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Israel's
Scriptures



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*1–2 Samuel and 1 Kings*THE UNITED MONARCHY: THE HOPE THAT (MOSTLY) FAILED—*PREFACE*

WITH THE ACCOUNTS in the books of Samuel and the early chapters of Kings, we move into another kind of narrative world, one that might resemble Shakespeare's histories and tragedies—such as *Macbeth* or *King Lear*—more than the biblical narratives treated thus far. Like Shakespeare's plays, these royal accounts of the Bible are set in the distant past, from the perspective of the writer. Based on traditional sources, they are semihistorical dramas, both national and familial, styled to speak to the concerns of the writer's contemporary audience. Like Shakespeare's dramas, they are perennially relevant studies of vivid characters, strong yet flawed, who struggle with their own shortcomings and with human relations that are both profound and vexed. But the biblical accounts, in addition, probe the difficulty of discerning and following the divine will and of reconciling oneself to sometimes inscrutable divine decrees.

The conventional divisions among 1 and 2 Samuel and the first part of Kings are somewhat artificial; the accounts of Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon overlap as a single multidimensional narrative that tells the story of the so-called united monarchy. This composite account was doubtless assembled from multiple streams of tradition and represents competing political stances. We hear the voices of those who admired the new institution of kingship, which succeeded the older mode of decentralized political organization—the period of judges, of whom Samuel was the last. We hear as well the voices of those who were opposed to that far-reaching cultural shift, which gradually transformed a kinship- and village-based society of farmers, with local and regional leadership, into a nation with a central government and a rudimentary system of social class. The book of Samuel also includes another set of competing voices: the supporters of Saul, from the northern tribe of Benjamin, in contrast to the supporters of his brilliant protégé—and eventual rival and supplanter—David, from the southern tribe of Judah. The book as a whole is a literary tapestry in which competing and complementary perspectives are woven together into a large, textured statement about social change and political division. It is also a theological commentary, which raises—and to some extent leaves open—the question of what role God might be playing in those social processes. After the death of Solomon and the dissolution of his kingdom, the history of the kings in both north and south is largely a history of the prophets who chasten and sometimes openly oppose them, starting with the nameless man of God who confronts Jeroboam at Bethel. The remainder of 1 Kings belongs chiefly to the prophet Elijah, who offers allegiance to no human king but to YHWH alone.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE CHOSEN: SAUL'S KINGSHIP—1 SAMUEL

THE STORY OF Samuel, the last and possibly the best of the judges (1 Sam 7:15), provides the framework through which we view the rise and fall of Israel's first king. The opening section of the book focuses on Samuel's birth, childhood, and lifelong work as a circuit-riding judge (7:16–17), and then in his old age, his reluctant anointing of a monarch so Israel can fulfill its ambition to be "like all the nations" (8:20). Saul's last important exchange before his own death is with the disgruntled ghost of Samuel, summoned back from Sheol by a medium, through whom Samuel delivers, not the guidance for which Saul longs, but rather a last rehearsal of Saul's royal failures (28:16–19); hence, Samuel renders the final judgment on Saul's kingship. But the book's first and most comprehensive statement about how God characteristically disturbs human power arrangements comes many years before that, in an exultant song (2:1–10) uttered by Samuel's mother, the once-barren Hannah. After bearing and weaning her son, Hannah pronounces that he will be *sha'ul*, "lent" to YHWH, for his whole lifetime (1:28). Curiously, the Hebrew pun is an anticipatory echo of the name of Saul—likewise pronounced *sha'ul*. Thus, Samuel's long, dedicated life forms the context and contrasting frame within which we view Saul's shorter and ultimately disappointing one. A further contrast can be drawn between Hannah's song of triumph and the silence of the victimized women with which the book of Judges ends. In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Samuel directly follows Judges; just one chapter separates Hannah's spiritual victory cry from Judges' extended account of the kidnap, rape, and even dismemberment of voiceless and nameless women, providing narrative perspective on the deteriorated moral and political condition of Israel.

Hannah's sung prayer is the first of a number of lengthy songs embedded within the book of Samuel. They look like psalms, and that is probably exactly what they are: liturgical songs, hymns, which likely developed separately from the main narrative strands. It seems they were inserted into the story because they were an approximate fit with the narrative and thus could serve to highlight key theological points and make them memorable. (Who remembers anything that Tony and Maria ever *said* in *West Side Story*? Yet Sondheim's lyrics set to Bernstein's music render their story unforgettable.) Hannah's song appears to be a psalm of thanksgiving for childbirth (cf. Ps 113). Even though the song does not exactly match the details of her story—the barren Hannah did not "give birth to seven" (1 Sam 2:5), as far as we know—it gives theological definition to a story that, as it advances, will raise unresolved questions about the providence of God.

