

PARALLEL GUIDE 22

Saul and David

Summary: This chapter covers the familiar stories of Saul and David. Secretly anointed by Samuel to replace Saul, David rises from obscurity to a place of honor in the king's court. Slaying Goliath, performing valorous deeds, and dealing justly with people gains David widespread acclaim. Saul jealously fears David and seeks to kill him. One of literature's most famous chase scenes ensues.

Learning Objectives

- Read **I Samuel 16-31**
- Identify the tribes from which Saul and David drew their support
- Cite the events that caused Saul to lose the support of both the prophets and the priests
- State the advantage that David's personal army provided
- Cite two occasions when Jonathan testified in favor of the legitimacy of David's claim to the kingship
- Give two examples when David curried favor with Judah
- Identify the witch at Endor

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. The biblical editor sees David's successes as due to YHWH's favor, yet David's own diplomatic and political skills are apparent. Do you (a) play down the significance of David's efforts and emphasize God's direction of events, (b) see the biblical view as an after-the-fact interpretation, the real cause of David's successes being his own astuteness, or (c) **hold the two interpretations simultaneously?** Give reasons for your position.
2. What does this text about the relationship of Saul and David imply for the possibility of God's involvement in contemporary national and international events? What does it imply for the possibility of God's involvement in your own life?
3. David becomes an outlaw or rebel. What is the difference between the outlaw/rebel and the freedom fighter who seeks to "set the people free"?

Preparing for Your Seminar

This chapter evokes some age-old questions about the relationship of religion and government or church and state. The relationship of religion and politics and how we interpret events poses a dilemma. In what ways did David interpret these? How did later writers interpret the same events when they held a particular religious point of view? What are different ways various governments deal with these questions today? How can we reconcile a government under God and religious freedom? Whose God? What does freedom mean?

Additional Sources

Bruce C. Birch in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. II (Abingdon, 1998).

Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (John Knox Press, 1972).

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

P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *I Samuel*, Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1980).

Chapter 22 SAUL AND DAVID

The stories of David as a shepherd boy, his slaying of Goliath, the friendship between David and Jonathan, and the death of Saul are among the most familiar in the Bible. The entire account of the reign of David, through the end of II Samuel, is told in such detail and with such dramatic flavor that it has been a favorite of storytellers in many media. There are at least two sources clearly represented, but the finished text does not require the reader to move back and forth in order to keep track of events as much as the story of the rise of Saul did. Only at the very beginning, when David and Saul first meet, is it necessary to separate the sources.

Read I Samuel 16-II Samuel 1, noting the following:

- 1) 17:12-31, 55-58 represent a source different from the main one used in the account. Mark these verses and notice that the story flows perfectly if you skip from 17:11 to 17:32.
- 2) There are a number of “doublets”—two versions of what seem to be very similar events: Saul throwing a spear at David, Saul offering his daughter as a wife for David, David being betrayed to Saul by the inhabitants who live where David is hiding, etc. Recognize that these doublets probably represent the two sources.
- 3) **In many ways the editor shows David as rightfully supplanting Saul. Every attempt is made to demonstrate that David’s claim to the throne is supported by YHWH.**

I Samuel 16-20 David in the Court of Saul

Jesse and his family were residents of Bethlehem in the southern tribe of Judah. By contrast Saul was of the northern tribe of Benjamin. Remember that the tribes of the south and those of the north had rather different histories. They had come together in the covenant renewal ceremony recounted in Josh. 24, and formed a loose confederation, but while the northern tribes felt a kinship over and beyond their allegiance to the covenant, Judah was never fully included in that bond. While Saul, and later David, were kings over “all Israel,” their natural supporters were the northern tribes for Saul and Judah for David. As David’s story unfolds, it shows him consolidating the support of his fellow Judahites, and only with difficulty eventually winning the allegiance of the northern tribes.

The tension between Samuel and Saul is shown in Samuel’s reluctance to follow YHWH’s instructions to go to Bethlehem and anoint a new king. The trip from Ramah, where Samuel lived, to Bethlehem would take him through Gibeah, Saul’s stronghold. Even the people in Bethlehem would be afraid to give hospitality to Samuel if he showed signs of continuing his conflict with Saul. Samuel is therefore told to say that the purpose of his trip is to offer sacrifice. This is an acceptable reason for his leaving Ramah, since his practice has previously been to travel in a circuit to offer sacrifices (I Sam. 7:16).

I Samuel 16:1-13 The Anointing of David

This story is similar in many ways to the accounts of the anointing of Saul. David is handsome, and therefore in keeping with the ideals of leadership—remember the picture of the handsome Joseph and the handsome Saul—and he is also the “least” of the sons of Jesse, as Saul was of the least of the clans of the least of the tribes. Once again YHWH is depicted as picking an insignificant person to bring about God’s purposes. We can be certain of YHWH’s involvement here. While YHWH chooses not on the basis of “outward appearance” but according to “the heart,” David appears on the scene—called like Saul from offstage (cf. 10:22-23)—with “all the physical symptoms of divine favor” (McCarter, p. 277). “He was ruddy, and³ had beautiful eyes, and was handsome” (v. 12). There can be no doubt from any point of view that this is YHWH’s choice.

Samuel examines all the sons of Jesse to find out which of them YHWH has chosen. There is no mention of the casting of lots, though some scholars have seen that, or a similar process, at work; Samuel has direct communication from YHWH concerning the matter. At any rate when David, the youngest, is finally brought in from keeping the sheep, Samuel knows somehow that this is the chosen one. Samuel anoints David with oil, and the spirit of YHWH comes upon him. Thus David, like Saul and the judges, is a charismatic leader.

