

PARALLEL GUIDE 21

Samuel and Saul

Summary: Before turning back to the biblical account, this chapter discusses two pressing theological issues raised with the ascendancy of Saul. Then follows a summary of the story of Samuel and Saul. Finally the chapter turns to a detailed study of I Samuel 8-15, ending with David's arrival on the scene.

Learning Objectives

- State the objections to the establishment of a monarchy in the “Samuel Source”
- State what two things had to occur to establish the king's authority
- State what two events in the “Saul Source” show Saul as a charismatic leader
- State what caused the final break between Samuel and Saul

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Recall a religious experience that you have had. How has your life situation changed since that experience? Have you been able to preserve the original religious experience? Record your thoughts in your notebook.
2. Read over **I Samuel 8-15** to sense the flow of the life of Saul. Skim the section several times. Look at Saul's life as a series of pictures or vignettes and make a list or a set of drawings that will call these to mind. Note any responses that you have to Saul's life.
3. Trace out the important events in this section of Israel's history and note what the turning points were.

Preparing for Your Seminar

The rise of the monarchy is a movement toward strong centralized government. How did this play out in the life of Israel? What were the factors that led to centralization? What do we see in our own institutions that go through the same cycles of increasing centralization as pressure mounts, coupled with increased resentment and fracturing?

Additional Sources

Bruce C. Birch, *The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. II* (Abingdon, 1998) is one of the newest commentaries.

Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (John Knox Press, 1972). Brueggemann offers a different view from the one we give. He suggests that these stories be read non-theonomously (without primary reference to God) or secularly. He does not see God at work to fulfill a predetermined plan since people make or break any given situation.

H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel* (The Westminster Press, 1964), is a solid, dependable commentary.

P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel*, The Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1980) is useful, though it may be too

detailed for the general reader.

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Chapter 21 SAMUEL AND SAUL

The rise of the monarchy was an important turning point for Israel. There had been some sense of unity among the twelve tribes during the period of the confederacy, but it was a unity more often recognized than real. Whenever necessary there had always been a leader, but the leaders who arose were more often tribal than national leaders.

Still, as far as all of Israel was united, it was a union rooted in the covenant with YHWH. Indeed it was he who raised up the leaders for the people as they were needed and so the authority of those leaders also resided with YHWH. This was the situation before the rise of Saul. Other nations might have hereditary monarchies—authority passed on from parent to child; Israel’s leaders were always considered to have been specifically selected and empowered by the God of the covenant, by YHWH himself, and their authority could not be passed on to their successors.

With the rise of Saul, two issues were raised which have persisted, in one form or another, throughout the Judeo-Christian story:

1) How can the fundamental character of an original religious experience be preserved when the conditions which gave birth to that experience are significantly altered?

The Sinai-desert-wilderness experience of YHWH was of a God of deliverance, establishing covenant with and ruling over a pilgrim people. The sense of God derived from this experience proved difficult to preserve in the settled, agricultural life of Canaan. The Deuteronomic writer, as we have already seen, insisted that *syncretism*, the blending of Canaanite and Yahwist religious viewpoints, was a total evil. It was in the political arena rather than the cultic that the question of whether or not Israel should have a king “to govern us like other nations” (I Sam. 8:5) came to a climax. There were many good, political reasons why Israel should have had a king. So one tradition of the story of Samuel and Saul sees monarchy as the will of YHWH; but the earlier idea of the immediate sovereignty of YHWH was seen by some as obscured by the sovereignty of the king. So another tradition expressed in the Samuel-Saul story regards the rise of the monarchy as apostasy.

Within the pages of the New Testament, and even more strikingly in the history of the early church, the same issue arose again and again. The idea of the Messiah, an “anointed” one who was to bring to fulfillment the promises made in covenant to Israel, was a Jewish idea. How then to explain the Messiah’s coming to the gentiles (the “nations,” in the sense of non-Jews), when they had no notion of a covenant with Israel, much less of a Messiah to fulfill it? The world of the Roman Empire was different from that of Judaism in many significant ways. Could the gospel, with its roots in the faith of the Hebrew scriptures, be expressed in the terms of gentile culture without losing its fundamental meaning? The attempt to do so began within

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the New Testament itself and was one of the major tasks of the church during the first five centuries of its life. Moreover, during the same time, the Christian faith that had grown up among a persecuted minority—one way of believing among many different ways of believing—was to become the religion of the state, the *official* way of believing. Could the faith of the small persecuted Christian community of the first two centuries retain its vitality and religious foundations under such circumstances? How does a faith in

opposition to the state religion become the state religion without losing its essential identity? These questions have continued to have ramifications throughout Christian history. Some of the ways they have been answered—rightly or wrongly—affect us even today. It was the enculturation of Christianity as the religion of the state, then the religion of the West, that led Christian missionaries in the New World, in sub-Saharan Africa, in Asia, and in the Pacific Islands to insist that Christianity could not be received within the framework of the “pagan” cultures of the native peoples. Now Christian theologians wrestle with the question of whether our own Western culture has changed so much that a new interpretation of the gospel is required. If so, how can this be done without losing the heart of the gospel?

2) How can any religious community develop the institutional organization it needs to preserve its identity throughout the passage of time, and still remain open to God’s direct inspiration and guidance?

