# The Theology of the Book of Samuel

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# Abbreviations

1QSam, 4QSam Fragmentary manuscripts of Samuel from Qumran Cave 1 and Cave 4

AB The Anchor Bible

*BibInt* *Biblical Interpretation*

BZAW Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

*CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly*

CEB Common English Bible

Diss. Dissertation

FOTL The Forms of the Old Testament Literature

*JBL Journal of Biblical Literature*

*JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*

JSOTSup Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement

KJV King James Version (Authorized Version)

LHBOTS Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies

LXX Septuagint

MT Masoretic Text

NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament

NIV New International Version

NJPS New Jewish Publication Society Translation

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

OTL Old Testament Library

*TDOT Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*

Vg Vulgate

*VT Vetus Testamentum*

VTSup Vetus Testamentum Supplement

WBC Word Biblical Commentary

*ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

English translations and printed Hebrew Bibles have different versions of the chapter divisions in the Scriptures, which were introduced into the text in the medieval period. Where necessary, I give the English reference first, then in square brackets the equivalent in a printed Hebrew Bible: e.g., 2 Sam 19:3 [4].

# Introduction

First and Second Samuel tell the story of a crucial century early in Israel’s life. After introducing Samuel himself, they relate how Saul became king and failed as king, and how David became king and also then went through crises. The story takes the Israelites from being a loose collection of clans living in homesteads, villages, and small townships, to being a state with a capital and a central government, a king whose son will succeed him, and prophets who support him and/or confront him. They share a relationship with their God who lives among them. At the beginning of the story he is living above the “covenant chest” (the “ark”) in a sanctuary at Shiloh; by the end of the story the sanctuary has come to be in the capital city and their king is planning to build a temple there. At the beginning of the story they are under pressure from the Philistines to the west and north; at the end of the story they are in control of an area corresponding to the modern bounds of Israel and Palestine along with much of what is now Jordan and Syria. These epoch-making developments take place over a period of a few decades, the reign of two kings, maybe from about 1070 BC to about 970 BC. The focus of the story does not lie simply on these developments but on the human and family processes and events associated with them – the family origins of the first prophet, the conflicts between the first king and his apparent rival, and the family conflicts of this rival when he becomes the second king.

Three related theological paradoxes emerge from this process and constitute central features of the theology of Samuel. Yahweh is ambivalent about the introduction of a monarchy that made this development possible. Events involve Yahweh’s activity and also human initiative. And both the first two kings whom Yahweh chose were religiously and morally ambiguous characters.

Whereas First and Second Samuel appear as two books in modern Hebrew and English Bibles, the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Batra* 14b) refers to Samuel as one book, and it is one book in Hebrew manuscripts, including the Masoretic Text. First Samuel is a coherent unit with a proper beginning (Samuel’s birth) and a meaningful end (Saul’s death), “but when read together with 2 Samuel these elements increasingly appear in retrospect to have been a tragic episode en route to something else.”[[1]](#footnote-1) If one were to attach a single name to the entire work as its subject it would be David.[[2]](#footnote-2) This volume thus studies “Samuel” as a whole; the context should make clear when Samuel refers to the book and when it refers to the prophet Samuel. The division between Samuel and Kings is slightly odd, as it is 1 Kings 1 – 2 that brings the David story to an end. Kings leads seamlessly on from Samuel, and the Septuagint is onto something when it describes Samuel-Kings as the “Four Books of Reigns.” But 2 Samuel does come to a conclusion of its own, and 1 Kings 1 – 2 is the beginning of Solomon’s story as well as the end of David’s.

Like most of the Scriptures, Samuel is anonymous, and we can only make informed guesses about the process whereby it came into being.

* The Talmud (*Baba Batra* 15a) goes on to name Samuel as the book’s author, but then qualifies that statement by adding that Gad and Nathan completed the work after Samuel’s death. Samuel is a key figure in the book as the person who anoints first Saul and then David. There is hard information in the book that would need to go back to the time of David and Solomon, and one can imagine that people in that time would be interested in having an account of how the monarchy came into being and how David and Solomon came to the throne.[[3]](#footnote-3) Scholarly theories have inferred that from that time there were indeed accounts of Samuel, of the adventures of the covenant chest, of the rise of David, and of the story of David’s family that was background to Solomon’s succeeding him, accounts that were incorporated into the book as we have it.
* The nearest thing in the scroll to a concrete clue about its origin lies in its references to things that remain true “now” or “today” (1 Sam 5:5; 6:18; 9:9; 27:6; 30:25; 2 Sam 4:3; 6:8; 18:18), but they do not indicate when “now” or “today” is, except in one reference to the kings of Judah (1 Sam 27:6). This note, then, comes from a time after the split between Ephraim and Judah after Solomon’s day and before the end of the Judahite monarchy in 587. Theologians with a “prophetic” outlook in the time of Isaiah or Jeremiah might have generated a version of the story of the monarchy’s history that incorporated thos earlier materials.[[4]](#footnote-4) In Jewish thinking, Samuel is part of “The Former Prophets,” while an influential scholarly theory links a first edition of the narrative as a whole with the time of King Josiah, the late seventh century.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* The next nearest thing to a clue is the narrative’s raising the question of who will succeed David and build the temple, but not answering it, and leaving the story of David hanging in mid-air. Other points of connection suggest that Samuel is written in a way that makes links with what will follow in Kings. The Septuagint’s seeing them as the four books of Reigns coheres with the possibility of seeing Samuel and Kings as a two-part work telling the story of the monarchic period as a whole from its beginnings to its caesura in 587. Perhaps they originally belonged together like Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers, and like them were subdivided for convenience, as Samuel itself was subdivided later. Samuel, then, more or less as we have it belongs in the time after 587.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* There is more than average difference between the versions of Samuel in the Masoretic Text, in the Septuagint, and in the fragmentary manuscripts among the Qumran scrolls.[[7]](#footnote-7) The marginal notes in modern translations indicate that they often follow these other versions of the book; I have usually stayed with MT. The existence of these slightly different versions indicates that Jewish teachers were still amplifying the book in the Persian and Hellenistic period, perhaps in different contexts in Judah, Egypt, and Babylon. Indeed, as an aspect of scholarly inclination to ask whether the First Testament as a whole largely comes from the Second Temple era, it’s been suggested that this period was the key one in which Samuel came into existence.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Different groups of modern scholars are more inclined to focus on one or other of these periods as fundamental to an understanding of the book, and I will occasionally draw attention to the way the story might have come home in different periods. My own hunch regarding the process is that the second of the four stages above is the key one; the crucial creative work on the book happened in Jerusalem some time during the divided monarchy. With any narrative, it can be worth asking what is the key question it seeks to answer, and a key question in Samuel might then be, “How did we come to have kings, anyway?” The vagaries of the Judahite monarchy could make this question natural. More specifically the question might be, “Who was this David, who continues to be so important to us?” David’s significance as the first great king, as the recipient of Yahweh’s promise, and as the benchmark by which Judahite monarchs are measured in Kings, would also make this question natural.

An understanding of Shakespeare’s plays (for instance) benefits from a knowledge of the period in which they were written, yet they make sense, stand, and speak independently of such knowledge. Likewise, the Samuel narrative makes sense, stands, and speaks independently of our being sure which period it comes from. Like other works from the ancient world such as the Iliad, it needs to be understood against the broad historical background of its culture, but within that broad context, more insight emerges from reading it in its own right as a narrative than from focusing on questions about precise historical background.

While the book does not reveal its author’s identity, we can infer what kind of person it was. He or she

* Had research access to state records and existent accounts of events in the time of Samuel, Saul and David
* Had the skill and education to write a work of some length – in other words, he or she was a scribe, and someone who would be at home in the circles of the “wise”
* Was gifted with the literary ability to paint a creative portrait of events, to imagine conversations that people had, and to work out what they would be thinking
* Had a prophetic sensitivity to what Yahweh was doing in this sequence of events and to what Yahweh thought of events as they developed
* Knew that Yahweh was at work in them but also knew that he mostly works behind the scenes through or despite the actions of human beings
* Had a prophetic perspective in emphasizing faithfulness, proper government, commitment, and truthfulness (*ṣədāqâ*, *mišpāṭ*, *ḥesed*, *’ĕmet/’ĕmûnâ*) and the need for kings to heed prophets
* Affirmed a commitment to the worship of Yahweh in the sanctuaries and eventually in the temple in Jerusalem but did not work with a specifically priestly perspective
* Was broad-minded, confident, and fearless in painting a portrait of people such as Eli, Samuel, Saul, David, and Joab
* Yet was then confident enough to leave the story’s audience to come to their assessment of these individuals in their complexity
* Emphasized the role of significant women, beginning with Hannah, almost ending with Rizpah, and including Abigail, Michal, Bathsheba, Tamar, and the smart woman in 2 Samuel 14.[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Was fervently pro-Israel over against nations such as Moab and Ammon, but open-minded in relation to foreigners such as Uriah and Araunah.

If one wanted a figure to whom one might attach the work in one’s imagination, then it might be Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14-20).

While Samuel opens in a way that could constitute an absolute beginning (it compares with the beginning to Ruth), it can be seen as continuing from Joshua and Judges, which link forward to it. Broadly it is thus part of the much longer story that runs from Joshua to Kings (the “Former Prophets”) or from Deuteronomy to Kings (the “Deuteronomistic History”) or from Genesis to Kings (the “First History”); in Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah (the “Second History”) Chronicles then retells the story from the end of Saul’s life onwards in an account of David that focuses on his preparations for the building of the temple and reflects its context in the Second Temple period. Samuel, then, forms part of Israel’s story from its origins to the end of the monarchy, and in relating the story of the monarchy’s origins, it has an important place in that narrative.

To understand the working of the sequence of scrolls from Genesis to Kings, an illuminating model is a sequence of television series. As Series Eight in the sequence that runs from Genesis to Kings, Samuel picks up issues left unresolved in Series Seven, tells its own story, and closes with unresolved questions that make the audience continue into Series Nine.

Like many television series and movies, Samuel is not simply history, but neither is it historical fiction. It is dramatized, visionary history, not chronological, objective history. While it concerns itself with things that happened, it uses imagination to discern what sort of thing people could appropriately have said, felt, and thought, and what will help the audience understand the significance of what was happening.

In the First Testament, there are works that are close to chronological history (e.g., parts of 2 Kings) and works that are close to fiction (e.g., Jonah), and scholarly views on Samuel’s historical value vary. Whereas figures in Kings such as Omri and Hezekiah feature in other Middle Eastern documents, we have no mention of Saul or David, though an inscription from Tel Dan does refer to “the house of David.” The book covers a period when Assyria and Egypt were in decline, which could make David freer to assert himself in the region than would have been possible at some other times. Other peoples such as the Aramaeans, the Ammonites, and the Philistines were doing the same. In this sense, David’s story is historically plausible. But intensive scholarly research over two centuries has not generated progress in agreement on Samuel’s historical value. It surely never will. There are scholars who believe that the narrative is simply factual, and scholars who believe it is pure fiction. While my working assumption is that it is something in between, I do not know which pole it is nearer to. On one hand, I assume that people such as Hannah, Eli, Saul, David, Abigail, Mephibosheth, and Bathsheba indeed lived in Israel in the eleventh and tenth centuries and lived the kind of lives that Samuel relates. In this sense they are like people such as Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, and Gedaliah in 2 Kings. While the Christian description of Joshua to Nehemiah as “The Historical Books” may give readers a narrow or thin perspective, it is not totally inappropriate.[[10]](#footnote-10) But in telling these people’s stories, Samuel uses the techniques of Jonah in imagining their lives, thinking, and conversations. It sits between Homer and Herodotus as a work that relates a historical story in an imaginative way.

Studying the Samuel narrative is then again comparable with studying Shakespeare’s “historical” plays. One can investigate their sources and the historical events to which they refer, and/or study the plays themselves and their theology or ethics or ideology; the forms of study have different aims. In this volume we are concerned with “the plays.” Actually, “you wouldn’t go to *Macbeth* to learn about the history of Scotland – you go to it to learn what a man feels like after he’s gained a kingdom and lost his soul.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Samuel has a further parallel with (post)modern drama. It’s quite common for individual episodes in a television series to jump forward and backward, and to make such jumps within an episode. So it is with Samuel. First Samuel 13 – 15 comprises two accounts of Yahweh’s decision to terminate Saul’s reign or not allow him to be the beginning of a dynasty. These accounts directly follow on his accession as king and they are but the beginning of an account of his reign. They function to tell the auditors where the story is going, but their message is not presupposed by the chapters that follow, which tell the auditors how his story eventually reached this denouement. Samuel’s own story constitutes a series of snapshots from his birth, his summons maybe twenty years later, his challenge to turn to Yahweh another twenty years later, and his old age (though he then takes fifteen chapters to die). In David’s story, the sequence of material in 2 Samuel 2 – 10 is as much thematic as chronological, though 2 Samuel 11 – 20 then follows a more connected chronological sequence. The closing four chapters comprise a collection of songs of praise, lists, and stories from different periods to bring the book to an end. The order of the book is often dramatic rather than chronological.

Further, several writers, directors, and producers of a television series may contribute different episodes. The Samuel scroll brings together material of various kinds from various origins, with less concern for smoothness than normally obtains in television. The material includes:

* An account of Samuel’s origins (1 Sam 1 – 4:1a)

within it, Hannah’s thanksgiving in 2:1-10 stands out as a separable unit

* A narrative about the covenant chest (4:1b – 7:1)
* An account about how Saul came to be king (7:2 – 12:25)

It incorporates more positive and more negative accounts of the idea of having a king[[12]](#footnote-12)

* A narrative about how Samuel rejected Saul (13:1 – 16:13)

It includes two stories about Yahweh’s dismissal of Saul, which opens the way for David

* A substantial narrative about how David comes to succeed Saul (1 Sam 16:14 – Sam 4:5). It includes several examples of two stories going over the same ground: two about David’s introduction to Saul (16:14 – 23; 17:1-40), two about the Ziphites betraying David to Saul (23:19-28; 26:1-5), and two about David refraining from killing Saul when he has the chance (24: 1-22; 26:6-25).
* An account of David’s becoming king and his success as king (2 Sam 5:1 – 10:19)
* A substantial narrative about the great failures of David’s life and the consequences regarding the question of who will succeed him (11:1 – 20:25). .
* Some closing footnotes to David’s story (21:1 – 24:25)

While the broad structure and plot of the work is clear, it doesn’t provide explicit markers of a structure, so any structure of the kind just outlined comes in part from the imagination of the reader; other commentators lay it out differently.[[13]](#footnote-13)

There are many ways to do Old or New Testament theology, as is revealed by a glance at the volumes in the series to which this volume belongs and in its companion series on the New Testament. Different approaches allow different insights to emerge from the text. Samuel is a narrative book, which makes for a distinctive approach to doing theology and distinctive implications for reflection on its theological significance. This fact is more obvious since the “literary turn” in the Humanities during the last decades of the twentieth century, which affected biblical studies and issued in a number of illuminating studies of Samuel.[[14]](#footnote-14) These literary studies have especially worked with the regular focuses of literary study, particularly the human characters; in this volume we work more with the theological implications of the narrative.

The characteristics of Samuel’s theological approach as a narrative need not be unique to a narrative book, but they come out particularly clearly in a narrative book.

* It focuses more on something that God did do, once, than on general statements about what God always does. It thus invites readers to live in a world in which God did this thing once.
* Yet it also speaks about things that God and people recurrently do. It thus invites people to live in a world in which these things recur.
* It can incorporate statements that stands in tension with each other. God relented; God does not relent.
* It can thus leave irresolvable enigmas unresolved: what is the relationship between God’s grace and human commitment to God?
* It can tell its readers the facts without necessarily telling them how to interpret them.
* It can leave questions open. Did God forgive David for his affair with Bathsheba and his having Uriah killed?

In discussing Samuel’s theology, one might proceed by writing chapters on its understanding of God, of Israel, of prophecy, of monarchy, and so on, or one might proceed by writing a chapter by chapter theological exposition of the text. I have done something in between in dividing the book into six parts, working through the parts one by one, and looking from a theological perspective at topics as they arise. Sometimes these topics are explicitly theological (e.g., God, his activity in the world, and his relationships with people). Sometimes they are more general (e.g., family or monarchy) and we consider their significance in the context of human life lived before God.

Doing such theological study can then seek to confine itself to teasing out the theological implications of the Scriptures themselves, or it can allow for evaluating their theology in light of convictions one brings to them. My focus lies on the first of these alternatives. Where the theology of the text goes against my convictions or convictions that are common in my culture, I seek to let the text confront them.

# Yahweh Who Prepares the Way for a King (1 Samuel 1:1 – 4:1a)

The overarching theological theme in 1 Samuel 1 – 12 is Yahweh as one who designates a king. There are two stages to the process whereby that designation happens. First Yahweh brings into being and summons a prophet who will do the designating of this first king, and of the second one (the third will emerge without divine intervention). Then this prophet does the actual designating, summoning and anointing the king. The exposition of the overarching theological theme and its implications concerning the nature of God and the nature of monarchy incidentally allows other themes to develop: something about the nature of family, about prayer, about ministry, about vocation, and about being the people of God.

In the Septuagint and thus in most English Bibles, Samuel follows Ruth, and shares the dynamics of that story. Ruth is a story about a family that suggests a family theology, a story about individuals that suggests a theology of the individual, and a story about women that suggests a theology of womanhood. It implies that Yahweh is active in its story, though only once does it explicitly speak of his acting, in way that parallels Samuel: “Yahweh enabled her to get pregnant” (Ruth 4:13). The close of Ruth then relates it to the broader narrative of Yahweh’s involvement with the story of the monarchy. In connection with the anticipatory element in 1 Samuel 1, the parallel with the end of Ruth is especially significant: the Ruth story looks on to David, the Hannah story to Saul.

Samuel links in a related way with Judges, which precedes Samuel in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. “In those days there was no king in Israel – an individual would do what was upright in his eyes” (Judg 21:25) makes an appropriate conclusion to an unsavory story about the Israelites slaughtering most of the Benjaminite clan, giving four hundred Gileadite girls as wives to the surviving Benjaminites, and directing the rest of the survivors to the annual festival at Shiloh where girls would be joining in the festival, so as to get some to go off with them. Samuel begins with a more seemly story about this annual festival. The story anticipates a time when there will be kings in Israel who might constrain such waywardness. Notwithstanding their faults, maybe Saul and David do.

Before they appear, 1 Samuel begins as an account of Yahweh’s bringing into being and summoning a prophet who will designate both those kings. It opens as a story about a family and about its individual members, about their relationship with Yahweh and Yahweh’s relationship with them.

## The God of Hannah

The God of Samuel is Yahweh. The book makes nothing of the possible etymological meaning of this name any more than it does of the names Eli, Elqanah, Hannah, or Peninnah (Samuel’s own name will be a different matter). Like most names its significance lies in what it refers to. Yahweh is “simply” the name of the God of Israel. Eli blesses Hannah in the name of “the God of Israel” (1:17) and subsequently a prophet-type figure speaks in the name of “Yahweh, the God of Israel” (3:30; cf. 10:18; 14:41; 20:12; 23:10, 11; 25:32, 34; 2 Sam 12:7). The title “God of Israel” recurs on the lips of the Philistines (5:7 – 6:5) and on David’s lips (2 Sam 7:27; 23:3).

Near the beginning of Samuel (2:1-10) there comes a song of praise that makes key theological affirmations concerning who this Yahweh is. It glorifies Yahweh in three respects:

Yahweh is the all-powerful God

Yahweh turns things upside down

Yahweh will give strength to his king.[[15]](#footnote-15)

It is Hannah, Samuel’s mother, who proclaims this song of praise as Yahweh has enabled her to move from barrenness to birth; that move is complemented by a movement from protest to praise.[[16]](#footnote-16) The content of her praise does not relate to the particularities of her experience. By implication, that experience assists her to articulate broader truths about Yahweh.

First, Yahweh is the crag onto which his people can climb (2:2). It is in this way that Yahweh is unique as the holy one. Hannah’s description of Yahweh as holy is almost the first such description in the First Testament story (Josh 24:19 precedes it) and almost the only occasion when Samuel describes Yahweh as holy (1 Sam 6:20 is the other example). It does bear comparison with the description of Yahweh in Exodus 15 as majestic in holiness. Declaring that “there is no holy one like Yahweh” presupposes that there are lots of holy ones, as the First Testament doesn’t mind presupposing that there are lots of *’ĕlōhîm*, of gods. The word “holy” applies to any supernatural beings. It denotes the metaphysical distinction between them and human beings. But there is variety among the holy beings, as there is among *’ĕlōhîm*. Yahweh is supreme over other holy ones and is the source of their life. They can die, he does not. The First Testament is not concerned to declare that Yahweh is the only being who can properly be described as *’ĕlōhîm* – it’s not very interested in monotheism. It’s interested in declaring that Yahweh is more powerful than all other *’ĕlōhîm*, than all other holy ones. If Hebrew could distinguish orthographically between God and a god, then this ability would help it to make the point. Its declaration is that Yahweh is uniquely formidable as his people’s protector. Therefore people should not pretend to an impressiveness that they lack. Their self-deception and willfulness will be exposed. Yahweh is the God who must be acknowledged and who cannot be put right (2:3). “The song of Hannah emerges as a study in power.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Second, Yahweh is therefore capable of turning things upside down and bringing about a reversal whereby people who looked strong collapse and feeble people become mysteriously strong, the well-endowed must seek jobs and the hungry have plenty, the childless are fertile and the fertile are bereaved, the alive die and the dying recover, the haves and have-nots and the insignificant and powerful change places (2:4-8a).[[18]](#footnote-18) In some ways Hannah’s psalm anticipates motifs within Samuel: Yahweh will deliver, he will prove to be a crag on which someone may find safety, he will silence the arrogant, he will break the bows of the mighty. In other ways her affirmation does not describe the activity Yahweh undertakes within Samuel, and people would need to think about it (for instance) after 587.[[19]](#footnote-19) The affirmation also relates backwards to the deprivations and afflictions described in Judges.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Hannah returns more plainly to power the other side of her study of reversal, making explicit that it is Yahweh’s possession of power that makes possible the imposition of reversal. Yahweh has this capacity because he is the one who established the world with stability (2:8b). Whereas the first two themes in the song concern the strong and the weak and then the haves and the have nots, with little implicit religious or ethical slant, this part of the song adds that dimension. Yahweh protects people who are committed to him, whereas the faithless go silent into the darkness of death (v. 9a). It is the people who assert themselves against Yahweh that he shatters (2:9b-10aα). He makes decisions about the entire world (2:10aβγ). In the opening cola of her song, Hannah opened her mouth wide, in the final strophe God himself does.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Hannah’s song resembles a psalm, and it would fit in the Psalter, which helps to clarify its meaning and significance. It implies that what Yahweh has done for her is an expression of Yahweh’s activity on the widest canvas, like many songs of praise in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 113). Yahweh’s blessing of her leads her into an act of praise that acclaims the entire breadth of Yahweh’s activity. A psalm of protest will sometimes end with such an act of praise, and so may a thanksgiving psalm (e.g., Ps 22; 30). When Yahweh delivers an individual or a community, it issues in praise in general terms, because Yahweh’s act gives expression to who he always is. While one can make links with Hannah’s story by seeing Peninnah behind the reference to enemies and seeing Hannah as the mother of seven, the points of connection are weak. “She sings not just as the mother of Samuel but as a mother of Israel.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The pattern suggested by the Psalms is that one protests to Yahweh, gives thanks for Yahweh’s answer, and praises Yahweh for who he is and for his characteristic acts which have been (partially) embodied in his response to the protest. Here Hannah jumps straight to the last.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The third way in which the song glorifies Yahweh also parallels some psalms, in particular Psalm 18 which reappears at the other end of Samuel as 2 Samuel 22. Hannah prays “in a prophetic spirit” (Tg), like Zechariah (Luke 1:67).[[24]](#footnote-24) Her song speaks about the king for whom her story prepares the way:

He gives vigor to his king,

lifts up the horn of his anointed one. (2:10)

When animals such as bulls fight, their horn is their key expression of strength. Breaking a horn signifies defeat; elevating one’s horn signifies victory. Yahweh ensures that his anointed does hold his horn high. The close of the song also clarifies the significance of its beginning:

My heart has exulted in Yahweh,

my horn has lifted high through Yahweh.

My mouth has opened wide at my enemies,

because I have rejoiced in your deliverance. (2:1)

While Hannah speaks here, she does not speak for herself. The voice is “the triumphant voice of the Lord’s Anointed.”[[25]](#footnote-25) The language of enemies, deliverance, horn, rock, strength, Sheol, exalting, silence, and thunder resounds again on David’s lips at the other end of Samuel, in 2 Samuel 22. The close of the psalm thus answers the question “Who speaks?” raised by the beginning. That psalm begins with the king speaking (“Yahweh is my crag”), but it also speaks about the king (“a tower of deliverance to his king and one who acts in commitment to his anointed, to David and to his offspring for all time”). Psalms 61 and 63 are other examples of movement between speaking as the king and for the king. There, a psalmist wrote the psalm that way for the king; and here a psalmist makes Hannah the mouthpiece for such an act of praise. She speaks as if she were the king at the beginning and speaks of the king at the end. In her psalm Hannah “pleaded” (2:1), and a midrash neatly has Hannah praying for Peninnah.[[26]](#footnote-26) Actually the whole psalm is spoken for the (second) king whom her son will anoint. He is the one who looks open-mouthed at his defeated enemies and rejoices in Yahweh’s deliverance.

Admittedly it’s not clear that Saul or David facilitate the reversals she describes. While Hannah belongs in a sequence of feisty women such as Rebekah and Deborah in the First Testament, it’s not clear that kings generally facilitate the self-fulfillment of the women associated with them. The stories of women function to expose the abuse of power in the David story.[[27]](#footnote-27) So do of the stories of men.

## The God of Shiloh

In due course then, Samuel will tell of Yahweh’s involvement in the beginnings of Israel’s monarchy. One might say that theologically Yahweh’s action is the framework round the entire story and is theologically prior to the human action. One might further assume that a divine plan is finding fulfillment in this story. But neither of these convictions forms the book’s starting point. Further, the narrative may presuppose a divine sovereignty such as ensures that human actions do not get out of hand and that in the end Yahweh’s overall aim is kept on track. But it describes human initiatives to which Yahweh responds as well as divine initiatives to which human beings respond. It would be a converse oversimplification to say that Samuel adopts Qohelet’s “under the sun” perspective, portraying things only as they can be seen with ordinary eyes, implying no claim to supernatural illumination. Samuel will tell its auditors things about Yahweh’s specific intentions, actions, and reactions (e.g., 1:5, 6, 19; 2:21, 25; 3:4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 19, 21), though on other occasions it will simply relate things that happened and make no comment.

So the story opens with a human initiative. Elqanah takes his family to Shiloh for an annual festival; it would be a response to a divine initiative in the sense that the Torah has expectations of such celebrations. It is the same annual occasion at Shiloh to which the close of Judges refers. Israel’s ancestors were frequently on the move, and God would meet with them on their travels, wherever they were. Now Israel is a settled people, Yahweh is settled with them, and he has a house (1:7) – maybe more than one, though the covenant chest’s presence (4:3) would make the one at Shiloh especially important. But families living further away would go to other sanctuaries and Shiloh may not have been the nearest sanctuary to Elqanah’s family’s home.

Actually, it’s a palace (*hêkāl*, 1:9; cf. Jer 7:4). English translations have “temple,” but Hebrew has no word for “temple” in the sense of a sacred place, and Samuel uses the term for a king’s dwelling, which fits Yahweh’s being the divine king. It need not imply a palatial structure, or indeed a structure at all (the reference to a doorpost might be an anachronism). It’s still a tent sanctuary (2:22), as David’s plan to build a “proper” dwelling for Yahweh implies (2 Sam 7:1-6). As a tent sanctuary it can still be moved around (in Josh 8 it is at Shechem and in Judg 20:26-28 at Bethel). The point is that Yahweh lives there, and someone can go and see him there, as they can go and see the human king (e.g., 1 Kgs 3:16). It is a portal, to Yahweh’s heavenly palace (2 Sam 22:7). In principle there are no restrictions on access, though Eli’s position and action outside the actual holy place hints that its staff would have some responsibility for ensuring that no one improper defiled it.

At the beginning of Samuel the name of the God whom the family go to worship at Shiloh is nuanced as Yahweh Armies or Yahweh of Armies (*yhwh ṣəbāôt*;1 Sam 1:3). Hannah uses this title in addressing God (1:11) and it recurs later (4:4; 15:2; 17:45; 2 Sam 5:10; 6:2, 18; 7:8, 26, 27); it is prominent in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. In this title, the name Yahweh is followed by the ordinary Hebrew word for armies. NRSV and NJPS have “LORD of hosts,” following the Vulgate in taking the title as a construct (genitive) expression which would mean more literally “Yahweh of Armies.” The Septuagint takes it the same way in 2 Sam 6:2, 18. But a rendering such as “Lord of armies” masks the oddness of the Hebrew expression. “Lord” replaces the name Yahweh, and proper nouns such as Yahweh cannot generally be used thus in construct expressions. “Yahweh Armies” would therefore be a more plausible understanding of the phrase. NIV’s “LORD Almighty” follows the Septuagint’s translation in 2 Sam 5:10; 7:8, 26, 27, taking the noun as an abstract plural. Elsewhere In 1 Samuel, the Septuagint throws up its hands and simply transliterates the word for “Armies” as Sabaōth.