The scene of the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22, and John 1:29-34) shows similarities to this story. **A Samuel-like figure, John the Baptist**, provides an anointing—though with the water of repentance rather than with the oil of coronation—in the context of which the spirit of God comes upon Jesus. The differences, however, are as striking as the similarities: John does not, as Samuel did, indicate whom YHWH has chosen—God declares that Jesus is the anointed one. The spirit does not come upon Jesus as a result of John’s baptizing, as Samuel’s anointing preceded the coming of the spirit on David—rather, at least in the fourth gospel, it is the descent of the spirit that allows John to recognize Jesus as the one whose coming he has announced. Interestingly, this complete set of parallels is seen only when we look at all four gospels; none of them contains the full range of similarities. One of the best-known strains of New Testament interpretation of Jesus depicts him as being a descendant of the “house of David.” The infancy narratives in both Matthew and Luke, though they differ in details, agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and was descended from David. There was powerful warrant for this claim: as the J writer saw the reign of David as the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, so later tradition came to expect that the disappointing failure of the Davidic monarchy—its eventual fall and the many centuries of foreign domination—would be set right and a new and final fulfillment of YHWH’s promises would be brought about by a “new David.” David was YHWH’s “anointed one,” God’s Messiah (the Hebrew for “anointed one”). The new Messiah, the one whom God would raise up and anoint to overthrow the foreign oppressors of his people and fulfill his promises, was expected to be of the “house of David.”

I Samuel 16:14-23 David Is Introduced to Saul

The spirit of YHWH might come upon many persons at the same time; the bands of prophets, all of whom were under the influence of the spirit in their dancing and speaking, demonstrate this. But the spirit of YHWH comes upon only one person at a time empowering that person for the office of king. Thus, when the spirit of YHWH comes upon David, the spirit departs from Saul (v. 14a). “In ancient tradition a person once touched by divine spirit can never again be free” (McCarter, p. 280). For Saul, this means that the departure of YHWH’s spirit leaves a kind of vacuum into which rushes “an evil spirit from the LORD [which] tormented him” (v. 14b). In our modern world, we might speak of mental illness, but that brings extra-biblical categories to bear on the story. **In the story, Saul’s suffering is described theologically, and since at**

this point in the development of Israelite thought there was no idea of a power of evil—such as later tradition was to see in the figure of Satan—the madness of Saul must be interpreted as due to a spirit sent by YHWH. David is first introduced to Saul’s court as a musician—a player of the lyre and singer of songs—in order to soothe Saul when he is in torment from the “evil spirit.” David’s music succeeds in soothing Saul, “Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer” (v. 21).

According to this account, David is a young but grown man, “skillful in playing [the lyre], a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the LORD is with him” (v. 18). He is characterized, in other words, in the language used to describe Israelite heroes. He is clever with words like Joseph, Esther, Daniel and many others—the exception is Moses. Like Joseph, he is handsome (cf. Gen. 39:6b). Above all, YHWH is with him. This part of the description actually explains all other parts—David is “prudent in speech, and a man of good presence,” for example, because of God’s favor. David becomes a member of Saul’s court and stays with Saul (v. 22).

I Samuel 17:1-11, 32-54 David and Goliath

We are omitting for the moment vv. 12-31 and 55-58, because they comprise a second version of the introduction of David to Saul. The context of this second version, however, is the well-known story of David and Goliath. The Philistine and Israelite armies are assembled over against each other, and neither is confident enough of its own strength to start the attack. The Philistines do have a champion, the terrifying and gigantic Goliath—his height has been variously estimated from 6’9” to 9’9”. Goliath comes from the Philistine camp and challenges the Israelites to send someone out to fight him. He proposes that the side of the loser will become the servants of the victor (vv. 4-10). Goliath is not only huge in size, but also clad in impressive armor and armed with a spear that has an iron point. “When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine they were dismayed and greatly afraid” (v. 11).

Only David is undismayed. Indeed he offers to fight Goliath (v. 32). Saul is at first unwilling to let David go, but he is eventually persuaded by the young man’s self-confidence (vv. 34-36). David is convinced that YHWH will provide him with the victory (v. 37). And when Saul says, “Go, and may the LORD be with you” (v. 37b), we should understand this not as a casual parting comment, but as a prayer that YHWH will indeed be fighting with David, since David alone would obviously fail. Goliath is not to be defeated in any normal way.

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Saul puts his own armor on David, perhaps with the thought that if David wore it to victory, he would share in the victory—the clothing being understood to represent the person. But David finds it impossible to wear the armor because of its weight. Perhaps it is also cumbersome and does not allow David the freedom of movement that he seeks. David’s entering battle without armor emphasizes his vulnerability in contrast to Goliath’s well-armed advantage. Beyond this, however, we are also entitled to read the rejection of Saul’s armor as a hint that Saul is not to have a share in David’s victory. David’s refusal of the armor may also mean that he is willing to fight using the skills he has honed, even if they are not what others use. In response to the Philistine’s taunts and threats, David speaks the words that express the theological meaning of this event: the Philistines depend on the power of their soldiers and weapons, but David represents YHWH. YHWH, who has constantly been the cause of the victories of the armies of Israel, will now prevail over the physical power of Goliath, “that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save you by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD’s and he will give you into our hand” (v. 45-47). While this speech may have been made by David at the time—it reflects his conviction expressed in v. 37 that YHWH would provide the victory—its polished form and the fact that the word translated “assembly” in v. 47 is the word customarily used for the gathering of Israel for cultic purposes suggest that it was composed later. Whenever it was composed, its repetition makes the point of the story impossible to overlook—David will not fight alone. His victory will be shared—with YHWH, God of Israel.

In his lack of arms, his relative smallness of stature, and his apparent vulnerability, David represents Israel. This is one more indication of the biblical motif of surprise that we have mentioned before. YHWH frequently chooses the younger (Jacob), the smallest (Gideon), the poorest (Mary, mother of Jesus), or the least likely (Saul or David) to confound his enemies and demonstrate his sovereignty. And just as surely as David represents Israel, Goliath—big and strong and terrible—represents her enemies. But David kills Goliath. First, he strikes Goliath unconscious with a stone from his sling. Then, using the giant’s own sword, David kills him and cuts off his head as a visible indication to the assembled armies that the victory belongs to him. The Philistines flee in terror, pursued by the Israelites. Verse 54 is an obvious anachronism, for Jerusalem was not yet in Israelite hands. In fact, it was not an Israelite city until David took it as his capital. The verse may refer to a later event: David may have taken the skull of Goliath to his capital, Jerusalem, and placed the armor, not in his own tent, but in the tent of YHWH at Mizpah (Nob in the story in 21:1-9).

