialog and debate on the text. Consequently, a feminist reading of the story of Michal would not become a definitive reading of Michal's story, nor would a modern reading. Rather a postmodern approach would invite these two perspectives, along with many others, into an ongoing conversation about the text.

In fact, a postmodern or emergent approach to the text seems to have a certain elective affinity with the sociology of knowledge. This is because it is not only the text which is open for examination, but as people engage in debate and discussion with diverse others, it is likely that they will be confronted with how their own social location and socially constructed reality shapes their interpretation.

As indicated at the start of this paper, it is fascinating to contemplate the social construction of reality. (Re)telling the story of Michal in order to offer an alternative interpretation provides one specific illustration of how both the reading of a text and the reader of the text are intrinsically shaped and constrained by culture. (Re)telling the story also raises questions about the modern quest for certainty and a definitive interpretation of the text. It also raises questions about the postmodern or emergent response to modern ways of thinking about faith. Finally, framing the larger discussion within the sociology of knowledge suggests that this can be a valuable, albeit challenging, way to think about the issues of reading and being transformed by the book that we love.

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*This paper is based on a revision of a 2010 Northwestern College (Iowa) chapel talk, a talk that did not focus in particular on connecting the (re)telling of the story of Michal to the sociology of knowledge or emergent church thinkers. However, in the context of that chapel presentation, after (re)telling the story of Michal and raising questions about the certainty of belief, this personal note was added: "I think if I only want to be certain about what I believe, I really don't need faith – I only need conviction. Instead, I believe that faith might be a willingness to trust in God in spite of our culturally limited understanding. A willingness to trust in God and his work in our lives in spite of the doubts, questions, and uncertainty we will wrestle with."

Certainly this personal note indicates a shift towards a more postmodern way of thinking about of faith. Moreover, it reflects how being a sociologist enamored with thinking about the social construction of reality, and also reading thinkers like Peter Rollins, has influenced this shift in thinking. Thus, an attempt to maintain some intellectual integrity would require acknowledging how this paper and a shifting perspective on faith are shaped and constrained by the culture in which we are immersed.

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