The title does imply that Yahweh is one who controls all combative power in the heavens and/or on the earth; he is indeed a king. He has the power to attack anyone or defend his people. The use of the title suggests the theology associated with his presence at Shiloh. He sits (by implication, enthroned) over the covenant chest (4:3-4), which is more likely his footstool than his throne. The title has not appeared earlier in the First Testament narrative, which suggests that its distinctive background lies in Shiloh. Shiloh had a sanctuary before the Israelites arrived, and the title will reflect the theology of the people who already worshipped there. The Israelites’ adoption of this designation compares with their adoption of ‘Elyon, “One On High,” whom Melchizedek worshipped (Gen 14:18). The title’s thrust presupposes that “it is Yahweh who is the (real) Almighty/Lord of Armies,” as the combined title *yhwh* *‘elyôn* (e.g., Ps 47:2 [3]) asserts that “Yahweh is the (real) One On High.” The designation also compares with the designation *šadday*, which also makes the Septuagint throw up its hands and not translate it in Genesis. But elsewhere it often has “Almighty,” the word it also uses for *ṣəbāôt*. The First Testament use of *šadday* (almost exclusively in Genesis and Job) implies that it, too, is not an originally Israelite designation and that it is simply a name of whose meaning Israelites might not be conscious. Curiously and strikingly, both these two designations can also suggest the personal commitment of the powerful God to his people and to the individual. The Septuagint’s translation of *’ēl šadday* as “your/my God” points in that direction; so does Hannah’s appeal to *yhwh ṣəbāôt*, which compares with the expression’s recurrence in Psalms 80 and 84. Yahweh Armies is the real God, the powerful God, and the God on whom his people can therefore rely.

In a paradoxical way, those facts about Yahweh emerge in the references to his relationship to Hannah in her inability to have children. Samuel repeats that “Yahweh had closed her womb” (1:5, 6). It is but the first in a series of statements about Yahweh doing tough things in this book.[[28]](#footnote-28) There will soon be a frightening comment on Eli’s exchange with his sons, who “did not listen to their father’s voice because Yahweh wanted to put them to death” (2:25). It is “the first hint in Samuel of the theme of divine dangerousness” (cf. 6:19-20; 2 Sam 6:6),[[29]](#footnote-29) though the declaration hardly means they can’t turn, as is suggested by his not yet actually putting them to death. And in Hannah’s story, Yahweh is the subsequently the subject of two more promising verbs: he gives, he is mindful (1:17, 19).

Difficulty over getting pregnant is a recurrent issue in the First Testament, and sometimes Yahweh causes it (e.g., Gen 16:2; 30:2), but it’s never said to be a punishment for wrongdoing (Gen 20:18 is a special case). The First Testament can refer to Yahweh opening the womb of someone who cannot conceive (e.g., Gen 29:31; 30:22) and enabling someone to get pregnant without that implication in the background (Ruth 4:13). Theologically, again, one might say that Yahweh is always the one who opens and closes wombs, but using this language on particular occasions signifies that special significance attaches to a particular woman’s infertility and pregnancy. While pregnancy may just concern one individual or family, record of it in the Scriptures likely relates to Yahweh’s broader purpose – as is the case with Hezekiah’s healing at the other end of Samuel-Kings (2 Kgs 20). We will discover that this note about Hannah relates to the link between her eventual pregnancy and the theme of kingship in Samuel, like the note about Ruth’s pregnancy.

## Family

Samuel begins with a scene from family life. “Samuel most resembles Genesis in its preoccupation with founding families and in its positioning of these representative households at the fulcrum of historical change.”[[30]](#footnote-30) The scene illustrates the First Testament’s vision of family, tempered by realism about how life is. Whereas one might have expected “family” to imply three or four generations, the story speaks only of two generations and thus in effect of a nuclear family; we hear nothing of Elqanah’s siblings or parents beyond the mention of his father in the list of his ancestors. The family is evidently enjoying the blessing that the Torah promises: it has produce to share and to offer to Yahweh, it can “go up” to the sanctuary, making pilgrimage for a festival each year (presumably Sukkot, the main harvest festival). “In a world in which God is the primary reality, worship is the primary activity.”[[31]](#footnote-31) The story goes from infertility plus worship to birth plus worship (1:2-3, 27-28).

The family bears Elqanah’s name, it is “he” who goes up to the festival to worship and offer sacrifice, and presides at the family celebration. But the family are full participants in the festival; it’s not just for the men. Peninnah’s daughters share in its as much as her sons (1:4), as Deuteronomy emphasizes daughters, wives, and mothers as well as sons, husbands, and fathers. The family is presumably patrilocal: when a woman marries she joins her husband’s extended family. It is patrilinear: it traces its genealogical line via the husband, and its male line has responsibility for the family assets. The story thus works with an order in which the husband has formal primacy, and its opening suggests that Elqanah will be its hero or subject, but he isn’t.[[32]](#footnote-32) The family is apparently not patriarchal, any more than the First Testament generally thinks Israelite marriages should be.[[33]](#footnote-33) Elqanah loves Hannah, and she is “his woman,” but he is also “her man” (1:8, 19; Hebrew regularly uses the ordinary words for “man” and “woman” to denote “husband” and “wife”). After the festival, together they get up early, together they worship, and together they go home (1:19).[[34]](#footnote-34) Hannah negotiates on an equal basis with Elqanah over going to the festival next time and about giving her baby to Yahweh. Elqanah’s “do what is good in your eyes” (1:23) contrasts with the “do what was upright in his eyes” at the end of Judges. Hannah can then stay home while Elqanah takes the family to make the regular sacrifice and an extra sacrifice he has promised (1:21), perhaps one made by the household relating to the harvest or the family or Hannah’s baby. It seems that they subsequently go together to surrender Samuel. The narrative says that Hannah went up with Samuel, but “they” slaughtered the sacrifice and brought Samuel to Eli, and it makes sense if “they” then worshiped there (1:28).[[35]](#footnote-35)

It is Hannah who names her baby; in the First Testament, naming a baby can be the task of father or mother or both, another indication of a difference between the father’s formal power in relation to the world outside the family and the power within the family. The husband doesn’t have authority to make decisions for the family nor do his wives have to submit to their husband’s authority. Nor does the First Testament suggest that a wife’s main role is to have children. Proverbs 31:10-31 indicates how being a mother is not the only way a woman can be significant. Both for a woman and for a man the family is where they find their significance and work. Like other women in the First Testament story such as Rebekah, Hannah assumes freedom to approach Yahweh; she doesn’t need a priest’s mediation. She is also free to negotiate with Eli and be glad of his blessing. The stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel and Leah show how in Israel as in Western societies, often it is the women who have the effective power, and the Hannah story “is, if anything, a matriarchal story.”[[36]](#footnote-36) While a husband might exercise authoritarian and oppressive power over the family, the First Testament does not tell of families having that problem, and its main block of family stories in Genesis portray wives behaving in at least as feisty a way as Hannah. Her story illustrates how behind the great man there is often a great woman (cf. Exod 1 – 2; Luke 1 – 2).

The story does not idealize the family. Families in the Scriptures are usually dysfunctional, and so is this one. This family is a locus of conflict, and grievously the worship and celebration of the festival is a context in which conflict emerges. While this occasion was potentially one that expressed and strengthen the family bond, “for Hannah, it became a nightmare.”[[37]](#footnote-37) The story does not pass judgment on the family in that connection. It is what it is. Nor does the story pass judgment on its individual members. It’s tempting for readers to critique Elqanah as clueless and/or narcissistic in his attempts to reassure Hannah about not being able to have children, to critique Eli for being judgmental of Hannah in his baseless accusation of her, to critique Peninnah (the “wicked stepsister”)[[38]](#footnote-38) for being resentful of Hannah, vexing her, and making her thunder, or to excuse her because Elqahanah did not love her, or to critique Hannah for not standing up to Elqanah or Penninah like Sarah or to commend her for her silence, to commend or critique her for being “bitter in her entire being” and “tough-spirited” (1:10, 15). Such interpretations miss its point, impose Western concerns, and apply Western assumptions. The story does not focus on the feelings of Elqanah, Peninnah, Eli, or even Hannah, or imply an evaluation of them.[[39]](#footnote-39) Its comments on Eli’s sons (2:12-36) work differently: it makes its comments on them, but it doesn’t do so here.

The specific realism about the negative way family can work stems from Hannah’s inability to have children. In a Western context, a man and a woman may feel that love is essential to marriage and also feel that they are not complete if they cannot have children. For men and women, having children is often important to their sense of being fully human; it is perhaps more intrinsic to womanhood. The First Testament may also assume that love is essential to marriage, and this story notes Elqanah’s love for Hannah, but it also assumes that a family needs children, theologically and practically; in a traditional society, it is economically important. As the Ruth story implies, the idea of children is built into the idea of family. The man and the woman need children to work on the farm and in the house, they need daughters as well as sons to pass on to other families as part of the arrangement whereby other families generate wives for their sons, they will need their sons and their wives more as they themselves get older, and they will need them to pass the farm onto. Hannah would be insecure if Elqanah dies. Given that having children is intrinsic to being human and given the practical importance of children to a family’s viability, having children conveys a sense of honor (Ps 127:5). Being unable to have children is a massive deprivation for a man or a woman,[[40]](#footnote-40) for personal and/or practical reasons, and threatens to be a cause of shame.

When a wife cannot get pregnant, the First Testament implicitly assumes that the problem lies with the wife, and the husband may marry a second wife. A story such as this one supports that assumption; Peninnah has no trouble getting pregnant. While Genesis 1 – 4 pictures the first marriages as involving one man and one woman who form a family unit with their children, it also tells of an unhappy exception to that rule. In general the First Testament treats the norm as one man and one woman together for life in the setting of an extended family, while recognizing that divorce happens and extended families split up. A wife’s infertility might count as grounds for divorce, but there are no accounts of divorce happening and several stories telling of how a man rather married a second wife. Polygamy in itself can be harmonious, but the First Testament portrays it rather consistently issuing in conflict, with the capacity to get pregnant being a cause. And there were aspects of the festival celebration that drew attention to the disparity between Hannah and Peninnah. While Peninnah is a full second wife and not a servant wife like Hagar, she may know that Hannah is Elqanah’s real love. Does Elqanah love Peninnah, or is she just there to bear children?[[41]](#footnote-41) The dynamics recall the stories of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah, as well as Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, though Elqanah values Hannah for who she is and not what she can produce, and wishes she could value herself on that basis.

The story of Eli and his sons is quite different family, and grievous. One may guess that Eli and Ms. Eli have done their best in bringing up their sons, and Eli has one last attempt to turn them back to the right way, but they don’t listen (2:22-25). And an emissary from Yahweh comes to confront him about their wrongdoing, in which Eli is also implicated, and announce the catastrophe that will come on the entire family (2:27-36).

## Prayer and Promise

The Scriptures include several stories about God telling a woman she will have a baby; apart from Hannah’s, the most detailed are the ones about Samson’s mother and Jesus’s mother. “Hannah's prayers and spirituality set the context for what follows, much as Mary's do for the Gospels.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Lectionaries pair Hannah’s story with Luke 2:41-52: Mary will have to give up Jesus too.[[43]](#footnote-43) But the stories about Samson’s mother and Jesus’s mother relate an announcement that comes by divine initiative and by means of a supernatural agent. In Hannah’s story the messenger is human and the message comes as a result of Hannah’s prayer. While taking a second wife who could have children solves the practical problem in Elqanah’s family, it doesn’t solve the personal problem of the person who cannot conceive and whose position in the family is marginal. So the story suggests insights about a theology of the individual as well as a theology of the family. It raises the question “how we might conceive of the community for all without losing the spirit of emancipation hermeneutics” and whether “marginality can be redefined as having power to transform self, community and society.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Whereas infertility leads to conflict in other stories, Hannah avoids the conflict by praying.[[45]](#footnote-45) She does not respond to either Peninnah or Elqanah but to the one the festival draws attention to. Perhaps in theory Hannah should have been able to accept Elqanah’s reassurance that he will look after her if she has no sons to do so (1:8), and to come to terms with her infertility and with the possibility that there are other forms of fruitfulness, of “capacity to touch hearts and to give life.”[[46]](#footnote-46) But fortunately for the story that will unfold, she is not prepared to do so. She anticipates the woman who wouldn’t accept a “No” from Jesus (Matt 15:21-28) and the woman who wouldn’t accept “No” from the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8).

Neither the festival with the prayer that would accompany the sacrifices nor the well-meaning words of Elqanah helped Hannah; maybe they made them worse.[[47]](#footnote-47) Yet the festival and the offering of sacrifice is a natural occasion for prayer. An Israelite can have a strong, frank, confident relationship with Yahweh such as Jesus has with his Father, and Hannah prays as Yahweh invites any Israelite to do, in the way the Psalms embody. She goes to the sanctuary and takes her stand in the sanctuary courtyard in front of the holy place. She is thus before Yahweh (1:12) not just at the sanctuary.[[48]](#footnote-48) She wants to be seen,[[49]](#footnote-49) and there Yahweh can “actually look at your maidservant’s lowliness” (1:11); “actually look” represents an idiom whereby one juxtaposes two forms of the same verb for emphasis, “with looking you look.” Her “lowliness” (*‘ŏnî*) means she speaks as an ordinary person without power, significance, or influence within the people or the clan. She “has nothing in her power, nothing in her free will, no presumptive claims . . . ; all things here are entirely in the hands of God.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Appeal to being an ordinary person without power is a feature of prayers in the Psalms (e.g., 25:18; 88:9 [10]; 119:50). It means calling on Yahweh as someone with the capacity to look at people in need. And what one has to do is get him to look. He will surely then be unable to resist using his power to act on one’s behalf. The appeal is thus to “be mindful” and not “put out of mind” (*zākar*, *šākaḥ*). Yahweh has many things and people to think about, so she needs to get him to focus on her.

Like Naomi (Ruth 1:20), “she was bitter in her being, and she pleaded with Yahweh” (1:10). Hannah “pleads” (*pālal* hitpael) more than anyone else in the First Testament (1:10, 12, 26, 27; 2:1); Samuel has more references to “pleading” than any other First Testament book, all but one in 1 Sam 1 – 12. The default English translation of this verb is “pray,” which is a usefully but also pusillanimously vague verb that can cover any kind of speech or non-speech in a relationship with God (or no such relationship, as in the expression “our prayers are with you”). But “pleading” means asking for something for oneself or for someone else – supplicating or interceding; the word has a legal background. It implies being desperate and powerless, with no other recourse, no other direction to turn. Prayer was not a means of getting to feel better. Hannah’s prayer and promise changed what Yahweh was doing and resulted in the birth of Samuel, the reform of the priesthood, and the birth of the monarchy.[[51]](#footnote-51) Eli warns his sons of there being no one to pray for them (2:25), and they die. Prayer was the key that opened Hannah’s closed womb.[[52]](#footnote-52)

She also “cried and cried” (1:10 also juxtaposes two forms of the same verb, “with crying she cried”). Even if the gates of the sanctuary are locked, “the gates of tears are not locked” (*b.* Berakhot32b). Only here does someone pray “towards” or “with” Yahweh; usually one prays “to” Yahweh, as Hannah later said she did (1:26). This preposition (*‘al*) has more aggressive connotations. It fits with her being called “bitter in her being” and “tough in spirit” (1:15).

An odd thing about her prayer is that it was silent (1:13), which is not the nature of prayer in the Scriptures. But silence is one of Hannah’s characteristics.[[53]](#footnote-53) “Prayer is . . . converse with God. Though whispering, consequently, and not opening the lips, we speak in silence, yet we cry inwardly. For God hears continually all the inward converse.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Her praying silently does anticipate Jesus’s later bidding to pray secretly (Matt 6:5-6). On the other hand, it was no brief prayer: as well as “crying and crying” (1:10), she was “profuse in her pleading” (1:12), like the people Isaiah and Jesus critique (Isa 1:15; Matt 6:7-8)!

A further link with prayer in the Psalms is that Hannah goes on to make a promise to Yahweh to be fulfilled if he answers her prayer. While prayer means asking God to do things or give you things, it also implies a commitment. “If you will give your maidservant offspring, I will give him to Yahweh all the days of his life, and a razor will not come upon his head” (1:11). While one could read her promise as a questionable attempt to bribe Yahweh and/or a questionable imposition on her son, the story implicitly sees it as an aspect of a reciprocal relationship with Yahweh and a proper gesture of thankfulness to Yahweh. “Truly here was a daughter of Abraham. He gave when it was demanded of him. She offers even before it is demanded.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

The nature of her plea makes her promise paradoxical. Giving the child to Yahweh would imply giving him to serve at Shiloh, as happens, so Hannah is not focusing on having someone to look after her in her old age. Will simply having a baby mean her humanly, womanly life is complete and her shame removed, so she can then happily give him up? Might she pray in a way that Eli couldn’t hear because she wants a son in the service of Yahweh through whom she can vicariously have the ministerial position that is not open to her as a woman?![[56]](#footnote-56) But “offspring” (*zera‘ ’ănāšîm*)is literally “seed of human beings,” which neither designates the sex[[57]](#footnote-57) nor limits the offspring to one; “seed” has plural reference in 2:20 and mostly elsewhere. It would make sense to assume she envisages her womb remaining open, which is what happens (2:21), and envisages surrendering her first child while expecting she would have more.

Letting one’s hair grow can be a sign of spending a short period as someone “consecrated” (*nāzîr*): so in Numbers 6, with no explanation of the practice, though that consecration also involves abstaining from alcohol and avoiding defilement through contact with a corpse. Hannah’s promise is that that her son will have a lifelong obligation just to the commitment about hair.[[58]](#footnote-58)

An amusing hiccup follows. John Chrysostom encourages members of his congregation, “You, then, woman, . . . appeal to the priest to join in making intercession for you.,”[[59]](#footnote-59) but he also notes the pathos of this scene: “at home her rival mocked her. She went into the temple, . . . and the priest upbraided her. She fled the storm at home, entered port and still ran into turbulence.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Eli is a tragically ambiguous figure, and here “we are already alerted that this is a priesthood in decline.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Hannah is beside herself and he takes her for a drunk, not an unlikely inference at the festival when the wine flows. And she does go to the sanctuary “after the eating at Shiloh and after the drinking” (1:9), but she hadn’t been drinking. She’s not a “daughter of Belial,” which might etymologically suggest a worthless woman, comparable to some people close to Eli (2:12) and some people opposed to Saul’s designation as king (10:27) and someone who later tried to oust David (2 Sam 20:1).

Eli’s misjudgment and Hannah’s response further highlight her modeling the nature of a relationship with Yahweh. The positive side to Eli is that he can see where he needs to change his mind, and his response to Hannah models what it means to be a priest. While the narrative presupposes that Hannah can go straight to God without going via a priest, it rejoices in Eli’s eventually supporting her. “Go, with things being well,” he says, *ləkî ləšālôm* (1:17). He hardly means “go in peace” in the sense of going home with a sense of peace; *šālôm* does not imply peacefulness but well-being. That meaning especially fits when Eli literally urges Hannah to go *into* well-being, which sounds more dynamic than going *in* well-being. The birth of a baby will mean things indeed being good for her. Eli spells out the implications when he adds, “The God of Israel – he will give you [or may he give you][[62]](#footnote-62) what you asked of him.” How did Eli know (or how did he know that a wish was appropriate, if that alternative understanding of his words is right)? Perhaps it is simply a priest’s job to know what Yahweh is saying to a suppliant; the Psalms may again imply as much. Perhaps a priest has to have prophetic gifts as well as the authority that comes from heredity and ordination.

The dynamics of what follows again match those implied by the Psalms. They presuppose two stages to the answering of prayer. Stage One is Yahweh saying, “I have heard, I will do as you say.” Stage Two is Yahweh doing it. The expression of thanks and trust that often closes a protest psalm (e.g., Ps 22) forms a response to an awareness of the Stage One answer; after the Stage Two answer, a thanksgiving/testimony psalm is appropriate. Here, having received the Stage One answer, Hannah went back to the family, had something to eat, “and her face was no more” (no more distraught, presumably, as LXX, Tg make explicit). The family go home, Elqanah and Hannah make love (the other infertility stories don’t have this feature). Yahweh is mindful of Hannah and she gets pregnant and gives birth, and thus receives the Stage Two answer (1 Sam 1:19-20). If the festival was Sukkot, it marked the end of a year, and she gives birth towards the end of the next year. When the family go up to Shiloh for the festival this time, she and her newborn do not go, but the family go and Elqanah fulfills its promise, and in due course she goes.

Hannah calls her baby Samuel (1:20). The explanation is puzzling. The name (*šəmû’ēl*) sounds like a cross between something like “Heard by El” and “His Name is El” or “The Name of El.” But Hannah says she called him Samuel because “it was from Yahweh that I asked for him” (*myhwh šā’altîw*). Explanations of names often involve paronomasia rather than etymology; “Abraham” does not mean “father of a multitude” (Gen 17:4) but it could sound like an expression with that meaning. Here, Eli has already spoken of Yahweh giving Hannah “the asking that she asked” (1:17). Hannah emphasizes the point when she takes Samuel to Shiloh: “Yahweh gave me the asking that I asked” (1:27). Eli takes up that phrase again later (2:20); it occurs only three other times in the First Testament. Hannah further develops the point in using the same verb in an unusual way: she is giving Samuel back to Yahweh as something she asked for, or as if it were something he asked for (*hiš’iltihû*), and it is because he is “asked in connection with Yahweh” (*šā’ûl* *lyhwh*; 1:28).[[63]](#footnote-63) There is thus subtlety there, because *šā’ûl* is the name of the king whom Samuel will anoint when the people “ask” for a king and “ask” who it should be (8:10; 10:22; then acerbically, 12:13, 17, 19). Looking back to Hannah’s words after Saul’s designation reveals their hint that the family story and the woman’s story are also a story about the origin of the monarchy. In asking for Samuel, Hannah has asked for the prophet who will be Yahweh’s means of designating Saul. Unwittingly she has asked for Saul, who will be the one for whom people ask. Notwithstanding the unhappy way Saul’s story will unfold, Hannah wasn’t drunk in asking for Saul.

## Ministry

Accompanying the transition to being a settled people with God having a more settled home in their midst was a transition to having a body of ministers who worked at that more settled home. To judge from the Torah and the Jerusalem temple, it would have a regular daily worship program, while the Hannah story indicates that it would host the annual festivals and visits from people bringing sacrifices for personal reasons – for instance, in connection with prayers for healing or for a baby, or thanksgiving for healing or a birth. Portions of such offerings would be given to Yahweh (that is, burned), portions shared by the family, and portions shared with the priests for whom it was part of their livelihood, for themselves and their family. Leviticus incorporates rules for sharing out the offerings, though one cannot infer from them the rules that would apply at Shiloh in theory or in practice.

Many modern and traditional cultures assume the practice of having people whose full-time occupation is caring for the community’s religious life. It wasn’t an aspect of Israel’s ancestors’ life as Genesis describes it. For them, the family’s father figure functions as its priest, though ordinary individuals such as Abraham’s servant or Rebekah can also take the initiative in approaching God about questions that matter to them (Gen 24:12; 25:22). One could say that the entire people is a priestly kingdom, a holy nation (Exod 19:6). But the chapter making that affirmation also presupposes the presence of priests among the people (Exod 19:22, 24) and the Torah lays down copious rules for their work. Perhaps priesthood, like kingship, is an institution that Yahweh eventually adopts because it corresponds to a human instinct, and/or it is a gift of God to humanity as a whole that he then also gives to Israel. But like kingship (and for that matter prophecy), priesthood works out with some ambiguity.

The priests have two roles. Eli’s sons offer sacrifices and facilitate people making their own sacrifices (2:28). It would be physically tough but straightforward work that might be appropriate for younger men, which could link with the rule that men should retire from regular priestly service when they were fifty (e.g., Num 4). The problem is that while Eli was evidently capable of failing in his work, his sons were comprehensively wayward in theirs.

Eli himself is engaged in keeping watch at the sanctuary, sitting on a throne outside Yahweh’s palace (English translations have him sitting on a “seat,” but there are virtually no other places where *kissē’* refers to an ordinary seat; cf. 2:8). Eli is in effect the next-to-last of the “judges” (cf. 4:18), the nearest thing to an authority figure. He is the first Israelite ever to sit on a throne, but he will soon fall off it (4:13, 18). He is in a position of authority in the courtyard of the meeting tent watching for people who shouldn’t come too near – for instance, because they are having too good a time at festival parties. Priests on this duty might also advise people on whether they should come to the sanctuary if they might have skin disease or be otherwise unclean. In other words, they needed to be able to make proper distinctions between holy and common and between clean and unclean, and to teach people about proprieties related to worship and other aspects of life (Lev 10:10-11). Eli’s misjudgment of Hannah does not take away from the importance of this role, as the story of Uzzah (2 Sam 6) will shortly demonstrate in its way, like the stories of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10) and Jeroboam (1 Kings 13), and as will the importance of the gatekeepers of the Jerusalem temple (e.g., 1 Chr 9:17-27). But Leviticus and the rest of the First Testament assumes that propriety does not concern solely matters of bodily fitness (see Pss 15; 24), and the critique of the Shiloh priests focuses on the broader realm. In addition, Eli “carries” – rather than “wears” – a chasuble (*’ēpôd*, conventionally transliterated “ephod”; 2:28), an object containing the means of consulting Yahweh about questions and telling people how Yahweh responds to them (1:17). Priests thus fulfill the role of prophets as well as priests; Eli challenges his sons like a prophet (2:23-25).

Young Samuel himself engages in “ministering” to Yahweh (*šārat* piel; 2:11), which usually denotes priestly work; for a “boy” (*na‘ar)*, it suggests practical work. Wearing a linen chasuble (2:18), he looks like a trainee priest, ready to replace the current priests. He is under the eye of Eli (2:11), training for both the sacrificial and the verbal roles – at least, he will fulfill both later. Eli’s sons, too, have “boys” they have trained (2:13, 15, 17); it will be as well if Samuel learns from Eli rather than from them.[[64]](#footnote-64) They were indeed “sons of Belial”; the cynical manner of their overseeing sacrifices indicated that they did not acknowledge Yahweh (2:12-17). While being priests may not have been a fulltime job and they may have also worked the land, like Jerusalem priests, their priestly work did entitle them to a share in sacrifices, and through the boy who assisted them they insisted on a cut that was other than was allowed by the “rule” for priests. We don’t know what the rule at Shiloh would have been, nor is it clear what they insisted on, but their claim evidently ignored the sacrifices’ significance for the people who brought them and also signified that “they treated Yahweh’s offerings with contempt” (cf. 2:28-29) and were “slighting” (3:13).[[65]](#footnote-65) In addition, they were in sexual relationships with women ministers on duty at the meeting tent entrance (2:22), apparently people with roles like those of the Levites.

They were thus involved in two common ministerial failings. Their ministry became something in which they engaged for their own benefit. And they were in these sexual relationships with people who worked with them, specifically with people who had less power than them. When the next generation follow their parents in ministry, it may work well, but it has risks attached; the parents may have a hard time disciplining their offspring and take risks with and for them. Engagement in ministry is dangerous in its temptations and in its penalties, and ministers run greater risks than lay people. Eli makes the point in an abstruse way, but the idea is clear: someone who offends against another human being can get Yahweh to plead for them, but someone who offends against Yahweh has no one who can help them (2:25). Eli may imply that “ordinary” sexual wrongdoing is one thing, but sexual sin in the context of the service of Yahweh is a whole other level of wrongdoing.

Eli knew his sons were slighting God and he did not “restrain” them (3:13). He had tried, but failed (2:22-25), as priest and father,[[66]](#footnote-66) and terrible consequences will follow. The tragedy will extend beyond the immediate family. Joining some dots in the First Testament story, one may infer that Eli was a descendant of Aaron, though possibly admitted to that line by adoption. “I definitely said that your household and your father’s household would go about before me for all time. But now (Yahweh’s affirmation) – a profanity to me. Because I honor people who honor me, but people who despise me will be slighted” (2:30). “The fact that he utters the expletive is unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible” and “shows the depths of his disappointment and indignation.”[[67]](#footnote-67) It means that “for all time” (*‘ad-‘ôlām*) may not mean “for all time.” Saul’s story will implicitly take up this question and the question of whether Yahweh can have a change of mind about things (13:13-14; 15:10-35), as will David’s story when Yahweh commits himself to David “for all time.” A commitment on Yahweh’s part expects a reciprocal commitment. Yahweh is free to maintain his commitment when its beneficiaries fail in theirs; it is an aspect of the meaning of *ḥesed*, the word translated by expressions such as “steadfast love” (2 Sam 7:15; 22:51). But he is also free eventually to decide “That’s it!” on the basis of the principle of the relationship being reciprocal: “I honor people who honor me, but people who despise me will be slighted.” Eli’s line did not acquire their position because they undertook some commitment, but they had to maintain a commitment to be sure of staying in their position.

So Yahweh is going to exercise his authority as judge on Eli’s household “for all time,” and its waywardness will not be open to expiation “for all time” (3:13-14). As the promise had been for all time, now the threat is. Eli responds, “He is Yahweh: that which is good in his eyes, he will do” or “he must do” (3:18). Though it might be a simple recognition that the catastrophe must happen, it is a slightly open statement, hinting that there might be hope.[[68]](#footnote-68) If the positive “for all time” might not mean what it says, maybe the negative one needn’t? Actually, the calamity soon begins. Eli drops dead, as an old man who is “heavy” (*kābēd*); ironically, the word also means “honorable.” His daughter-in-law declares that “the honor has gone from Israel” because of the covenant chest’s capture and because of her father-in-law and her husband (4:21-22). She doesn’t say “because of their death.” Perhaps she knows the honor had gone long before.