Prior to the rise of the monarchy, Israel was led by “charismatic leaders”—people on whom the spirit of YHWH had come. These men and women were able to direct the people in the way that YHWH was indicating for that time. Prophecy—including inspired speaking of the word of God—was built into that leadership role. But once an ordered succession of kings replaced the charismatic leaders, prophecy had to emerge in different form. “The prophets,” who earlier had been primarily ecstatic “holy ones,” became important theological and political figures, first serving in the courts of the kings but later becoming dissociated from any semblance of royal control. They became the channels for YHWH’s direct leadership, often pronouncing judgment against the royal leadership (though other prophets subjecting themselves to royal control, even toadying to the king, persisted to the end of the kingdom, cf. Jer. 28:1-17. Although we call them “false prophets,” such a term does not appear in the Bible). In studying the role of the prophets during the monarchy we observe almost constant tension between prophet and king, and indeed between prophet and priest, for the priesthood was also an hereditary office.

The same issue has come up in many forms in the history of the Christian church. The early church—the Spirit-led community described in the Acts of the Apostles—soon found it necessary to develop patterns of regularity in order to defend itself against often bizarre versions of its gospel and life. The rise of the office of bishop, with guarantees of proper succession and authorization in that office; the canonization of scripture; the development of creeds as tests of orthodoxy—these were the major products of this quest for stability.

From time to time, however, movements have arisen to express discontent with the directions provided by the ordered leadership of the church. The monastic movement,

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the various reform movements of the church including those of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, and the present-day “neo-pentecostal” or “charismatic” movements are examples. A tension similar to that between prophet and king—and more particularly prophet and priest—has existed in Israel in each of these cases. In neither of these two issues is it possible to choose simply for one side or the other. When changing conditions have caused old forms of expression to lose their meanings, it is **impossible** to preserve the vitality of the original spiritual experience through them. The forms then become mere museum pieces, irrelevant to the life which must be led in the new conditions. Yet, it is very difficult to translate the central meanings of the original experience into new forms without loss and distortion. Similarly, it is impossible to maintain the identity and purpose of a community throughout time without some organizational means for expressing its unity and continuity. Without such, the community would be left to the claims of any and every individual who claimed a “word from the Lord.” Yet, it is impossible to keep alive the spirit and heart of the community if the form of organization—always conservative—prevents access to the living word of God calling his people into ways which are different from those which have prevailed in the past.

As you study the history of the monarchy in Israel, keep these issues in mind. They are common to all communal life under God and are the important matters for your concern, not the memorizing of lists of

kings.

I Samuel 8-15 **Samuel and Saul**

With the completion of the story of the ark of God (4:16-7:1), we return to the story of Samuel. We have followed that story from his miraculous birth (I Sam. 1) to his establishment as judge over Israel. This is the Samuel who “judged Israel all the days of his life. He went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all these places” (7:15-16). Samuel has become a judge in a way different from any of his predecessors. In effect he rules the entire land in peace as well as war. He becomes the most important figure in the history of the people of Israel since Moses. But things are about to change, for Samuel is also the last of the judges. With Saul a new way of being a people emerges.

I Samuel 8

Samuel tries to establish his sons as judges to succeed him, but they do not meet with favor. The people ask for a king like other nations have. Samuel warns them against the tyranny a monarchy will bring, but the people insist, and YHWH tells Samuel to do according to their will.

I Samuel 9:1-10:16

Saul, a handsome young man, **goes in search of his father’s lost asses**. Not finding them, he seeks help from Samuel, here portrayed as a local seer. Samuel has been told by YHWH to anoint Saul “prince” over the people, so he prepares a feast for Saul, provides him lodging for the night, and assures him that the asses have been found. The next day, in private, Samuel anoints Saul as “prince” and sends him on his way home. Samuel predicts that certain signs will occur and instructs Saul to go to Gilgal and wait seven days until he arrives to offer sacrifices. The signs occur—including an episode in which the “spirit of God possessed” Saul and he prophesies. Saul goes home but does not speak of the kingship.

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I Samuel 10:17-27

Samuel calls the people of Israel together at Mizpah and rebukes them for demanding a king. Nonetheless, he casts lots to determine who shall be king, and the lot falls on Saul, **who is acclaimed by the people**. Samuel describes the rights and duties of kingship and writes them down in a book. He sends the people home, but some “worthless fellows” despise Saul and question his designation.

I Samuel 11

The Ammonites, from beyond the Jordan, besiege Jabesh-gilead. Saul receives the news through messengers from the city. He cuts up a yoke of oxen, sending the pieces to all the tribes with a call to rally. The tribes respond, and the Israelite army destroys the Ammonites. Some Israelites want to kill the “worthless fellows” who rejected Saul, but a magnanimous Saul will not allow it. The people, unified in victory, go to Gilgal to “renew the kingdom,” and Saul is made king “before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly” (11:15).

I Samuel 12

In Samuel’s “farewell address,” he justifies his career as judge, showing that he has not wronged Israel. He reminds them that YHWH led them through all kinds of troubles, yet they demanded a king during the Ammonite siege. Now they have a king. If they and the king obey YHWH, all will be well; if they do not, YHWH will be against them. Then Samuel, to show his power still with YHWH, calls down thunder and rain

out of season. The people falter in their support of a king and ask Samuel to pray for them. Samuel tells them to fear not—he will continue to intercede for them and instruct them—but to obey YHWH, lest they be destroyed. This sets the stage for divided allegiance on the part of the people should Samuel and Saul become adversaries.

I Samuel 13:1-15

Saul has an army of three thousand, two thousand with him near Bethel and the rest with his son, Jonathan, at Gibeah. Jonathan defeats a Philistine garrison at Geba, which prompts the Philistines to muster a large force for battle. Meanwhile, Saul summons Israel to join his forces and waits for Samuel at Gilgal. The Philistines greatly outnumber the Israelites, and the Israelites are terrified and hide in any available hole. Saul waits at Gilgal for seven days, as Samuel instructed him (10:8), but when Samuel does not come, Saul himself offers sacrifice. Samuel appears and is angry at Saul for having offered the sacrifice against his instructions. He announces that God has rejected the house of Saul over the kingdom.

