

Restraining Rage: A Comparison of David and Achilles in 1 Samuel 25 and *Iliad* 24

This paper argues that, although acting in contrasting ethical systems, the characters of David in 1 Samuel and Achilles in the *Iliad* share similar stories of rage, especially as seen in the supplication scenes of 1 Samuel 25 and *Iliad* 24. While uncommon in contemporary scholarship, the comparison of the Hebrew Scriptures with the Homeric epic elucidates the fundamental features shared by both literary traditions (Gordon, 1955).

Initially, the parallels between Saul and Agamemnon, who function as contrasting characters to the heroes in both narratives, suggest similarities between David and Achilles. In particular, Saul and Agamemnon undergo humiliation before their troops for disregarding a prophet, exhibit incompetency in military command, and contend with younger, better subordinates for the greatest reputation. From these connections between Saul and Agamemnon, it is logical to conclude that David and Achilles, who juxtapose the king of Israel and the commander of the Achaeans, similarly resemble each other.

Nevertheless, comparing David and Achilles is challenging. Although both heroes register as superlatively bellicose (Nagy, 1979) leading bands of extraordinary warriors, the ethical systems in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Homeric epic clash. On the one hand, Achilles participates in a shame-culture, where the *time* earned by the *arete* of the *agathos* determines the standing of the *agathos* in society (Adkins, 1960, 1997; Dodds 1951). On the other hand, David operates within a guilt-culture, where intention supersedes action (Borgman, 2008). Therefore, since the characters exist in divergent value systems, the comparison between David and Achilles must occur at the point at which they function outside their normal ethical boundaries. For Achilles, this moment occurs in *Iliad* 24 during the famous supplication of Priam. Although scholars have traditionally identified pity as the principal emotion motivating Achilles (Kim,

2000), both Graham Zanker and James Arieti argue that guilt over Peleus and Patroclus influences Achilles as well, thereby revealing his withdrawal from the ethical system of *time* and *arete* (Arieti, 1985; Zanker, 1996). For David, this moment occurs in 1 Samuel 25 during his wrathful response to Nabal. With unprecedented fury, David marshals his troops, swearing to kill all of the males in the household of Nabal as retribution for the insult against his honor. Hereby, although neither character switches ethical systems altogether, David and Achilles appear closest to the value system of the other in 1 Samuel 25 and *Iliad* 24 respectively.

Intriguingly, both scenes primarily display the dissolution of anger as the result of supplication: Priam ends the rage of Achilles and Abigail quells the vengeance of David. Moreover, these instances of supplication share many similarities: both contain especially vulnerable suppliants—an old man and a woman—bringing an underwhelming amount of gifts for someone either dead or about to die. In both 1 Samuel 25 and *Iliad* 24, the hero relinquishes his wrath for reasons beyond the presentation of ransom.

Therefore, in 1 Samuel and the *Iliad*, David and Achilles experience similar episodes of anger-abating supplication. While unexpected, the shared feature reveals the fundamental connection between both literary narratives, despite their difference in genre.

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