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Author: M. P. Anstey

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1 Sam 16:1-13 – Cultural Treason

Matthew Anstey, Charles Sturt University, School of Theology

This seems like a simple story with a simple moral: *God looks at the heart*. Let's 'see' if we are right...

Saul had been king of Israel for many years and had been, to put it mildly, a disaster. He failed to listen, failed to lead, failed to follow God. Though Samuel is upset that Saul has turned out so inept at leadership, Yahweh comes to him and tells him to stop sulking, and to go and anoint one of Jesse's sons as king.

Samuel realises that this is treason: "Yahweh, I'll be murdered if King Saul hears of this!"

"Well then, Samuel, why not take a young cow and tell everyone you've come to worship?"

Samuel grabs the cow, heads off to Bethlehem and invites everyone to the sacrificial feast. Jesse arrives with seven sons and Samuel spots them. He sees Jesse's oldest son, Eliab, and thinks to himself, "This has to be the one. I'll anoint him".

Yahweh disagrees: "No Samuel. You've got it wrong. You're looking at his credentials, but I'm looking at something else. I'm looking *at the heart*. Try again."

Jesse is not deterred. He brings out son number two, Abinadab. Samuel rejects Abinadab as well, and then all the other sons. Samuel is not satisfied though. After all, he has brought his cow and anointing oil all this way. So he asks Jesse the obvious question, "Jesse, any more sons hidden away? Now don't be shy!"

"Well, Samuel, if you insist, there's the baby of the family, just a kid. He's out with the sheep."

Samuel jumps at the suggestion. "Bring him immediately. No one is even to sit down until he comes." David, looking rather sheepish (!) I imagine, arrives. The young lad is good-looking, strong and healthy. Yahweh presses Samuel: "This is the one. Rise and anoint him."

David is anointed before (and in place of) all his brothers and the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him. Samuel's job is done. He grabs his crafty cow and sets off to Ramah.

So far, so good, but perhaps we need to follow Yahweh's advice and discern the *heart* of this seemingly quaint moral story, the inner forces that make it tick. For a careful reading uncovers a radical, countercultural story about how human identity is defined.

The heart of the matter is this: in ancient Israel, the dumping of the seven older brothers in favour of the youngest is *inconceivable*. The entire well-being of the clan was dependent on the absolute rights of the older sons over the younger, the pecking order from first to last. Birth order was not just a biological fact, it was a cultural fact, determining one's social identity. It simply didn't matter if the first-born was a *blockhead*, in all things he had priority over his brothers.

So when Yahweh rejects the older brothers it is *not* a statement about their suitability for kingship, but that *God does not evaluate people according to dominant cultural values*. Samuel is worried about political treason, in toppling King Saul. The astonishing thing is that Yahweh is instigating *cultural treason*, by rejecting the prevailing culture's categorisation of people.

And with what, pray tell, does Yahweh want to replace might and status? What is Yahweh's alternative criterion for defining identity? *The human heart!*

Are you kidding, Yahweh? Let me remind you of what you have said about the heart:

“The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth”¹

“The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it?”²

The heart can be stubborn, hardened, agitated!³

Wouldn't it make more sense to value people by moral rules – have you heard of the Ten Commandments? – or noble virtues, like charity and honesty and kindness? At least look at David's CV or a few character references.

No, Yahweh, you're happy to ditch the whole system of social status in favour of the human heart.

Well, before we judge Yahweh a complete fool, let's reflect further on this heart-thing that seems to matter so much. We've heard the case against, let's hear the case for.

The heart can *also* be made soft and gentle, it can be calmed; the heart can make judgements and discern wisdom. The heart can be made pure. The heart reveals our inner motivations, feelings, and desires.⁴

So *this* seems to be what Yahweh is interested in, and now it starts to make sense. Yahweh is *redefining* humanity not by status but by our deepest commitments, our beliefs and passions and loyalties.