I Samuel 13:16-14:23

Of their army Saul and Jonathan seem to have only six hundred soldiers left, and raiding parties from the Philistines are ravaging Israel. (A note is inserted commenting on the Philistines' monopoly on the smelting of iron and the sharpening of iron implements.) Jonathan and his armor-bearer go to a Philistine garrison and, after a sign that YHWH is with them, surprise the garrison with an initial attack. An earthquake (?) further confuses the Philistines, and when Saul and his troops, hearing the noise of the battle, join in, they easily rout the Philistines. Some "hangers-on" who have been with the Philistines and the hiding Israelites also join in.

I Samuel 14:24-46

Saul makes an oath on the day of the battle. The oath declares a curse on anyone who eats food during that day. Jonathan has not heard the oath, and when he becomes weak, he eats a bit of honey. The honey revives him. When told of the oath, he thinks

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it unwise, since soldiers cannot fight well when weak from hunger. Indeed the army becomes so hungry that at battle's end, it slaughters some animals and eats the meat with the blood. Saul, being told that the troops are eating meat with the blood, tells them to bring their animals to an altar which he builds and to kill and eat them there. Saul then seeks a message from YHWH before going into battle again, but no message comes. Saul casts lots to see whose sin it was that has angered YHWH, and the lot falls on Jonathan. Saul decrees that Jonathan should be killed for breaking the oath which Saul made, but the people rally to Jonathan's support and ransom him. Saul gives up the pursuit of the Philistines.

I Samuel 14:47-52

Verses 14:47-52 are a summary of Saul's works, with a genealogy of Saul's family.

Samuel, by YHWH's instructions, sends Saul to fight the Amalekites and to commit them to the *cherem*. Saul warns the Kenites, who are living among the Amalekites, to leave. Then his forces defeat the Amalekites, and all are destroyed except Agag, the king, and some of his best animals. YHWH tells Samuel that he is sorry he has appointed Saul as king. Samuel comes to Saul and chastises him for saving Agag from the *cherem*. Saul explains that Agag and his best animals were saved in order that they might be offered in sacrifice to YHWH. Samuel replies, in poetic form, that "to obey is better than sacrifice" (15:22). Samuel again declares that YHWH has rejected Saul, and the two part, never to meet again.

The Two Sources of the Story

At least two points of view are woven together by the Deuteronomic editor to make the present story; one favors the kingship of Saul and one opposes it. Most scholars agree that the point of view which pictures Saul in a favorable light is the earlier. The OAB, following a common practice, calls this the “Early Source” and the other the “Late Source.” It is true that the influence of the Deuteronomic editor can be seen much more clearly in the “Late Source,” indicating that in its present form it is later than the other “source.” It is probably going too far, however, to say that the dislike of the idea of kingship which this source expresses is due solely to the painful experience with a series of despotic kings which Israel had suffered by the time of its writing. It is not simply a matter of reading back such a later experience into the times of the beginning of the monarchy. Most likely that resistance to the novel idea of kingship was present from the very outset. Israel had never had a king. She had always considered herself to be governed by YHWH. Israel was not a nation, but a people: she was the *people of God*, and it was this that made her distinct from the nations. The idea of becoming like the nations must have been strange and distasteful to many.

The necessities of the times, however, indicated that something had to be done to unite Israel against the increasing power of the Philistines. Conservative Israelites could well point out that YHWH’s power had been sufficient to overcome all obstacles in the past, but many people must have thought that the successes of the Philistines required a new response. The enthusiasm for the idea of a monarchy, the glowing descriptions of the manly appearance of Saul, and the divine instructions to Samuel to anoint him king, all would seem to indicate that the origin of this

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picture is “early.” The picture does not seem to be influenced by later disastrous experiences of the monarchy. This does not mean that one can assume that all the anti-monarchical material is late and, therefore, untrustworthy. In its present form this material is late. But much of its content can be accepted as coming from a time as early as the so-called “early source.”

For purposes of discussion we refer to the two “sources” in the story by the descriptive titles “Samuel Source” and “Saul Source.” These names indicate that one source—in opposition to monarchy—elevates the status of Samuel at the expense of Saul, and the other looks upon Saul more favorably. There is some question as to whether sources as such are involved here at all. Some scholars have argued that what we have are simply points of view. It was inevitable and necessary that the two aspects of monarchy, the ability to protect and the tendency to oppress, be contrasted. In the chapters of I Samuel referred to in this lesson, it is relatively easy to distinguish these two points of view and so label them “sources.” In later chapters dealing with the relations between Saul and David, there are also at least two points of view, but it is very difficult to say whether the “Samuel” and “Saul” sources are still involved.

I Samuel 8

Please read the “Samuel Source” version about the selection of Saul: 8, 10:17-27, 12.

The cry of the people for a king **offends Samuel (v. 6)**. He has been judge over Israel, and now he has appointed his sons as judges. The request for a king seems to Samuel to be a rejection of his leadership. YHWH assures Samuel that it is not Samuel—or, at least, not only Samuel—whom the people are rejecting, but YHWH (v. 7). They have continuously rejected YHWH and served foreign gods, and are doing so now—this is the meaning of their rejection of Samuel’s leadership (v. 8). The demand for some symbol which can be seen and, even more importantly, to some degree controlled is a central feature of idolatry. A god such as YHWH who is invisible and beyond human control is not a comfortable god to deal with. In times of uncertainty, how could Israel be sure that YHWH was with them? It seems always much safer to put one’s trust in something or someone that can be *seen*. A king—or, in our day, a powerful president, a strong

military establishment, or any other form of “money-in-the-bank”—represents a kind of security which an invisible God does not.