In II Sam. 21:19, we are told that it was one of David’s soldiers, Elhanan, who killed Goliath. Yet here, and also in I Sam. 21:9 and 22:10, David is the slayer. This discrepancy was apparently noticed even in Old Testament times, for the author of the books of Chronicles—a history which parallels that of the books of Samuel and Kings—irons it out by saying that it was Goliath’s brother whom Elhanan killed (I Chron. 20:5).

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One explanation modern scholars have offered for the discrepancy is that a deed of one of David’s followers was later attributed to David. This does not seem probable, however, for the slaying is not an isolated event in the David story: the account of the sanctuary at Nob (I Sam. 21:1-10, 22:6-23) depends in part for its point on the victory of David over Goliath. Another ingenious explanation was advanced a few years ago when some texts discovered at the town of Mari seemed to use the word david as a common noun meaning “commander.” It was argued that Elhanan, the slayer of Goliath, had the title david, which eventually became used as his proper name—Elhanan and “David” were the same person. **This interpretation is now largely abandoned, as the original reading of the Mari text has been questioned.** Probably the well-known name of Goliath was attached to two different events.

I Samuel 17:12-31, 55-58

A Second Version of the Introduction of David to Saul

In this account David’s older brothers are members of Saul’s army, but David as the youngest remains at home to tend his father’s sheep. David visits Saul’s camp to bring provisions to his brothers and their commander (vv. 17-18). There he hears the challenge made by the Philistine giant, Goliath. He is incensed, at both the challenge and the Israelites’ failure to respond. At this point—according to this narrative—David and Saul are unacquainted. David undertakes to “answer” Goliath against the wishes of his brothers, who accuse him of “presumption” and of an evil heart (v. 28). David kills Goliath with his sling, and vv. 55-58 show Saul inquiring who the young man is. Finding no one who knows, Saul asks David himself on his return from battle with the giant. There is another interpretation of these exchanges, based on **deeper knowledge** of Hebrew language and idiom. “To be the son of X” means, in appropriate contexts, to owe political allegiance to X. Thus, Saul may be asking, “Where do David’s political allegiances lie?” Joab is not willing—or really not able—to answer. Saul asks David, “Whose son are you?” David, in an example of his shrewdness, answers the surface question impeccably while avoiding the deeper question altogether. Thus the two accounts appear on the surface to differ—in 16:14-23, David comes to the court of Saul by invitation to soothe the king’s madness; in 17:12-31, 55-58, he wins his way into the court by defeating the Philistines’ champion. The two accounts are not necessarily contradictory.

I Samuel 18:1-4 David and Jonathan

“David and Jonathan” is a phrase that has become a symbol for deep friendship and love between two men.

In these verses, the beginning of the lasting friendship between the two is noted. Jonathan, as the superior, the son of the king, initiates a “covenant” between them. Presumably this was a rite performed “before YHWH,” establishing a relationship between the two. We see that later in the story (23:17) Jonathan, the superior party here, acknowledges David’s superiority over him as the future king of Israel.

Jonathan gives David his own clothing and armor—both as a sign of friendship and possibly as a symbolic act signifying that David’s deeds in some sense are also the deeds of Jonathan.

Saul and David as Rivals

The weaving together of sources continues through 18:19, after which the source that produced the second version of the Saul-David meeting is abandoned. While this

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should be noted, our concern here is not with sources but with the story line—the rise of David and Saul’s corresponding fall. Recall the situation Saul faces: Samuel has withdrawn his support of Saul and announced that YHWH has rejected his kingship (15:23). Saul and his army have been unable to face the might of the Philistines and have endured the taunts of Goliath for days, finally being rescued from their shame by a mere youth with a sling. Now this youth has become a successful leader of Saul’s armies, and “. . . all the people, even the servants of Saul approved” (18:5). Eventually a song comes to be sung: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (18:7). This song is put in the context of David’s slaying of Goliath (vv. 6-7), but almost certainly it is meant to be read in the context of v. 5—the many successes of David.

I Samuel 18:5-9 David’s Popularity

It is inevitable, under these circumstances, that Saul should become jealous of David. Saul has no organized machinery of government, no police to enforce absolute discipline over his people, as many rulers have had. His status as king depends on YHWH’s choice of him—which has been called into doubt—and upon the support of the people. If David, a bright new star as yet untarnished in the eyes of the people, is to gain too much support, it might well mean Saul’s loss of the kingdom. Saul’s remark in v. 8—“They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom?”—is a shrewd analysis of the political situation. It is possible, at another level, that the writer has put a prophetic word in the mouth of the king, so that he unintentionally declares the coming kingship of David: what more indeed will he have?

There is no indication here that Saul is aware of the event which is described in I Sam. 16—the anointing of David as the future king. The series of attempts on David’s life described in the next few chapters are futile attempts by Saul to keep his kingdom. The reader, however, is expected to see them as attacks against YHWH’s anointed one. By contrast, we see David constantly refusing to lay a hand on Saul, because he (Saul) is one who also has been anointed by YHWH—even though that one had since been rejected. Our storyteller sees David as one who respects what YHWH has done, while Saul is depicted once again as failing in his responsibilities before God.