While Hannah's story is all about barrenness and its dramatic reversal in response to prayer, this song touches on that only incidentally. Its central theme is the total sovereignty of God, which expresses itself as the freedom to intervene radically in our world:

*YHWH kills and brings to life, brings down to Sheol and brings up;
YHWH impoverishes and enriches, casts down and, yes, exalts;
He makes the poor stand erect from the dust; from the ash-heap he lifts the vulnerable,
to make them sit-in-dignity with nobles; he bestows on them a seat of honor. (1 Sam 2:6–8a)*

The book of Samuel will show the house of Saul cataclysmically brought down, and David's house raised up and sustained to future generations. This song anticipates those changes of fortune in the starkest terms, but the subsequent narrative does not bear out the impression that YHWH is the director of a black-hat–white-hat drama. Rather, the narrative portrayal of Samuel, Saul, and David is the most complex exploration of moral character in the Bible, in a presentation that should give readers pause in rendering final moral judgments, positive or negative, about even those easy targets, religious and political leaders.

Hannah sings as a victorious prayer warrior, a barren woman vindicated by the birth of a son. Like the nameless mother of Samson (Judg 13), Hannah dedicates her son to YHWH before birth—although, in this case, the son will actually follow through and offer selfless leadership (1 Sam 7:15). This opening picture of a mother and her devoted son affords a point of contrast with one of the recurring themes of this book, that of fathers and their no-good sons. The first instance of the theme is Eli, the priest at Shiloh. Hearing that his sons

have abused their priestly privileges at the sacrificial offerings, he issues a stern warning, framed as a memorable dictum that anticipates much of the plot line of the book:

Don't, my sons. For it is no good report that I hear the people of YHWH spreading. If someone sins against another person, then God may mediate it, but if someone sins against YHWH, who will intercede for him? (1 Sam 2:24–25a)

At this point, the narrator adds a rare notice about the divine mind, enigmatic though it is:

But they did not listen to the voice of their father, for YHWH desired to kill them. (2:25b)

Eli is the first of several fathers in this book whose lives take a tragic turn in relation to their sons, resulting in lines of succession that are mostly crooked. The fact that Samuel's own sons are extortionists contributes to the Israelites' demand for a king "like all the nations" (8:5). Saul's son Jonathan is good, but Jonathan's heart is with David, his father's rival (in Saul's eyes) and successor. The heinous behavior of David's sons is the subject of much of 2 Samuel. In the case of Eli, the narrator's bald statement about YHWH's desire to kill gives substance to Hannah's words, "YHWH kills and brings to life." This is the first hint in Samuel of the theme of divine dangerousness.¹ In Exodus, readers may have been disturbed by the report of YHWH hardening Pharaoh's heart, but now such divine hardening is aimed at Israelites. In both books, the central concern is whether or not those in power acknowledge YHWH's absolute sovereignty—and the higher the station of those who fail to do so, the harder the fall. "You honored your sons more than me," YHWH tells Eli the high priest, withdrawing the favor that had been promised to this house "forever" (2:29–30). The sovereign God can make a commitment and subsequently break it; in this, the experience of Eli's rejected house foreshadows what will happen to Saul.

The Choice and Rejection of Saul

The only major story of Samuel in his prime is the battle against the Philistines, when he performs the classic role of the judges, starting with Deborah, in leading Israel to military victory. The story implies a contrast between Samuel and the several failed judges who have preceded him, while it also shows the difference between Samuel and Saul. Notably, the account begins with a call to repentance, the very thing that was almost entirely missing in the book of Judges. The Israelites are under acute pressure from their aggressive neighbors in the coastal plain, masters of iron technology for the production of both agricultural implements and weaponry (1 Sam 13:19–22). When the people of Israel en masse "lament" after YHWH (7:2), Samuel tells them that nothing will change externally until something changes internally:

"If with your whole heart you would turn back to YHWH, then put away the foreign gods that are among you, including the Astarte-images [*asherot*], and direct your heart firmly toward YHWH and serve him alone, so he may deliver you from the hand of the Philistines." The Israelites removed the Baal-images and the Astarte-images and served YHWH alone. (1 Sam 7:3–4)

Samuel then gathers the people for fasting and sacrifice at Mizpah, a traditional site of solemn assembly "before YHWH" (Judg 11:11; cf. 20:1), and the Philistines seize the opportunity to launch an attack. Although the Israelites are gripped by fear, Samuel calmly proceeds with the sacrifice and the prayers. Only then does he lead the people into war, where they win a tremendous battle, giving Israel the upper hand against the Philistines for the rest of his life (1 Sam 7:13–14). The battle ends with a second public act of piety: Samuel erects a stone dubbed *even ha-ezer*, "the stone of help" (7:12).