While people in society seem to need a visible source of strength, the desire that there be someone to be blamed when things go wrong seems to be present. YHWH is not subject to human judgment. God cannot be controlled, either by bribes before the event or by blame afterward. A king, however, could be held accountable to the people. He would be more manageable, even if he were a tyrant, than God is. Hence verse 8:8, linking the request for a king with the people’s earlier tendency to leave YHWH for “foreign gods,” has relevance for human social organization in any age. For security, we seek tangible objects of faith and trust; to allow ourselves

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a way to escape responsibility, **we want these faith-objects to be open both to our judgment and to our condemnation when things go wrong.** The plight of the leader in whom too much trust is placed can never be an enviable one!

The list of things that a king would do to Israel (vv. 10-18) sounds like a description of the reign of Solomon, the tyrannical third king of Israel. Probably, as the footnote in the *OAB* says, the present account reflects the discontent which Solomon caused. It is possible, however, that such a picture could come from observation of the Philistine organization or that of the Canaanite city-states. At any rate, v. 18 seems to reflect the Deuteronomic outlook on history. In Judges, when the people “cried out” to YHWH, he heard them and raised up a deliverer for them, but now when they “cry out because of your king,” he will not answer them. This is the strongest possible stand that could be taken against the monarchy, that it represents such an extreme rejection of YHWH that he will not redeem Israel from it.

In spite of such opposition to the cry for a king, the “Samuel Source”—the point of view opposed to the monarchy—says finally that YHWH told Samuel to “listen to their voice” (v. 9). YHWH consents to the kingship. What could this mean? It may be that the Deuteronomist sees this as God’s grudging consent with the knowledge that the people were going to have a king anyway. Or, it may be that YHWH’s consent was an instance of “giving them enough rope.” More probable, given the general Old Testament mindset that could speak of God “hardening Pharaoh’s heart,” it shows the belief that, since the monarchy did arise, it must have been in accord with God’s will.

This interpretation, if correct, would correspond with the tension that exists in one of the major issues which appears in the rise of the monarchy: that changing circumstances require adaptation, and yet that adaptation involves the risk of loss of the heart of the original spiritual insight. **It would be “God’s will” that adaptation take place, and yet God’s judgment can still come upon the negative results that might follow.**

I Samuel 10:17-27

Responding to the people’s demands and YHWH’s instructions to follow their desires, Samuel calls the people together at Mizpah to select the king. The “Saul Source” has Gilgal, another ancient shrine, as the place where the people acclaim Saul as king. It is possible that, besides expressing different opinions about the monarchy, the two “sources” may have been identified with these two rival shrines.

Saul is chosen by lot. The only other detailed descriptions of the use of the sacred lots—in Joshua 7 and I Samuel 14:38-44—are when the lots are used to discover a hidden offender. That might not be significant—in each case the lots allow YHWH to work in the choice—but the casting of lots here is prefaced by Samuel’s speech. The speech is not simply opposed to the monarchy, as if Samuel has taken the opportunity to berate the people once more before turning to the business at hand. As P. Kyle McCarter points out, the form of the speech is that of the prophetic judgment speech.

It would be overstating the case only slightly to say that this arrangement implies that the gift of a king is a kind of punishment. . . . We might paraphrase as follows: YHWH has protected the people unfailingly since the Exodus (v. 18). He alone is their deliverer. . . . Yet they have rejected him and demanded an earthly king (v. 19a). Well then, they shall have their king (v. 19b), and (it is implied) this will be punishment enough! (I Samuel, p. 195)

At any rate, the lot indicates *YHWH's* choice, and the cry “Long live the king!” (10:24) is the *people's* acclamation; both are necessary to establish the king's authority. Saul is anything but eager to accept the duties of kingship. It is only after he is brought out of hiding that the people can acclaim him. They do so because of his stature: Saul is a tall, kingly figure. YHWH's choice looks like a good one.

I Samuel 10:26-27 is probably inserted by the editor. The “Saul Source” passage, chapter 11, which follows the selection of Saul by lot in chapter 10, ends with Saul showing mercy on the “worthless fellows” who had opposed him. Reference to them may well be made in 10:27 in order to account for their appearance in 11:12-13. Samuel remains unconvinced. He lectures once more on the rights and duties of kingship; further, he records his lecture (v. 25).

I Samuel 12

After Saul has been selected by lot, Samuel gives his “farewell address.” He seeks to retire with honor by conducting a “trial” of himself before the people. **He believes they are rejecting him, although they admit (12:4) that he has not wronged them in any way.** YHWH is witness to the fact that they have acquitted him (12:5). Samuel recites the major points in Israel's history in which YHWH's leadership has been sufficient to bring her to victory, and identifies the siege of Jabesh-gilead by Nahash the Ammonite as the event that caused her to call for a king (12:12). The account of this siege is given in the “Saul Source” (chapter 11) as the occasion when the people acclaimed Saul, previously anointed by Samuel, as their king. It is impossible to tell whether the D editor inserted this reference into 12:12 from the “Saul Source,” or whether the two traditions agree that this Ammonite threat was the occasion for Saul's becoming king.

Samuel's lecture, as it proceeds in 12:14-15, gives a clue to understanding how it can be that a king has been provided by YHWH in spite of the assertion that seeking one was, in effect, a rejection of YHWH: if the people and their king follow YHWH, all will be well, but if they do not, YHWH will be against them. It is not the fact of kingship itself that is evil, but apostasy from YHWH. If asking for a king is apostasy, then apostasy may be seen as both the cause and the result of the monarchy; but it is possible to remain faithful to YHWH even under a king.