## Vocation

Meanwhile, “the boy Samuel was gradually growing and was good both with Yahweh and also with people” (2:26). He grew up without his parents (who came to see him once a year) but “with Yahweh” (2:21). While he is not quite the first person whom Yahweh “calls" (Yahweh is the subject of this verb in passages such as Exod 3:4; 19:3, 20; 31:2; 35:30; Lev 1:1), he is the only prophet in whose story “calling” has a key place; the verb comes twelve times in 1 Samuel 3. Actually Yahweh says nothing about his being a “prophet,” though the narrator describes him thus: Yahweh “did not let any of his words fall to the earth, and all Israel from Dan to Be’er Sheba acknowledged that Samuel was trustworthy as a prophet of Yahweh” (3:19-20). He would apparently have been known as a “seer” (*rō’eh*; see 1 Sam 9:9). Etymology offers more clue to this word’s meaning than is the case with “prophet” (*nābî’*), whose etymology is a matter of guesswork. Samuel is also “a man of God” (9:6-10; 2:27) whom people can consult for a fee in order to “inquire of God” (9:9)

The amusing misunderstanding over who is calling reflects how calling means summoning, which Eli and Samuel are used to Eli doing when Samuel is ministering before Eli. In Western thinking, “calling” or “vocation” implies being drawn into work that will express one’s gifts, but in the First Testament, calling simply means summoning, a summons to do something that the boss wants done. The boss might be unwise to summon a person to a task for which he or she lacked the gifts, but the focus lies on the boss and the task, not the servant. In Samuel’s case, we might guess that having the parents he had would have prepared him well to be a servant of Yahweh, though the story doesn’t quite make the point. It does invite the inference that his apprenticeship to Eli was important in this connection (2:11, 18-21; 3:1). Yet paradoxically, Samuel did not yet acknowledge Yahweh (3:7), which was the problem with Eli’s sons (2:12), and Samuel’s sons will not be much better (8:3). Yahweh seems to make a habit of choosing odd people (Jacob, Moses, Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon . . .).

Yahweh eventually takes his stand before Samuel (*yāṣab* hitpael; 3:10), the only occurrence of this phrase in the First Testament. Yahweh speaks in a voice so real that Samuel takes it to be Eli’s. Something objective is happening; this voice is not inside Samuel’s head. The reference to an appearance (*mar’â*, 3:15) reinforces the point; the term is less technical than the word that more specifically denotes a vision (*ḥāzôn* in 3:1). Samuel did not have a vision of Yahweh, as Isaiah and Ezekiel did. Yahweh took his stand there. He appeared. Yahweh will now be appearing, letting himself be seen (*rā’â* niphal) at Shiloh, revealing himself there (*gālâ* niphal). It does not occur to either Samuel or Eli to think that Yahweh might be calling to Samuel. One can hardly blame them. Yahweh’s word had been rare and vision had not been widespread (3:1). The implication is not that it had been widespread previously or had failed because of the waywardness of the age or of Eli and his sons. Rather, there has been little history of Yahweh speaking or giving visions or calling such as would make it natural for Eli or Samuel to recognize what is going on,[[69]](#footnote-69) as the story implies when it comments that Yahweh’s word had not yet revealed itself to Samuel (*gālâ* niphal; 3:7). This word “vision” comes here for the first time in the First Testament narrative, and there have been few references to “Yahweh’s word” coming to anyone.

The references to vision and word are indications that prophecy is now beginning, in response to people doing what is upright in their own eyes (Judg 21:25). But at least God’s lamp hasn’t gone out (which makes one think forward to 2 Sam 21:17; Ps 132:17) and the covenant chest is still at Shiloh, even if Eli is getting too old to be able to see (3:2-3) and has failed to get his sons to see. But he eventually realizes who is speaking to Samuel, and instructs him on how to respond and submit to Yahweh’s word. Even here, “call” does not refer to a vocation or commission – there is no sending in the story. There is a message, but no instruction to deliver it, and it might be partly for Samuel himself. But Samuel assumes he has to deliver it, as perhaps the story takes for granted. Typically, the prophetic message relates to something unpleasant (compare Isa 6; Jer 1:4-19; Ezek 1 – 3). Samuel holds back from delivering it; but “the brave old man demands, with a firmness backed up by an oath, that Samuel not conceal ‘anything of all that He told you’” (v. 17).[[70]](#footnote-70)

Samuel is now moving from being an assistant to being a servant of Yahweh, like Moses, Joshua, and in due course David. “Speak, Yahweh, because your servant is listening” (3:9): “Samuel grows into his name.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Yahweh is with him (3:19) as he was with Joseph (Gen 39:2, 3, 21, 23), Joshua (Josh 6:27), and the judges (Judg 2:18), and will be with David (18:12, 14, 28). In 1 Samuel 3 he enters the scene a boy and an apprentice priest, and exits a prophet or a priest who is also a prophet;[[72]](#footnote-72) he will also function as a “judge.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Although the story says that people recognized him as a prophet (3:20), they would hardly have known what the word meant (it has been used previously of Abraham and Moses, somewhat loosely, and in Judg 6:8). Its implication here is that Yahweh lets himself be seen and reveals himself at Shiloh with Yahweh’s word (as in 3:4-14), and that Yahweh’s word thus comes to Israel as it did not previously (3:1) by means of Samuel’s word (3:21 – 4:1). There was no slippage between Yahweh’s word coming to him and his word coming to the people; as prophet and priest he was a truthful or trustworthy or reliable (*ne’ĕmān*; 3:20). In place of Eli and his sons, Yahweh has declared the intention to “establish for myself a truthful priest such as acts with my mind and my spirit. I will build him a truthful household and it will walk about before my anointed for all time” (2:35). Samuel is a first fulfillment of the promise of such a priest, though his sons fail too. So “for all time” again doesn’t work out, and the story will look for another fulfillment of the promise, which will by implication come in Zadoq. This failure is a concrete example of something broader. Replacing Shiloh by Jerusalem doesn’t achieve much, nor does replacing Eli’s line by Zadoq’s, nor does introducing prophets, nor does appointing kings. When situations get desperate, God sometimes takes action, but it doesn’t move things on. It’s even true of Jesus’s coming. But meanwhile, Yahweh’s word comes to Samuel; Samuel’s word comes to Israel; and Yahweh confirms all his words.

The uniqueness of Yahweh’s speaking to Samuel links with the significance of the action Yahweh is about to take, which will shock people’s ears when they hear about it. Yahweh goes on to reiterate the message that the divine messenger has already delivered about removing Eli and his household “on that day.”[[74]](#footnote-74) This expression covers more than that removing, though Yahweh does not here indicate what else “that day” will bring, so that for the moment Yahweh’s announcement raises suspense, until 1 Samuel 4 relates the main catastrophe of which the death of Eli and his sons is an incidental result.

# Yahweh Who Designates a King (1 Samuel 4:1b – 12:25)

Samuel does not begin by telling readers its theme or its theological concerns, though with hindsight they can see them hinted in its opening pages. Samuel was the baby who was “asked for” (*šā’ûl*; 1:28). Hannah sang of Yahweh’s “anointed” (2:10). The calamity that follows Yahweh’s summons of Samuel will lead into the anointing of one whom the people ask for.

## The God of Bet Shemesh

In MT’s versification, the covenant chest’s adventures begin when “Samuel’s word came to all Israel. And Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle” (4:1). By implication, Samuel’s message commissioned the battle, to bring about the fulfillment of the threats in 1 Sam 2:27-34; 3:11-14.[[75]](#footnote-75) But Samuel is missing from 4:1b – 7:1, and more likely the account of his recognition (3:19 – 4:1a) is anticipatory;[[76]](#footnote-76) through what follows he is still a boy at Shiloh. Eli and his sons are still in charge, and if anything, his absence from the narrative frees him from any blame for what happens.[[77]](#footnote-77) This story then has a dramatic beginning in 4:1b that does not give any background.[[78]](#footnote-78)

There is less disagreement about the end of the story of the chest, though there is some ambiguity about its meaning. Modern translations agree with MT against the medieval chapter division that the story ends with the people of Bet-shemesh getting the chest off their hands (that is, 7:1 is the end of the story). They are keen to pass it on because of a conviction expressed in their question, “Who can stand before [that is, stand in attendance on] Yahweh, this holy God?” It is a key theological question raised by the story, which in effect 7:2-17 will answer.

The Israelites and the Philistines are both seeking to consolidate and extend a holding on land, the Israelites aiming to expand westward and the Philistines northward; they meet in the borderlands in between. Joshua 13 had noted that Israel had not yet got control of the Philistine areas and Judges has reported ongoing clashes between the Israelites and the Philistines, who dominate the Jezreel plain. One could see the engagement’s theological rationale as lying in the Israelites’ destiny to control the whole of Canaan, which (sort of) answers the question why Yahweh is on Israel’s side and not the Philistines’,[[79]](#footnote-79) but the story does not make that point. The narrative takes war for granted, and specifically takes for granted Israel’s engagement in war.

Whoever started it, Israel’s reversal in a first engagement makes the Israelite elders ask a good question, “Why has Yahweh knocked us down today in front of the Philistines?” (1 Sam 4:3a). Actually the narrative didn’t say that Yahweh had done so, but if it is the right question, earlier narratives have suggested one or two possible answers (see, e.g., Josh 8; Judg 3:3; 10:6-7). It turns out, however, to be a rhetorical question.[[80]](#footnote-80) There is no discussion, “no consultation of anyone—prominently Samuel. Rather, at once the solution.”[[81]](#footnote-81) “They have been left in the lurch”;[[82]](#footnote-82) their solution is to fetch “the chest of the covenant of Yahweh” from Shiloh “so that he may come among us and deliver us from our enemies’ fist” (1 Sam 4:3b). The chest had rings and poles to make it portable, and it had been carried around in a similar connection before (see Josh 6). Bringing it would mean bringing the stones engraved with the basic terms of the covenant, which were inside it, along with the sphinx-like creatures on top of it, and the assumed presence of Yahweh sitting enthroned over it. The one enthroned is Yahweh Armies, which would be significant in the circumstances. The elders are pardonably hazy about the relationship between Yahweh’s presence in the tent and his presence in the battle, but anyway he has evidently not been exercising his sovereignty as Yahweh Armies on Israel’s behalf and needs to be reminded of the covenant, of his pledge to them.[[83]](#footnote-83)

The chest’s arrival issues in an earth-shaking shout among the Israelites. When intelligence reaches the Philistines regarding its explanation, it issues in fear among the Philistines of the “powerful gods” who are now present in the Israelite camp. They thus have half of an understanding of Israelite theology, and they articulate the Israelites’ own implicit assumption, that the chest’s presence means the presence of the God who delivered Israel from the Egyptians by his hitting them with his hand and specifically by bringing down epidemics upon them (4:8; cf. Exod 3:9, 19-20; 6:1; 7:4, 5). Unfortunately, their insight galvanizes them for a fight and they defeat the Israelites, capture the chest, and kill Hophni and Phinehas, though they fail to see the implications of knowing that Yahweh’s hand operates by bringing epidemics. Yahweh’s hand and the Philistines’ fist and hand are key motifs in the story (4:3, 8; 5:6, 7, 9, 11; 6:3, 5, 9) and its sequel (7:3, 8, 13, 14). The fist (*kap*)suggests a hand that grasps in a way that cannot be evaded, though also a hand that hits – which is the implication of the more general word for hand (*yad*). The Philistines’ gods losing both fists and hands (5:4) adds to the pointed nature of the story. While the Philistines’ awareness of Yahweh as the God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt makes them like Rahab, they do not draw the inferences that she did, as the Israelites resemble the Israelites in the Rahab story, but not enough.

When Eli hears about the defeat, his sons’ deaths, and specifically the chest’s capture, the aged priest and judge drops dead. By implication, 2:27-34 and 3:10-14 find fulfillment. The news (especially the news about the chest) sends Eli’s pregnant daughter-in-law into labor, and she also dies, but not before she names her child Ichabod. The name would literally mean “Where is honor” or “Alas, honor” or “Dis-honor,” but she explains it as meaning “honor has gone into exile from Israel.” The chest has gone to Philistia; the honor has gone there. The simple term “honor” (*kābôd*) hardly refers to Yahweh; Hannah described Yahweh enabling poor and needy to possess a throne of honor (2:8), and it is Israel’s honor that gone into exile and been replaced by shame (cf. the collocation in Ps 4:2 [3]; Isa 61:6-7).

In due course the Philistines’ priests and diviners advise their people to give honor to Yahweh, who might then lighten his hand on them, their gods, and their country (6:5). It is the only other reference to honor in Samuel; the only reference in Joshua and Judges occurs when Joshua urges Achan to give honor to Yahweh before he dies (Josh 7:19), though the Exodus story relates how Yahweh had decided to gain honor from the Egyptians (*kābēd* niphal,Exod 14:7, 17, 18). So here the Philistines realize that they had better give it. They no more think of Yahweh as simply located in the chest than the Israelites do (otherwise they would also probably not be sending it off *with* an offering). But they have discovered that the chest is too hot to handle. “Israel may be defeated in spite of its possession of God's ark and the ark itself may be seized, but all this is not to imply that God has lost any of his power over other people's gods.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Not only does Yahweh raise his hand against their images; they themselves are afflicted by epidemics. Although the chest’s presence does not exactly mean Yahweh’s presence, it does draw forth Yahweh’s action. In another ironic link, the Israelites’ cry (*šaw‘â*) for deliverance (*yəšû‘â*) had gone up to God in Egypt (Exod 2:23, the only preceding occurrence of this word for “cry”), and the Philistines’ “cry” now goes up to the heavens (5:12).

The Philistines realize they must send the chest off to its “place” (*māqôm*; 6:2), apparently its country not its sanctuary (which they have destroyed?).[[85]](#footnote-85) Their diviners and priests advise sending it with a reparation offering to make up for the offense they have committed. The chest and offering are set on a new cart hauled by milch cows. Though separated from their calves, they make straight for Bet-shemesh, which proves they know where the chest’s home is. The people there welcome it and make offerings to Yahweh. But then some of them look at the chest (or look into it) and Yahweh strikes down a large number, which leads the town to ask that question, “Who can stand before Yahweh?” Something like electricity attaches to holy ones. While one might be nervous about being in the presence of any holy one, a particular nervousness could attach to standing before Yahweh as *the* holy one, and particular vulnerability attaches to people who “stand before” the holy one in the sense of serving him. The wording suggest that the disaster at Bet-shemesh happened in the context of some act of service that somehow turned out to be an act of contempt and led to a catastrophe.

The chest means death and destruction. If the Israelites properly laughed through the story of the Philistines and the covenant chest, “laughter may have died on their lips on hearing the end of the story.”[[86]](#footnote-86) The chest really does convey the presence of Yahweh, the powerful God. You cannot take him for granted but neither can you mess with him, whether you are Philistine or Israelite. “The ark in and out of battle entails defeat and disaster for both communities.”[[87]](#footnote-87) Both get the chest (4:3, 11, 17, 21, 22; 5:1), both shout (4:5, 14; 5:9, 11), Yahweh afflicts both, strikes both down.

The story doesn’t make sense, which is why that question made sense.[[88]](#footnote-88) Yahweh does not explain what has happened. No one says they should repent; that possibility arises only twenty years later (7:2-6). The narrator does not explain. Interpreters speak of omniscient narrators; in the Scriptures, narrators may have some supernatural knowledge, but if they possess omniscience, they keep it to themselves. There is no theodicy. “He is Yahweh – he does what is good in his eyes” (3:18).[[89]](#footnote-89)

Once again, having asked a question, they take action,[[90]](#footnote-90) sending the chest off to Qiryat-ye‘arim. It is not too far, and nearer than Shiloh, which loses its significance as Israel’s central sanctuary even if it has not been destroyed. Further, it seems not to count as a fully Israelite town; it belonged to the Gibeonites (Josh 9:17). After the Gibeonites tricked Joshua into not eliminating them, he let them become manual laborers, looking after practical and menial aspects of worship, which fits the role they receive here. They set someone apart to look after the chest, making him holy (1 Sam 7:1).

## Being the People of God

The return of the chest is not an indication that relationships between Israel and the Philistines are resolved. The Israelites still need rescuing or delivering from the Philistines (7:3, 8). They are now to have an “ostensibly” important meeting with the Philistines, but a more important meeting with Yahweh.[[91]](#footnote-91) Samuel has grown up and Yahweh has been speaking through him and fulfilling his words. He has come to be recognized as trustworthy as a prophet (3:19 – 4:1a), and his moment has arrived. He declares that Israel must turn to Yahweh with their entire mind (7:3). Turning (*šûb*) is something one does with one’s body, but it needs to involve the mind (*lēbāb*). It means not just mind or inner person as opposed to something outward, nor an outward turning without a change in inner attitude, nor a half-hearted such change, but one of the whole mind. Israel needs to jettison alien gods, the Ba‘als and the Ashtarts, fix its mind on Yahweh, and serve Yahweh alone. Samuel’s challenge resembles the one in Joshua (Josh 24:14-15, 20, 23) and Judges (Judg 2:11-13; 10:6-16). It suggests a recurrent issue for the people of God, an inclination to put faith in the culture’s resources instead of the God who had proved himself in the past. And it suggests a need to clean things up in this connection from time to time. Is there a link with Israel’s letting the chest sit in a Gibeonite town for twenty years? There are times when one has to wait and times to take action. Such a moment has arrived.

Perhaps it is a prophet’s job to recognize such a time, and then to discern the action that needs taking. There is a negative action, the jettisoning, and then a gathering, at Mizpah (7:5). It is one of the centers of Samuel’s activity (7:16) and it recalls another historic occasion (Judg 20). Here Samuel pleads for them. It is his responsibility and vocation both as a priest and prophet, and they urge him not to be deaf to them or fail to cry out to Yahweh for them (7:8, 9). They draw water and pour it before Yahweh, and they fast. It is the only First Testament reference to a water libation, though the practice is known from elsewhere and appears in the Mishnah (Sukkah 4:9); it might symbolize pouring out yourself (Tg; cf. Lam 2:19)[[92]](#footnote-92) or it might go along with fasting and denote that people were not even drinking water. People would often make a burnt offering when they were pleading with Yahweh for something, as we might make a gift to someone when we ask a favor. While it can be a sign of a sad understanding of the relationship, it can be a sign that we are not asking for a favor in a way that costs us nothing (2 Sam 24:24). Samuel makes a particularly sacrificial burnt offering for them (7:9): the whole event makes for a marked contrast with 2:12-17. They acknowledge, “We have offended against Yahweh” (7:6).

Yahweh answers and thunders (7:9-10); the thunder constitutes the answer. The two aspects to an answer to prayer[[93]](#footnote-93) become one. Only here in Samuel does Yahweh “answer” a prayer, and only here in First Testament narrative does Yahweh thunder. Perhaps there was literal thunder that encouraged Israel and panicked the Philistines, or perhaps the language has its regular metaphorical significance. Either way, Yahweh somehow throws the Philistines into confusion (*hāmam*) and they collapse (*nāgap* niphal), the verb that applied unhappily to Israel in 4:2, 10. Typically, the event involves Yahweh’s action (he is the subject of two verbs), the Philistines’ action or reaction, and Israel’s action or reaction (7:10-11). But all Israel has to do is give chase; not so typically, they do not have to fight. This victory resembles the conquest of Jericho more than most victories in Joshua, Judges, or Samuel. It thus provides an alternative model of the interaction of Yahweh’s activity and Israel’s activity.

So Yahweh “helped” the Israelites “thus far” (7:12). Both expressions may be misleading. “Helped” (*‘āzar*) often suggests more than assisting and supporting people as they play their part: rather, somebody powerful (such as God) takes action on behalf of someone who cannot do anything. The verb comes in company with words for “delivering” (e.g., Ps 37:40; 79:9; 109:26). And “thus far” doesn’t imply “so far but who knows what will happen now,” but “to this very point” (CEB). We are coming to a climax in the story (7:13-17). Israel has returned to Yahweh, Yahweh has put paid to the Philistines and Israel has recovered its land, and there is peace between the Israelites and the pre-Israelite peoples of Canaan, the Amorites. Samuel the priest and prophet is exercising authority (*šāpaṭ*)around Israel, sorting things out where necessary at Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, acting as “judge” in succession to Eli. At last there is someone to succeed Moses and Joshua.[[94]](#footnote-94) Samuel has built an altar in his home town at Ramah, which perhaps replaces Shiloh as a key sanctuary. Everything looks good.[[95]](#footnote-95) But it will turn out that there is an ambiguity in that expression “thus far.”

The event illustrates a key sequence in the life of the people of God, maybe two. They acknowledge their waywardness, turn away from other servitudes and trusts, and turn to God in worship that costs them something. As a weak people they cry out, God answers in word and deed, and they do what needs doing to enter into the benefits of that sequence. Of course often people do not turn or cry out and the implication is not that God always answers in word and deed. Part of the theological genius of narrative is to tell of something that has happened and/or could happen without implying that it always happens. It issues an invitation but it makes no promise.

Samuel himself is capable of issuing exhortations and not quite making promises. He will subsequently review the story of Israel from the exodus (12:10). It is a story of Yahweh’s acts of faithfulness (his *ṣədāqôt*, 12:7: cf. Judg 5:11; Ps 103:6; Isa 45:24; Dan 9:16; Mic 6:5), a salvation history. It is also a story of Israel’s putting out of mind, wrongdoing, abandoning, and serving other deities, a history of waywardness. The pattern in Judges therefore needs to continue. “If you live in awe of Yahweh, serve him, listen to his voice, don’t rebel against Yahweh’s voice, and are after Yahweh your God . . . (12:14). Then “it will be well,” the NRSV goes on. But Samuel doesn’t say so. The if-clause runs out in an ellipsis.[[96]](#footnote-96) In contrast, the negative if-clause that follows, “if you do not listen,” then “Yahweh’s hand will be against you” (12:15). As many psalms presuppose, sometimes Israel will be faithful and blessing will not follow; there is slippage between act and experience. While Samuel speaks in the terms of Deuteronomy’s expectations, he also implicitly recognizes that Deuteronomy’s promises about obedience and blessing will not always work out. Fortunately the rules about disobedience and trouble don’t always work out, either, which is just as well here because “the issue at stake is the destruction of Israel rather than [merely] the failure of the monarchy.”[[97]](#footnote-97)

Once again Samuel gives a sign to show he speaks the truth, but this time a scary sign, as a result of which the people are in awe of Yahweh and of Samuel (*yārē’*;12:18). Or are they afraid of Yahweh and of Samuel? They now describe Yahweh as “your God” not “our God.”[[98]](#footnote-98) Samuel does tell them not to be afraid (12:20). They are the gentlest words of his tough ministry. “Yahweh will not give up on his people, on account of his great name, because Yahweh determined to make you a people for himself” (12:22). He has to be faithful to himself and stick by decisions he has taken and commitments he has made. It is his people’s great security. Yet they should not take too much for granted: if they live in a grossly dire fashion, they will be swept away like Sodom and Gomorrah (*sāpâ* niphal, 12:25; cf. Gen 18:23-24; 19:15, 17). Does this threat contradict the reassurance and set alternative prospects ahead of them, so that they choose? The ambiguity about their position parallels and links with the ambiguity over whether their own faithfulness issues in blessing. And at the end of 1 Samuel 12 Samuel returns to his grim warning, and “swept away” is his last word.[[99]](#footnote-99)

Prophets and priests[[100]](#footnote-100) live life in an identification with two sides in a relationship, speaking for Yahweh to their people and to their people for Yahweh. In Samuel’s role, praying and teaching go together (12:25); neither is complete without the other.[[101]](#footnote-101) It thus fortunately continues to be his job to intercede for his people; if he stops, he would be doing wrong against Yahweh (*ḥāṭā’*; 12:19-23). Yahweh is committed to staying faithful to Israel notwithstanding its faithlessness, and Samuel’s pleading is the practice that holds Yahweh to his intention rather than (e.g.) giving in to a justified inclination to abandon Israel. It would be foolish of them to tempt Yahweh in that direction. He is, after all, the one who undertook all those acts of faithfulness and rescue (12:6-11), whereas the gods to whom they might alternatively turn are empty (*tôhû*). They cannot do anything useful and cannot rescue (12:21). The applies to their kings.[[102]](#footnote-102)

Much of the “sermon”[[103]](#footnote-103) in 1 Samuel 12 would speak to people during the divided monarchy and after 587 in reminding them of Yahweh’s acts of faithfulness and their rebellions, urging them to start following Yahweh’s way, and promising them that he would not let go of them. Samuel does not describe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as covenantal except in referring to the covenant chest, and the word *covenant* can have many meanings. If we mean by a covenant a solemnly-undertaken committed reciprocal relationship, then the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is covenantal, and Israel needs to be committed to it, as Yahweh it. But covenants can by terminated by one party or the other. The relationship between Yahweh and Israel is better than covenantal. It’s more like a family relationship. Yahweh will not make use of any basis for terminating it. It’s more or less impossible to stop being the parent of your children.

## Why and Why Not Have a King

The account of why and how Saul becomes king and then loses his warrant as king is substantial, complex, mysterious, and jerky. It is substantial because his reign is a turning point in Israel’s story and it can illustrate key issues. The jerkiness (e.g., the move from 8:1-22 to 9:1 – 10:16) parallels the way one episode in a television series may make a jump from where the previous episode ended before possibly bringing things together. The complexity generates a portrait of Saul as a complicated and enigmatic person who is not amenable to confident unequivocal description or judgment, like other biblical characters such as Jacob, Rebekah, David, and Mary. The mystery extends to God’s relationship with Saul, as is the case with God’s relationship with Moses and Job; his attitude to kingship in general is “enigmatic.”[[104]](#footnote-104) The jerkiness and the different angles on central government also reflect the narrative’s combining several versions of why and how Israel came to have kings, like a movie script that merges several screenwriters’ work. The several versions, telling the story from different angles, cannot be put end to end, but together they comprise a richly diverse account. It illustrates another aspect of the genius of narrative: it can portray people and issues in the appropriately complex way. During the divided monarchy and after 587, it might aid the Judahite community in thinking about monarchy and about the future, though it would not tell them the answer. The further genius of narrative is that it forbids its readers from taking too much for granted, from thinking it has come to an end when it had not.

“Samuel isn’t a political book” but it is “a book about politics” that suggests “a revolutionary transformation in biblical political theology” in denying that “the king is God,” asserting instead that “God is the king,” and seeking to wrestle with what human kingship can therefore mean.[[105]](#footnote-105) “The centrality of human power in relation to the divine lies on the surface in Samuel.”[[106]](#footnote-106) Thus “how human kingship could exist within an authority structure that allowed Yahweh to remain the “Great King” is one of the key questions addressed by the books of Samuel.”[[107]](#footnote-107) Yet only once in Samuel is Yahweh termed “king” (1 Sam 12:12), over against 299 references to human beings as kings. It looks as if Yahweh prefers to be seen as “deliverer” than as “king (*môšîa‘* rather than *melek*);[[108]](#footnote-108) these two words come together in one of Samuel’s rebukes of the people’s desire for a king (10:19; see also 14:39; 2 Sam 22:3).