It is instructive to compare Samuel's exemplary battle with Saul's own first battle against the Philistines. That is the occasion when Saul learns (along with the reader) that his dynasty will not endure, yet for reasons that are far from clear. Some (unspecified) time into his reign,² Saul picks a fight with the Philistines. When his son Jonathan strikes down an important Philistine regional prefect,³ they muster in full force: 30,000 Philistine troops to Saul's 3,000. The Israelites panic and begin to desert, yet Saul is under orders to wait seven days for Samuel to come and offer the requisite sacrifices and then give Saul further orders (10:8). Saul waits out those days, and still Samuel does not come. He is now down to 600 fighting men and feels that he

can wait no longer and so takes matters into his own hands:

Saul said, "Bring me the burnt offering and the shalom offerings," and he offered up the burnt offering—and just as he finished offering up the burnt offering, here comes Samuel! Saul went toward him to offer him a blessing, but Samuel said, "What have you done?!" Saul said, "When I saw that the people had scattered away from me, and yet you had not come at the appointed time, and the Philistines were gathered at Michmash—then I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down upon me at Gilgal, and I have not entreated the presence of YHWH!' So I pulled myself together and offered up the burnt offering." Samuel said, "You have acted foolishly! You did not keep the commandment of YHWH your God that he commanded you. Indeed, now YHWH would have confirmed your reign over Israel for all time, but now your reign will not endure! YHWH seeks for himself a man after his own heart, and YHWH will command him to be ruler over his people, for you have not kept to what YHWH commanded you!" (1 Sam 13:9–14)

Countless commentators, preachers, and even historians of ancient Israel have struggled to identify what might have been the nature of Saul's failing great enough to cause him to lose all hope of a dynasty. "I pulled myself together"—he seems to have done what an ambiguous and dangerous situation would require. When Samuel does at last appear, Saul is relieved; he shows no awareness of having done anything wrong. Even if he has made a mistaken judgment, Samuel's explosive anger and the harsh divine punishment seem wildly disproportionate to that offense. No one explanation for Saul's downfall suffices. The question should be approached from multiple angles, and here I suggest three. These several modes of interpretation are complementary, and the insufficiencies of any one of them points toward the need for another mode of explication.

What Went Wrong?

A Political Approach

Attempting to reconstruct the ancient political situation in light of the texts,⁴ one might conclude that Saul was a successful military leader from the northern tribe of Benjamin who became king with the support of a northern coalition. (Samuel himself was from the city of Ramah in the heart of Benjaminites territory in the northern hill country of Ephraim; see 1 Sam 1:19; 7:17; etc.) Both accounts of his anointing as king represent Saul as an unlikely candidate for national leadership. He first enters the story as a young man, not much more than a boy, who is out looking for his father's stray donkeys and suddenly finds himself and his ancestral house identified as the focus of desire for all Israel (1 Sam 9:20). According to another version of the story, he is a reluctant candidate, hiding in the baggage area while Samuel is casting lots to name a king (10:22). Such stories may suggest that Saul's supporters initially thought he could be easily controlled. However, as time passed, he started acting like the kings of all the other nations, raising a standing army and instituting the draft:

There was intense war against the Philistines all the days of Saul, and whenever Saul would see any warrior or man of strength, he would conscript him. (1 Sam 14:52)

Probably Saul assumed priestly prerogatives, as represented in the story of his fateful offering of sacrifices in Samuel's stead. Moreover, he planned for his own son to succeed him, contrary to the Israelite ideal of charismatic leadership chosen by God.