The miracle of the thunder and rain (12:16-18) is a demonstration of Samuel's status as YHWH's true spokesman. It is the time of the wheat harvest, when there would normally be no rain. At this sign, the people become afraid of what they have done in asking for a king, but Samuel simply repeats his warning: be faithful to YHWH. YHWH will not turn from them if they are faithful, but if they forsake YHWH, both they and their king will be swept away (12:24-25).

The result of Samuel's address and the action which follows is to bring home to the people that—though they may survive the monarchy—they have given much away for the sake of it. They have given up their uniqueness as God's people to become like the nations. They have given up the advantages of charismatic rule.

Now, reminded of the fairness of Samuel's administration and made to acknowledge it (vv. 3-5) and called upon to witness a new demonstration of the prophet's intimacy with YHWH (vv. 16ff.), they realize at last how foolish they have been. But it is too late. They have their king, and **there can be no return to the old way** (McCarter, p. 217). It is their good fortune that Samuel cannot turn his back on them. He will continue to pray for them and "instruct you in the good and the right way" (v. 23). Please read the "Saul Source" account about the selection of Saul: I Samuel 9:1-10:16, 11.

The "Saul Source" shows genuine warmth of feeling between Samuel and Saul. This attitude can also be seen, if only briefly, in the "Samuel Source": in 10:24, after the lot has fallen upon Saul, Samuel says, "Do you see the one whom the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people." That both sources agree on Samuel's early fondness for Saul makes all the more bitter and heart rending their eventual separation.

The initial picture of Samuel presented in this story is different from that in chapters 1-8. Instead of being the judge over all Israel, Samuel is only a local seer. The explanation in 9:9, that "seer" is an old term for what at the time of the telling of the story was called a "prophet," also shows that the events in the story were quite early. Not only is Samuel here unknown to Saul, indicating that his fame is local, but an early and soon-to-be-forgotten word has been used to describe his office. (Notice that v. 9 fits better after v. 11; the word "seer" is not used until v. 11.)

The description of Samuel blessing the sacrifice before the people eat (9:12-13) is still another indication of an early origin for this story. It could come from a time before animals were routinely butchered for eating. Meat was not an everyday item on the menu of ancient peoples—animals were too scarce. When an animal was killed, the act was always regarded as a sacrifice. Life was taken, and this could be done only with the proper recognition of its sacredness. But this aspect of the story may also come from a time after the centralization of the cult in the Jerusalem temple, when temple priests gained a monopoly in the slaughtering trade. In either case, Samuel is portrayed here not only as a seer but as a priest—a fact which the Deuteronomic version of his early life clearly states. As priest, he blesses the sacrifice and offers to YHWH the parts of the animal so indicated by the ritual; only then do he and the people eat.

Verses 15-17 are a "flashback," a sign of the high art of the storytelling. The day before, YHWH revealed to Samuel Saul's coming and instructed Samuel to anoint him "prince." The word for prince, *nagid*, (pronounced nah-GHEED) is different from that for king, *melek*. Perhaps, as some maintain, this choice of words reflects

a reluctance at the time of the writing to call a leader of Israel a "king"—even in the pro-monarchy "Saul Source". The word "king" has been used earlier, however, and in 11:15 will be used again when the people acclaim him; then he is made king. In the later history of the northern kingdom, after the division of the nation following Solomon, this pattern presents problems: a prophet "announces" that someone other than the present king is to replace the monarch. Then chaos results until the challenge to the throne is settled. There is also here a play on words, noticeable only in the Hebrew—and this continues throughout the story. The root of the word *nagid* is *nagad*, meaning "to tell." In 9:6, 8, 18, 19, 10:15, and 16, the verb is used. No particular significance can be attached to this, though it is another indication of the storyteller's art, picking up an important word in the story to use it playfully in another form throughout the tale.

Samuel shows unusual courtesy to Saul—he tells Saul to go up to the high place before him, when normally he, as the older, would go first; then he gives Saul an honored place at the feast (9:19, 22). Saul is confused by this honor. He reminds Samuel that he is from a humble family in the smallest of the tribes, Benjamin (9:21). It was customary in the ancient Near East, as throughout the Orient, to speak humbly of oneself. At one level, therefore, there is nothing unusual in Saul's speech. At another level, however, the storyteller is

once again using the familiar motif that God can use the weakest and most insignificant instruments to bring about God's purposes. Saul, at least at this point in the story, is a simple, unassuming man. His only sense of duty is to his family, his only ambition, to find his father's asses. He seems quite unaware of the responsibilities about to be thrust upon him. The ordinary is about to step into the extraordinary. Saul will become king. The man from the least of the clans of the least of the tribes will rule. For this is, as we discover, the will of YHWH.

This story of Saul's anointing may seem full of coincidence—it is pure misfortune that the asses are lost, pure good fortune that the searchers find themselves within sight of the city of the great seer just as they are ready to give up the search and go home. But what will they offer to the seer? The servant discovers he has—at the bottom of his pocket, no doubt—a quarter of a shekel of silver. And whom do they happen to meet on their way but Samuel himself? It is important to realize that for the storyteller none of these are coincidences. They all show the hand of YHWH. The following day, after the servants have been sent on ahead, Samuel anoints Saul as “ruler over . . . Israel” (10:1). The sacred power of the anointing, symbolizing YHWH's choice of Saul, does not rest in the oil itself, but in the person doing the anointing. Samuel, as God's spokesman, has the power to declare God's choice by the symbolism of the oil. The signs that are to happen (10:1-7) will show that Samuel's words are truly from YHWH. The prediction in 10:6 that the spirit of YHWH will come upon Saul, throwing him into a frenzy like that which characterized the “band of prophets,” shows not that the king is to exercise a prophetic office but that the idea of kingship is still connected to an outpouring of the spirit—it is a charismatic office, like that of the judges.