The first king emerges

1. because the hereditary principle for government didn’t work (8:1-5). Samuel was no more fortunate or effective as a parent than Eli had been, and he hadn’t confronted his sons, as Eli at least had.[[109]](#footnote-109) Samuel thus confirms a point that emerges from Eli’s story. An irony then emerges, since Israel soon falls into hereditary assumptions about kings and has the same experience over the hereditary principle. Another irony is that the other disappointed father in Israel’s story was Gideon, the man who refused to be ruler over Israel (Judg 8 – 9).
2. because the previous form of government didn’t work, in that the people with authority misused their authority to benefit themselves (8:2). The beginning of this narrative establishes that the exercise of authority (*šāpaṭ*, *mišpāṭ*) is a key theme.[[110]](#footnote-110) It is misleading that *mišpāṭ* is conventionally translated “justice,” because it refers concretely to the exercise of authority, in giving judgment and in other contexts. But *mišpāṭ* does imply the *proper* exercise of authority. An implication of the elders’ appeal is the traditional Middle Eastern assumption that it is a king’s business to see to the exercise of authorityin a way that is fair and protective.[[111]](#footnote-111) The further irony emerges that the exercise of authority by Israel’s kings will hardly be better than that by Samuel’s sons, like all forms of authority known to humanity.
3. because the elders, whose previous appearance had been to ask why Yahweh had defeated the Israelites and then to jump to a dubious solution (4:3), again see a problem and jump to a dubious solution (8:4-5). Their reasoning does recall the observation at the end of Judges about people deciding for themselves what was upright when there was no king, which implied that a king would solve the problem. But why should a king make a difference, if a figure like Samuel did not?
4. because the elders want Israel to be like other nations (8:5). It might seem that moving towards strong central government is indeed a natural or inevitable sociological development as the nation grows and develops. The story in 1 Samuel 8 – 12 is then an account of a nation going through a necessary “rite of passage.”[[112]](#footnote-112) But “like other nations” is “a bid . . . for ordinariness” as a means to survival.[[113]](#footnote-113) Israel was designed to be and to model something different. So the elders who ask for a king adduce bad reasons as well as defensible ones (the Samuel sons are not suitable as successors to their father), and they seem persuaded not a bit by what Samuel warns.[[114]](#footnote-114)
5. because the people are thereby rebuffing Samuel as the person put in authority by Yahweh (though they could claim that Deut 17:14-20 allows the appointment of a king – by Yahweh) and/or rebuffing Yahweh himself, in keeping with their consistent practice (8:6-8). The king’s appearance “opens a new way to apostasy from the first commandment.”[[115]](#footnote-115)
6. because Yahweh is prepared to do as they say (8:7), though he first wants Samuel to get them to think about the implications of their proposal. God “gives them up” to their own desires (cf. Rom 1:24, 26, 28).[[116]](#footnote-116)
7. even though they will find having a king is expensive (8:9-17). Central government costs money, even if it tries to be economic, though in practice governments don’t try hard to be economic in the way they themselves live off the back of their people. “From Samuel’s perspective, what characterizes a king above all is that he will *take.*”[[117]](#footnote-117) He can later claim to have been cheaper, even if his sons were not (12:1-5; “take” recurs there, too).[[118]](#footnote-118) But a government has to be fed, and the people are going to have to foot the bill. To be less anachronistic, it’s all going to cost labor, the price being mostly paid by people other than the elders themselves.[[119]](#footnote-119) There is yet more irony in the fact that this warning is labelled as a description of the way the king will exercise authority, of his *mišpāṭ*. One would have hoped that a description of the king’s *mišpāṭ* would have been more positively prescriptive for the people’s sake, like (one hopes) the account of it in 10:25 (cf. 2 Sam 8:15). Here the king’s *mišpāṭ* is simply what he will legitimately be entitled to do in making kingship work; it means more than “custom” or “manner.”[[120]](#footnote-120) But at least the “rule” may draw attention to limits that a king must respect.[[121]](#footnote-121)
8. even though the king will be one who thus puts them into servitude and makes them cry out, instead of being a liberator when they cry out (8:18).[[122]](#footnote-122) And when they do cry out thus, Yahweh will not respond. They have chosen their alternative bed and they will have to lie in it. To put it more positively, they will learn a painful lesson if they insist on their request. To put it even more positively, though the monarchy will fail, it is nevertheless “a sign act” that “will provide a continuing testimony to God’s righteousness, to the people’s faithlessness, and to the difference between a human kingdom and the kingdom of God.”[[123]](#footnote-123)
9. because they nevertheless insist on having a king; they feel the need of someone to fight their battles (8:19-20). In itemizing the cost, Samuel made more explicit that having a king like other nations implies the general assumption that the main task of a government is its people’s protection. The Philistine imbroglio has shown this necessary in the past, and the surprising fact that there is apparently now a Philistine base in the vicinity (10:5) also suggests the need. In a moment Yahweh will refer to the people’s need for deliverance from the Philistines and to the cry they have uttered (*ṣə‘āqâ*; 9:16), like the one they uttered in Egypt (Exod 3:7, 9). Yes, they want a king to lead them in battle, a *real* king, not an occasional human judge and an invisible divine king. This aspect of their request looks like an afterthought, and might be intended that way.[[124]](#footnote-124) But as Samuel said, a military requires expenditure.
10. because Yahweh agrees (8:21-22). What else was he to do? Turn his back on them as they had turned their backs on him? Insist on appointing another non-kingly leader? In the Scriptures and in the subsequent life of the people of God, he is consistently trimming what he wants to what is practicable, not least in the forms of leadership he allows to develop. “The mysterious forbearance of God and the continuing perfidy of God's people walk side by side.”[[125]](#footnote-125) “He gave them a king, as it is written, according to their heart, but not according to His heart.”[[126]](#footnote-126) The monarchy is “an unwelcome but inevitable reality.”[[127]](#footnote-127)

## How and How Not to Have a King

“We move from why it was done to how it was done” [[128]](#footnote-128) The argument between the people (or the elders representing them), Samuel, and Yahweh ends with Samuel sending everyone back to their home town. A decision has been reached. How it will be implemented? Will the elders consult? Will there be nominations and an election? Will Samuel spend time consulting with Yahweh? Who would Yahweh want as king (cf. Deut 17:15)? The answer is that Yahweh will designate Saul.

1. He is someone with an impressive family background, and he is himself impressive in appearance (9:1-2), though it will transpire that the narrative is playing with the auditors in implying that these are important considerations. And maybe it’s significant that he comes from little Benjamin (9:21; cf. Ps 68:27 [28]), with its shameful background (Judg 19 – 21).
2. “Saul makes his first appearance in the Bible as an agreeable young man, motivated only by a sense of family duty, unassuming, deferential, and, as far as we can see, without high ambition.”[[129]](#footnote-129) He is also not as knowledgeable or as bright as his boy (9:3-10), which warns us more overtly that things may not turn out well.
3. Saul and the boy arrive at a certain town while looking for some lost donkeys. Maybe it’s Ramah, as Samuel has a house here (9:18). By no coincidence Samuel is going to be there, leading worship at the shrine, the first (almost the only) individual *bāmâ* (“high place”) in the First Testament story (9:11-15). Yahweh has told him that someone is coming whom he is to anoint. Yahweh prefers to speak of the prospective leader as a commandant (*nāgîd*), whose task is to restrain or control or marshal Israel (*‘āṣar*; 9:16-17). Both noun and verb are elusive words, but a main point about them is that they do not mean “king” or “reign.” A commandant suggests someone chosen, designated, exalted, and anointed by Yahweh,[[130]](#footnote-130) someone “announced” by Yahweh (the verb *nāgad* comes eight times in 9:1 – 10:16), someone under Yahweh’s direction, more like a prophet than a king. It confronts any idea of a leader who engages in decisive initiatives on the basis of his own vision of what a situation needs. Thus Yahweh here four times calls Israel “my people” (9:16-17);[[131]](#footnote-131) he uses the expression only once more in 1 Samuel (2:29). Despite Deut 17:15, the idea of the leader being someone God “chooses” stands in some tension with the usual talk of the people as chosen by God, a more common theme in Deuteronomy. “Monarchy potentially endangered this belief in the election of the people as whole.”[[132]](#footnote-132)
4. He is the one to whom Israel’s entire desire or delight (*ḥemdâ*)relates or belongs or attaches (9:20). Samuel’s noun could imply something proper (Ps 19:10 [11]; 106:24) or something wrongful (Deut 5;21 [18]; Josh 7:21).
5. Saul’s response, “What, me?” (9:21), matches a common pattern when Yahweh summons people, but that parallel does not make the response less significant. It suggests he has not been aspiring to such a designation, whatever Samuel means when he says he knows what Saul has in his mind, about which he promises to talk to him (9:18-19). But Saul doesn’t take Gideon’s stance of simply refusing to “rule” over the people (*māšal*; Judg 8:22-23), on the basis of Yahweh’s being the one who rules; but then, it was the Israelites not a prophet who approached Gideon.
6. Saul thus becomes the first person to be anointed as a ruler (as opposed to a priest). In effect Samuel crowns him, and declares that Yahweh has anointed him (10:1).
7. He gives Saul signs that what he says is true (10:2-13), as Yahweh did for Moses and for Gideon; it can be another feature of a summons by Yahweh. The signs’ fulfilment will also be an indication that Samuel is the prophet whom Saul can and must trust and follow (cf. Deut 18:21-22). The climactic sign is that he will find himself joining a group of prophets in “acting like a prophet” (*nābā’* hitpael) as Yahweh’s spirit or wind or breath comes dynamically upon him (10:6). Translations such as “in a prophetic frenzy” (NRSV) or “speaking in ecstasy” (NJPS) do not clarify the verb’s meaning. In the eighteenth-century First Great Awakening, groaning, screaming, and collapsing could be signs of God’s having an impact on a person, and such phenomena have recurred in more recent Pentecostal and charismatic movements. Like prophesying or speaking in tongues, the experience may imply a heightened consciousness, but it need not do so. It does imply Saul acting in a way he normally did not. He will thus “turn into another man” (10:6). To put it another way, God gives him another mind or attitude (10:9), an anticipatory summary of what happens when he meets the prophets. By nature Saul is just a regular guy, without gifts of leadership or aspirations to leadership, like people such as Moses, Joshua, and Gideon. If the fulfilment of Yahweh’s purpose depends on Yahweh, the leader of Israel does not need leadership gifts. The coming of Yahweh’s spirit will look after such matters. Yahweh gives him another mind, “a spirit of royal might”[[133]](#footnote-133) instead of one that just knows about cattle,[[134]](#footnote-134) and he is now a man who can sing praise (cf. Tg).
8. He is then to do what his hand finds to do, given that God is with him (10:7). Again puzzlingly, however, Samuel adds that he is to go down to Gilgal by the Jordan and wait for a week for Samuel to come to offer sacrifices and make known to him what he is to do (10:8). The sequence of events in 1 Samuel 11 – 13 will partly clarify things.
9. Meanwhile, once again the narrative jumps (10:17-27). Samuel summons the people to Mizpah again, reasserts a rebuke for their rebuffing Yahweh in saying they want a king, but gets them to assemble by families so they can identify by lot the person of Yahweh’s choice. The process might seem worrying, as the last person identified this way was Achan (Josh 7), but it will apparently be okay for the appointment of Matthias (Acts 1:26). The method underscores the assumption that determining who should be king isn’t a matter of discerning who has the leadership qualities, or even the personal qualities, but of discerning who is Yahweh’s choice. The private and secret anointing (10:1) and the public identification confirm each other.[[135]](#footnote-135)
10. Saul is hiding with the stuff belonging to the gathering, but it doesn’t stop Samuel designating him. Like declining to tell his uncle about his anointing (10:15 – 17), hiding is a sign of being someone who doesn’t push himself forward, and/or a sign of “Saul’s premonition that ruling is a burden from which he must hide.”[[136]](#footnote-136)
11. The people acclaim him. Samuel gives the people another description of how the king will exercise authority, his *mišpāṭ* (10:25), different from the earlier one (8:11-18): NRSV here renders the phrase “the rights and duties of the kingship.” Perhaps it is the kind of thing that appears in Deut 17:14-20. Samuel writes it down and sets it before Yahweh, and everyone goes home. There are some people who are not impressed by Saul, but he keeps quiet (10:25-27), which might be a sign of wisdom (Prov 11:12).

## How To Be a King

The Philistines were not Israel’s only problem (11:1-5). According to Judges 11, the Ammonites claimed the Israelite territory east of the Jordan, are now trying to drive the Israelites out of Jabesh-gilead, and are intent on disabling people who remain.[[137]](#footnote-137) News reaches Saul, who is out plowing. It will seem surprising if he has already been acclaimed as king, but if a main point about a king is to lead the people in battle, the need for him to function as king arises only now. Or maybe 1 Samuel 11 provides a third account of a proper process whereby Yahweh might indicate that a person should become king rather than merely someone with authority like Gideon, Eli, or Samuel. It is then parallel to the accounts in 1 Samuel 10 rather than chronologically sequential: there is private anointing, public identification, and also active demonstration that Yahweh is at work through him. All three are important indicators of Yahweh choosing Saul and thus of the argument for recognizing him as king. Anyway, the Ammonite action tests whether Saul can fulfill the role of king.[[138]](#footnote-138) Once again Yahweh’s breath or wind or spirit overwhelms Saul, and his anger blazes (11:6). Yes, he is a different person, and “Saul’s finest hour”[[139]](#footnote-139) follows.

Some events in the United States and in Britain in the year in which I write may help us understand the way Samuel speaks about a spirit of anger, and the latter may help us understand these events. A spirit of anger and/or affront and/or fear and/or compassion and/or worry has overwhelmed many people in connection with racism, imperialism, and global warming, and led to public demonstrations over these matters and people taking violent action against property and/or people. This spirit was not something that was previously active in them, though it may have been there latent. It aroused them from outside and turned them into different people (demonstrators often comment “I am not the kind of person who usually does this sort of thing, but…”). To speak of this spirit overwhelming them is not to indicate approval of it; Samuel will later speak of a bad spirit overwhelming Saul, and some of the ways in which a spirit has overwhelmed people in Britain and in the United States has been bad. But in this case, the anger is God’s, as is the case (for instance) with God’s spirit of wisdom (Exod 28:3).

If this spirit overwhelmed someone, it came from outside, and with force. The Hebrew expression (*ṣālaḥ* followed by the preposition ‘*al*) is used almost exclusively in references to a spirit coming onto a person (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Sam 10:6, 10; 11:6; the preposition is *’el* in 16:13; 18:10, suggesting into rather than onto). The spirit lays hold on them. Whereas LXX and Vg translate “jump on,” forcefulness rather than suddenness is the connotation. NRSV’s “possess” might be misleading, while Tg’s “dwell” undertranslates. The spirit’s overwhelming people doesn’t mean overriding their will or making them act in an involuntary way, but that a force from outside pushed them into behaving in a way they otherwise wouldn’t.

Energized by the anger generated by God’s breath or wind or spirit, Saul does what his hand finds to do, God being with him (10:7). He summons an Israelite fighting force (threatening them Mafioso-style[[140]](#footnote-140) with death if they hold back) and leads them in striking down the Ammonites. The story does not refer to Yahweh acting, but Saul subsequently declares that Yahweh has effected deliverance for them. The three references to deliverance in the chapter make clear it is not Saul who is meant to be celebrated as a result of what happens.[[141]](#footnote-141) But what happens is reason for being merciful to the people who had doubts about him (11:7-13), and reason to “renew” the kingship; so they “made Saul king” there.

In due course, the people of Jabesh will star in the final act in the drama of Saul’s life (31:11-13). For them, “Saul would always be the one who rescued them from extreme danger, their redeemer-king.” And the first great of Saul as king will have a substantial link to the promise of a king “who would embody justice and righteousness, who would defend the cause of the poor and the needy, who would uphold the rights of the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. Great expectations were thus shaped against the concrete background of failed monarchs, or unjust and greedy ones.”[[142]](#footnote-142)

# Yahweh Who Rebuffs a King (1 Samuel 13:1 – 20:42 [21:1])

Samuel does not aim to write a biography of Saul (any more than of David).[[143]](#footnote-143) Its focus is now his failure to live up to his vocation. Narratively, Saul features only as a “negative contrast to David.”[[144]](#footnote-144) Nor does the account of his failure and downfall work in chronological sequence. Several individual chapters cover the entire story, so that the chapters resemble a set of paintings portraying the same scene from different angles. Chronologically, 15:1-35 does not simply follow on 13:2 – 14:52; nor does 16:1-23 simply follow on 15:1-35; and so on.

While leadership qualities do not determine who Yahweh designates as leaders, the leaders’ response to Yahweh’s choice – how they respond morally and how they respond in relation to Yahweh – makes a difference to them and to their people. Saul is now a king, like other kings; but he is “thrown back wholly upon the Spirit of Yahweh, and therefore he stands or falls by the fact that he does His will, that as a king and lord among men he is His servant.” Everything depends on his management of his position as both lord and servant.[[145]](#footnote-145)

## The Fog of War[[146]](#footnote-146)

From the beginning, the Samuel narrative has from time to time left things unclear. Why did Yahweh close Hannah’s womb? Did Eli mean “the God of Israel will give you what you asked” or “may the God of Israel give you what you asked”? When Elqanah said, “may Yahweh establish his word,” what word did he refer to? Is Ramathaim the same as Ramah? Sometimes the answers to these questions might have been evident to the narrative’s first auditors, sometimes the gaps are there by the nature of a story because it’s impossible to include everything, sometimes we can work out the answers, sometimes the author may have just wanted us to think about them. The way 1 Samuel 13 – 20 opens signals something similar about how it will proceed:[[147]](#footnote-147) “Saul was a man of [blank] years when he became king and he reigned [blank?] two years over Israel” (13:1). The account of the battle at Michmash and of the first threat of Saul’s losing the throne (13:2 – 14:52) manifests the densest compendium of such unclarities in Samuel.

Some battle accounts in the First Testament tell a coherent story of deliberate and careful inquiry of Yahweh and/or clear and explicit instructions from Yahweh and/or effective and decisive action with a positive and conclusive outcome. This battle account is not an example. The battle begins as a human initiative (13:2-7). There is no overwhelming by God’s spirit or blazing of anger, though neither is there any critique of the initiative; perhaps Saul is doing what his hand finds to do, in accordance with Samuel’s encouragement (10:7). But who is this Jonathan who strikes down a Philistine garrison – or is it a Philistine garrison commander (*nāṣîb*, 13:3)? We have not heard of this Jonathan before. Or is it Saul who strikes it down (13:4)? Was the army “called out” by him or did it simply muster, as LXX and Vg imply (the verb is *ṣā‘aq* niphal)? What is the relationship between Jonathan’s forces and Saul’s forces in the engagements that follow? Are Gibeah of Benjamin, Geba of Benjamin, and Geba the location of the Philistine base (13:2-3, 16) different places, and are any of them the same place as Gibeah of God where the Philistine base/garrison also is (10:5) and/or as Gibeah of Saul (11:4)?

And where is Samuel? Alongside that earlier encouragement, he had spoken of the making of offerings, which would be the natural accompaniment of seeking Yahweh’s blessing, and had added that he of course would come to make the offering. Why does he not show up within the timeframe he set, when the army is beginning to run for cover? When Saul “forces himself” and makes the offering, is he at fault? Is Samuel at fault in his absence or his judgment? “Samuel may think that Saul has failed the test, but the narrator betrays no trace of any attitude of judgment or cheap superiority over the doomed king.”[[148]](#footnote-148) Why does Yahweh not speak? Is he being tough? Should Saul have acted instead of sacrificing? When Samuel arrives and tells Saul he has been a fool for ignoring Yahweh’s command, what command does he refer to (Yahweh, as oppose to Samuel, issued no command about Gilgal)? Are the words of condemnation Samuel’s or Yahweh’s?

For ignoring that command, Saul’s reign “will not stand” (*qûm*, 13:14). Is it his own reign, which will actually last quite a while but come to an end with his death by his own hand, or is it his dynasty? In the former case, this note is one of the indications that the story portrays the long process that does end in his death. In the latter case, there is an irony, because this story shows his son as having the character and gifts that a king might need, even while also suggesting an uneasy relationship or non-communication between father and son that will worsen as the chapters unfold. Does Yahweh’s declaration lie behind Jonathan’s not succeeding his father even though he is eminently qualified? Is the narrative simply informing the auditors of where the story is bound to go? Or does the threat to Saul presuppose an “unless”? Does it imply “may not stand?” The ambiguity of Samuel’s declaration parallels the ambiguity of his instruction in 10:8.[[149]](#footnote-149)

“Yahweh has sought for himself an individual in accordance with his mind. Yahweh has ordered him to be commandant over Israel” (13:14). Oddly, one thing that seems clear is that English translations mislead when they speak of an individual “after his own heart,” which sounds like someone whose heart or mind matches Yahweh’s (though Tg comes near that understanding with “an individual doing his will”). Other occurrences of such phrases suggest that it means someone on whom Yahweh’s heart or mind has set itself (cf. 14:7), someone of Yahweh’s own choice. Saul had been that person. Who might it now be? It will be David, but at the moment it might be Jonathan, “who is everything good that Saul isn’t.”[[150]](#footnote-150)

One could have expected the exchange between Samuel and Saul to lead to a defeat in which Saul perishes. Instead it leads to a victory achieved by a brave ruse of Jonathan’s, aided by his boy. Perhaps Yahweh will act on our behalf (14:6), Jonathan speculates, and thinks up a sign that will tell them whether Yahweh is doing so. Is Jonathan ambitious to outdo his father, like Absalom? Anyway, Yahweh cooperates, the earth shakes, there is a supernatural panic among the Philistines, and a commotion (14:15-16). Saul has the Shiloh priest, Eli’s great grandson, with him. Why wasn’t he at Gilgal, and is Saul to consult the representative of Eli’s condemned and deposed line? According to MT, he has the covenant chest with him: is it not at Qiryat-ye‘arim? In LXX he has only a chasuble, which seems more plausible, but why would MT have “chest” instead? The chasuble presumably contains the Urim and Thummim through which Saul hopes to consult Yahweh, but what is he asking, and why does MT lack most of the later presumed reference to Urim and Thummim in 14:41? And when he decides, before the process can be completed, that they had better go into battle anyway and give chase, isn’t it surprising that “Yahweh delivered Israel” (14:23), especially when only here in 1 Samuel 13 – 14 is Yahweh the subject of a verb?

Was Jonathan then right that Saul was unwise in requiring his army to fast until the fighting was over (14:29-30), or was fasting a proper act of discipline (cf. 7:6)?[[151]](#footnote-151) When his troops hungrily barbecued at the end of the initial victory, were they failing to observe the proprieties about draining the blood from an animal before barbecuing it, or does eating *over* the blood imply divination? Is the altar that Saul then builds the same thing as the rock just referred to, or something more proper (14:31-35)? When it transpires that Jonathan had unwittingly broken the fast, was Saul amenable to the death of his son, who has been showing himself more a person of initiative and trust in Yahweh than Saul is, and who might be the person Yahweh has in mind to replace him? When the troops redeem him, how did they do so?

It’s impossible to be clear on much of the story. Sometimes leaders may take action that they identify within the parameters God lays down (but sometimes the plan turns out to be wrong); sometimes leaders get concrete instructions. Sometimes leaders may specify a sign through which God may confirm something as a good idea (but sometimes God may not cooperate). Sometimes leaders may take an initiative and God may work through it (but sometimes God may not). Most troublesome, sometimes leaders may take an action in good faith but it turns out that God disapproves, and disaster follows. As Qohelet might have put it, one can never be sure of acting in a way that seems good in God’s eyes and that he therefore blesses, rather than of the opposite. With this text, “it is easier to speak of impact than of meaning or intention . . . . The text embraces remarkable of levels of ambivalence.”[[152]](#footnote-152) It does reflect how decisions within the people of God reflect issues of power and personality.[[153]](#footnote-153) And as Qohelet might also have put it, when things in a story are clear, we can rejoice. When things are unclear, we have to deal with it.

One ultimately wrestles with how to gain insight from a narrator who seems to claim authoritatively that it is humanity's fate, even nature, to remain ignorant in the face of God's omniscience, yet ever compelled to strive for knowledge and understanding . . . . The Deuteronomic narrative style, for all its authoritative manner, still involves a profound contemporaneity and sublime relativity that revels in the mystery and

ambiguity of life. No matter that the reader gives the narrator of chapters 13 – 15

and the God within them their basic due of communicative omniscience and reliability;

the story that begins with Jonathan's initiative and ends with Saul's rejection never fails to highlight life's rich complexities . . . . [It aims] to provoke humanity toward an everpresent quest for the truth, even as we are disposed to recognize our relative ignorance.[[154]](#footnote-154)

## Devoting

The possibility that 13:13-14 was an anticipatory judgment fits the way 14:1 does not seem to presuppose it. Saul’s mistake in 13:2-12 was a misjudgment that typifies his rule and was the kind of act that led to his downfall. The account of his downfall compares with the account of his rise, where the sequence of stories are partly parallel. It fits that the story about Jonathan and the fast closes with a summary account of Saul’s achievements and family (14:47-52). We have read the whole story of his reign. But now (in the narrative) Samuel gives Saul another command, which the narrator later in effect confirms did come from Yahweh (15:2-3, 10-11). Amusingly, whereas 13:1 – 14:52 is full of ambiguities that give premodern, modern, and postmodern interpreters scope to read them their own way and thus to affirm the story, 15:1-35 manifests some clarities that disturb premodern, modern, and postmodern interpreters, though it also has its own ambiguities over the actions, words, and motives of Saul, Samuel, and Yahweh.[[155]](#footnote-155)

Yahweh is set on “attending to” Amalek. The verb (*pāqad*) is neutral in meaning; it earlier referred to Yahweh’s “attending to” Hannah, so that she had multiple pregnancies (2:21). Here it implies negative attention. It relates to what Amalek did to Israel on its way out of Egypt. The attack was unprovoked but the first account of it (Exod 17:8-15) does not portray it as very terrible, though afterwards Yahweh undertook to obliterate Amalek’s memory (the story might therefore seem self-defeating). But a later reference says that Amalek “met with you on the way and attacked you from behind, all who were shattered behind you, and you were faint and weary, and it was not in awe of God” (Deut 25:18). The Amalekites were “wrongdoers” (*ḥaṭṭā’îm*). But like Exodus, 1 Samuel 15 does not refer to the ethical point that Deuteronomy makes, though Samuel later adds to the Amalekite king:

As your sword bereaved women,

so your mother will be bereaved from among women (15:33)

Yahweh therefore now commissions Saul to attack Amalek and “devote” men, men, children, and animals. LXX, Vg, and Tg translate the verb (*ḥāram* hiphil) “destroy,” but in its expansive rendering LXX adds “anathematize,” which gets nearer the verb’s distinctive meaning. In its first occurrences in the Torah, the verb and the related noun (*ḥērem*, Lev 27:21-28) simply mean giving something to Yahweh in irrevocable fashion. Killing is neither essential to “devoting” nor does it get to the idea’s essence, though most First Testament references do refer to killing, like references elsewhere. The inscription commissioned by Mesha the king of Moab to commemorate a victory over Israel a couple of centuries later refers to devoting people to his god in this way.[[156]](#footnote-156) One significance of such killing is that the killers gain nothing from their action.

The story gives no indication that Israel is seeking redress for the attack two or three centuries previously, in which Israel in any case won a victory. Nor does it indicate that the Amalekites, who live far away in the Negeb, are a problem to Israel at the moment. Saul is to undertake the action because Samuel says that Yahweh says so: “I am the one Yahweh sent to anoint you as king over his people, over Israel: so now listen to the sound of Yahweh’s words” (15:1). Saul does as he is told, though sparing the Kenites who live among the Amalekites but had shown commitment (*ḥesed*) to the Israelites when they left Egypt (Judg 1:16 is the nearest we have to a clarification of that reference). He also spares the Amalekite king and the best of the domestic animals and other things of value.

“Devoting” in the sense of killing as a divine punishment raises a number of questions. Can it ever be right for Yahweh to kill? The Scriptures assume throughout that it can be right. Could it be right to kill this generation of Amalekites for something that their ancestors did, and to include their children and their animals? The Scriptures assume that one generation are tied up for good or ill with previous generations, and that children are tied up for good or ill with the destiny of their parents; so are a family’s animals. Can it be right for Yahweh to use Israel as his agents in punishing other human beings? The Scriptures assume that it can be. Isn’t this belief dangerously open to misappropriation by other peoples? Yes, but then most things in the Scriptures are, and the danger is maybe no greater than converse ideas such as that God doesn’t punish people for their wrongdoing or that our children and our animals don’t suffer through our wrongdoing. Like moving from “is” to “ought,” it is tricky to move from “God told them to do it” or “God once did a certain thing” to “God is telling you to do it” or “God regularly does this thing,” as maybe Israel knew well. As is the case with the analogous story of Abraham’s offering of Isaac (Gen 22), Israel did not assume that Yahweh regularly issued this kind of command, nor that he generally related in this way to other peoples in its world.[[157]](#footnote-157) Indeed, the First Testament refers to “devoting” almost entirely in connection with Israel’s arrival in Canaan.[[158]](#footnote-158)

There is a difference between assumptions in this story and teaching that Jesus will give, though the difference needs stating carefully. It’s not that Jesus introduces the idea of loving and forgiving enemies,[[159]](#footnote-159) which is a principle implied elsewhere in the First Testament and in Samuel itself; indeed, we have noted that in Saul’s day Amalek was not Israel’s enemies. And Jews feel as uneasy about the instruction to destroy Amalek as Christians do.[[160]](#footnote-160) Conversely, Jesus does affirm that judgment will come on nations that neglect his family (notably, in Matt 25:31-46). The difference is that he describes God as bringing this judgment at the end of the age rather than picturing God being involved thus in this age, and the judgment involves eternal punishment. It’s not obvious that these differences imply a theological or ethical advance on Samuel as opposed to expressing different insights. Jesus also describes, without disapproval, an oppressive servant being hacked to piece like Agag (Matt 24:51). Of course, these are “only parables,” but then 1 Samuel 15 is “only a story.” Whatever degree of historicity it may have, its account of Saul devoting the entire Amalekite people is not simply factual. The Amalekites are alive and well later in Samuel (27:8; 30:1, 13) and Agag is reincarnate as Haman “the Agagite” in Esther, where his opposite number is Mordecai the descendant of Kish.[[161]](#footnote-161) Amalek “is now an emblem of evil rather than an historical entity,” like Nineveh in Jonah.[[162]](#footnote-162) It stands for an embodiment of disorder that attempted to reassert itself after Yahweh put disorder down at the Red Sea.[[163]](#footnote-163) The action that Yahweh commissions had what might be called an eschatological significance that took it closer to those parables. It embodied a commitment to eliminate evil.

Saul gets into trouble for compromising on what Yahweh commanded in this connection, though he has more than one excuse (“I saved the best animals to sacrifice to Yahweh, and also I gave into pressure from the people”). But the symbolic significance of this compromise makes Yahweh relent over making Saul king. As it was explicit that the attack on Amalek was Yahweh’s idea not Saul’s, it is explicit that Saul’s rebuff is Yahweh’s idea not Samuel’s. Samuel is angry (*ḥārâ*;some translations have him “upset,” but “angry” is the verb’s regular meaning). Is he angry with Saul or with Yahweh? He cries out to Yahweh all night: is he pleading with Yahweh to change his mind? If so, it is “a failed intercession”; he cannot achieve what Moses achieved (Exod 32:11-14).[[164]](#footnote-164) He goes to see Saul, accuses him of profiting from the venture, adds a rhetorical question, then adds a pair of lines that move from comparative to absolute:[[165]](#footnote-165)

Is there delight for Yahweh in burnt offerings and sacrifices

like listening to Yahweh’s voice?