I Samuel 18:10-19:17 Attempts on David’s Life

Verses 18:10-11 and 19:9-10 are apparently doublets of the same story—Saul throws a spear at David, but David escapes. Similarly, 18:17-19 and 18:20-27 may be doublets—in the first, Saul offers his daughter Merab as a wife for David, and in the second, it is Michal who is offered. These doublets and others that occur later are results of the editor’s combining of different sources. In the text as it now stands the daughter is offered in both cases in order to entice David into more reckless acts against the Philistines in the hope that he will be killed in battle. The offer of Merab comes so close on the heels of Saul’s promise to reward the

slayer of Goliath with one of his daughters that that must be considered the prime motive. Verse 17b seems to be an editorial interpretation. David does not feel worthy of either offer, so Merab is given to another man. But the case with Michal is different. Here what Saul proposes in hopes that events will turn to his advantage, David senses as an opportunity, for “David was well pleased to be the king’s son-in-law” (v. 26). The political ramifications

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of this opportunity must not be overlooked. At the very least, David achieves in his marriage to Michal legitimate membership in the royal household. The stories of Michal and Merab are exemplary. We find throughout this section that whatever action Saul takes relative to David—and whatever its motivation, whether malice as here or even goodwill as in 16:21-22—it will contribute to David’s success. And whatever David does—whatever the motive, whether idealism or even desire for personal gain—brings him success. For YHWH is with him (16:18; 18:14, 28). P. K. McCarter, Jr., calls this the “theological leitmotiv” of these Saul and David stories. “David’s success is divinely given and . . . cannot be thwarted by his own lack of selfishness [the case of Merab] or excessive ambition [the case of Michal] any more than by Saul’s opposition. In other words, both men are caught up in something larger than themselves, in events in which they must participate but cannot finally control” (I Samuel, p. 314).

Their destinies are not in their own hands, but in the hands of YHWH, who holds the future of all of Israel.

This does not mean that the participants do not act. It is Saul’s intention—now that he has seen YHWH’s (and Israel’s) love for David—to kill him, for clearly he represents a danger to Saul and his household. In 19:1-7, Saul appeals to his son Jonathan and his servants to kill David. But Jonathan warns David and pleads with his father for David’s life, with the result that Saul is—apparently—convinced that David is no threat to him. This account is similar to the one described in the whole of chapter 20. There, too, Jonathan pleads with Saul for David. But in the second story Jonathan is unaware of his father’s feelings toward David: David tells a disbelieving Jonathan of his father’s intent to kill him. Unlike the first story, this one finds Jonathan unable to change his father’s mind. Instead, Saul rages against Jonathan for siding with an enemy of the family against his own father and against Jonathan’s own future throne. The contradiction between a Jonathan who in 19:1-7 is aware of his father’s anger at David and a Jonathan who in chapter 20 is reluctantly convinced of Saul’s attitude, indicates that once again we are faced with two different traditions.

Saul’s anger goes out not only to Jonathan for his defense of David, but also to his daughter Michal. In 19:11-17, Michal warns David that her father will send someone to kill him and lets David escape through the window of their bedroom. She places “an idol” (v. 13) on David’s bed and puts “a pillow” of goat’s hair at its head. The exact meaning of this is impossible to tell. The “idol,” in the Hebrew, is *teraphim*, a plural word. Remember that Rachel took Laban’s family gods (*teraphim*) when she and Jacob fled (Gen. 31:19). These *teraphim* were small enough to be concealed in Rachel’s saddlebags. Perhaps the *teraphim* which Michal placed on David’s bed was a single life-sized image, so that the messengers of Saul mistake it for David asleep. On the other hand, idols placed at the site where the intended slaying of David was to take place may have frightened the killers away in superstitious fear. The problem of interpretation is made more difficult by the fact that the word translated “pillow” is obscure, and there is no certainty as to its proper translation.

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Saul interprets Michal’s behavior as treason against her family. Michal defends herself against Saul’s charge by implying that David would have killed her had she not assisted his escape (v. 17). But the truth of the matter is that Michal no less than Jonathan loves David. David—YHWH’s anointed David—is irresistible, even to the family of the king he will inevitably replace.

I Samuel 19:18-24 David at Ramah

This story seems to have been told at least in part to account for what was apparently a popular saying about Saul: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” One can only guess at what the saying originally meant. In I Sam. 10:10-12, a version favorable to Saul, it is implied that Saul was seen to be a prophet. Here, the implication is that it was used to taunt Saul: Does Saul think so highly of himself as to count himself a prophet?

While the story may have been told originally to account for the popular saying, in its present context—very hostile to Saul—it serves to show that Saul, by attempting to invade the sanctuary of Samuel and the prophetic band, has lost any possible support he might have had from the prophets. Samuel and all with him are on the side of David. Later Saul will lose the support of the priests by the massacre at the shrine of Nob (22:6-19).

I Samuel 20 Jonathan Assists David

This passage was mentioned briefly as a possible doublet of 19:1-7. It seems to be from another source. In its present context, the story suggests that David is making an attempt at reconciliation with the king. He begins with a threefold question which affirms his loyalty to Saul: “What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?” (v. 1b) Jonathan is surprised that David thinks Saul wants to kill him, although in the somewhat similar story in 19:17, it was Jonathan himself who brought such news to David.

He suggested a test to discover whether or not Saul is angry with David. The next day is the new moon (v. 5). It was apparently the custom for households to eat together at the new moon—a monthly observance. David is to hide and Jonathan is to excuse his absence—if he is missed—by saying that he has gone to Bethlehem for a “family reunion.” If Saul accepts this excuse, it implies that he is still favorably inclined toward David; if it angers him, it means that he is so ill-disposed that he could not even recognize the rightness of David’s obligation to family (vv. 5-7).

The rest of the story tells of the carrying out of this test. A signal is agreed upon by which David will know the outcome: Jonathan will come out to where David is hiding and engage in archery practice and, depending on what he tells “the lad” who will be with him to retrieve his arrows, David will know the outcome (vv. 18-23). Saul misses David’s presence. On the first day he assumes David may be “not clean” (v. 26), that he has some ritual defilement, such as sexual contact with a woman, which would prevent him from attending a ritual meal. On the second day, however—ritual uncleanness would last only for the day on which it occurred—that excuse will no longer do. When Saul is told the story which David and Jonathan have contrived,

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he flies into a rage. Somehow he knows that the story is untrue, and he knows that Jonathan’s friendship for David is so strong that it comes between Jonathan and himself. That friendship threatens Jonathan’s own future: “For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established” (v. 31). Saul’s rage does not just show personal anger, that of a father betrayed by his son; it is the hurt and frustration a father feels when his son insists on rejecting the future that the father has planned for him. The extent of Saul’s rage is revealed when he throws a spear at his son.