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The final instruction that Samuel gives is that Saul should go down to Gilgal and wait seven days for Samuel to come to offer sacrifice. Because the D editor has inserted a story from the “Samuel Source” directly after this story, the point of this seven-day period is lost. It is mentioned, however, in 13:8-15, where Saul's failure to wait for Samuel longer than the time Saul had been told to wait is the cause of a breach between the two.

I Samuel 10:27b-11:15

The siege of the east-Jordan town of Jabesh-gilead by Nahash the Ammonite is the occasion for Saul's recognition by the people as king. Saul is at home in Gibeah. News of the siege and the desperate plight of the town comes to Gibeah, and Saul is seized by the spirit of God (11:6). But here the spirit directs him not to prophesy but to lead. Saul cuts a yoke of oxen in pieces, sending the pieces throughout Israel as the Levite in Judg. 19:29—also in Gibeah—had done with the corpse of his concubine. This is a call to the members of the confederacy to rally to the cause of YHWH. It is also a threat that failure to respond will result in reprisals by Saul—their oxen will be cut as these are. It is not simply fear of Saul that moves the tribes to respond. The dismemberment seems to represent a kind of conditional curse—God's curse, not Saul's. And the “dread of the LORD” comes upon the people. This term usually refers to the supernatural dread or fear by which YHWH overcomes enemies; here it overcomes any reluctance on the part of Israel to obey the summons of YHWH.

Saul is proclaimed king as a result of the victory of Israel against the Ammonites. The picture of him and of his rise to the kingship is still cast in terms of the way of life of the confederacy. He is a charismatic leader, as were the judges, but with two differences: he is able to mobilize all of Israel to come to the aid of Israel; i.e., his power is not local; and he becomes king; i.e., his power is not temporary. Saul is still understood to hold his power only at the approval of YHWH; he is not so established—the monarchy is not so established—that he might not just as quickly lose his authority as a result of divine disapproval. **Indeed, Saul is best understood as a transitional figure, neither simply a judge nor yet a firmly established king.** According to this source, Israel could not hope for a finer king than Saul. He is both handsome and humble and specially chosen by YHWH. Empowered by the spirit of YHWH, he leads the forces of Israel to victory and saves Jabesh-gilead from the Ammonite enemy. In the moment of his victory and his acclaim by the people, he

defends his detractors—the “worthless fellows” of 10:27—against the people’s anger. A noble and merciful king! That there is a king now does not mean that Samuel’s role is ended; he still has a part to play. At this point Saul and Samuel are friends, both dedicated to YHWH’s cause in the face of enemies. Unfortunately, this friendship cannot last.

I Samuel 13:1-15 The Breach Between Saul and Samuel

Chapter 13 opens with the formula used by the D writer throughout the Book of Kings to introduce the reign of a new king. The text, however, contains blanks at two places: Saul’s age when he began his reign and how long he reigned. As the text now stands, only two years are given for Saul’s reign. In contrast Acts 13:21 says that Saul reigned for forty years, the usual number to express “a long time.” The story of Saul in I Samuel implies such a long reign. He was a young man when Samuel

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met him (9:1ff), but in chapter 13 he is old enough to have a grown son, Jonathan, to share the command of the Israelite forces. The confusion in the text about the length of time involved may be due to the D editor’s conviction that Saul could not have been king for long, since he did not have YHWH’s approval. This is a theological interpretation of Saul’s kingship, rather than a historical one. It is also possible that the figures were simply not available to D, or that they were lost later. Under Saul and Jonathan, the Israelites have staged an uprising at Geba (13:2-3).

The Septuagint or the Greek version of the Old Testament in verse 3 adds: “and the Philistines heard of it and proclaimed, ‘The slaves have risen.’” The Philistine actions to put down the uprising, even allowing for probable exaggeration of numbers (v. 5), strike fear into the hearts of the Israelites, and they hide in any available hole (vv. 6-7a).

Saul waits seven days at Gilgal as Samuel instructed him (13:8). His followers are scattering away from him and Samuel has not arrived, so Saul proceeds to offer the sacrifices in preparation for action. Samuel finally does arrive, and he rebukes Saul: “**You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God**” (v. 13). The only commandment mentioned is that from Samuel in 10:8, so this apparently refers to Samuel’s instructions given there. Samuel then announces that Saul is no longer the chosen one of YHWH. The Lord has “sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be ruler over his people” (13:14). Though this man is not named, the reader would understand the reference to be to David.

Later, in chapter 15, a different account of YHWH’s rejection of Saul is given. Many scholars regard the chapter 13 version as simply a doublet of chapter 15—that is, the same event told in a somewhat different way. This is possible, but not very likely. More probably, in chapter 13 Saul offends Samuel’s sense of pride and leadership by taking over what Samuel regarded as his own function of priesthood. Saul did what had to be done: his forces were dwindling away, and decisive action was necessary. But Saul’s action has offended Samuel, and he leaves Saul in anger. It is a story of a clash between two leaders. The statements about YHWH having abandoned Saul may well have been inserted into the story later. They interpret it. The narrative of chapter 13 is itself much too early in the story to contain such a final-sounding rejection. Saul shows no sign of having been rejected by YHWH in the events which follow in chapter 14. In fact there were probably many clashes between Samuel and Saul before the final separation took place, and this is but one.

I Samuel 13:16-14:23

This section of I Samuel—from 13:16 to 14:46—is at its very center about Saul and Jonathan. That becomes evident in later verses. In the meantime, a number of important issues are raised.