There: listening is better than a sacrifice,

to heed is better than rams’ fat.

Because rebellion: the wrongdoing of divination,

presumption: the trouble of effigies.

Because you rebuffed Yahweh’s word,

he is rebuffing you from being king. (15:22-23)

These classic lines compare with prophetic indictments such as Hosea 6:6 and Amos 5:21-24. Yet the comparison would be bizarre if they related to a straightforward historical action involving Saul’s showing mercy in his act of slaughter; Hosea and Amos are contrasting burnt offerings and sacrifices with commitment and faithfulness (*ḥesed* and *ṣədāqâ*) not with unsparing slaughter. But if Amalek stands for forces of disorder and opposition to Yahweh, the indictment makes more sense, and also compares with the equivalent indictment in Jer 7:16-26. Compromising over Amalek is indeed like compromising over divination by means of effigies (*tərāpîm*). I take the effigies to be representations of family members who have passed, who can be honored and remembered by means of them and can also be consulted for information (especially about the future) that they now possess through being beyond the confines of this world. Divination by consulting Yahweh (the Urim and Thummim) would be okay for Israel, and divination by means of effigies might be understandable on the part of other peoples, but Israel’s use of such means would be an act of rebellion and rebuff of Yahweh’s word. Compromising over repudiating the opposition to Yahweh that Amalek symbolizes belongs in the same category. “Here, then, was Saul’s sin. He wished to be more merciful than God.”[[166]](#footnote-166)

## Relenting

When Samuel declared that Saul’s reign would not stand, might the pronouncement presuppose an “unless,” like Jonah’s equivalent pronouncement to Nineveh? Saul certainly hopes that Yahweh leaves open the possibility of repentance and of finding forgiveness: “please carry my wrongdoing” (15:25). The verb (*nāśā’*), the regular term for forgiveness, suggests declining to require a person to carry the consequences of their wrongdoing and agreeing to carry them oneself. “Go back with me so I may bow down to Yahweh,” Saul adds. Samuel refuses. “You have rebuffed Yahweh’s word, and Yahweh has rebuffed you from being king.” He is giving the kingship to Saul’s “neighbor, . . . a better man” than him, a good man as he is not. And “the Glory of Israel will not act falsely[[167]](#footnote-167) and will not relent, because he is not a human being, to relent.” This rebuff does not dissuade Saul; he again acknowledges his wrongdoing, and does bow down to Yahweh (15:24-29). But there’s no indication of a response. Samuel grieves over Saul (15:35). It’s not only as if Saul’s reign is over; it’s as if Saul is already dead.[[168]](#footnote-168) They never see each other again

First Samuel 13 and 15 parallel other stories where calamity follows what seems not such a gigantic mistake or wrongdoing: compare 2 Samuel 6; also Genesis 3; Exodus 32; Joshua 7; Acts 5. They offer some comfort in connection with the way life does work in that way. But none of these examples happen at ordinary moments. All have special significance because of the context to which they belong. Here, Israel’s “No” to Yahweh as king (1 Sam 12:12)

must be broken with the revelation of the divine Yes of the kingdom instituted by God, which does not compete with God’s own kingdom. And in order to represent this Israelite No and at the same time the fact that it is broken by the divine Yes, Saul must first become king. No gross, no blatant personal sin of Saul is needed to exhibit this negative aspect of the grace of the kingdom willed and created by God. All that needs to be seen is that he is just the person and ideal which the nation has foolishly imagined, and can only imagine, as its king. And it is this which is made evident in the double sinning which is microscopic to human eyes, but gigantic and absolutely decisive in God’s eyes . . . . It is because Saul represents Israel in its resistance to Yahweh being its king that he has to be rejected.[[169]](#footnote-169)

The underlying cause of Saul's rejection lies not in his action in chapter 13 but in the attitude of Yahweh towards him or in something he represents: “I gave you a king in my anger, and took him in my wrath” (Hos 13:8).[[170]](#footnote-170) While monarchy was a development that Yahweh had not wanted, and he had appointed a man who would not fulfill the job description, the narrative does not quite suggest that he had deliberately appointed someone who would fail. “Fate and flaw” are part of Saul’s story, though especially fate; Saul becomes “kingship's scapegoat.”[[171]](#footnote-171)

Whereas some Christian readers have been offended at the idea of God commanding Saul to devote the Amalekites, other Christian readers have been offended at the idea of God relenting or regretting or repenting or having a change of mind (*nāḥam* niphal) about making Saul king. It has been an axiom of Christian thinking that God does not change his mind. It would imply inconsistency or a recognition that one had made a mistake. When Samuel speaks thus, then, he is using anthropopathic language.[[172]](#footnote-172) It does involve anthropopathic language, but so does talk of God having compassion. Nearly all language about God involves describing God in human terms, which is the only way we have to think and speak of God; our being made in God’s image means we can use human analogies so to think and speak of God truthfully. The question is what this example of anthropopathic language tells us about God.

Sometimes relenting is an aspect of the dynamic relationship between God and humanity.[[173]](#footnote-173) God is not locked into the alleged inflexibility of a Median or Persian king (Dan 6:8 [9]). But God relents for reasons and not randomly in the way that a human being might (1 Sam 15:29; cf. Num 23:19). Jeremiah 18:1-11 speaks of a principled basis for his relenting, both from promises and from threats. Turning from wrongdoing can cause Yahweh to cancel his declaration of intent, as the Jonah story indeed shows.

Does Saul’s acknowledgment of wrongdoing not count as such a turning? It contains no expression of regret, though that feature does not have the importance in the Scriptures that it has in Christian spirituality. But neither does it explicitly refer to turning, which is the essence of repentance in the Scriptures. And it is accompanied by the making of excuses, which always undermines an apology. Further, Saul oddly asks for Samuel’s forgiveness, not Yahweh’s. So Saul’s equivocation or shiftiness could give Yahweh or Samuel a basis for declaring that Saul’s confession does not count. After being confronted over wrongdoing that looks much more reprehensible than Saul’s, David will use the same expression as Saul, “I did wrong” (*ḥāṭā’tî*, 15:24; cf. 2 Sam 12:13), and his prophet’s response will be enigmatic, but less negative than Samuel’s to Saul. Samuel reiterates that Saul has rebuffed Yahweh’s word, and that consequently Yahweh has rebuffed him as king. Apparently Saul’s confession does not undo his repudiation of Yahweh’s word nor does it cause Yahweh to reverse his repudiation of Saul as king. But Samuel then seems to add an explanation: Yahweh does not act falsely and does not relent. Both are odd statements, the first because its relevance is not immediately obvious, the second because Yahweh has told Samuel that he *has* relented, of making Saul king (15:11); the narrator will repeat the point momentarily (15: 35).

Sometimes contradictory statements in the Scriptures have to be allowed to stand and be in dialog and tension; it is a characteristic of Qohelet. Yahweh does not relent; Yahweh has relented could simply mean that there is no predictable, calculable link between human turning and divine turning.[[174]](#footnote-174) Whether or not God turns or relents is an aspect of God’s freedom, an aspect of “I will be what I will be” (Exod 3:14).[[175]](#footnote-175) We may trust that there are reasons for his acting in one way on one occasion and on the other way on another occasion, but we may not know what the reasons are.

Here, however, Samuel offers some explanation: God “will not act falsely and will not relent, because he is not a human being, to relent” (15:29). One implication might be that Yahweh does not relent without reason, as a human being may. Christian unease over the notion of God relenting has this concern. And Yahweh’s capacity for relenting does not mean he is fickle. Here, however, the comment about not relenting follows up the comment about not acting falsely, and the double statement follows the declaration that “Yahweh has torn Israel’s kingship from you today and given it to your neighbor" (15:28). As Samuel put it earlier, “Yahweh has sought for himself an individual in accordance with his mind. Yahweh has ordered him to be commandant over Israel” (13:14). Chronologically, the commission has not yet happened, but within the frame of this narrative it has happened and Yahweh is not going back on it. To do so would mean breaking a promise, which Yahweh would not do.[[176]](#footnote-176) The logic in 1 Samuel 15 parallels Balaam’s more explicit statement in the other passage about Yahweh not relenting (though using the hitpael rather than the niphal):

God is a not a person so he lies,

a human being so he relents.

Would he have said and will he not act,

spoken and will he not implement it? (Num 23:19)

Sometimes God makes a definitive decision that he will not go back on, as another of Jesus’s parables illustrates (Luke 16:19-31). In this story it’s too late for Saul to repent, because Yahweh has already made a promise to David. “Samuel's former warning in 13.13-14 becomes a divinely decreed reality.”[[177]](#footnote-177) Yahweh has decided to appoint someone else as commandant over Israel, someone who is good compared with Saul (15:28). Good compared with Saul? A deserter, a usurper, a calculator, a womanizer, a traitor, an outlaw, a mercenary, a murderer? If the bad thing about Saul was his laxness in relation to the Amalekites (15:19), is David better because he is more ruthless? After 16:12, the only other “good” person in 1 Samuel is Abigail in 25:3, who is good in understanding. Perhaps “good” simply means “good in Yahweh’s eyes,” someone his mind has set upon (13:14).

## One King Anointed, One King Assailed

Sent without explanation but with danger to anoint a son of Jesse in Bethlehem, Samuel sees Eliab, Jesse’s eldest, as is perhaps assumed here (16:6). He has the appearance and height that had been important when Yahweh chose Saul.[[178]](#footnote-178) But Yahweh doesn’t look at things as human beings do (cf. Isa 55:8).[[179]](#footnote-179) Yahweh has looked at Eliab’s mind or thinking or inner attitude. The significance of this comment may emerge when Eliab gets angry and disdainful to David later (17:28).[[180]](#footnote-180) The person Yahweh has chosen will not be qualified by seniority, appearance, or height but by thinking and attitudes. The “not this but that” should not be misunderstood: it evidently means “not so much this as that” or “less this than that,” because the one Yahweh has his eye on actually is a tanned, brown-eyed handsome young man (16:12). Yet apparently Yahweh can see something in David’s attitude that he could not see in Eliab. On the other hand, when Eliab says those tough things about David’s impudence and the ambitiousness of his thinking and attitude (17:28), he is not far wrong.[[181]](#footnote-181) “From the moment David first speaks (17:26), he seems to manifest a distinctive spark of ambition.”[[182]](#footnote-182) “Even before 2 Samuel 11, ominous signs appear throughout the story and foreshadow David’s moral demise.”[[183]](#footnote-183)

Samuel anoints David, and Yahweh’s wind or breath or spirit overwhelms him, as it did Saul (16:7, 12-13). The anointing is a family event not a public one, and while Samuel knows what it meant and the audience of the story knows, who can tell what the family would have thought at the time? Samuel had anointed Saul without anyone else knowing what it signified, and God’s spirit had come on him and he had prophesied. Is David to be a prophet? Or a priest? – priests are also anointed.

As happened after Samuel anointed Saul and God’s spirit came on him, life then goes on as normal for a while. But alongside God’s spirit’s overwhelming David is its leaving Saul (16:14). The implication is not the one that could apply in Christian language usage, where the Holy Spirit’s departure would imply losing one’s relationship with God. Saul is not being cast off as a person or cut off from Israel. The narrative is talking about the coming and departure of Yahweh’s spirit in connection with appointment as king and resourcing for that role. Saul is being fired from being king, or being given notice of his firing, and the withdrawing of Yahweh’s spirit is tied up with Yahweh’s giving up on Saul as king. On the other hand, the coming of Yahweh’s spirit on David and Yahweh’s being with him do not issue from deserve on his part. He is simply the person God chose. Maybe Yahweh had reasons, but the narrator doesn’t tell us what they might have been, beyond the comment about attitude.

Whereas Yahweh has left Saul, David has great success in battle and great popularity. His appointment as commander-in-chief “was good in the eyes of the entire people and also in the eyes of Saul’s servants” (18:5). “He was successful . . . successful . . . successful . . . successful” (18:5, 14, 15, 30). People “loved him . . . loved him . . . loved David . . . loved David . . . love you . . . loved him” (18:1, 3, 16, 20, 22, 28).[[184]](#footnote-184) “Love seems to come to him as gift and destiny.”[[185]](#footnote-185) “Yahweh was with him . . . with him . . . with him” (18:12, 14, 28). While there will be no other references to the Spirit of God being involved with David (the exception in 2 Sam 23:2 proves the rule), this phrase recurs (cf. 16:18; 17:37; 2 Sam 5:10). It is another way of making the same point. Saying that Yahweh’s spirit came on David makes a link with the Saul story, but Yahweh’s being with David is more intrinsic to and characteristic of his story. It meant he defeated Goliath and had other victories and achievements, which were soon worrying Saul. In Christian usage, God being with you suggests having a sense of God’s presence. In the Scriptures, it suggests an objective fact with visible implications (cf. 1 Sam 10:7; 20:13; 2 Sam 7:3, 9; cf. Matt 28:20; Lk 1:28).

For Saul, in addition, “a bad spirit from Yahweh assailed him” (1 Sam 16:14). The translation “evil spirit” is misleading: while the adjective (*ra‘*) can mean something morally or religiously bad (15:9), it can also denote something painful and tragic (10:19), which is the implication when God is doing the sending (e.g., Isa 45:7). References to a bad spirit cluster uniquely in 1 Samuel (16:14, 15, 16, 23; 18:10; 19:9). “Evil/bad spirit” is hardly a way of describing mental disturbance; the Scriptures have other terms for what Western thinking might call depression or mania. And the “bad spirit” between Abimelech and the Shechemites (Judg 9:23) seems different from this bad spirit, as do the deceptive spirit in 1 Kings 22 and the jealous spirit in Numbers 5.

Paradoxically, there may be more comparison with the wise spirit of Exod 28:3 and Deut 34:9, in that both relate to someone’s work for Yahweh. So whereas the regular spirit of Yahweh brought a positive energy that enabled Saul to function as king, his bad spirit from Yahweh was a negative energy that hindered his functioning. The implications of “assail” (*bā‘at*) overlap with those of “overwhelm” (*ṣālaḥ*). This verb, too, suggests something taking hold of a person from outside, more or less irresistibly, but taking hold in an unequivocally disturbing way. The departure of God’s spirit and the arrival of another spirit from God foreshadow the struggle between David and Saul that will feature prominently in the remainder of 1 Samuel,[[186]](#footnote-186) when “the bounty of David’s blessing was matched by the depth of Saul’s misery.”[[187]](#footnote-187)

The bad spirit arouses Saul’s anger, jealousy, and fear and makes him less and less capable of functioning, and “the more jealous and devious he became, the more successful David was.”[[188]](#footnote-188) When he behaves like a maniac, it is because something has come upon him from outside. But his fear, resentment, and jealousy are rational reactions to events in his family, court, and country, especially for someone lacking self-confidence. It wouldn’t be surprising or unreasonable if Saul had some negative inner feelings to be brought to the surface after the traumatic events recounted in chapter 13 – 15. But the narrative emphasizes the negative energy coming from outside. The coming of a bad spirit from outside can follow on anger and scheming, not lead to it (18:8-10), yet we would be unwise to infer that the anger simply opens the way to the coming of the bad spirit, any more than to suggests that good qualities open up the way to the coming of God’s spirit. Does sending the bad spirit mean God compels Saul to act badly? Perhaps the bad spirit aroused potentials that were already present inside the person. There is a “delicate balance” between fate and fault in the Saul story.[[189]](#footnote-189) “Saul is continually and relentlessly active in his pursuit and retention of royal power. He is not a passive recipient of fate but is the agent of his own undoing. If we follow the account of the story itself, it will not do to portray Saul simply as a hapless victim of fate. That element of victimization operates in the narrative, but alongside it is Saul's own self-destructive effort.”[[190]](#footnote-190)

Saul prophesies away again (19:20-24). Translations such as “he fell into a prophetic frenzy” again obscure the significance of the statement as an indication of God’s spirit bringing about something theologically, religiously, and ethically important.[[191]](#footnote-191) “The same faculty for the numinous and the same sensitivity for suddenly being lifted into a higher state of consciousness which occurred there under the positive sign of election, appear here under the negative sign of being rejected."[[192]](#footnote-192) It’s not the bad spirit that has this effect, as it is when he gets his spear out (18:10). It’s God’s spirit and it has the opposite effect. God’s spirit is still capable of turning Saul (and his messengers) into another person, to protect David and even to protect Saul from wrongdoing by turning him into someone who declares Yahweh’s message and/or his praise.

## The God of David

There was a further link between the spirit of God, the bad spirit from God, and the process whereby David came to replace Saul as king. It led to David’s being drawn into the life of the court in a way that would ultimately lead to his becoming king. Music helped Saul, and David could play guitar. In addition, David is a brave warrior with a gift of words and a presence. He is a real man.[[193]](#footnote-193) The summary by one of Saul’s boys (16:18) that looks like a subsequent retrospective on what David will turn out to be perhaps describes aspects of the way he is a better man than Saul and the way his mind, attitudes, and inner being will match the destiny Yahweh is putting in front of him.

In 16:1 – 17:58, following on the anointing and the introduction to court is a third scene that fits with the first but not the second. In his capacity as kid brother he would bring provisions to his big brothers in the army, but no one else (specifically, Saul) knows him there. He does turn out to have a warrior instinct, and Yahweh proves to be with him. I take it that actually Elhanan killed Goliath (2 Sam 21:19), but as told here the story portrays further aspects of what David himself turned out to be.

David’s first words are, “What will be done for the person who strikes down that Philistine and removes the disgrace from upon Israel, because who is this foreskinned Philistine that he has taunted the ranks of the living God?” (17:26). The series of ethnic comments and slurs (how primitive these Philistines are!) ends with a key theological statement. Yahweh is “the living God.” The description does not mean alive as opposed to dead but lively, vigorous, and active as opposed to sleepy, sluggish, and idle. The living God is the one who spoke out of the fire at Sinai in a way that no other people had heard (Deut 5:26), and who would take the Israelites across the Jordan into Canaan and drive out its present inhabitants (Josh 3:10-11; cf. 2 Kgs 19:4, 16; Ps 42:2 [3]; 18:46 [47]; 84:2 [3]; Jer 10:10; 23:36; Dan 6:20, 25 [21, 26]; Hos 1:10 [2:1]). David implies some shortfall in the Israelites’ own assumptions about Yahweh. How could they be tolerating the taunts that are being put to them that reflect on their God who is quite capable of defeating these Philistines?

In this story, it is the words that count. The battle belongs to them.[[194]](#footnote-194) Although the story is memorable, by focusing on the words the narrator has compromised the aim of telling a story. David’s statements would be are more at home in the context of a psalm or the words of prophets such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Zechariah. They recur there. A story’s nature is to carry the impact of the exercise in communication that it represents. Can theological statements compete? Do they inevitably lose impact? Yet communication in general, and the Scriptures in particular, incorporate direct statement as well as narrative.

David repeats his words to Saul, then adds his testimony to the experience that had proved that truth about Yahweh to him: Yahweh had rescued him from lion and bear. Therefore “he is the one who will rescue me from this Philistine” (*nāṣal* hiphil; 17:36-37). The words also follow up a different kind of recollection. Rescuing did not mean Yahweh striking the assailants down while David watched. When a lion or a bear carried off one of the sheep, “I would go out after it and strike it down and rescue from its mouth. And should it rise against me, I would take hold of it by the beard, strike it down, and kill it” (17:35). Rescuing is something David himself does. He does the striking down. So what does he mean by saying that God rescued him and will rescue him from Goliath? “The battle is Yahweh’s, and he will give you [plural] into our hand” (17:47). But in the single combat that follows, nothing miraculous happens. David wins by a canny stratagem. “Yahweh will surrender you into my hand and I will strike you down” (17:46); but it is David’s stratagem that brings about the inescapable surrender. “You are coming to me with sword, with spear, and with javelin, but I am coming to you with the name of Yahweh Armies, the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have taunted” (17:45). Well, yes, but the missing feature in the antithesis is “I am coming to you with a sling and some stones,” which will (with hindsight) turn out to be more practical use and more effective than Goliath’s weapons. In proffering David his armor (17:38), Saul shows himself doubly dimwitted: the offer ignores the importance of Yahweh and makes no allowance for the need of some strategy, of some “lateral thinking.”[[195]](#footnote-195) The Saul of 1 Samuel 17 is not the Saul of 1 Samuel 11, and David is showing himself to be a better man than Saul.

While “there are no miracles in 1 Sam. 16 – 31,”[[196]](#footnote-196) one could call what now happens a marvel or wonder (*pele’*). The story’s language and the thinking compare and contrast with that used when “Yahweh thundered,” the Philistines “collapsed,” and the Israelites “struck them down,” and subsequently, “Yahweh’s hand was against the Philistines,” the towns that Israel had lost “returned” to Israel, and Israel “rescued” its territory (7:10-14). Whether the thunder was literal or metaphorical, the imagery suggests an event that was extraordinary and out of this world. So surely was this one.

The story ends amusingly with David depositing Goliath’s head in Jerusalem (17:54) – anachronistically or anticipatorily, as he hasn’t captured Jerusalem yet. But David’s theological declarations addressed to Goliath are meant to be heard in Jerusalem. Yahweh of Armies is the God worshiped there (e.g., Ps 46:7, 11 [8, 12]; 48:8 [9]). The object of David’s victory will be that “all the earth may acknowledge that Israel has a God, and that this entire congregation may acknowledge that it is not by sword or by spear that Yahweh delivers” (17:47). While the word “congregation” (*qāhāl*)can denote an “assembly” in a looser sense (e.g., 1 Kgs 12:3), the only other occurrences of the word in Samuel-Kings denote the people assembled in the temple in Jerusalem, where Solomon is concerned “that all the peoples of the earth may acknowledge that Yahweh is God” (1 Kgs 8:60). Likewise Hezekiah, when Jerusalem is under pressure from the Assyrians and they have “taunted” Yahweh, bids Yahweh to act “so that all the kingdoms of the earth may acknowledge that you, Yahweh, are God alone” (2 Kgs 19:19, 22). All the earth needs to acknowledge it, but “this congregation” needs to acknowledge that Yahweh is the one who “delivers,” that it is not by means of bow and sword that deliverance comes, and that it is with his name that it treads down its adversaries (Ps 44:3-7 [4-8]). It is as Yahweh breaks bow and spear that he makes battles cease to the end of the earth (Ps 46:9 [10]).

## The Royal Family

Samuel began as the story of an ordinary family. It had its tensions and suffering but it worshiped and flourished. The same was true of the families of Kish and of Jesse. David now becomes a member of Saul’s family, his adoptive son and Jonathan’s adoptive brother.[[197]](#footnote-197) David and Saul address each other as “father” and son” even in 24:11, 16 [12, 17]). But Saul’s family story is almost relentlessly gloomy. It is more like a mafia family, like the Sopranos’ family.[[198]](#footnote-198) David’s family will not be an improvement. Such grimness, misfortune, and sadness can issue from the weaknesses of the head of the family, combined with the pressures and temptations of power and responsibility. Let no readers wish they were in positions of power. Let them hide like Saul, or decline the opportunity to leave the sheep so as to come to a prophetic dinner, as David did not. The trouble is that the people in the Scriptures who seek to evade God’s summons find they cannot. When a person therefore fails to evade responsibility, let them not leave go of a Samuel and a Nathan, and let God not leave go of them.

When David joins Saul’s court, Saul loves him (16:21). Admittedly the translation is uncertain. While Samuel may refer to the king being fond of the young man, the words for love (*’āhēb*, *’ăhēbâ*) are also political words. Hiram’s “love” for David (1 Kgs 5:1 [15]) meant he “was loyal to” David (CEB). Jerusalem’s “lovers” (Lam 1:2) were her allies or friends. Maybe this narrative implies a form of political commitment on Saul’s part.[[199]](#footnote-199) But on any understanding of love, the reference to Saul’s love will turn out to be an irony when Saul is trying to get David killed. Love turns to envy, resentment, fear, and anger (18:8, 12, 15, 29; 20:30). “What an extraordinary degree of frenzy! What excess of madness,” John Chrysostom comments. “For envy is a fearful, a fearful thing, and persuades men to despise their own salvation.”[[200]](#footnote-200) The anger extends to his own son, an anger that expresses itself in a shaming of Jonathan and an attempt to kill him with his spear. Is it a half-hearted attempt? Instead of “threw” (*ṭûl*), LXX, Tg simply have “raised” (the usual meaning of *nāṭal*). Either way, the action foreshadows Saul’s serious attempts on David’s life that will follow. Not unreasonably, this action issues in a responsive anger on Jonathan’s part, an anger at the shaming as much as the threat (20:30-34).[[201]](#footnote-201) The problem is that fact that Yahweh is with David. Saul fears that David is a rival for the throne. Even first-time non-Israelite readers of Samuel know that the story is going in this direction because they have read spoilers in 13:1 – 15:35, but Saul doesn’t know it. Indeed, in a sense Yahweh doesn’t know it. The future is still open for Saul. But giving in to his fears (18:8) will brings about their fulfillment.

David “remains a complete opacity in this episode, while Saul is a total transparency and Michal a sliver of transparency surrounded by darkness.”[[202]](#footnote-202) Saul’s internal life seems to be at the mercy of others, beyond his control.[[203]](#footnote-203) Whereas First Testament narratives often leave people to infer the characters’ feelings from their words and actions, and “David is a cipher,”[[204]](#footnote-204) the narrative is explicit about Saul’s. It highlights the difference in the account of David, who “knows how to veil his motives and intentions—a veiling replicated in the narrative strategies used to present him.”[[205]](#footnote-205) In what sense was it “upright in David’s eyes to be the king’s son-in-law” (18:26)? When flight becomes a recurrent choice for David, crying when he knows he must definitively flee (20:41) is the nearest to a revelation of his feelings. There might seem little scope for trust in this family (*bāṭaḥ* comes only in 12:11 and *’āman* hiphil in 27:12, which prove the rule). In another sense, flight may be a strange expression of trust. Through 1 Samuel David makes no attempt to bring about his advancement (2 Samuel will be different). He hardly needs to; Saul and Jonathan are doing it for him. The bad sprit is at work; it is the nearest to a hint in the narrative that Yahweh is involved in bringing about David’s advance, as if he is implementing a plan.

Elqanah’s love for Hannah (1:5) finds a parallel in Michal’s love for David (18:20, 28) which issues in her taking David’s side over against her father, protecting him and telling lies for him (19:11-17). The first Testament has no hesitations about lying to intimidators, tormentors, and tyrants (cf. 6:1-7; 20:6; 21:2, 13 [3, 14]; 27:10; 2 Sam 5:22-25; 15:34; 17:19-20; Exod 1:15-21), and John Chrysostom refers to Michal in justifying his engaging in deception so as to avoid being made a bishop.[[206]](#footnote-206) Michal’s deception recalls Rachel and the effigies (*tərāpîm*): Saul is a new Laban, Michal a new Rachel, David a new Jacob, “the new representative of the line of promise and the future hope of the nation.”[[207]](#footnote-207) That link hints that Michal’s “love” might also be more multi-faceted than simply the love of a woman for a man and an illustration of the interweaving of politics and relationship in a royal family. The broad potential in the Hebrew words for love helps facilitate expression of the point. Maybe Michal sees which way the wind is blowing and fancies being queen. But her countercultural action signifies that she recognizes she must commit herself to David and his kingship rather than to her father and his.[[208]](#footnote-208) She and her big sister pay a price for being princesses: in the context of the court, women are victims and political pawns (18:17-19; 25:44; 2 Sam 3:12-16), as are their children (21:8). They have no autonomy.[[209]](#footnote-209)

The main narrative of life at Saul’s court begins as a story of love (18:1-4). “David and Jonathan are friends because they are both fighting Yahwists, with a common love of biffing Philistines . . . . ‘When two such persons discover one another, when, whether with immense difficulties . . . or with . . . amazing and elliptical speed, they share their vision—it is then that Friendship is born. And instantly they stand together in an immense solitude.’”[[210]](#footnote-210) Interpreters who read the story in the context of an approval of same-sex relationships may understand the relationship between Jonathan and David as a homosexual one, while interpreters who read the story in the context of disapproval of such relationships may not so understand it. Emically rather than etically considered, the narrative’s implications lie more with that other ambiguity over the nature of “love.”[[211]](#footnote-211) When “Jonathan’s very self became bound up with David’s, and Jonathan loved him as himself” (18:1; cf. 20:17),[[212]](#footnote-212) his gift of clothing and battle equipment (18:4) hints at his surrendering his position to David: they suggest regalia or insignia. They confirm that Jonathan is extravagant and uncalculating, as the story of his attack on the Philistine garrison suggested (14:1-15). He is not afraid of David ending up as king, as his father is (18:8). His self-confidence means he’s not afraid of David, and he doesn’t need to be king. Saul was small in his own eyes (15:17). He didn’t originally have any ideas of becoming someone big, but once you are in that position, it’s not surprising if it becomes important and becomes key to your self-identity.[[213]](#footnote-213) Nicely, the verb for “became bound up with” (*qāšar* niphal) also means “conspire” (22:8, 13; 2 Sam 15:31).[[214]](#footnote-214) A charge of conspiracy “hangs in the air between Saul and his ‘two sons.’”[[215]](#footnote-215) And Saul isn’t wrong that there is a conspiracy against him, but the conspirator is Yahweh.[[216]](#footnote-216)

As is the case with Michal, it would be inappropriately cynical to confine Jonathan’s love to a political commitment. Even David eventually speaks as it if it more (2 Sam 1:26), though it’s harder to interpret his description of Saul and Jonathan as lovable and gracious (2 Sam 1:23). And most of the references to Jonathan’s relationship with David can suggest both the personal and the political. They include Jonathan’s delighting (*ḥāpēṣ*) in David (19:1; cf. 18:22; 2 Sam 20:11) and David’s finding grace or favor in Jonathan’s eyes (1 Sam 20:3; cf. 16:22; 20:29; 25:8; 27:5). Jonathan’s love for David issues in a loyalty expressed in a covenant, a *bərît* (20:8; 23:18; cf. the reference to “cutting” or solemnizing in 20:16). This word has a parallel breadth of meaning to that of “love.” The last *bərît* in Samuel was the unpleasant one that Nahash tried to make with the people in Jabesh (11:1), and apart from the references to the covenant chest, all but one of the other occurrences of *bərît* in Samuel denote a treaty (we will wait until 2 Sam 23:5 for the exception). Here the covenant implies that “Yahweh [will be] between us for all time” as its guarantor (20:23, 42) and that David will show Jonathan Yahweh’s commitment (*ḥesed*; 20:14-15). Only rarely do the image of covenant and the quality of commitment come together in the Scriptures; linking them and associating them with references to love, delight, and binding oneself mark the nature of the positive relationships. Within the family, the covenant means Jonathan mediates with his father on David’s behalf (19:1-7). The friendship sealed in the covenant is an act of betrayal to the family in the strict sense.[[217]](#footnote-217)

Most people listening to the story in Samuel know that Saul dies and David succeeds him, and perhaps know that kingship falls into David’s lap like ripe fruit falling from a tree (unless they knew other versions of the sequence of events). “That may tempt us to find the outcome self-evident.” But “within the story, it is not at all self-evident that the hero’s career will terminate in succession to the throne . . . . The superficial message is that David has one foot in the grave, in terms of power and political opportunities. But Jonathan is not misled by the moment.” Yet neither does he want his sons to be victims of a change of dynasty when it comes.[[218]](#footnote-218)

# Yahweh Who Protects a King (1 Samuel 21:1 [2] – 2 Samuel 1:27)

The chapter title is deliberately ambiguous. Yahweh’s rebuff of Saul and his commissioning of David introduce conflict into the royal family. David becomes a threat to Saul and Saul becomes a threat to David. Over subsequent chapters David has to run for his life, but Yahweh protects him. David twice has the chance to kill Saul, but refrains. There are two reasons why David might have encouraged a ghost writer to include the stories. They undermine any claim that David had brought about Saul’s demise so that he could succeed him. And it would be in David’s interest to argue that killing the king was wrong. The prevalence of regicide in Kings would also mean that later monarchs might appreciate the inclusion of the stories.