Jonathan then goes to the field where David is hiding and, by means of the prearranged signal, tells David that Saul intends to kill him. They meet face to face and grieve with each other.

The depth of the friendship between David and Jonathan is expressed in two passages: vv. 8-17 and v. 42. The passages also serve one of the editor’s purposes—to show David as one who came to the kingship

legitimately. Jonathan prays “may the LORD be with you [David], as he has been with my father” (v. 13). Even more: “If I am still alive, show me the faithful love [chesed] of the LORD, but if I die, never cut off your faithful love from my house even if the LORD were to cut off everyone of the enemies of David from the face of the earth” (vv. 14-16). Jonathan implicitly recognizes David as the favored one of YHWH, pledges him allegiance, and asks in return that the house of Saul and the house of David never be completely separated from each other.

Finally, in v. 42, Jonathan repeats essentially the same request for unity of the two houses when he prays, “The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever.”

Jonathan’s recognition of David as YHWH’s favored one and Saul’s successor is at the theological center of this passage as it now stands. But there is more than a relationship between God and David at stake here; there is the covenant between Jonathan and David (vv. 15-17, 42). It will be fulfilled in the story of Jonathan’s lame son, Mephibosheth (II Sam. 9). Mephibosheth escapes the Gibeonite massacre of his family and comes to live with David, who wishes to “show kindness for Jonathan’s sake” (II Sam. 9:1). Thus the very survival of the lineage of Saul comes to depend ironically on David’s fulfillment of his covenant of chesed with Jonathan.

I Samuel 21-30 David the Outlaw

David, now clearly in flight from Saul, comes to the shrine at Nob, near Jerusalem. The priest, Ahimelech, is the great-grandson of Eli, who with his three sons maintained the shrine at Shiloh. After the destruction of Shiloh by the Philistines, the priestly family apparently moved to Nob.

I Samuel 21:1-9 The Bread of the Presence

Ahimelech is surprised to see David, a commander, without his troops. David lies: he claims to be on a secret mission from the king and says he will meet up with his troops later (vv. 1-2). The writer makes here no moral judgment on David’s deception; apparently the reader is expected to see no wrong in it under the circumstances

facing David. David asks for bread—five loaves. It is actually to provide him with a large enough food supply to carry him far in his flight, but he allows it to appear as a normal request for provisions for himself and his soldiers. There is no common bread available, only the “holy bread,” that is, the “bread of the Presence” or the “show-bread”—bread which was kept before the altar for YHWH and renewed each Sabbath. Normally, this would not be eaten by anyone except the priests (see Lev. 24:5-9). Ahimelech asks if David and his followers are ritually clean—particularly if they have kept from sexual intercourse with women. David assures the priest that such is the case, since they were soldiers at war. Soldiers were obliged to abstain from sexual acts while at war, since war was a sacred act of commitment to YHWH. Under these conditions, the holy bread is given to David. It seems unlikely that no common bread could be found at a shrine where several people lived permanently. Among other things the passage seems intended to show that not only the royal but also the religious establishment of Saul’s kingdom is intimately involved—even if by deception—in the preservation of David’s life, for Ahimelech not only feeds him but arms him. Or perhaps the passage is intended to show David as already sharing in the priestly authority which was often held by kings—it is impossible to be sure. Jesus will refer to this passage as justification for his disciples’ “threshing” grain on the Sabbath: if David could break the law pertaining to the bread at a time of need, so could Jesus’ disciples, since human needs are supreme even over the rules of the Law (Matthew 12:1-4, Mark 2:23-28, Luke 6:1-5). These New Testament passages suggest that interpreters at the time of Jesus accepted David’s explanation concerning his troops. The gospel writers obviously intend a parallel between David’s followers and Jesus’ disciples.

In v. 7, Doeg the Edomite is introduced. He is “the chief of Saul’s shepherds,” according to the NRSV translation. The text is difficult here. The Jerusalem Bible translates “the chief of Saul’s guardsmen,” and it does seem likely, in view of what is to come, that Doeg was a mercenary of some sort. Nothing further is said about him during this story, but he reappears in 22:9-10 to report to Saul what he had seen at Nob. That he is “detained before YHWH” probably means that he is there for a cultic act of some kind. The Edomites were held in very low esteem by the Israelites—remember the story of Jacob and Esau, in which Esau was the father of the Edomites. Doeg, besides being the one who is to betray David to Saul (22:9-10), will eventually obey the command which Saul could not get an Israelite to obey: to kill the priests at Nob.

David asks Ahimelech for some kind of weapon, explaining that the king’s mission is so urgent that he has had to leave without his armor. The priest gives him the sword of Goliath, which has been kept “behind the ephod”—not a linen ephod, but an image of some sort. In I Sam. 17:54, David was said to have brought the head of Goliath to Jerusalem, but to have put the giant’s armor, presumably including the sword, in his own tent. As was noted, this verse cannot be historically correct, since Jerusalem was not at that time an Israelite city. We suggest that at a later time, after David had taken Jerusalem, the skull of Goliath may have been brought there, and that the armor may have been put in the tent at the shrine, not David’s own tent. This

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could account for its location in this story.