For example, vv. 19-22 give us a picture of the contrast between two cultures at the beginning of the Iron

Age. The Philistines had mastered the use of iron, but the Israelites were still using Bronze Age techniques. Bronze, a mixture of copper and tin, is much harder than copper alone. Copper is too soft to hold a cutting edge, but the addition of a little tin in the smelting process makes the harder metal, bronze.

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Iron, even harder, requires a much hotter fire to melt the metal from its ore so that it can be shaped. The Israelites did not have the technology to do this; they could not even sharpen or care for the iron implements taken from the Philistines. Inserted into the story at this point, this note shows the superiority of the Philistine ability to wage war.

Chapter 14 contains two stories: one about the battle which Jonathan and his armor-bearer begin and which Saul's forces join (14:2-23), and the other about Saul's imposing an oath of fasting on his troops (14:24-46). Together, these two episodes are intended to explain why Saul did not follow up his advantage and strike a more serious blow against the Philistines.

Jonathan and his armor-bearer attack a small garrison force of Philistines (14:6-15). Jonathan voices the belief of a faithful Israelite: "It may be that the LORD will act for us; for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few" (14:6). YHWH does not need powerful armies to do God's work: two individuals are enough if YHWH is working through them! Verse 15 says that an earth tremor at the time of the battle served to increase the panic among the Philistines.

Saul hears the noise of the battle and at first tries to consult YHWH by means of the sacred lots. In 14:18, Saul instructs the priest Ahijah to bring the ark of God. The ark, when last mentioned, was in the little town of Kiriath-jearim. The LXX is probably correct in saying that it is an *ephod* containing the sacred lots—the Urim and Thummim—that Saul calls for. There seems to be no time, however, to consult the lots. **Again Saul seems to feel that he must act, whether YHWH has spoken or not.** He offered the sacrifice at Gilgal without Samuel, and now he goes into battle without YHWH's command. There can be little doubt that Saul is completely sincere in his service, but that he is impetuous (cf. 13:9; 14:24)—this attribute of Saul is in every part of the tradition.

In the battle that follows, the support which Saul lacked at the beginning hurriedly rallies around him. Not only the Israelites who have been hiding, but also "the Hebrews who previously had been with the Philistines and had gone up with them into the camp" (14:21) join Saul's forces. The "Hebrews who had been with the Philistines" may refer to *habiru* who had become "slaves."

Whatever the military realities of the battle, there is no doubt about the ultimate reason for Israel's victory. Though the Israelites are inadequately armed—especially in the face of Philistine technical superiority—and outnumbered, "nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few" (14:6). It is neither Jonathan's heroism nor Saul's speed in coming to his son's aid that brings victory; it is the earth's quaking (v. 15) that sends the Philistines into great panic. It is not the number of new soldiers that join Saul's army in the midst of the battle which carries the day for Israel; rather it is—and here the narrator is explicit—YHWH who "gave Israel the victory that day" (v. 23). To God alone belongs the victory.

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I Samuel 14:24-46

During the battle of Michmash Pass, Saul imposes an oath of fasting on his troops, with a curse laid on any who break the fast. Saul's motives for the fast are at one level apparent—there can be no doubt that he wishes to gain YHWH's favor for the Israelite cause. On a second level, however—that at which we assess Saul's

character—it is more difficult to determine motive. Saul “is not depraved. He is capable of some success as the leader of YHWH’s people. But he is a man abandoned by his God. Indeed, he seems ill-fated, for most of what he attempts goes awry” (McCarter, p. 251). Does Saul feel God’s absence? Is that why he tries so hard, too hard? Or is he rash and presumptuous toward YHWH, trying to manipulate God by means of ritual (14:24; cf. 13:12, 15:15)? Both are possible, but the latter seems to be the view of the writer who finally shaped the material here.

Jonathan, not knowing about the oath, eats some honey to revive his strength (14:27). When told of his father’s instructions, Jonathan considers them unwise: the Israelites, weakened from hunger, will not be able to fight effectively.

Verses 31-35 have been brought into the story from another source. The verses were probably originally associated with some site that was supposed to have been the first altar that Saul built (v. 35). Nevertheless, their story fits the overall plot. The troops are so hungry that they cannot wait to eat. So they fall to eating animals that have been slain without any sacrificial ritual, eating the flesh “with the blood” (v. 32). Even apart from the oath which Saul had laid on the army, this would have been considered sinful, for meat was not to be eaten without the proper sacrificial cultus, and most especially it was not to be eaten “with the blood.” The blood—as the life of the animal—was to be reserved for YHWH. This prohibition may be found in both the Deuteronomic and Priestly codes (Deut. 12:23-27; Lev. 19:26). So Saul erects a crude altar and tells the troops to kill their animals there and refrain from eating the blood.

In vv. 36-46, Saul prepares to follow up the battle with a massive attack on the Philistines. The priest urges, however, that YHWH be consulted first because there is no reply from YHWH. Saul concludes that someone must have sinned. By means of Urim and Thummim, the sacred lots, it is discovered that Jonathan has broken his father’s oath (vv. 41-42). Saul is prepared to follow out the curse of death that went with a violation of an oath to YHWH, but the people will not have it. “So the people ransomed Jonathan and he did not die” (14:45). It is not said how they ransomed him. It may have been by substituting another human life. Had this been done, however, the curse of the oath would have been removed, and Saul could have gone on with the attack under the blessing of YHWH. He did not do so: “Then Saul withdrew from pursuing the Philistines; and the Philistines went to their own place” (14:46). So ends Saul’s great opportunity for a decisive defeat of the Philistines. It is impossible to leave this story without saying a word about Jonathan’s part in it, because this is not a story about Saul only, but about Saul and Jonathan. Jonathan is depicted as all that Saul is not. He does not act rashly but in a considered manner; he thinks before he attacks, taking time to consult YHWH (14:6-10). He is practical; he would not have taken the oath of fasting—it does not make good military sense (14:29-30).