And this sharpens another detail in this story. *David and his brothers are young people*, and it is precisely during our younger years that identity is most significantly shaped. Yahweh steps in at this crucial moment in their emerging self-identity and says “No! Don't fall for appearances and cultural norms. It is the heart that matters, look to the heart!”

This was radical in David's time and it is radical today, because our culture also has powerful shapers of children's identity: *advertisers*.

The US advertising industry spends over \$15 billion a year on direct advertising to children. Media exposure averages now at 8.5 hours per day for 8 to 18 year olds. Sociologist Juliet Schor, author of *Born to Buy: The Commercialised Child and the New Consumer Culture*, explains that advertisers are seeking to create “powerful systems of symbolic meaning that are at the root of how humans understand the world and act in it.”⁵

These symbolic systems aim to define children (and adults) by *what they wear, what they eat, and what they buy*, and the embodiment of this cultural system is the *celebrity*. Celebrities

¹ Gen 8:21.

² Jer 17:9.

³ E.g. Jer 3:17, Exod 7:14, Deut 28:65, Ezek 36:26.

⁴ E.g. 1 Kgs 8:61; Psa 24:4, 51:12; Prov 10:8, 20:5; Joel 2:13

⁵ Schor, Juliet and Ford, Margaret 2007, “From tastes great to cool: Children's food marketing and the rise of the symbolic”, *The Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics*, 35(1), 10-21, p. 15.

have made it to the promised land of endless consumption, and yet miraculously remain perfectly shaped, immaculately dressed, and ceaselessly happy.⁶

Schor explains how children, in their search for self-identity, are taught to differentiate themselves from adults by *desiring* what adults *reject*.

When we condemn junk food, children desire junk food.

When we condemn overly sexualised images, as seen in too many girl's clothes and toys,⁷ children desire to be mini-adults with adult bodies and behaviours.

When we condemn celebrities who have it all, children want to be celebrities who have it all.

The more we condemn these things, *the more we reinforce their ability to shape identity*, pushing them further into the domain of "coolness" which children crave in their journey to selfhood. The "coolness" provides both differentiation from parents and solidarity with peers, a powerful (and toxic) combination that advertisers foster.

What does our text say to this? Yahweh offers Samuel both a No and a Yes. The No is God's critique of dehumanising cultural criteria and the Yes is God's alternative vision, *Look to the heart!*

We too need God's No and Yes. Rather than simplistic condemnation of or fear-filled retreat from popular culture, God's No is in our teaching children and youth *cultural literacy*, so they can interpret and critique the seductive but nihilistic narratives of advertising.

God's No is in our courage to instigate cultural treason to topple dis-figuring hegemonies and God's Yes is in our imagining and living out an alternative vision of what it means to be authentically human, a vision centred on the heart: *that vital God-shaped centre that discerns the wise way forward, that feels with compassion, that commits to friendship through thick and thin.*

God's Yes is in choosing David, an ordinary human being, who reached great heights and floundered in the darkest depths. God saw David's heart and not his status or successes or failures. David was called, "A man after God's own heart".⁸

The Good News is that God's desire to renew humanity has been realised in Jesus of Nazareth, who shapes our hearts to desire what matters most: friendship with God and love for God's world and God's people.

Who do you want to be? Who do you want your children to be? A superficial person, measuring others and being measured by wallet and waistline and wardrobe? Or a discerning, passionate, faithful person, a person after God's own heart?

May God grant us wisdom to see through the superficial and see into the substantial. Amen.

⁶ Grant McCracken, "Who is the celebrity? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process", *Journal of Consumer Research* 1989, 16(3), pp. 310-321, p. 317, writes "Celebrities are proof that the process works. Celebrities have been where the consumer is going. They have done... what the consumer is now labouring to do."

⁷ The Australia Institute has documented this in their discussion paper, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia* (<http://www.tai.org.au/documents/downloads/DP90.pdf>).

⁸ 1 Sam 13:14; cf. Acts 13:22.