I Samuel 21:10-22:4 David on the Run

We return to Nob shortly, but between the two Nob episodes are placed these short tales of David on the run from Saul. David goes to Achish, the king of Gath. The story is probably misplaced: it is hardly to be supposed that David would rush into the midst of the Philistines carrying the sword of their champion, whom he had slain! The king’s servants remind Achish of David’s fame, reciting the song, “Saul has slain his thousands/ and David his ten thousands” (v. 11). They also call him “the king of the land.” It is impossible to determine whether this is simply an anachronism, or whether the editor is allowing the Philistines—unknowingly—to utter a prophetic statement. We are not even certain what the phrase meant. At any rate, David realizes that he is in danger and uses a brilliant tactic to escape: he pretends to have gone mad. The king cries out with the complaint that would be appropriate to many leaders: “Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence?” (v. 15) In ancient times the insane were considered to be possessed by a god. The ecstatic behavior of a prophet and the actions of the insane were similar, and supernatural possession was used to account for both. To have such a person in one’s camp, when the god in possession was that of one’s enemy, would not be acceptable. David, therefore, is allowed to leave.

David goes on to Adullam to a cave stronghold, where he gathers about him a personal army made up of “everyone . . . in distress . . . in debt . . . and discontented.” The phrase here translated “discontented” suggests particularly bitterness of deprivation. If we focus on David’s followers, we may well see them as the outcasts, even the dregs, of Saul’s society. If we focus on David, we find him depicted as champion of the disenfranchised, the oppressed. At any rate David has returned to Judah. The members of David’s band are probably mostly from David’s own tribe, Judah. They become his soldiers, however, not because David has become a tribal leader, but because of their common bond as outlaws. It is as an outlaw leader that David appears in I Sam. 23-26. **A tribal leader must always be careful to retain status within the tribe; a personal army such as David builds up here relieves him of such a concern.**

The Book of Ruth, a story of the love of a Moabite woman for her Israelite husband and his mother, was probably composed during the fourth century BCE, after the return from the Exile in Babylonia. A main purpose seems to have been to protest against the insistence that Jews not marry gentiles. According to the

Book of Ruth, a Moabite woman was the ancestress of King David. While the book in its present form is late, I Sam. 22:3-4 may supply some degree of evidence that a Moabite connection for David's ancestry is correct. David assumes that his family will be safe in Moab.

I Samuel 22:6-23 The Massacre of the Priests at Nob

We return to the story of the priests of Nob, now in the second of three acts. In the first act David has received food and arms from Ahimelech, one of the priests. Act II takes us to Gibeah, where Saul holds court in the open air "under the tamarisk tree on the height"—a shrine at a "high place." As he speaks to his servants, the increasingly suspicious, now almost mad king reveals how thoroughly he is convinced that David is actively campaigning to overthrow him. He addresses his servants as

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Benjaminites, drawing attention at one and the same time to their tribal relationship to him and their separation from David, the Judahite (v. 7). He reminds them that they can expect little from David if he should be successful in his rebellion—they will get no fields, vineyards, or positions of prominence (v. 7). In his disturbed state of mind Saul accuses his followers of treason and includes his own son, Jonathan, among the conspirators (v. 8).

At this point Doeg the Edomite, the thread that holds the story together—we remember that he was present at the shrine at Nob when David came seeking bread and arms—tells Saul of that episode. Saul summons the priests of Nob, accuses them of conspiracy, and refuses to accept the quite reasonable reply of the priest Ahimelech (vv. 9-15), who presents himself before Saul as having nothing to hide (v. 12: "Here I am, my lord").

Next Saul orders his guard to kill all the priests, but they will not do so—these are priests of YHWH. Even the command of the king is not enough to overcome the awe in which the priests were held. But Doeg, neither an Israelite nor a Yahwist, and eager to gain favor with Saul, massacres the priests (vv. 16-19). This episode completes the self-destruction of Saul. He has lost any chance of support from the prophets by his attempt to invade their center at Ramah (19:18-24); now he creates an offense before all Israelites by almost eliminating the entire house of Eli—only Abiathar escapes (v. 20). The priesthood must forever oppose him; and he can expect only grudging support from the people.

Abiathar, the last of the house of Eli, does escape and comes to David, bringing the ephod with him (22:20-23, 23:6). The enmity of both prophets and priests would be enough to guarantee Saul's eventual downfall, but Abiathar's move has an even more immediate result: Saul now possesses no way to inquire of YHWH before going into battle. Indeed, Saul will not communicate with YHWH by generally accepted methods again (cf. 28:6). David, whose selection by YHWH has been announced by Samuel, now possesses in physical form YHWH's presence with him and his cause. By means of the sacred lots contained in the ephod, YHWH will now take direction of David's campaign. Finally, the picture here is one of Saul as destroyer of the cult of YHWH and David as its preserver. After admitting that he was the "occasion" of the massacre, David accepts responsibility for Abiathar, and as he is the last of the priests of Nob, David is seen as rescuing YHWH's cult from extinction.

I Samuel 23:1-14 Keilah

Keilah, a town in Judah, is under attack by the Philistines. In particular, the Philistines are robbing the threshing floors. This means that, even after the battle is over, the remaining inhabitants will be doomed to starvation since their supply of food will be gone. David, presumably by means of the sacred lots, is instructed by YHWH to save Keilah and is assured of his victory. "David rescued the inhabitants of Keilah" (v. 5). The episode serves the purposes of the editor well, not only showing YHWH's guidance of David, but

also portraying David in the role a king should assume—defending his people.

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Verse 6 is parenthetical and editorial. It serves to connect the story of Keilah with the previous episode. It reintroduces Abiathar, whom David will consult about the will of YHWH, and with that reintroduction, returns us to the center of this section of I Samuel: the relationship of David and Saul.

Saul discovers that David is at Keilah and comes to take him. By means of the sacred lots, YHWH warns David that the people of Keilah will surrender him to Saul. Acting on this warning, David flees from Keilah and hides in the hill country. At first Saul seems to give up the chase, as he might just as well do. “Saul sought him every day, but the LORD did not give him into his hand” (v. 14).

I Samuel 23:15-18 David and Jonathan Covenant Again

Once again, and this time in completely unambiguous language, Jonathan hails David as the next king of Israel and pledges his own support. In this story, as in the immediately preceding ones, the editor is demonstrating the legitimacy of David’s claim to the throne. The story is probably best understood as a kind of introduction to the story which follows. The David who spares Saul’s life is completely aware of his own destiny.