Moreover, though the story leaves no doubt that the victory belongs to YHWH, YHWH may act through a human agent, and here that agent is Jonathan—the people acclaim him as the one “who has accomplished this great victory in Israel” (14:45). With a son like Jonathan, Saul might well have established a dynasty. But YHWH will choose elsewhere, and Jonathan, who will die at the hands of the Philistines, will live on in the memory of David.

The end of the reign of Saul in vv. 47-52 is a sympathetic one. The genealogy in vv. 49-51 shows also the pro-Saul stance of the source. Ishvi is given as the name of one of Saul’s sons. Ishvi is a form of *Ish-yah*, which means “man of YHWH.” Elsewhere in the story of Saul, when David has become the hero and Saul the rejected king, the name is given as Ishbaal, or “man of Baal,” and that name is further changed to read *Ishbosheth*, or “man of *shame*,” The accusation is thereby made that Saul was so little a follower of YHWH as to name one of his sons after Baal, and thereby to be a cause for shame. A man who proved his dedication to YHWH and to Israel as much as Saul did, and one who could gain such support as is indicated in the “Saul Source,” is not likely to have been so insensitive as that. Ishvi is probably the correct name for the son and

shows Saul to have been a devoted follower of YHWH. The name change, however, may be seen as an example of the thoroughness of later writers in their attempts to discredit Saul.

I Samuel 15

We arrive now at the turning point in the career of Saul. He has built up an efficient army. Samuel, still a friend and advisor, sends him on a holy war against the ancient enemy of Israel, the Amalekites. But from the *cherem*, the “ban” which here requires the total destruction of the enemy, Saul saves Agag the king and some of his prize animals.

Samuel, the prophet, rebukes Saul for violating the *cherem*. Saul, well-intentioned and probably sincere, replies that he intended to sacrifice the animals in a special offering to YHWH. This may, of course, be merely an excuse given by someone who is caught in an unlawful act, but given the character of Saul—the simple military leader, not skilled in theological matters—it seems as likely that he is sincere in his actions. When Samuel instructs him in his error (v. 22-24), Saul repents and acknowledges that he has been swayed by the demands of the people. A sincere man, but one unable to keep entirely straight the theological demands of the occasion, is the profile of Saul that emerges.

Samuel must speak the prophetic word. This he does in psalm, vv. 22-23: “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice” (v. 22). There are two messages here, one appropriate to the scene of the battle itself, the other of more lasting value. On the surface, Samuel condemns Saul for using his own judgment instead of following the sacred law: Obey! At a deeper level is the message that a life of obedience is more important than the observance of “religious” activities. The second message is to recur again and again in the later prophets and psalmists, until there develops a tradition of attack on hollow cultic practice (e.g., Hosea 6:6, Amos 5:21-24, Psalms 51:16-17). It is not that the cult itself is bad—in its proper order, it is good. **But there is something more important than the proper practice of the worship of YHWH, and**

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that is obedience, the proper attitude toward YHWH. Without obedience, worship becomes vain and empty.

Verses 26-29 express the final word of rejection to Saul. As the spokesman for God, through whom Saul had been “announced” as “prince” and anointed as king, Samuel declares that YHWH has rejected Saul as king over Israel. God has given the kingdom to “a neighbor of yours, who is better than you” (v. 28). Saul begs, not for the words to be retracted, but for Samuel to allow Saul to save face before the people by worshiping with him. Samuel grants this, and proceeds to fulfill the *cherem* by hewing the cheerful Agag “in pieces before the LORD.” But the breach between the two men is permanent. “And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul” (v. 35).

We are at the pivotal point of the Book of I Samuel. This is the last time in the book that Samuel and Saul occupy center stage. Hereafter, except in the story of the witch of Endor and in Saul’s death scene, Saul moves to the periphery and our attention is focused on David, his successor.

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End of chapter

Impossible to preserve^{back}

Say difficult, not impossible. We're Anglicans, after all.

In search of his father's asses [back](#)

Amy-Jill Levine says that this story already marks Saul out as a loser. Biblical heroes meet their future brides at wells. Saul just asks for directions, gets them, and keep on going.

Acclaimed by the people^{back}

After being fetched out of hiding.

Offends Samuel^{back}

So he really didn't much like Saul from the start?

Judgement and condemnation ^{back}

OK, but what are you proposing as an alternative?

God's will^{back}

This is characteristic with the view of God presented elsewhere in the Old Testamenet and in these chapters. God lets the people do bad stuff, even wills them to do it, and then punishes them when they do.

Rejecting him^{back}

Somehow here I think of Churchill and the 1945 election.

There can be no return^{back}

Of course there could have been a return. They could have got rid of Saul as easily as they chose him.

An example of the very sloppy way in which this material has been edited. The text generally refers to the book of the bible under discussion as I Samuel. So why the sudden reference to the Book of Kings? The LXX calls I Samuel and II Samuel I Kings and II Kings, and the two following books, which the OAB calls I Kings and II Kings, III Kings and IV Kings. Any questions?

You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God [back](#)

It was this passage that clarified for me what I don't like about Samuel. He reminds me of the religious leaders in Iran - particularly the "supreme leader," a religious figure who overrules the secular government when he feels like it.

Saul feels that he must act back

In other words, he's behaving like a king.