Through these several actions, Saul gradually lost support; meanwhile, David was on the rise. His own tribe, Judah, first anointed him king in Hebron (2 Sam 2:4). Seven years later, after the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, the northern tribes cast in their lot with him (5:1–3). The prominent role of Jonathan makes sense in light of this reconstruction, and especially the remembrance that he made a covenant with David (1 Sam 18:3). When public favor shifted, Jonathan endorsed the change:

May YHWH be with you, as he was with my father. . . . You are the one who will reign over Israel, and as for me, I will be second-in-command to you! (1 Sam 20:13; 23:17)

Although this political reconstruction fits well with the biblical data, these are not the terms that the biblical narrator uses to explain Saul's failure. The narrative elsewhere acknowledges the significance of political

forces in David's own loss of public favor, when his son Absalom steals the hearts of the disaffected (2 Sam 15:1–6). However, in the case of Saul, it is YHWH who rejects him. Therefore, some theological explanation is necessary—or more than one. The early church theologians rightly recognized that many or most biblical passages have multiple layers of meaning, both literal and symbolic; both are useful here.

A Literal Theological Approach

The focus here is on attending to the details of the story at hand, while reading that complex story within the wider literary context of which the writers and editors might expect their hearers to be aware. A starting point for a focused and, at the same time, large-scale analysis is Samuel's call to the people to repent, to turn back to YHWH before he leads them into battle against the Philistines (1 Sam 7:3).⁵ Later, the elderly Samuel issues a second call to repentance—notably, just before Saul's mistaken sacrifice (1 Sam 13). In his lengthiest speech, Samuel offers his own credentials as a trustworthy, non-extortionist leader, qualified to represent the people in prayer before YHWH (12:3–7). He then rehearses Israel's disobedience and forgetfulness from Egypt, through the generations of the judges to the present, culminating in their demand for a king (12:8–17). Samuel's message is that YHWH will tolerate their desire for a king as long as they and the human ruler remain wholly devoted to their real king, YHWH (12:12).

Samuel's concluding words about himself and Israel are revealing:

As for me, it would be profanation for me to sin against YHWH, by ceasing to intercede for you. I will instruct you in the way that is good and straightforward: Just fear YHWH and serve him faithfully with your whole heart; yes, see what great things he has done for you! But if you do evil, then both you and your king will be swept away. (1 Sam 12:23–25)

Those who have read Judges know that Samuel is calling the people to reverse the fatal pattern of behavior—namely, *not* seeing YHWH's great deeds for Israel—that has afflicted them ever since the death of Joshua (Judg 2:10; cf. 2:7).

Samuel's sense of his own role, as revealed in this speech, stands in contrast to what Saul says in defense of his ill-fated action: “the people had scattered away from *me*” (1 Sam 13:11). Samuel understands that his charge is to pray for the people and teach them to orient their hearts wholly to YHWH. In short, it is not about him. That understanding distinguishes Samuel not only from several of the judges who preceded him but also from Saul, who “acted foolishly” because he feared for himself. It is instructive to recall that at an earlier time, when the people desired to replace Samuel and his worthless sons with a king, YHWH challenged the great leader to get past his own self-concern: “It is not you they are rejecting but *me!*” (8:7). Samuel did so, as his later prophetic address to the people shows: “You this day have rejected your God” (10:19). Thus, he demonstrates what from a biblical perspective is the one thing most crucial for leadership; in the book of Samuel, and especially in Kings, the ability to repent and refocus on God is *the* differential that distinguishes the many bad monarchs from the few good ones.

To the very end of his life, Saul remained absorbed in himself, as is evident from his words to the shade of the dead Samuel, almost the last words Saul speaks:

I am in terrible trouble! The Philistines are making war against me, and God has turned away from me, and I called on you to let me know what I should do! (1 Sam 28:15)

Saul is to the end deeply flawed, yet the story of his downfall is not simply moralistic; it is a full-blown tragedy. The other bad kings of the Bible are cartoon characters, and most are completely forgettable, but Saul's portrayal is profoundly sympathetic. At his very first appearance, the narrator describes him as “choice [*baḥur*] and good [*tov*]—and no one among the Israelites was better than he” (9:2). Saul is a man touched by the spirit of God (10:10), who shows generosity of spirit toward his early doubters (11:12–13). Therefore, it is painful to see God turn from him, and Samuel's own grief over this (15:35) is a clue to the point of view that readers might be expected and encouraged to take. We might also take a clue from the tender attitude of the medium of Ein Dor, who provides the last deeply human interaction the doomed king has. She fusses over

him like a mother, insisting that he eat a good meal “so there will be some strength in you when you set out on the road” (28:22)—before he goes off to die on the battlefield.⁶ The final view of Saul evokes compassion rather than judgment; thus, the narrative pushes toward a third way of understanding his rejection: at the symbolic, or figurative, level of interpretation.