I Samuel 23:19-24:22, and 26:1-25 Saul Seeks David and David Spares Saul

These two accounts form a doublet—they are two sources telling the same story. There are differences between the stories, but they are essentially the same in their structure and are probably about the same event.

Chapter 23:25-29 appears to be a separate story inserted into the main account. In 23:19-24, David is at Horesh in the wilderness of Ziph and is betrayed to Saul by the Ziphites. The story follows logically if vv. 25-29 are omitted and if 24:1 is seen as an editorial comment.

Saul looks for David with three thousand soldiers. David and his outlaws are hiding in a cave when Saul enters the cave “to relieve himself” (24:3). David’s followers, hidden in the darkness of the cave, urge David to kill Saul. David goes so far as to cut off the skirt of Saul’s robe—without Saul’s being aware of it. But he cannot bring himself to lay a hand on Saul, for Saul is—in spite of his unworthy behavior and in spite of YHWH’s obvious rejection of him—YHWH’s anointed.

After Saul has left the cave, David calls to him and asserts his loyalty to Saul, offering the piece of Saul’s robe as evidence that opportunity to harm the king had been given and refused. Saul repents of his suspicions against David and his attempts to kill him. He even declares that he knows that David will be king and asks David not to destroy the house of Saul so that his name will be preserved through descendants. The version of the story in chapter 26 differs in the details concerning David’s opportunity to kill Saul. David and Abishai, the brother of David’s general, Joab, slip into Saul’s camp at night and steal Saul’s spear, the sign of his authority. A confrontation between David and Saul follows, similar to that in the other version, and Saul, as before, repents. Saul does not go so far as to admit that David will be king, but he calls a blessing on David and says, “You will do many things and will succeed in them” (v. 25). This story is certainly the older one. Though YHWH is at

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work in both versions, God works more subtly here. David is more active and less pious here. Saul is not so completely denigrated.

The independent story in 23:25-29 also tells of an attack by Saul on David, but this time in the wilderness of Maon. The story ends with a note accounting for the place name, “Rock of Escape.” The editor probably included this separate story in the account of the attack at Ziph to show once more YHWH’s protection of David. There can be no doubt that YHWH is the main actor in all of these stories. It is YHWH who directs events, delivering Saul into David’s hands, and it is David’s respect of YHWH that causes him to spare Saul, YHWH’s anointed.

David and Saul will not meet again. When David returns to Israel after having served in the army of the Philistines, the king will be dead.

I Samuel 25 Abigail and Nabal

Before this story begins we have first notification of the death of Samuel—“and all Israel had mourned for him.” The notice is repeated in 28:3. Why we do not know. In this story David and his band of what would today be termed guerrilla fighters ask for provisions from a wealthy farmer, Nabal. Nabal gruffly refuses, and David prepares to battle with him. Nabal’s wife, Abigail, shrewdly intercedes, knowing that David would win. She brings gifts to David and pleads for mercy. “Nabal” means “fool,” particularly in the sense of moral moron, and Abigail pleads that it was his foolishness that prompted Nabal’s inhospitality to David. She foretells David’s successes by the power of YHWH, that he will become “prince over Israel” (v. 30), and begs that he not shed blood now for which he will later repent.

David grants her petition. Nabal continues meanwhile to act the fool by holding a feast and becoming very drunk. In the morning, when he is sober, Abigail tells him of her encounter with David. When he hears this, “his heart died within him; he became like a stone. And about ten days later the LORD struck Nabal; and he died” (vv. 37-38). This sounds like a stroke, from which Nabal did not recover, but in the mind of the Israelite storyteller, it is YHWH’s act: vengeance is brought by YHWH. David marries Abigail. In vv. 43-44, the editor tells of other wives David took: Ahinoam of Jezreel and Michal, the daughter whom Saul later took away from David to give to another man. The focus of the passage is not entirely on David. What he gains in marrying Abigail, who is not only “clever and beautiful” (v. 3), but also the wife of a wealthy Calebite landowner, is significant. He may have lost Michal, but by marrying Abigail and Ahinoam, he begins—under YHWH, of course—to build a base of power in central Judah.

I Samuel 27:1-28:2 David with the Philistines

In the attempt to evade Saul, David goes once more to Achish, the king of Gath. Achish gives him Ziklag, a town within the borders of Judah which had been held by the Philistines. An historical note is given: Ziklag remained a personal possession of the king, not part of the regular domain of Judah. To persuade the Philistine king of his loyalty, David conducts raids on southern peoples who are not Israelites, claiming all the time that his raids were against Israel. Achish is convinced that David has

indeed renounced his own people and is loyal to the Philistines. The story of David and Achish continues in chapters. 29-30. There we see not only ingenuity on David’s part, but also loyalty on the part of Achish—he joins Michal and Jonathan and Abigail as loyal to David’s cause and his eventual and inevitable success.

This scene has intrigued many storytellers. It reads like a scene from a Shakespearean play. Samuel had died, as mentioned also in 25:1. The Philistines are massed at Shunem against Saul’s army at Mt. Gilboa. The Valley of Jezreel, stretching from Megiddo to the Jordan River, was the natural pass from the coastal plain inland to Syria and Mesopotamia. Apparently the Philistines are attempting to cut northern Israel in two. Saul can obtain no word from YHWH, “not by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets” (v. 6). He has made enemies

of the prophets and the priests; the Urim and Thummim, the sacred lots, are with David in the hands of Abiathar the priest. In sum, YHWH has withdrawn from Saul.

I Samuel 28:3-25 Saul and the “Witch of Endor”

In his zeal for YHWH earlier in his career, Saul outlawed the mediums and wizards—those who foretold the future by means other than by appealing to YHWH (v. 3; cf. Lev. 19:31; 20:6). In his desperate situation, Saul seeks direction from the very ones he has outlawed: he asks for a woman who is a medium (in earlier translations, a “witch”). His attempt to root out such persons has been so ineffective that his servants have no difficulty in providing one: “There is a medium at Endor,” which is nearby (v. 7).