## David the Man of Action

The ironic overwhelming by God’s spirit that prevents Saul and his henchmen seizing David (19:19-24) does not put an end to Saul’s preoccupation with David. David’s tortuous involvement with the royal family apparently continues for a period of years, as conflict with the Philistines recurs and Saul betroths more than one of his daughters to him. Although “resealing his covenant with Jonathan gave David a single safe port in a sea of enemies,”[[219]](#footnote-219) his involvement with the family comes to a conclusive end when Jonathan tells him of Saul’s definitive decision to execute him (20:1-42). “David is a ‘son of death’ (20.31).”[[220]](#footnote-220) He thus gives up on the situation in Gibeah in a final way and flees for his life (21:1, 10 [2, 11]; 22:17). It is not the first time he has “fled” (19:12, 18; 20:1) and it will not be the last (27:4). The chapters that follow comprise a series of stories about flights, pleas, chases, lies, prayers, strategies, threats, commissions, slaughterings, revelations, miscalculations, and follies. David is thus on the run for a further period of years, mostly in Judah and some distance from Gibeah, until he comes to another decision about flight and escape that means abandoning Judah and settling in Philistia, never to see Saul again (27:1). “During these wilderness years his anointing to the kingship is contradicted detail after detail by daily events . . . . There are fifteen wilderness stories ahead.”[[221]](#footnote-221)

David is continuously active, never settling down for too long, and often taking initiatives, but there is no indication that he knows what he is doing when he takes flight, that he has a plan, here or later.[[222]](#footnote-222) He leaves Gibeah without provisions or weapon, but talks his way into obtaining them at Nob, not far away, which has apparently replaced Shiloh as Israel’s main sanctuary (21:1-9 [2-10]).

The story introduces auditors to the ambiguity of these wilderness years. Israelites were aware that they needed both to take seriously the metaphysical distinction between humanity and God (let alone the moral one) and also to affirm the reality God’s approachability and of their connection with God. And Israel observes differences from Yahweh as the holy one in the way it manages contact with sex, with death, and with blood – so Bathsheba makes herself holy from her taboo at the end of her period (2 Sam 21:4). Questions about taboo or defilement (*ṭum’â*)and about whether someone is clean or pure (*ṭāhôr*,1 Sam 20:26) thus overlap with questions about holiness. When people are to meet with the holy one, they need to make themselves holy and they may need someone to help them manage that transition (16:5). The importance of food makes food one natural arena for marking the difference between humanity and God (as is implicit in the story in 2:12-17). One expression of that principle was the depositing each week of loaves of bread before Yahweh, the Presence Bread (traditionally, “showbread”), which thereby becomes holy rather than ordinary (*ḥōl*), and at the end of the week the priests would eat it. Possibly the rule at Nob was not quite so precise; Ahimelech is willing for David and his men to have it, but they need themselves to be holy (21:3-6 [4-7]). While the First Testament does not refer to “holy war” and treats war as an ordinary thing, like food or buildings or times or possessions or people, war can be made holy as those things can, by being given over to Yahweh so that (for instance) you surrender any rights to it. And making war in Yahweh’s name, fighting Yahweh’s battles (25:28), involves being holy in the sense of observing those separations. David can therefore plausibly claim that his men are holy and can eat the Presence Bread. One might wonder whether his claims about their holiness are true, but the First Testament would have little worry about his being “compelled to be a perfect liar”[[223]](#footnote-223) in some circumstances.

David also acquires Goliath’s sword, which would be “charged with symbolic meanings: a trophy of the unconquerable enemy conquered by faith; a token of the first great Davidic victory in the service of Saul, and now used in defense against Saul.”[[224]](#footnote-224) So equipped, he flees down off the mountain ridge a day or two’s journey west to Philistine territory, to Gath (21:10-15 [11-16]), Goliath’s town. People know about him there, and they intriguingly call him “king of the country,” by which maybe they mean “the kind of person who could be ruler of a city state in Israel” like their “king” Achish, though auditors would catch another significance in the comment. It’s but a first indication of a potentially friendly relationship between Gath and David’s Israel,[[225]](#footnote-225) but David is afraid of the consequences of this recognition. He again gets by through deception, behaving like someone crazy or weird or “erratic.”[[226]](#footnote-226) We should not interpret this description too technically, though it does seem humiliating in light of the recognition of him as a king and his destiny to be king. But there is no future for him in Gath except life in a care home, so David “escapes,” another important verb alongside “flee” (22:1; 23:13; 27:1; cf.19:10, 12, 17, 18; 20:29). He moves half way back towards the mountain ridge to Adullam to what is variously described as a cave and a stronghold there (22:1-5). Its location enables it to become a refuge for people who might be in danger and/or who a gathering point for dissidents. It suggests another contrast over against the Gittites’ description of him as a king and the prestige, security, and salary of a position at Gibeah (22:7). But some “genius” is involved in the way “David manages to throw in his lot with Israel's enemies, the Philistines, while retaining the affection of the Israelite populace.” [[227]](#footnote-227)

For safety he takes his parents to Moab, the home of Jesse’s grandmother and the refuge of her original parents-in-law during a famine according to Ruth 1:1-2; 4:14-22. Eventually he leaves for the Heret Forest in Judah, apparently further up the ridge. From there he ventures down to Keilah, a town nearer the Philistines’ area that is subject to Philistine raids on its threshing floors and thus on its grain supply for the next year. David “delivers” Keilah from the Philistines (arguably doing Saul’s work)[[228]](#footnote-228) and appropriates their livestock (provisioning his gang would be an ongoing challenge). Saul seeks him out there and the people of Keilah are going to surrender him. Had the livestock originally belonged to them?! For Keilah, was having David’s gang around as much of a liability as an asset? Were they more scared of Saul than of David? David escapes and stays on the move for some time in the area south and east of Hebron, focusing on evading Saul; he has more than one fortunate escape.

The story of David, Nabal, and Abigail (25:1-42) incidentally open another window on the means whereby David and his bandit group survive through this period, if it indicates that his men run a protection business. It is activity about which he feels proud and honorable, through which he is arguably continuing to do Saul’s business, and Nabal’s staff accept its usefulness (25:7, 15-16, 21). Nabal, however, who might be seen as Saul’s *alter ego*[[229]](#footnote-229)does not see David as a king but as a runaway servant (25:10). When David determines to slaughter Nabal and his clan (25:22), Abigail maneuvers him out of his plan, “transcending the violence that marks her community . . . through acts of hospitality . . . to the hungry, to the landless, to the marginalized.”[[230]](#footnote-230) Nabal pays a price for his hard-heartedness;[[231]](#footnote-231) he fortuitously drops dead. It enables David to add Abigail to his harem along with Ahinoam from elsewhere in the area, though he loses Michal (25:39-44). Perhaps Abigail brings Nabal’s impressive estate with her into the marriage, easing David’s economic position.

David’s series of unplanned (and not always thought-through) ventures ends with a move back to Gath, which does make Saul give up chasing him (27:1-7). As in 20:1, it looks as if he is not relying on Yahweh but on “self-help.”[[232]](#footnote-232) With his large company, he would look more impressive than when seemed a bit crazy. He persuades Achish to give him Ziklag, which is nominally a Judahite town anyway, apparently in reward for services about to be rendered concerning whose nature David consistently lies (27:8-12). “This time, David makes a fool of Achish.”[[233]](#footnote-233) With his braggadocio,[[234]](#footnote-234) from Ziklag he raids and slaughters and leaves no one alive, telling Achish that he has been raiding in Judah. Such was his rule (*mišpāṭ*).There is no talk of “devoting” here; it is just slaughter, ensuring no reports get back to Achish. The profits apparently go to him, presumably with the cut for David and his men that they need. It is here that we get the only piece of chronological information in the narrative: David was at Ziklag for sixteen months, up until Saul’s death. The well-founded suspicions of other Philistine leaders (presumably the rulers of the other Philistine towns) rescue David from having to fight for the Philistines against Judah. “Whether David, lacking this providential way out, would really have pitted himself against his own people is another imponderable in the character of this elusive figure.”[[235]](#footnote-235) One suspects that David would have found a way of making things work his way in such a battle (29:1-11).

## David the Man Who Acknowledges Yahweh

The ambiguity of the David narrative means there is another aspect to David’s story. Woven into the reports of ventures and flights that claim no religious or ethical grounds or significance, and that may look as if they could have none, are notes of a religious or ethical kind. David has a capacity “for combining political savvy with a surprising morality and genuine devotion to God.”[[236]](#footnote-236)

Doeg reports that Ahimelech had inquired of Yahweh for David, and Ahimelech confirms it (22:10, 15). David’s calling on Ahimelech issues in “the darkest passage in the story of David’s rise to power,”[[237]](#footnote-237) and David himself acknowledges some responsibility (22:22). The Talmud (Yoma 22b) nicely comments that Saul falls foul of both halves of Qohelet’s exhortation (7:17) that one should neither be too righteous (in being merciful to Amalek) or too wicked (in the slaughter at Nob). When David takes his parents to find refuge in Moab it is “until I know what God will do for me” (22:3); we actually never hear of them again. It is a wildly open phrase: “until God gets Saul to stop pursuing me? Until he makes me king?” There are no reports of such hopes on his part, but do comments along these lines suggest that we should read them between the lines elsewhere, or that on the contrary we should not? Is David’s “until . . .” a statement of trust that stands in tension with the reports of decisive action?

References to David’s inquiring of Yahweh interweave the account of the Keilah adventure (23:1-13). When he heard that its people were in trouble, he inquired about whether to go and defend them. When his men raise questions about the wisdom of this plan, he checks out with Yahweh again. It’s not clear how he does this inquiry, in that the story only subsequently reports Abiathar’s arrival with a chasuble; but when he does arrive and Saul threatens to attack, David asks Yahweh whether Saul will do so and then whether the people of Keilah will surrender David and his men, which leads them to make scarce. David has access to information and direction from Yahweh; Saul works in ignorance.[[238]](#footnote-238)

In the first account of David having chance to kill Saul (24:1-22), his men remind him that Yahweh had told him he would surrender Saul to him and that he could then do as he saw fit. The reminder (or invention) gives David chance to show that what he sees fit is not to raise his hand against Yahweh’s anointed. He repeats the phrase, and utters it again later (and three more times in the second story). Anointing signifies being set apart by and for Yahweh. Anyone or anything anointed if off-limits. David’s attitude contrasts with Saul’s at Nob. David does cut off a corner of Saul’s coat, after which his heart strikes him (2 Sam 24:10). That expression could suggest guilt, but David does not speak of guilt, and more likely the feeling is something like dread over what he has had chance to do. Yahweh can decide on the rightness or wrongness of their action towards one another, David says. And yes, he will be faithful to Saul’s descendants as well as to Saul himself.

On the second occasion (26:1-25), Abishai says something similar to David’s men: Yahweh has given Saul into David’s power. One lectionary nicely links this story with Luke 6:27-38. “The real sermon on the Sermon on the Mount is the way David dramatizes the divine injunction to be merciful, given to him in the signs of spear and jug. He plays the magnanimous king by taking the “fool’s” (1 Sam. 26:21) life in his hands and giving it back, because it belongs to the Lord.”[[239]](#footnote-239) This second story goes beyond the first, as one would expect.[[240]](#footnote-240) David’s profession of innocence in the relationship is even more profuse. He challenges Saul’s staff about failing to look after Saul and protect him from assassination. He grieves over being driven away from his share in the country that is Yahweh’s domain, as if to encourage him to go and serve other gods in the countries that belong to them, and to meet his death away from Yahweh’s presence (we know that he knows that actually Yahweh is there in those other countries – he calls on them there).

In between the two stories is the account of David, Nabal, and Abigail. Here David swears by God that he will slaughter Nabal’s entire clan, but then thanks Yahweh when Abigail prevails over him to do no such thing and Yahweh brings Nabal’s wrongdoing down on his own head. In buying David off, Abigail declares a particularly wide-ranging and systemic recognition of him (25:28-31). “Yahweh will definitely make for my lord a trustworthy household.” The words are Yahweh’s declaration from way back (2:35) and they anticipate the promise that will come later (2 Sam 7:16; cf. also 1 Kgs 11:38). Here the reason is that “my lord is engaged in Yahweh’s battles” with people such as the Philistines, whose final defeat will be one of David’s most important achievements. “And nothing bad will be found in you through your days,” she adds. It sounds like an exaggeration, whatever she means by “bad,” but perhaps it is explained by what follows:

When someone sets about pursuing you and seeking your life, my lord’s life will be bound up in the bundle of the living with Yahweh your God, but the life of your enemies he will hurl away, in the middle of a sling’s hollow. And when Yahweh acts toward my lord in accordance with everything good that he has spoken concerning you, and charges you to be rulerover Israel, this is not to be a cause of collapsing or stumbling of mind for my lord—to have shed blood for nothing and for my lord to have found deliverance for himself.

The “this” is what she goes on to refer to: shedding blood needlessly in order to find deliverance for himself. Such action is set over against leaving it to Yahweh, and leaving it to Yahweh would be the appropriate stance of a commandant (*nāgîd*), one who stands between Yahweh and his people and rules them as his appointee.[[241]](#footnote-241) “Abigail functions as a prophet,”[[242]](#footnote-242) though the narrator is of course imagining the speeches in the story as in the stories on either side, imagining what would or should or might be said. Abigail does not mention that Yahweh will make her husband drop dead (25:38), which could have aroused commentators’ suspicions. But she is “a woman of good insight” (25:3), “a woman of wisdom and decisive action,”[[243]](#footnote-243) who though married to a stupid man (or perhaps through being married to a stupid man) is able to counsel David in wise ways.[[244]](#footnote-244) So Yahweh again protects David from his temptations here.[[245]](#footnote-245)

The subsequent story about David and Ziklag (30:1-31) compares and contrasts. Returning to Ziklag after being ousted from the Philistine force, he and his men find that the Amalekites have been on a raid, burned the town down, and taken the women and children captive. It is presumably a reprisal for the raids reported earlier (27:8). The Amalekites are not people you can mess with, even when they have been eliminated, but fortunately they do not practice “devoting.” Taking people captive is economically more sensible than killing them. David’s men turn on him; he is under pressure (*ṣārar*), like Saul (28:15), who had prayed for Yahweh to deliver David from pressure (26:24). But “David strengthened himself through Yahweh his God” (30:6). Like the earlier comment that Jonathan had “strengthened his hand” through Yahweh (23:16), the expression suggests a reinforcement that makes a down-to-earth material difference, through reminders of Yahweh’s commitment and promises. While the verb (*ḥāzaq*) is sometimes translated “encouraged,” because it suggests building up morale and giving new energy (e.g., Neh 2:18; Ezek 13:22), it’s an encouragement that makes that practical difference. When David strengthened himself, it means he got a grip of himself, gained the strength to take the action that was needed (cf. 2 Sam 2:7).

He then proceeded to inquire of Yahweh through Abiathar with the chasuble. Should he pursue the Amalekites? Will he catch up with them? Yes, he will, and he will rescue the women and children (30:6-7). They march as far as Wadi Besor, which flows roughly east from Beer Sheba towards the Mediterranean. Although it wouldn’t take long, many of the men are exhausted, perhaps because they have not had chance to recover after the trek from further north. But most of them have got their breath back, locate the Amalekites enjoying the proceeds of their adventures, slaughter them, rescue the women and children, appropriate the flocks and herds, and march back to the wadi. Here, the question whether they should “devote” the Amalekite herds doesn’t arise. David doesn’t ask, and Gad doesn’t take an initiative and tell him, as Samuel did in relation to Saul. Yahweh can operate in different ways in different contexts, and the Torah as we have it doesn’t exist in David’s day, and even when it does exist, it does not require to be taken like a lawcode, as David assumed already back at Nob (21:3-6 [4-7]) and as Jesus will note (Mark 2:23-27), and we have noted that actually the era of devoting is over for Israel, even if other peoples do it (e.g., 2 Kgs 19:11; 2 Chr 20:23), and even if Yahweh does (Isa 43:28).

The question at Wadi Besor is rather, do the men who were too tired to proceed get a share in the gains? Against the view of some of the men who fought, David’s answer is, “Of course they do.” It’s “what Yahweh has given us.” David makes it a rule that stands “until today” (though this rule also doesn’t make it into the Torah) that “the share of the person who goes down in battle is the same as the share of the person who stays with the stuff” (30:24-25). The profits of the venture do also provide him with resources to make himself more popular with his “friends” in Judah. As the narrative emphasizes attitudes that imply he was not implicated in Saul’s death, it is open about actions that will stand him in good stead in the future (cf. 2 Sam 2).

Like the first story of David’s wilderness years, this final David story in 1 Samuel epitomizes David’s ambiguity. He is the man of action, the man who can act without thinking about right and wrong, the man who can undertake appalling deeds, but also the man who can seek Yahweh’s advice and will, who can resist temptation, who can act with generosity. This man cannot be grasped. As “we are never given a hint of what Samuel thinks of David”[[246]](#footnote-246) (and Samuel never speaks to David), the narrator wisely declines to sum him up. “We know so much about David—and yet so little.”[[247]](#footnote-247) These dynamics continue through 2 Samuel. The image of David that dominates many readers’ minds is constructed from the Psalms; it is simpler, more comprehensible, and more obviously edifying, yet it may not truly come even from the Psalms but rather be built up from them on a basis of false inference.

The image in Samuel is theologically more profound. We cannot “explain” David as a great hero or a man of deep spirituality, and we cannot therefore explain why he rather than Saul should have been God’s choice. He simply is, in his complexity, contradiction, and inconsistency. If there is an “elliptical path taken by divine providence to guide David toward his monarchic role,”[[248]](#footnote-248) we cannot see why it should be. God’s choice of him and his perseverance with him emerges from God’s freedom rather than David’s deserve. Living with God’s working with David requires belief in God’s freedom and grace.

## The Fog of Flight and Pursuit

The story of David and Saul is “a cat-and-mouse game”[[249]](#footnote-249) played in the dark. We do not know how long a time period it covers. There is no order about the narrative of these years; one could reorder it without making a difference to the impression it conveys. There are short stories and longer stories, large and small repetitions.

History, as this narrator construes it, is not simply driven and shaped by grand themes. It works much more concretely by an heir giving away his robe (18:4), by women singing glad songs and (unwittingly?) intensifying the second numeral which applies to David (18:7), by a musical therapist driving Saul further away from sanity (18:10-11), by a military man being banished from court and becoming even more popular (18:12-16), by a daughter who loves a man who must be killed for reasons of state (18:20, 28), by a boldness that secures two hundred foreskins when only one hundred are required (18:25, 27), by a deference that self-abases and waits and can wait forever (18:18, 23).[[250]](#footnote-250)

Perhaps the chapters collect a variety of existent stories and assemble them in a random way, or perhaps the author created them that way to convey the impression they give, of events unfolding in a meaningless way that gets no one anywhere, except that it keeps David alive and gives Saul manifold opportunity to evade the fate that 13:1 – 15:35 has laid out for him. It’s never over until it’s over, for David, for Saul, and for God. In the meanwhile, the narrative recalls Daniel 11 with its account of one thing following another, one human initiative following another, but nothing getting anywhere.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,

To the last syllable of recorded time;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing. (Macbeth, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5).

As the narrative offers no hint that David has a plan and is pursuing it, except that of staying alive, it offers no hint that Yahweh has a plan and is pursuing it, except that he intends for David to become king. The only question is how will Saul meet his end and how will David reach the throne,[[251]](#footnote-251) and in this connection Yahweh is engaged in events. But he is not orchestrating everything or behind everything. He takes no initiatives like the ones in 9:15-17 and 16:1. As the narrative is quiet about David’s thinking, so it is quiet about Yahweh’s. It does not hint that Yahweh is pursuing a plan that is mysterious to us but nevertheless real.

Samuel (and most of the OT) is wrestling with a more radical thesis that renders God's role, his will and plan, undecidable. It is not just that we cannot fully know his will and plan, for 1 Samuel gives us no assurance that there is any such thing as a divine will and plan . . . . Divine statements and comments on divine activity are very limited in their information and in their relevance to the context . . . . Throughout the remainder of 1 Samuel, David will generally succeed, but we can only ask, and then ask again, why? Is his success due to the Lord's intervention, and, if so, does this have anything to do with David's character or behavior? Or is it due to his own ability and sagacity, to Saul's incompetence, to the help of others, or to just plain luck? The same applies to Saul's failure.[[252]](#footnote-252)

Why are these stories about David and Saul in the Scriptures? Commentators work hard to suggest how they offer positive or negative examples for life, or wisdom for life, or insights on spirituality. They do offer pointers in these directions, but the principles for discerning the instruction they offer often come from modern Western principles and priorities, and the narrative interweaves stories that may offer instruction of this kind with stories that offer no such pointers. The implication is that the focus of the narrative does not lie here. It rather constitutes an account of a chaotic sequence of events involving a series of conflicts between two confused and confusing people whose lives are not offered for analysis on the basis of insight or morality or spirituality, any more than it portray the sequence of events as one in which God is pursuing a purpose behind the scenes.

By the end of chapter 26, the matter of Saul's death has been ominously raised three times, but what neither character nor reader yet knows is its manner. Will God strike him as he did Nabal? Will he die of natural causes? Or will he fall in battle? Whatever turns out to be the case, one puzzling aspect of the story will remain: why is it taking so long to dispose of Saul? We already suspect that there is something of a providential delay in this deferred denouement. But what does the providential delay itself signify?” It anticipates the story of Israel, which will also go on so long from Moses’s day to the fall of Jerusalem.[[253]](#footnote-253)

For Israel, too, it’s never over till it’s over. And God will wait a long time for events to turn out in a way that fulfills his purpose while giving his people chance to determine their destiny.

For Saul, was it over before he went to see the medium, or afterwards? Perhaps it’s never too late for God, but it may be too late for Saul. When Nebuchadnezzar came to besiege Jerusalem, was it too late for the city? Did the lifting of the siege give the city one last chance? When Nebuchadnezzar resumed the siege, was it too late for the city? When the food was totally gone, was it too late? Even if it’s never too late for God, it may be too late for Jerusalem. Jeremiah half-implies that it’s too late to prevent the city’s fall, but it’s not too late to surrender; but it was too late for Zedekiah. Perhaps it is too late for Saul, and he will indeed have to join Samuel (28:19), with neither of them aware that they are awaiting resurrection day. But the narrative’s interest lies more in the story of Israel. And in the Masoretic Text it continues straight into what we call 2 Samuel 1.[[254]](#footnote-254)

## Saul Desperately Seeking

Saul’s story is a riddle, an enigma, a *mashal*.[[255]](#footnote-255) Over against David with his initiatives and decisions is Saul with his initiatives and decisions, in the context of “the crossing fates” of the two characters.[[256]](#footnote-256) Compared with David, Saul isn’t much of a “man.”[[257]](#footnote-257) One could get the impression that he spends hardly any time being king (e.g., fighting the Philistines).[[258]](#footnote-258) But perhaps relationships with the Philistines were generally friendlier than Samuel’s reports of periodic battles may seem to be imply.[[259]](#footnote-259) As the dominant feature of David’s story is his need to evade Saul (he must have been doing other things in between), the dominant feature of Saul’s story is his pursuit of David. He is obsessed by the quest.

The horrific implications emerge immediately when he discovers about David going to Nob on the way to Gath and Saul slaughters the priests there, and the entire town (1 Sam 22:6-23). Ahimelech had trembled when David came. Did he tremble for David’s sake,[[260]](#footnote-260) or for the same reason as the Bethlehem elders when Samuel arrived?[[261]](#footnote-261) If the latter, “Ahimelech’s apprehension” at David’s arrival is “grimly vindicate[d].”[[262]](#footnote-262) Ahimelech speaks straight to Saul, but Saul makes no allowances and asks no questions about the truth or untruth of Doeg’s testimony. There is no “devoting,” but it is an almost complete elimination. In his paranoia,[[263]](#footnote-263) “the king who has lost his kingship and kingdom . . . is demonstrating the loss by acting in a way unbefitting any king.”[[264]](#footnote-264) It is the logical action of a man with power who looks at things the way Saul does and a way of getting at David, or the action of a truly mad man frustrated by a pretend-mad man.[[265]](#footnote-265)

Ironically the elimination again lets one man escape and thus surrenders to David the priesthood, its means of guidance, and in due course the continuance of the priestly line through David’s reign. In the short term, when Saul discovers that David is at Keilah and gives chase, Abiathar can be the means of David getting the guidance to evade Saul (23:1-13). Saul subsequently prays for Yahweh’s blessing on people from Ziph for having mercy on him by telling him David’s whereabouts (23:21). The odd reference to mercy pairs with the puzzling reference to people not feeling hurt for him (22:8, *ḥālâ*). Along with the cry he will shortly utter and the tears he will shortly shed (24:17), are they among the signs that Saul is a morally injured person?[[266]](#footnote-266) The Philistines “accidentally” force him to give up that pursuit (23:19-28). It is not the only time that they are the means of David’s deliverance, by accident or by David’s maneuvering. “Saul's career has been marked by seeking and not finding or by seeking one thing and finding another.”[[267]](#footnote-267)

He chases David to En-gedi, which will mean the mountain area above the oasis rather than the oasis itself. When David declines the chance to kill him, Saul cries and responds: “You are more in the right [*ṣaddîq*] than me. . . in that Yahweh surrendered me into your hand and you didn’t kill me . . . . Yahweh – he will recompense you with good things on account of this day, for what you have done for me. And now, there, I hereby acknowledge that you will definitely become king and the kingship over Israel will be firm in your hand. So now, promise me by Yahweh, if you cut off my offspring after me and if you eliminate my name from my father’s house . . . ” (24:18-21; it is the kind curses that runs out in an ellipsis). Once again, 24:1-22 tells the whole story of Saul and David, and after this acknowledgment, Samuel can die (25:1).[[268]](#footnote-268) The whole story repeats in 26:1-25, with Yahweh causing a deep sleep to fall on Saul’s company (it does not stop David from rebuking them). Samuel had told Saul he had been stupid; he now says it himself (*sākal* niphal, then hiphil, 13:13; 26:21). He contrasts with David, who has been smart and successful (*śākal* hiphil, then qal, 18:5, 14, 15, 30).[[269]](#footnote-269) He promises never to harm David again and prays, “may you be blessed, my son David, yes, you will indeed act and yes, you will indeed be successful” (26:21, 25). They are the last words they will ever speak either to the other; 27:1 marks a new beginning, the moment when David finally abandons Judah. Once more there follows, not long after, a report that Samuel had died, though not very finally (28:3).