A Symbolic Theological Approach

This kind of approach recognizes that a story may have an enlarged significance that causes readers to move beyond the immediate context and particulars of the narrative; Saul may stand for something more than himself. The seminal twentieth-century biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad observes that there is

something supra-personal in the way in which [Saul] became guilty. . . . He was called to be a special tool of the will of [YHWH] in history, for it was through him that [YHWH] wanted to give effect to his plan to save Israel (1 Sam. ix. 16). On this task he came to disaster. This picture of Saul certainly makes it clear that the life of the anointed was still subject to other laws than was the life of ordinary human beings, and that it was threatened by the possibility of much more dreadful disaster.⁷

The very first word that the narrator uses to describe Saul is *baḥur* (1 Sam 9:2). Elsewhere, that word—formally, a past participle from the root meaning “choose”—may simply denote a young man in his prime (“choice”), but in this story the stronger sense, “chosen,” is implied. Immediately, YHWH’s will for him is declared to Samuel: “This one will keep my people in check” (9:17). Yet beyond that, Saul, like any king, stands for his people, whom the Bible identifies dozens of times as the chosen of God (Deut 7:6; Isa 44:1; Ezek 20:5; etc.); therefore, Saul’s rejection may stand also for the rejection of Israel. This is a shocking line of interpretation, one that makes sense only if Saul’s story is recognized as a carefully crafted response to a profound experience of shock. The narrator(s) who crafted the **Deuteronomistic History** as we read it now may well have lived through the first great disaster in the nation’s history: the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel and its capital of Samaria, destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 bce. It is likely that a version of the Deuteronomistic History, including the book of Samuel, was written down in the wake of that disaster, when many northerners migrated south to Judah and Jerusalem. Saul, from the northern tribe of Benjamin, instantiates the northern kingdom. He stood “head and shoulders above everyone else” (1 Sam 9:2), and likewise, the northern kingdom was much larger and had more natural sources of wealth than Judah. The story of Saul might be seen as a kind of allegory, a story behind which stands another story. The tragedy of the king chosen and dismissed by God is a way of reckoning with the theological dimensions of the disaster of 722. It reckons indirectly with the same “riddle from ancient times” (cf. Ps 78:2) that the psalmist tells in plain language:

*[God] rejected the tent of Joseph, and the tribe of Ephraim he did not choose;
but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loved. . . .
He made the choice of David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds. (Ps 78:67–68, 70)*

Saul stands for the northern kingdom of Israel, in both its choice and its rejection. However, a rich symbol often has more than one application. A century and a half after the fall of Samaria, Jerusalem—“Mount Zion”—fell to the Babylonian army (587 bce), and the Davidic kingdom collapsed. It appears that the Deuteronomistic History, initially composed (from earlier sources) after the fall of the northern kingdom, received further editing following that second collapse and exile. This “second edition” is the one that now appears in the Bible.⁸ In that editing process, the symbol of rejected Saul acquired more scope. If at first he represented the northern kingdom in its destruction, then after 587, Saul came to represent the totality of Israel and Judah in exile. By contrast, David represents in various biblical traditions the possibility or prophetic certainty of restoration (e.g., Amos 7:11–15; Mic 5:1 Heb., 5:2 Eng.; Isa 7:13–15; Ps 78:65–72). Subsequently, both Jews and Christians have anchored in David hope for the future; from his house comes the forever-anointed one, the Messiah. Thus, together, the two kings anointed by Samuel represent God’s judgment of Israel and God’s enduring faithfulness to Israel.

Notes

1. The theme of divine dangerousness recurs in two stories connected with the ark of God; see the stories of death at Bet Shemesh (1 Sam 6:19–20) and the threshing floor of Nakhon (2 Sam 6:6).
2. The Masoretic Text leaves uncertain the chronology of Saul's reign (1 Sam 13:1).
3. For the view that the object of the attack is an important individual, a prefect or governor, rather than (as commonly construed) a garrison, see David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 336.
4. For the perspective represented here, I am indebted to my teacher Robert R. Wilson of Yale University.
5. On Samuel's call to repentance as the key to understanding the rejection of Saul, see Bryna Jocheved Levy, *Waiting for Rain: Reflections at the Turning of the Year* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 186–90.
6. On the compassionate treatment of Saul by the medium of Ein Dor, see Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 73–92.
7. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:325.
8. For a brief, highly readable, and plausible reconstruction of the composition of the Deuteronomistic History, see Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 136–49.