Saul disguises himself before approaching the woman. He asks her to call Samuel. In v. 12, the text makes no sense: “When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman said to Saul, ‘Why have you deceived me? You are Saul.’” Probably the text originally said, “When the woman saw Saul . . . and recognized him.” When she tells Saul what she saw while in a trance, she says that she saw a “god” coming up out of the earth. The Hebrew word is *Elohim*. In this context it must mean a “spirit.” This is one of the earliest glimpses we have of the old Israelite idea of Sheol (SHE-ohl), the place of the departed. There was no expectation of a life after death at this stage of Israelite thought—at the most, one “slept with his fathers.” It is difficult to imagine a person simply not being. To “sleep” with one’s forebears is still to have some kind of existence. Sheol, similar to the Greek Hades (HAY-dees), was thought to be a place under the ground where the dead “slept.” From Sheol the medium has called the “ghost” of Samuel.

Samuel is angry at being so summoned. Saul tells him of his desperate situation, in which no word can be obtained from YHWH. Samuel reminds Saul that he had earlier declared that YHWH had turned away from Saul. Verses 17-19a are probably an editorial insertion, but they fit with the general reproach which Samuel makes to Saul. YHWH has abandoned Saul, and will give Saul, his sons, and his army over to the Philistines on the next day (v. 19b). Saul is overcome by despair.

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I Samuel 29-30 David Among the Philistines

Although David has won the trust of Achish of Gath through trickery, the other Philistine lords remember the song sung about David’s valor and do not trust that he and his forces will be with them at the time of the decisive battle against Saul. Possibly they remember the way in which the “Hebrews” who were with the Philistines turned on them at the first successful counterattack under Jonathan (14:21). They insist that David and his troops stay behind. David’s reply to Achish is ambiguous enough to indicate that the Philistine lords may be right. Achish takes the phrase “my lord, the king” to refer to him, but Saul has remained YHWH’s anointed for David, and there is no reason to believe that the phrase cannot still apply to Saul.

The story of the destruction first of Ziklag and of the attack on the Amalekite force is somewhat similar to that of the deliverance of Keilah (23:1-5), but the similarities are not enough to suggest that the two stories form a doublet. The hated Amalekites have raided the town during David’s absence and have taken people away for sale as slaves—including David’s two wives, Abigail and Ahinoam. The people in their grief blame David for not being there to protect them. David, after consulting YHWH, pursues the Amalekites, kills them, regains the captives from Ziklag, and takes the Amalekites’ herds and flocks as spoil. He distributes these among his soldiers and their families as well as throughout southwestern Judah. This again is evidence of David’s political wisdom, or at least his cleverness. He not only spared the Israelites in his raids from the Philistine lands, harassing their enemies instead, but now he sends them presents of the loot from their chief enemy, the Amalekites. David’s ability to provide for Judah is probably also intended to stand as one more contrast to the failures of Saul, whose death is depicted in the next chapter.

I Samuel 31- II Samuel 1 The Death of Saul and David's Lament

The Philistines sweep over the Israelite forces. Saul is wounded and pleads with his armor-bearer to kill him, but the servant refuses. The fear (v. 4) that stops him from killing the king could not have been ordinary cowardice, for he later kills himself. He fears to lay his hand on the anointed of YHWH. Saul must fall on his own sword. The next day the Philistines find his body and know that final victory is theirs. They send his armor to the temple of their gods and put his body on the wall of Bethshan as a witness to the Israelites. The body is rescued by the people of Jabesh-gilead, the city Saul defended as his first act at the time when he was still favored by YHWH (I Sam. 11).

A different story is told in II Sam. 1. An Amalekite who seems to have been serving with Saul reports Saul's death to David. The young Amalekite says that he, at Saul's request, killed Saul. Perhaps the young man hopes to gain favor with David by claiming to have killed the king, but David rewards him differently. He has the young man put to death for presuming to kill YHWH's anointed.

David's lament for Saul follows in vv. 19-27. The song is very early, and there is a possibility that David himself composed it. The song certainly expresses the deep respect, even love, which David had for the king, and his deep grief for Saul and Jonathan. Notice how, as so often happens, popular usage has given a biblical phrase a meaning completely opposite to its original intent: "How the mighty have fallen!"

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(vv. 19-27) It now is used as an almost joyful exclamation when someone proud and vain comes to humiliation; in the lament, David mourns that those who were truly mighty have now fallen.

We have come to a turn in our story. Note how little is immediately resolved by Saul's death. It is true that he is dead—and his sons as well. That does not result in David's immediately becoming king. The Philistines have overrun Israel, and her people are without a king. David, we know, is anointed of YHWH. He will become king, there can be no doubt; but the how of his becoming king still has to be explained. That is the task of the stories that immediately follow.

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End of chapter

Hold the two interpretations simultaneously ^{back}

This is sometimes called doublethink. Doubleplusungood.

Rightfully supplanting Saul [back](#)

Well David succeeded, didn't he? History is usually written by the winners.

A Samuel-like figure [back](#)

I think that comparing John the Baptist to Samuel is an insult to the former.

Largely abandoned [back](#)

Masterly use of the passive voice! It has been said :) that there are only two situations where it's good to use the passive:

- 1) Where the actor's identity is not known.
- 2) Where it's better that the actor's identity not be known.

Deeper knowledge [back](#)

OK, I'm a grumpy old man who was brought up to believe that the correct use of words matters more than most things on earth - live with it or don't. But I don't like to see evaluative words like "deeper" used, when the perfectly fine descriptive word "greater" exists.

Covenant [back](#)

Could we use this passage as a counter-argument to the famous passage in Leviticus?

Could account for [back](#)

This is a widow. The following will help you remember the difference between a widow and an orphan"

"An orphan is left behind, but a widow goes on alone."