We do not hear of Yahweh speaking to Saul. Some irony attaches to the prophesying in 19:20-24, because no prophet speaks to Saul as to David (22:5), until the prophet who comes back from the dead to say nothing new except name David as the “neighbor” who will succeed Saul (28:6, 15). Yahweh does not respond to Saul’s inquiries as he does to David’s (23:2, 4, 11, 12), not least in connection with Saul’s attempts to capture him: but then, Saul had slaughtered the vehicles of inquiry except for the one who escaped to David. Saul’s son strengthens David’s hand through Yahweh, and declares that Saul will not capture him and that he will become king with Jonathan second to him. A crucial new nuance thus attaches when they again confirm a covenant before Yahweh (23:16-18).[[270]](#footnote-270) But it is their last contact.

Saul faces his last battle (28:1), as it will turn out to be. On notable earlier occasions (13:1 – 15:35) Samuel had mediated Yahweh’s message to him, though there had been problems in the outworking of this role. But anyway, Samuel is dead. Saul has now killed off the priests except for the one who escaped to David and took the chasuble with him. He has expelled from the country the mediums who might be able to engage in divination on his behalf. Previous references to effigies (15:23; 19:11-17) hint at the prevalence of such forms of divination in Israel, and if Saul has abolished them, it is an impressive achievement. Now when Saul asks (*šā’al*!) Yahweh what is going to happen or what to do, Yahweh does not answer by dreams, by Urim, or by prophets. Saul is reduced to the resources of the Philistines themselves (6:2).[[271]](#footnote-271) It is a sad end for one who once prophesied.[[272]](#footnote-272) At Endor, ten miles or so across the Jezreel Plain from the Israelite camp, Saul’s staff find a medium, a ghost-mistress, who can channel voices from people who have passed. The practice is common in the West now as it was in Israel; it’s not a recourse just for people in traditional societies. It’s common in Israel today,[[273]](#footnote-273) not least among graduate and other middle-class women.[[274]](#footnote-274)

The story that follows presupposes some nuancing of the regular First Testament understanding of death and its aftermath, which it shares with other traditional societies. The human person is not a combination of a body and soul in which the body is a dispensable shell for the body and death means the two simply separate (“John Brown’s body lies a molding in the grave but his soul goes marching on”). Body and mind or spirit or personality are indeed distinguishable and semi-separable, so that the body can be in one place but the spirit somewhere else (e.g., 1 Cor 5:3-4; 2 Cor 12:2-4), but in their normal state they are two aspects of one whole. Death then means not their separation but the departure of life from the whole person. On the basis of Jesus’s resurrection, people who belong to him can look forward to the resurrection of their whole person in the future; it will require a miraculous reconstituting of the person they once were, their bodies having totally perished. Meanwhile, they await that event, and the grave or Sheol are the two sides to the place where they wait. Body and spirit, they continue to exist, but they are lifeless. Sleep provides a useful analog for their position.

## How or How Not to Die a King

Saul and two other men travel across the plain and arrive at night; it’s sometimes said that contact with dead people happens more at night. Saul asks the woman to make contact with Samuel’s ghost (*’ôb*). Samuel appears, evidently having had a kind of interim physical reconstituting, though only the medium sees him. His appearance both scares her and makes her realize who Saul is. Perhaps part of the background is that a medium may profess to hear and transmit voice and words (cf. Isa 29:4), but not to see the physical person. And maybe the actual appearance of a figure such as Samuel would confirm a hunch that her visitor was more than just an ordinary guy. She calls Samuel an *’ĕlôhîm*, apparently presuming that the word can denote any figure who is more than merely natural.[[275]](#footnote-275)

Saul needs Samuel to tell him what he should do; the wording is the same as Samuel’s before the Gilgal event (10:8).[[276]](#footnote-276) The Philistines are making war against him and God has turned away from him. “It is a moment of great intensity in this long narrative, and I think Saul's most exposed, most honest, moment.”[[277]](#footnote-277)

Samuel does not appreciate being awakened from his sleep in Sheol. Presumably a medium could not generate an appearance by Samuel against God’s will, but on this occasion it suits God to allow it, and typically, he does not mind very much whether the prophet whom he calls is happy to be drafted. Indeed, “death has not mellowed Samuel”;[[278]](#footnote-278) further, he “refuses to be an alternative to Yahweh, who has already made his position clear (v. 16). There is no space between Yahweh and himself that can be exploited.” Commonly, a prophet’s vocation is to encourage a king before a battle and tell him not to be afraid (cf. Isa 7:4), and Jonathan once gave David that kind of encouragement (23:17), but Samuel will not fulfill the role.[[279]](#footnote-279) He reaffirms the message he gave Saul after the Amalek event and tells him that he and his sons will die in the battle next day. “He returns from the dead to cut through all the events that have occurred since 1 Samuel 15.”[[280]](#footnote-280) The one things he adds to his earlier messages is the identification of the neighbor to whom God will give the kingship (28:17). It constitutes a prophetic confirmation of what Achish’s men have said (21:11 [12]), Jonathan has said (23:17) and Saul himself has said (24:20).

Why should Saul ask the witch to call up Samuel, of all people? Because Saul knows that Samuel can be relied upon to speak the truth to him; Samuel is the plumb line of truthfulness, in the narrative, and Saul knows it: “With Samuel, Saul is forced back to brutal reality, away from brutal illusion. He has been battling David all this time, as he thought, but in reality he has been battling Yahweh.” . . . This meeting between Saul and Samuel. . . is like an inverted version of their first, divinely guided meeting. In the first encounter, Saul did not intend to meet Samuel, but does, and is involuntarily offered the kingdom; in their last meeting, he wills to meet Samuel and is told that his army will fall “into the hand of the Philistines” because the “kingdom” has been given by God “to David” (1 Sam. 28:19, 17).[[281]](#footnote-281)

The story can be read as sympathetic to Saul and to the medium. The woman is not a witch but a seer who brings the word of Yahweh to Saul in a way that maybe he finally hears,[[282]](#footnote-282) and afterwards she makes a meal for him before he sets off on his journey back to the camp; a meal is perhaps part of the séance process.

The narrative takes a quite matter-of-fact form and raises no questions about the possibility of contacting dead people. It thus compares with the attitude taken elsewhere in the First Testament (e.g., Lev 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deut 18:11; 2 Kgs 21:6; Isa 8:19), which does not question the possibility but does forbid such activity. After Second Temple times, the story became more puzzling, partly because Jews and Christians had come to assume the existence of Satan, of resurrection, and of heaven and hell. Like modern readers, Jewish and Christian readers might then be disinclined to take the story literally. While Samuel in general did not attract the attention of Jewish and Christian writers over the centuries as Genesis, Psalms, or Isaiah did,[[283]](#footnote-283) Saul and the medium did draw their attention. Nicely, Origen insists on a literal interpretation against people such as Tertullian who read the story figuratively and believed that Satan generated an apparition of Samuel.[[284]](#footnote-284) In the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries attention focused more on the medium/witch/prophetess.[[285]](#footnote-285)

The Torah gives no reason for its prohibition. It is an aspect of repudiating aspects of traditional religion and spirituality such as the use of images of God and tattoos. Considerations that may underly such repudiations are that they can give a misleading impression of God and of the nature of a relationship with God, and can carry implications associated with alien religious beliefs and draw people into sharing those beliefs and practices. Paul takes a similar view of meat sacrificed to other gods (1 Cor 10:14-32). Outside that context, some practices associated with other religions such as tattooing might be unobjectionable. As regards recourse to mediums, seeking contact with family members who have passed is not inherently incompatible with faith in Yahweh. But Isaiah 8:19-20 (admittedly an enigmatic passage) declares that there actually is something wrong with seeking messages from Yahweh that way, and a central implication of 1 Samuel 28 is similar. Israel had other ways of being in touch with Yahweh and he had other ways of speaking to Israel, and Yahweh has made it clear that he has nothing else to say to Saul. Saul’s recourse to the medium confirms the point: Samuel simply says what Yahweh regularly gave him to say to Saul. The challenge to Saul was to respond to what Yahweh had said to him already. Jesus will make a similar point in a parable about two people wo have died. The well-to-do man wants Abraham to send the poor man back to warn his family about the fate that awaits them, to which Abraham’s response is that they need to listen to Moses and the Prophets (Luke 16:19-31).

In the battle that duly follows, the Philistines win a victory, kill Saul’s sons, and wound Saul. He commits suicide rather than be captured, killed, and further humiliated. The Philistines decapitate him and fasten his body to the wall of Bet-shean, the Philistine town nearby. They thereby make even his last act a failure and attempt to ensure that he does not even find rest in the tomb and thus in Sheol. But the people of Jabesh-gilead whom Saul had once delivered send a company to bring the bodies of Saul and his sons back home and give them a proper burial. So Saul's life does end not in humiliation but with dignity.[[286]](#footnote-286) “The curtain falls where his reign began.”[[287]](#footnote-287) Indeed, “it is perhaps a more generous portraiture toward Israel’s first king than we have heard narrated elsewhere.”[[288]](#footnote-288) In City of God 17:7, Augustine has a version of the LXX text of Samuel’s words that speaks of God taking the kingdom from Israel, not just from Saul, which Augustine interprets in a troubling direction: it denotes the replacement of the Jewish people by the church. The honoring of Saul rather fits with Saul’s preparing the way for David in a strange sense; “David is chosen for Saul and for the people he represents.”[[289]](#footnote-289)

The sequence of events in 1 Samuel 31 repeats in 2 Samuel 1 in a way that maintains the irony characterizing this narrative. On his return to Ziklag, David surely flops, draws breath, and makes love to Abigail one night and Ahinoam the next. Except that David isn’t a flopper, and not much of a lover (he doesn’t get around to fathering children for some while: see 3:2-5). He knows that the Philistines and the Israelites were getting ready for a battle, so the two days are moments of suspense until an Amalekite who is a resident alien in Israel arrives. At least, the Amalekite says that’s what he is, and it’s not the kind of thing you make up. But he gives a different account of Saul’s death from the narrator’s account, which we are presumably invited to take as the true one. The Amalekite thinks that David will like his version (and perhaps promote him to full citizen),[[290]](#footnote-290) but David doesn’t. At least, David says he doesn’t, though the narrator doesn’t tell us what David is thinking, here or in his subsequent lament for Saul and Jonathan. Here is a man who says he killed Saul but didn’t; in him does David, who might have killed Saul but didn’t and yet profits from his death, meet his alter ego and then execute him?[[291]](#footnote-291) Anyway, through him “the symbols of [Saul’s] kingship are transferred to David . . . . The confirmation of David’s kingship by the people governed by that crown still lies in the future. But the crown has arrived.”[[292]](#footnote-292) And no doubt it suits David to continue to emphasize to anyone listening that you don’t attack “Yahweh’s anointed,” and that doing so is a capital offense (1:16). The expression “Yahweh’s anointed” comes otherwise only in Lam 4:20, where it is glossed as implying that he is “the breath of our nostrils. . . in whose shadow we said we would live among the nations.” Thus “on the death of the king, the very life of the nation is under threat.”[[293]](#footnote-293) And Saul’s reign has achieved nothing. “Israel is once again occupied by the Philistines, returning to the position it had been in prior to Saul's reign.”[[294]](#footnote-294)

Irony and ambiguity continue in David’s elegy for Saul and Jonathan. Why would he want it taught (1:18)? An elegy belongs at someone’s funeral. Why would he want it taught specifically to Judahites (1:18)? Is that requirement another affirmation that he, the Judahite, does not rejoice in the death either of the anointed king or his potential successor, and neither should they, and everyone else should note the fact? On the other hand, when the Philistines already know about these deaths because they brought them about (1:20; cf. 1 Sam 31:9), why avoid letting the Philistines know about them?[[295]](#footnote-295) But rhetorically the exhortation functions as an expression of sorrow at the fact that the Philistine women will indeed rejoice.[[296]](#footnote-296) Saul and Jonathan were great shedders of blood and piercers of bodies (1:22)? The person talking is the great killer David! They were always victorious, equally speedy and strong (1:22-23)? Actually 1 Sam 14:47-52 did imply something along those lines. Both of them were lovable and gracious (1:23)? They were parted neither in life nor in death (1:23)? What about the conflict between them, over David!?[[297]](#footnote-297) David speaks with “elegiac generosity.”[[298]](#footnote-298) Saul decked the Israelite women in crimson luxury and gold ornaments (1:24)? The elegy is a eulogy,[[299]](#footnote-299) and eulogies don’t tell the whole truth. David’s words have a “calculated eloquence,” an “intended rhetorical effect on an audience.”[[300]](#footnote-300) Who, then, knows what feelings lie behind them? But the elegy parallels the honoring of Saul and his sons by the Jabeshites, as the Amalekite’s story parallels the narrator’s account. “Although the Lament might serve David, it serves the memory of Saul and Jonathan more.”[[301]](#footnote-301)

# Yahweh Who Establishes a King (2 Samuel 2 – 12)

Like Samuel as a whole, 2 Samuel 2 – 10 works in a rough chronological order but also groups related events within that broad framework. These chapters cover the positive side to David’s reign before the narrative comes to David’s affair and the killing of Uriah with its grim aftermath. The chapters raise issues concerning key aspects of the nation’s life: government, family, a capital city, defense, the main place of worship, and Yahweh’s promises for David’s dynasty. In each case, the narrative brings out the theological ambiguity of the subject, or the wider First Testament context does so.

## Government: David’s Kingship

The auditors, the narrator, and David himself, know what is due to happen after Saul’s death. David needs no prophetic anointing; Samuel performed it long ago. But Saul’s anointing and David’s anointing were private or family affairs. Humanly-speaking or politically-speaking, they didn’t bring about recognition or enthronement. Samuel organized it for Saul. David now asks Yahweh what to do, implicitly in order to bring it about (2:1-4a); consulting Yahweh is what he does when there is or could be conflict between him and his clan (1 Sam 23:1-13; 30:1-10), and this moment is a key one for them all. He doesn’t ask about Benjamin, where Saul was based, but about Judah. He came from there and has links there, partly through his marriages: Jezreel (the Jezreel in Judah) and Carmel are both in the Hebron area. Otherwise, he leaves it to Yahweh to offer instructions. The narrative doesn’t tell us whether he was still a client of the Philistines or whether the people of Hebron had any say in his move there (“going up” has military connotations in 2 Sam 5:17, 19).[[302]](#footnote-302) But his clan do settle in Hebron, the natural capital of Judah, and the Judahites do anoint him there. Was a priest such as Abiathar their agent in this action?

David goes on to thank the Jabeshites for the commitment to Saul that they had expressed in burying him. He prays for Yahweh to show them commitment and steadfastness, and promises that he will bring good things to them in return for what they did. Oh, and by the way, the Judahites have anointed me king (2:4b-7). While it might seem that the Jabeshites are too far north and east to be of immediate political use to him, actually Saul’s cousin and commander-in-chief, Abner (1 Sam 14:50), is about to crown Saul’s son Ish-bosheth[[303]](#footnote-303) over Israel as a whole at Mahanaim (2 Sam 2:8). The precise location of both towns is uncertain, but on any theory they are close to being next door. Mahanaim’s location east of the Jordan suggests Israel’s reduced state, weakened by the Philistines. The list of oddly miscellaneous places designated by the term “Israel” (2:9) further conveys a telling impression of what the diminished “Israel” means.

There follows ongoing conflict between Saul’s people and David’s people. David’s people get consistently stronger and Saul’s frailer (*dal*,3:1). The narrator has noted that David enquired of Yahweh before making his move, whereas for Ish-bosheth, Abner just takes action. Yahweh of course intends David to become king over Israel as a whole. The only question is the human means by which this aim will come about. Abner is the real power in Israel. His significance is suggested by Ish-bosheth’s accusation that he has bedded Rizpah, the mother or two of Saul’s children (2 Sam 21:8) and Saul’s “secondary wife” or “servant-wife” (a *pilegeš*, 3:7; “concubine” is a misleading translation, as the word does not imply an extra-marital relationship but someone who, with her children, does not have the same status or rights as a primary wife). Whether the accusation is true or not, it suggests that Ish-bosheth may suspect Abner, as a member of Saul’s family, of having aspirations to the throne.

The strength of Abner’s position in Israel is then suggested by his proposing that David should solemnize an agreement with him for Abner to support David in turning Israel as a whole over to him (3:12). Abner describes it as a fulfillment of Yahweh’s word (3:18), which of course it is. Samuel has not recorded a word that precisely expresses what Abner says, but it wouldn’t be surprising if Abner had political considerations in mind in putting it that way. Perhaps the agreement would entail Abner acquiring the position of commander-in-chief. But his move becomes an ironic part of the way Yahweh’s will is put into effect. He contributes to the fulfillment of Yahweh’s word through losing his life in an act of violence that constitutes redress for a killing he undertook but tried to avoid. He had killed the brother of Joab, one of David’s henchmen and eventual commander-in-chief (8:16), who slays his brother’s killer of whom he could also be suspicious as his potential rival as commander.[[304]](#footnote-304) Should Abner have died as a fool dies? “Abner is a prime example of *hubris* that never comes to know its limits,” so the answer is “Yes.”[[305]](#footnote-305) Actually “there is not room for both Abner and Joab in David’s camp; one or the other must die.”[[306]](#footnote-306) The fulfillment of Yahweh’s purpose comes about through misunderstanding and waywardness and by means of random, misguided, and willful human acts, through bloodshed and betrayal. Killing begets killing as “the road to kingship is strewn with violent and murderous encounters, and funerals are the order of the day.”[[307]](#footnote-307)

When Ish-bosheth heard of Abner’s death, “his hands became weak” (4:1: contrast the phrase in 1 Sam 23:16 about a hand becoming strong). Abner’s death had worked in David’s favor, and he had lamented Abner (2 Sam 3:31-39), again with the implication that he was not behind it. I am soft/tender/gentle (*rak*), David claims, implausibly, and he prays for Yahweh to requite Joab (3:29, 39), but Yahweh didn’t, and David left the task to Solomon for after his death (1 Kgs 2). Meanwhile, it didn’t stop David making good use of Joab as commander-in-chief in his aggressiveness and ruthlessness, nor stop Joab, “a skilled fighter and a bold talker,”[[308]](#footnote-308) making good use of his capacity to confront David (2 Sam 10 – 12; 14; 18 – 20; 24). In due course two Benjaminites assassinate Ish-bosheth (4:2-12). “For David to secure power in the north, some carefully placed killings must occur – Saul and Jonathan, Abner, and now, in this chapter, Ish-bosheth.”[[309]](#footnote-309) Then representatives of the northern Israelites come to David:

“Here, we are your flesh and blood. Further, in previous days, when Saul was king over us, you were the one who took Israel out and brought Israel in. Yahweh said to you, ‘You’re the one who will shepherd my people Israel. You’re the one who will be ruler over Israel.’” So all Israel’s elders came to the king at Hebron, King David solemnized a pledge to them at Hebron before Yahweh, and they anointed David as king over Israel. (5:1-3)

The monarchy falls into David’s lap. They are not literally David’s flesh and blood, like Abimelech when he speaks thus to the Shechemites (Judg 9:2), and the point of the comment lies in that fact. They are making a declaration of commitment, a performative statement: we hereby pledge ourselves to being one people with you. Once again there is no talk of Yahweh’s involvement; their approach, their pledge or covenant, and their anointing are human actions, though they, too, refer to an alleged message to David.[[310]](#footnote-310) They, too, describe themselves as fulfilling Yahweh’s word, but they, too, may be mentioning Yahweh chiefly as part of their political maneuvering, yet speaking more truly and theologically than they realize. So do their actual words as they pick up the word “commandant” (*nāgîd*), Yahweh’s term when he commissioned Samuel to anoint Saul (1 Sam 9:16; 10:1). It suggests someone appointed by Yahweh who rules under Yahweh’s direction. “The elders apparently do not wish to overlegitimize or excessively exalt David in office.”[[311]](#footnote-311) They perhaps imply that they are not the only ones: Yahweh is happy for David to be *nāgîd*, but not so enthusiastic about his being king.[[312]](#footnote-312) The people also quote Yahweh as commissioning David to “shepherd” them, which contributes further to a reframing of the notion of kingship.[[313]](#footnote-313) It is the first occurrence of the verb “shepherd” since the beginning of David’s story (1 Sam 17:15). David knows that a shepherd looks after sheep, provides for them, directs them, and protects them from attack (cf. Ps 23).

The related, less metaphorical Hebrew expression for the king’s remit is that he is responsible for the exercise of faithful authority or right decision-making, for *mišpāṭ ûṣədāqâ* (2 Sam 8:15). This phrase can be seen as the Hebrew term for social justice, though that notion in English is vague, and one has to allow for differences in the notion of justice in different cultural contexts in accordance with the different conceptual schemes within which it functions.[[314]](#footnote-314) The First Testament understanding can usefully be seen against the background of other Middle Eastern understandings.[[315]](#footnote-315) The Hebrew hendiadys combines the ideas of legitimate power and authority (*mišpāṭ*) and obligation to do the right thing by people in one’s community to whom one is bound (*ṣədāqâ*). The king’s responsibility is to govern in a way that expresses *mišpāṭ ûṣədāqâ* and to see that the nation as a whole works on that basis as people such as a community’s elders and the heads of its households exercise their responsibility.

## Family: David’s Wives and Children and Brothers

When David made his move on Hebron, his “men” came with him, with their “households” (*bayit*;2:3). These chapters do not refer to extended families (*mišpāḥâ*; cf. 1 Sam 9:21; 10:21; 18:18; 20:6, 29; 2 Sam 14:7; 16:5), perhaps a sign of the breakdown of such structures in a body that has been on the move and on the run. A household would presumably be a unit such as could fit in a house, not so far from what Western people might call a nuclear family. Brothers are prominent in 2 Samuel 1 – 4, usually as the agents or victims of violence.[[316]](#footnote-316) Deuteronomy especially emphasizes that the community needs to see itself as a brotherhood, but monarchy seems to encourages fratricide.

David took Ahinoam and Abigail with him to Hebron (2:2), and acquired four more wives there (3:2-4). The Hannah story presupposed that for ordinary people the essence of marriage lies in providing a context for developing love and for sexual expression, for generating a family, and for partnering in work, though marriage would also seal relationships between families. Being in leadership reworks assumptions. Having several wives is a sign of a man’s status and significance, and marriage’s potential for sealing relationships also becomes a paramount consideration, as Ish-bosheth’s suspicion of Abner’s relationship with Rizpah implies (3:6-7). Ahinoam and Abigail regularly appear as “the Jezreelite” and “the wife of Nabal the Carmelite”; their origins would undergird David’s identity as a Judahite, encourage his relationship with Judahite clans further south than Bethlehem, and stand him in good stead as he moves to Hebron. Likewise, wife number three’s being the daughter of King Talmay of Geshur suggests a healing of the relationship implied by 1 Sam 27:8. The narrative tells us nothing about the background of David’s other three wives; maybe they were just a means of making David look impressive. It does tell us that between them the six wives gave birth to six sons in Hebron (3:2-4). The notes about wives and children are marks of David’s flourishing and eminence, though “the list bristles with potential disasters,”[[317]](#footnote-317) as will emerge. In Jerusalem David acquires more full wives and secondary wives, and fathers eleven more sons and some daughters (5:13-14). “This listing of David's wives clashes with any romantic stereotypes that may have accrued to David in our imaginations.”[[318]](#footnote-318) While the First Testament does not express general disapproval of polygamy but accepts it as an aspect of the way things are, like divorce and multiple marriages in Western societies, it regularly notes the trouble in which it issues. Deuteronomy 17:17 does specifically prohibit kings from multiplying wives. A king could argue that the context there suggests multiplying foreign wives who served other gods; but would David’s Jerusalem wives be Jebusites?

Then there is Michal. “Instead of receiving validation from her loved one, Michal has, it seems, married a man much like her father.”[[319]](#footnote-319)

David expresses no affection for Michal (actually he expresses no affection for any of his wives). She is the wife that he acquired “at a price,” . . . and she is rightfully his as part of a deal that Saul breached. Later when David will transfer the ark of the Lord to Jerusalem, Michal, “daughter of Saul,” will spy her husband dancing (2 Sam 6:16) and despise him (by then her affections for him have diminished). She probably realizes that her restitution to David in this scene expresses the new king’s political eclipse of Saul, her father, which the transfer of the ark of the Lord to David’s city later solidifies. Her return to court also strengthens David’s legitimacy as Saul’s successor. Thus, we should not expect the narrator to present on stage the tender reunion of husband and wife after years of separation. David’s demand for Michal’s swift return was driven not by his affection for her but by his desire to signal to his court that he has supplanted her father’s house.[[320]](#footnote-320)

Michal had loved David (1 Sam 18:20), and as with Saul and Jonathan it might be overly cynical to take this love as simply the hard-headed, practical kind of allegiance. But it looks as if David left her behind when she facilitated his flight from Gibeah, which led to Saul’s passing her on to Paltiel/Palti ben Laish (19:11-18; 25:44); claiming her back (2 Sam 3:12-16) might be quite legal and in keeping with the Torah.[[321]](#footnote-321) The political consideration overrides Paltiel’s tears, too.[[322]](#footnote-322) The juxtaposition of Rizpah and Michal (3:6-16) draws attention to their sharing the fate of being “politically charged symbols.”[[323]](#footnote-323)

While the narrative does not tell us Michal’s reaction to this sequence of events, her closing scene in the narrative hints at it (6:16-23). “At the beginning of their story a loving Michal helped David escape ‘through the window’ from her father's henchmen while now she looks at him from a distance ‘through the window,’ in seething contempt.”[[324]](#footnote-324) “Through the window” conveys a further irony: it is the position of a woman looking for the man she is preparing to welcome (Judg 5:28; cf. Cant 2:9). Whereas Ahimelech could describe David as honorable, speaking to Michal’s father (1 Sam 22:14),[[325]](#footnote-325) only sarcastically could Michal now describe David as showing himself honorable (2 Sam 6:20). As she sees it, his honor has gone, as happened to Israel when the chest that is now returning first departed (1 Sam 4:21, 22).[[326]](#footnote-326) “This is the only time that the two exchange words, a meager harvest for a union that began, at least on Michal’s side, with love.”[[327]](#footnote-327)

Her story closes with the laconic footnote, “Michal the daughter of Saul had no child until the day of her death” (6:23). Because Yahweh closed her womb? The story doesn’t say so, as it did with Hannah. Because David never came near her? Because she didn’t wish to go near David? One way or another, her story ends with sadness and expresses the price a woman pays for being born into the royal family. “The animosity between the house of David and the house of Saul is played out in 2 Samuel 6 as a marital conflict.”[[328]](#footnote-328) “Michal’s union with David had promised the possibility of keeping the Saulide line alive, but her failure to produce children removed the last brick supporting the house of Saul.”[[329]](#footnote-329)

## Capital: Jerusalem, David’s City

Jerusalem is significant both as a city and as a capital. In the Scriptures, the city comes into existence in Genesis 4, in among the first murder, the first instance of polygamy, the development of cattle raising, and the invention of musical instruments and tools, which hints at the city’s ambiguity. The context of Cain’s fear suggests an aspect of its significance. It is potentially a place of security, at least in relation to outsiders, though modern city life may seem a place of insecurity, in relation to insiders. Roughly, the difference between a city (*‘îr*) and a village (*pərāzâ*) is that a city has walls (cf. 1 Sam 6:18), which offer protection and the possibility of refuge for people in villages and homesteads in a time of invasion. In peaceful times, the city can live symbiotically with the villages and homesteads around it. Specialists in tool-making, pottery, and jewelry can focus on their work in the city, and farmers and shepherds who are in surplus can bring their surplus to the city and exchange it for these specialists’ wares. At least, it would be a neat theory. Among the Canaanites and the Philistines, the land comprised a collection of city-states, of which Jerusalem/the Jebusites was an example, so that there is no distinction between a city and a capital. But when the Israelites as a collection of clans become a nation organized as a state with a king, city comes to accompany throne, and consolidate it.[[330]](#footnote-330)

Jerusalem straddled the border of Judah and Benjamin. Long ago, the Judahites took Jerusalem (Judg 1:8), but evidently couldn’t hold onto it. “The Jebusites living in Jerusalem, the Judahites could not dispossess, and the Jebusites have lived with the Judahites in Jerusalem until today” (Josh 15:63). In yet another comment, “the Jebusites living in Jerusalem, the Benjaminites did not dispossess, and the Jebusites have lived with the Benjaminites in Jerusalem until today” (Judg 1:21). We have heard nothing of the city since Judges 19, when the Levite with his wife and servant thought with terrible irony that it was a less safe place to stay than an Israelite town. The Israelites’ failure to take possession of the city presumably reflects the strength of its position, on a bluff of land with steep slopes on three sides. That strength would also underlie its antiquity as a city or city-state. It features in a number of documents from the second millennium, including an Egyptian curse and some letters from officials in Canaan to the Egyptian king at el-Amarna,[[331]](#footnote-331) though the name Jebusites (and Jebus), like Hivites and Perizzites, do not occur outside the First Testament.

It’s now apparently the only city in the mountains that’s still occupied by Canaanites, and David determines to capture it. It represents a completion of Israel’s occupation of the highland, and in its strong position and its location between Judah and Benjamin it would make an excellent site for a capital. Thus “the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites . . . and David captured the stronghold of Zion” (2 Sam 5:6-7). As a low-key but theologically-freighted sentence, it is unsurpassed in the Scriptures. The Jebusites are confident that they can resist David’s forces, but they are wrong (5:6-9), though exactly how the city fell is unclear. What is clear is that it is an achievement of human bravery and ingenuity, and it issues in the town becoming “David’s City,” equivalent to “Gibeah of Saul” as the state’s administrative center. David subsequently builds it up on all sides; Zion was perhaps the high point and the citadel within the city. While Deut 20:17 requires that the Israelites should devote the Jebusites, Samuel does not say they did so. Araunah the Jebusite is still farming nearby in 2 Samuel 24, and those other references note that the Jebusites are living with the Judahites and Benjaminites in Jerusalem “until today”; 1 Kgs 9:20 has Solomon turning them into a conscript labor force.

Thus “David kept getting bigger as Yahweh the God of Armies was with him” (5:10). It is the first occasion since David’s going up to Hebron (2:1) that the narrative has commented on Yahweh’s involvement; these two references mark the beginning and end of the story of David’s becoming king in Hebron and in Jerusalem. And he is now an important player on the regional scene. “A foreigner . . . writes a fitting climax to the story of David’s rise to power as king of Israel” as the king of Tyre provides him with timber and craftsmen to build him a house in Jerusalem.[[332]](#footnote-332) “And David acknowledged that Yahweh had established him as king over Israel and that he had exalted his kingship on account of his people Israel” (5:12).

It is sometimes said that David was in the habit of consulting Yahweh before making any significant moves, but the narrative does not give this impression. He did consult Yahweh before making his move on Hebron (2:1) and in connection with the battles against the Philistines (5:17-26), as he did on a few earlier occasions (1 Sam 23:1-11; 30:7-8), but more often he makes up his mind what to do and does it, and Yahweh is with him as he does so. Christians often speak of seeking the Lord’s guidance about some action, but only one time in a thousand does the Lord send an answer by means of some prophetic word; usually, people pray and then go on and decide what to do using their own insight. It looks as if David does the same. And it looks as if it is the way God expects his people to decide things. We may guess at the rationale for David’s capturing Jerusalem, but the narratives gives neither a practical nor a theological rationale. In due course Solomon, Yahweh, and the narrator will refer to Jerusalem as the city that Yahweh chose (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:44, 48; 11:13, 32, 36; 14:21; cf. Ps 132:13), but it seems that David chose it first. Subsequently, its significance was vastly enhanced through its marvelous escape from conquest by Sennacherib (cf. Isa 36 – 37; Pss 46; 48), then imperiled through its abandonment by Yahweh and its destruction in 587. And its choice by Yahweh will be the basis of hopes for the future when it looks as if he is ignoring its needs (Zech 1:17; 2:12 [16]; also 3:2)

The puzzling account of its capture (5:6-8) includes the report that the Jebusites had told David he would not get into the city because “the blind and the disabled will turn you back.” David had then challenged his men to find a way to take the city; he disdainfully described “the blind and the disabled” as people “he dismisses” or as people who “dismiss him” (the participle can be understood either way). The verb (*śānē’*) is usually translated “hate,” but like its antonym “love” it suggests more an attitude and commitment than an emotion. Were the Jebusites simply saying that even blind or disabled people could hold the city? But the narrative then adds, “so that’s why people say, ‘someone blind or disabled will not come into the house.’” Now the Torah says that blind and disabled can’t be priests (Lev 21:18). Is the “house” the temple that will eventually be built here. Or is it the “house” whose building the narrative goes on to relate (5:11)? In the context, part of the background to this question lies in another puzzle. Just before its account of the capture of the city, the narrative introduced us to Saul’s grandson, Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth (4:4),[[333]](#footnote-333) who had “become disabled” through a fall. The puzzle there is why the narrative introduces Mephibosheth at that point; the subsequent references to the blind and the disabled provide a clue. Can someone like Mephibosheth not be king because he is disabled? The story might also link with the only other reference to blindness in Joshua-Kings, in 2 Kgs 25:7, when Zedekiah loses the throne and is blinded.[[334]](#footnote-334)

We await more clarification, which comes when David wants to know if there is anyone still alive from Saul’s household (9:1-13). One could, as usual, ask whether politics lies behind David’s question and behind the action he goes on to take. If so, what follows suggests it might be possible for “compassion to co-exist with political expediency.”[[335]](#footnote-335) David asks whether there is anyone to whom for Jonathan’s sake he should show commitment. The word (*ḥesed*) combines the implications of love and loyalty, of grace and faithfulness. Like grace, it suggests a generosity or willingness or dedication that emerges from the heart of the person who shows it rather than from the deserve of the person who receives it. And like faithfulness, it suggests an unwavering steadfastness and consistency, one that persists even if the other person forfeits any right to it. The word comes more in Samuel than any other book in the First Testament apart from Psalms, and it comes three times in 9:1-13. It also came three times in the story of David and Mephibosheth’s father, where Jonathan got David to promise to maintain a commitment to Jonathan’s household, even if Jonathan were dead and even if Yahweh had wiped out all David’s enemies and therefore David no longer needed to keep his commitments (1 Sam 20:14-17).

David now lets Jonathan cash his check post mortem. He summons Mephibosheth from the place where he is staying, across the Jordan. Mephibosheth bows right down, which might be difficult, and calls himself not only David’s servant but a dead dog. He will know that anyone associated with his father tends to end up deceased. But David passes on Saul’s assets to Mephibosheth via a surviving member of Saul’s staff, Ziba, while insisting that Mephibosheth should eat at David’s table in Jerusalem. The last line in the chapter notes again that he was disabled; 5:8 “echoes in the background.”[[336]](#footnote-336) Whatever those puzzling phrases meant, they do not denote that David dismisses a disabled person or that a disabled person dismisses David or that a disabled person cannot come into the house. (There will be some more foreground in 2 Sam 16 and 19).

## Dynasty: David’s Promise and Prayer

Meanwhile, Yahweh has spoken of David’s house(hold) in another connection.

Yahweh will make a house(hold) for you. When your days are full and you lie down with your ancestors, I shall set up your offspring after you, who will come out from inside you, and I shall establish his kingship. He is the one who will build a house for my name. I will establish his royal throne for all time. I myself will become a father to him and he will become a son to me. When he goes wrong, I will reprove him with a club in the hand of human beings, with the blows of human hands, but my commitment will not depart from him as I removed it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your household and your kingship will be trustworthy before you for all time. Your throne will be established for all time. (7:11-16)

Britain has the “the House of Windsor,” Spain has “the House of Borbón,” the Netherlands has “the House of Orange-Nassau.” A “house” is a dynasty. Dynastic monarchy was a regular feature of Middle Eastern states, and Saul had thus once expected that Jonathan would succeed him; Abner had then presumed that Ish-bosheth should do so. David had not assumed that it would be that way in Israel. He knew that Yahweh had designated him as king, even though he had no direct familial links with Saul. He almost gained a link through a marriage to Merab and temporarily gained one through a marriage to Michal, which might have helped politically insofar as people made that dynastic assumption. Here Yahweh declares that he will make a household for David. It’s an odd promise in a way, in that David already has a substantial household, but here the word “house” suggests “dynasty.”

Yahweh will set up his offspring, his physical son: that is, establish him in a position of authority. Initially Yahweh’s words simply suggest a reference to David’s own successor, who we know was Solomon, who would already king by the time the earliest version of this promise was put into writing; maybe his time was already past. The promise that he will build the material house that David desired makes further clear that Solomon brings this promise’s fulfilment.

The promise is further that this successor will have a son-father relationship with Yahweh. Only occasionally does the First Testament speak of Yahweh as father and never of an ordinary individual as his son, though it does assume that Yahweh relates to Israelites in the manner of a father who has compassion for his children (Ps 103:13) and it expresses regret that people did not call on Yahweh as father (Jer 3:19). The implication is not that the Israelites could not relate to Yahweh with the confidence of children relating to their father; the Psalms make clear that they were freer in their relationship with Yahweh than Christians may be in relation to their earthly father or their heavenly father. But the First Testament doesn’t use that image to convey this reality. It does speak of a father-son relationship between Yahweh and the king, in passages where the point is that a son is heir to his father’s beneficence (Ps 2:7-8; 89:26-27 [27-28]), which might be part of the point in 2 Sam 6:12-14. More explicit is the link between fatherhood and chastisement,[[337]](#footnote-337) a significant feature of references to fathers and sons in Proverbs. Fathers discipline their children. Fatherhood denotes authority and sonship denotes obedience (e.g., Matt 21:28-31). Yahweh’s promise, then, is that he will discipline this son, but he will not cast him off. He will be like the prodigal father (Luke 15:11-32).

In light of the observation in Heb 1:5 that God never said to an angel, “I will be his Father and he will be my Son,” Martin Luther declares that this promise in 2 Sam 7:14 refers to “Christ alone.”[[338]](#footnote-338) Tertullian comments, “if you explain this simply of Solomon, you will send me into a fit of laughter,” apparently because it makes David sound like a woman giving birth,[[339]](#footnote-339) though David uses the same language of Absalom as his son (16:11). Actually Heb 1:5 doesn’t quite say that 2 Sam 7:14a is a prophecy of which Jesus is the fulfillment, and the New Testament nowhere else refers to the passage. If it did, Menno Simons has the better of the argument in noting that the whole promise cannot refer to Jesus, because it envisages sin on the part of David’s son. Further, “that this is spoken of Solomon literally, he himself testifies in plain words. (I Kings 3:6; 8:20). Solomon, without doubt, represented in figure Christ Jesus, as in His glory, wisdom, building of the temple, etc. You see, very dear sirs, we should not take the letter for the spirit, and the spirit for the letter. But that the promise according to the Spirit had reference to Christ is incontrovertible; for this the holy prophets of God plainly show” (he refers to Isa 9:6[5]; Jer 23:5; 33:15).[[340]](#footnote-340)

The antithesis of letter and spirit doesn’t work very well, but we can begin recasting Simons’s point by noting that the framework of Yahweh’s promises is long term. They speak of a name, a “place” for Israel, of freedom from foes, and of a continuing dynasty. They use the expression “for all time” (*‘ad-‘ôlām*) three times; it comes five more times in 2 Samuel 7 (and 1 Chr 17), more times than any other chapter in the First Testament apart from the exceptional Psalms 119 and 136. And Psalm 2 assumes that the father-son relationship applies to “his anointed,” to “my king,” whoever it is at any particular moment. Psalm 89 is more specific, in appealing to Yahweh’s pledge that he would establish David’s offspring for all time and not let his commitment depart from his sons even though he would chastise them if they abandoned his teaching; it therefore protests that he has gone back on his pledge (*bərît*, the word that does not come in 2 Sam 6).

On their arrival at Sinai, Yahweh said to the Israelites, “If you really listen to my voice and keep my pledge, you will be for me personal treasure from among all the peoples” (Exod 19:5). It has been suggested that Yahweh’s words to David now bring to an end the time when Yahweh’s commitment to Israel is governed by such an “if.” [[341]](#footnote-341) On this understanding, 2 Samuel 7 marks a transition “from law to grace.” Up to now “God’s relationship with Israel . . . was a *conditional* relationship in which God was faithful, but his blessings were dependent on Israel’s obedience.”[[342]](#footnote-342) Here Yahweh makes “an *unconditional* promise of undeserved grace.”[[343]](#footnote-343)

There are several problems with this view. First, Yahweh’s relationship with Israel was based on grace from the beginning. Yahweh’s promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) were not based on law or on obedience; they came out of the blue. The “if” in Exod 19:5 has something preceding it, the reminder that “You yourselves saw what I did to Egypt. I lifted you on eagles’ wings and brought you to me. So now . . . .” (Exod 19:4-5).The Israelites did not escape from Egypt on the basis of fulfilling an “if.”

Second, on the other hand an “if” continues to be intrinsic to God’s relationship with his people, in both Testaments. If you forgive other people, you get forgiven (Matt 6:14-15). If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love (John 15:10). There is no difference in God’s way of relating to his people before David, after David in the First Testament, or in the New Testament. The language of “conditional/unconditional” does not appear in the Scriptures, but in terms of this framework, one might say that God’s relationship with his people is unconditioned (it did not come about because they fulfilled conditions) but conditional (its continuance depends on their keeping up their commitment, as God keeps up his). Even that way of putting it makes the matter more quasi-legal than it is. God’s relationship with his people is covenantal rather than contractual. It is at this point that English is fortunate to have the two expressions that spell out possible implications of the Hebrew word *bərît*. A covenant is a relationship like the mutual commitment of David and Jonathan, a solemnly expressed and formally ratified pledge to which the two parties promise to be faithful. It is not a legal concordat with sanctions that can be the subject of a court case but a personal bond that nevertheless carries at least as much weight. In Western thinking, marriage is a covenant of this kind, though it is also a legal bond. When two people marry, they do not say “I will marry you on condition that you do the following . . . .”; yet their marrying does presuppose that they are making a binding mutual commitment. Such is the relationship between God and his people before David, after David, and in the New Testament. It is not a contract.

Third, while both the priority of grace and the necessity of obedience are intrinsic to the covenant between God and his people, one or other may need more emphasis in different contexts. Genesis emphasizes grace, Exodus (and even more Deuteronomy) the need for obedience. Romans emphasizes grace, James the need for obedience. So Yahweh’s message to David might have marked this time as one when grace needs the emphasis. But that possibility is not the implication of Yahweh’s words. Yahweh does not draw a contrast between Sinai and Zion or between Moses and David. He draws a contrast between Saul and David – or rather, between his commitment to Saul and his commitment to David. His promise reworks and nuances the message of Samuel (1 Sam 13:13-14; and even more 15:28-29). He had chosen Saul out of his grace, not because he had deserved it through his obedience, but had subsequently rebuffed him because of his disobedience. He had transferred his allegiance to David and would not change his mind about David, even though he no more deserved it because of his obedience than Saul did. And persisting with David will no more reflect David’s deserve. Maybe Yahweh has let the negative point about kingship be demonstrated through Saul and needs now to let the arrangement continue. He will thus operate on the basis of mercy and grace to Israel and to David and maintain his commitment not to change his mind about David by not abandoning his son as he abandoned Saul. Solomon’s story will prove the point: like David, Solomon is more wayward than Saul, but he gets away with it.

In what sense that commitment is to hold “for all time” is not clear. The future will continue to see interaction between Yahweh’s will and the religious and moral stupidity of kings and people. For four centuries, descendants of David will reign in Jerusalem, which at least avoids most of the assassinating and deposing that goes on in Ephraim. But after Solomon their realm will become pathetically smaller and it will become yet smaller over the centuries until the last Davidic king flees the city to be made blind, in 587. Yahweh does promise that this calamity will not be the end of the story (e.g., Jer 23:5-6), and as a descendant of David, Zerubbabel governs Jerusalem under the Persians. Subsequently, Hasmonean kings reign there after Jerusalem sees off Antiochus Epiphanes, but they were not descendants of David, and no descendant of David sits on the throne in Jerusalem ever again. Jesus ben Joseph reigns there metaphorically, but he is not very enthusiastic about being designated as the anointed of Yahweh who was to come (e.g., Luke 7:18-23; 9:18-22). Many Jews believe that in due course God will fulfil his promise to David and a descendant of David will reign as anointed king in Jerusalem, but after 2,500 years or so such an event could hardly count as the fulfilment of a promise made “for all time.”

Actually, it already became clear in 1 Sam 2:30 that “for all time” (*‘ad-‘ôlām*) might not mean “forever.” And one way or another, Yahweh evidently did change his mind about his promise to David’s household, as he did about the promise to Eli’s household. Perhaps “for all time” always presupposes “until there is reason for me to stop”; the general poor effectiveness of the Davidic monarchy over the centuries might provide reason. Perhaps Yahweh presupposes “until I decide to try something better,” which would fit with Jesus’s comments. The symbolic significance of David and of the idea of being the anointed one would mean that Jesus could hardly say “I’m not the anointed one,” but the literal implications of the idea would also give a misleading impression. So Jesus avoids the question. For parallel reasons, it was both appropriate for his followers to say, “he is the anointed one” and to say, “but there are other things to say about him that are more important.” Maybe it’s therefore useful that “Christ” came to be more of a name than a reminder of David.

Such considerations lie outside the framework of 2 Samuel 7. Within its framework, what follows is a prayer of David’s in which he first expresses wonder at the contrast between who he is and who Yahweh is and what Yahweh has done with Israel.

Thus you are great, Lord Yahweh, because there is no one like you, no God except you, in all that we have heard with our ears. And who is like your people, like Israel, a nation on the earth that God went to redeem for himself as a people, to make for himself a name, and to do big and awe-inspiring things (for you all) for your country, before your people whom you redeemed for yourself from Egypt (nations and their gods). You established your people Israel for yourself as a people for all time, and you Yahweh became God for them. (7:22-24)

He then goes on to urge Yahweh indeed to do as he says. Why does he do so?

When, therefore, we pray to God, it is not that we are doubting whether he is already inclined to do us good; or whether he watches out to support us in all our necessities; or whether he knows them well; or that when he has spoken, he does not want to carry out his Word. Rather, the fact is that our faith ought to be exercised, and that God, in offering us his mercy and grace, invites us to have the boldness to call on him (Eph 2:18).[[344]](#footnote-344)

## Defense: David’s War-making

Describing one’s military as defense forces is a euphemism, but the war-making in 2 Samuel does start as defensive (5:17-25). The Philistines might have been fine with David reigning over Judah in Hebron, vaguely as their underling or client. His being crowned king over wider Israel would be different, especially with a capital just up the valley from their heartland. So they invade. It’s the kind of occasion when David inquires of Yahweh. Inquiring via the chasuble can generate only a yes or no, as it does on the occasion of the first incursion (5:17-21). On the occasion of the second, David gets a battle plan (5:22-25), which suggests a word from Yahweh via a priest or prophet. He will hear the sound of marching in the treetops, which perhaps implies a rustling that is a sign that Yahweh’s forces are on the march.

Further collections of battle reports (8:1-14; 10:1-19; 12:26-31) recount another victory over the Philistines and further victories over the Moabites, Arameans, and Ammonites. The reports follow a description of Yahweh having settled David down in his house, untroubled by enemies all around (7:1), but that description looks like an oversimplification, as it has been in other contexts (see Josh 22:4; 23:1). There is more settling with enemies that needs doing,[[345]](#footnote-345) and/or this sequence provides a particularly clear example of the chapters following a dramatic rather than chronological order. Indeed, the narrative later reports more conflicts with the Philistines (2 Sam 21:15-24), when his men discourage him from getting involved because they don’t want to risk the quenching of Israel’s “light” (*nēr*; cf. *nîr* in 1 Kgs 11:36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19). Maybe they are afraid he is past it. Even in his heyday he apparently starts leaving the fighting to Joab (11:1), and Samuel almost closes with a list other warriors, through some of whom “Yahweh brought about a great deliverance” (23:10, 12).

As a result of his accomplishments, David becomes the dominant power between Egypt and Mesopotamia. It is a time of Egyptian weakness during the 21st Dynasty, but it is an astonishing achievement. The battles are thus not just defensive wars like his earlier battles with the Philistines, nor wars undertaken to protect other people who were under attack, like Saul’s attack on the Ammonites, nor wars to put down Yahweh’s enemies, like Saul’s attack on the Amalekites. They include expansionist wars and wars of redress. They fulfill political aims, foster national pride, create an international reputation for David, establish a small empire, and they bring economic gains; David paid for the materials in 5:11-12 somehow. He also dedicated (*qādaš* hiphil) a substantial amount of the spoils to Yahweh, which might contribute to the cost of offerings in the tent sanctuary and in due course to the building of the temple. These ends were achieved with the accompaniment of cruelty to animals and inhumane treatment of prisoners (8:1-8).[[346]](#footnote-346) There was no inquiring of Yahweh before these campaigns, though there was a prayer, by Joab (!) (10:12).[[347]](#footnote-347) But in these ventures, “Yahweh delivered David wherever he went” (8:6, 14). The victories do not imply a recognition of David’s faithfulness; Yahweh was often delivering Israel in Judges.[[348]](#footnote-348) But once again, there is a synergy of human activity and divine activity in what happens. The achievements would not come about without David’s activity; they would not come about without Yahweh’s activity. They resemble the conceiving and birthing of a child.

Modern readers of the David story may be inclined to contrast his military activity with the imperative to love one’s enemies, but theological reflection cannot stop there, or even start there. David recognizes the obligation to love one’s enemies; he does so in relation to Saul and to Shimei (16:5-14). Conversely, the Jesus who tells people to love their enemies (Matt 5:44) also looks forward to repaying everyone for what they have done (Matt 16:27; cf. Rom 2:6-11; Rev 22:12) as well as to arranging the eternal punishment of people who have not looked after his brothers and sisters (Matt 25:31-46). Can we resolve the tension between these two stances?

One aspect of the teasing out lies in noting the difference between people who act with enmity to us and people who act wrongly towards other people, between enemies within our own family or people and enemies within other families or peoples, between personal enemies and national enemies, or between individuals and nations. Paul speaks of not taking redress from one’s enemies but rather feeding them (Rom 12:19-20), picking up from Proverbs (20:22; 25:21-22), but goes on to note that it is the imperial authorities’ job to wield weapons that will execute wrath on wrongdoers (Rom 13:1-4). While it may require extravagant courage and hope to tell individuals to love their enemies, it may require even more unreasonable courage and hope to tell nations to do so.[[349]](#footnote-349) That consideration may offer a clue to the difference in scriptural attitudes to questions about national violence and questions about individual violence. Israel gets in trouble in Samuel for wanting a central government, but one should be sympathetic to the dilemma they feel. Surviving and succeeding in their relationships with other nations worked fine when Yahweh was killing Egyptian children, drowning the Egyptian army, and making the walls of Jericho collapse, but such intervention was not Yahweh’s regular way of operating. More usually, they had to fight their battles. This difference looks like an aspect of a regular difference in the way God relates to the world and to humanity. Sometimes people pray and God does something miraculous; sometimes he enables an infertile woman to get pregnant; sometimes he resuscitates someone who has died. More often, he lets matters in the world unfold on the basis of the dynamics he wrote into the world when creating it and on the basis of his making humanity responsible for the world. And the way nations relate to each other is the way they do when someone like David is their leader. Yahweh brings the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Qir; but they get there by fighting. It is in the same way that the Israelites gain possession of Canaan.

Admittedly, the First Testament story recognizes that this process doesn’t work well. The story that reaches a high point in Samuel and in the opening chapters of Kings marches steadily downhill until both Ish-bosheth’s Israel and David’s Judah lose their national existence and never regain it within the First Testament. Within the story in Kings, Israel and Judah come under the control of bigger empires, and stay that way. The visions in Daniel note how directionless is these empires’ history, and the New Testament doesn’t give the impression that things change with the transition from the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Greek Empires to the Roman Empire. Nor have things progressed under succeeding imperial powers. Working with the people of God as a nation turned out not to work in the First Testament. The New Testament shows few signs of a different perspective, notwithstanding Luke 1:53-55, 68-75; Acts 1:6-8, which prove the rule as they reaffirm some such hopes but give no indication that the hopes lead anywhere. David is the highpoint of an experiment whereby Yahweh engages in history with his usual energy that holds nothing back, and demonstrates that this experiment fails.

And David surely pays a price for being used in this way. Given the job that he wanted undertaken, Yahweh knew what he was doing when he chose David. He chose someone with a trust in him and a killer instinct, a person who would advocate for the saving power of the God of Israel and then not only put Goliath to death but cut his head off and take it to Jerusalem. What David advertised himself to be as a child soldier[[350]](#footnote-350) continued to be his way of operating and being, over a decade or two or three. He surely paid a price. It is possible that Saul was a morally injured and traumatized person.[[351]](#footnote-351) It must be the case that David would be. People come back from battle traumatized, and David has more battle experience than most. How could he not be injured by what he has done? Is it significant that he now gives up leading Israel into war (11:1; 12:26-31)? It is hardly surprising that the highpoint of his story as king is also the beginning of the story of his own moral folly as he not only commits adultery, as many leaders do, but arranges for Uriah’s killing, as they may also do (“history books are full of many other murderous adulterers”).[[352]](#footnote-352) His heroic masculinity unravels.[[353]](#footnote-353)

The story of David’s war-making is the highpoint of his story as a leader and of Israel’s story as a nation, and marks the beginning of the downfall of both. If there are “lessons” for the twenty-first century, they concern a realism about our national lives and our war-making, about the wars from which we have prospered. Britain and the United States enjoy the life that we do because we created empires and annihilated native peoples. The lessons might also include a more serious acceptance of obligation to give resources to the healing of the trauma of the people who fight for us.[[354]](#footnote-354)

## Sanctuary: David’s Temple

Whereas Saul had apparently not thought of bringing the meeting tent the covenant chest to Gibeah to consolidate its position as the nation’s center, David does make this move. The account of his establishment as king reaches its highpoint with the interrelated narratives of his bringing the covenant chest to Jerusalem and his proposition concerning the building of a temple there. While both initiatives may have a political side, like everything he does, and while both initiatives relate to worship, both also move in the realm of symbolism and both relate to the reality of Yahweh’s presence in the city.

“Presence” is a rich and complex idea. In English translations, “presence” commonly translates the word for “face” (*pānîm*): when you are in someone’s presence, you see their face. Further, the English word “before” more literally denotes “to the face of.” So at the sanctuary Hannah was praying “to the face/presence of Yahweh” and Samuel ministered there to his face/presence (e.g., 1 Sam 1:12, 15, 19, 22; 2:11, 18; 3:1). The same expression can be used of situations outside the sanctuary: Abraham stood to the face/presence of Yahweh at Mamre (Gen 18:22; 19:27), and his servant bowed to his face/presence in Laban’s house (24:52). Statements about Yahweh being “with” David also indicate his dynamic and active presence.

But most references to Yahweh’s face or presence denote the reality of his presence in the sanctuary; he has committed himself to being there. David dancing “before” Yahweh (2 Sam 6:5, 14, 16, 21) proves the rule; whereas he is not in the sanctuary, he is dancing before the covenant chest. People know that they can go and see Yahweh in the sanctuary, ask him things, thank him for things, and honor him there. In a sense it’s odd to speak of the face and presence of Yahweh in this way; the language more literally fits a deity who has an image, with a face that one can see. But Israel knows that Yahweh metaphorically but really has a face that looks at people and smiles at them, as he metaphorically but really has eyes, ears, mouths, noses, hands, and feet that work, as those of other so-called deities do not (Pss 115:5-7; 135:16-17). In English we can speak of a blind person going to “see” someone; “sight” becomes a metaphor, but it denotes a reality of being in the person’s presence.

The question of the origin and history of the sanctuary where the covenant chest resided is convoluted, but Samuel simply presupposes that Yahweh had commissioned its construction and undertaken to be invisibly but really present above the chest, between or above the sphinxes. While Samuel mostly refrains from using the image of covenant to describe the relationship of Yahweh and Israel, it frequently refers to “the covenant chest.” The chest contains the stone tablets inscribed with the Decalogue, the basic covenant obligation that Yahweh laid upon Israel at Sinai in light of his deliverance of the people from servitude to Egypt (cf. 1 Kgs 8:21).

Israel had managed without the chest for a decade or two or three since its depositing at Qiryat-ye‘arim/Ba‘alê yəhûdâ; the people had been able to gather “in the presence of Yahweh” in sanctuaries other than Shiloh (e.g., 1 Sam 7:5-6; 10:17-25; 11:14-15; 12:7). Maybe the dominance of the Philistines, controlling the Geba/Gibeon area (2 Sam 5:22-25), would have made retrieving it problematic (6:11 notes that Obed-edom from Gat, who is presumably therefore a Philistine, is still there). The vivid poetic account of the chest’s retrieval in Psalm 132 almost suggests that no one could remember where it was. The psalm may link with an annual celebration of the retrieval, and the story in 2 Samuel 6 might link with it, too. Victory over the Philistines perhaps now opens up the possibility of retrieval,[[355]](#footnote-355) and the new context of David’s settling in Jerusalem makes it desirable. Recovering it will establish a link between exodus, Sinai, Jerusalem, and (in due course) temple. It will be a political act, a religious act, and a theological act. Whereas the city is something new, the covenant chest will give it a link with the old. Jerusalem will succeed Shiloh, though it will not become the only legitimate sanctuary; Solomon will go to Gibeon, described as “the biggest shrine” (1 Kgs 3:4).

David has a tent ready for the chest (2 Sam 6:17): it’s the first allusion to a sanctuary tent since reference to Shiloh (1 Sam 2:22). It’s not clear whether it counts as “the meeting tent” (see 1 Kgs 1:39; 2:28-30; 8:4; 2 Chr 1:3-6, 13; 5:5). The title “Yahweh [of] Armies” (2 Sam 6:2) also makes the connection with the covenant chest and Shiloh (1 Sam 1:3, 11; 4:4). David’s leading the procession dressed in a linen chasuble makes another link with Shiloh; it is what Samuel wore there (1 Sam 2:18; cf. 22:18). It was common Israelite practice to take over Canaanite sanctuaries and transfer them to Yahweh’s service; it happened to sanctuaries such as Bethel. So it would make sense if the place where David puts the tent for the chest is the site of the Jebusite sanctuary in whose context David would be priest-king “after the manner of Melchizedek” (Ps 110:4).[[356]](#footnote-356)

There is some overlap between the celebratory liturgical bringing in of the chest and the ritual for inaugurating temples, palaces, and cities, recorded in some Assyrian inscriptions from the time of kings such as Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Esarhaddon.[[357]](#footnote-357) Things go wrong when the chest threatens to fall off its wagon, Uzzah reaches out to steady it, and Yahweh angrily strikes him dead. The narrative offers no explanation for this event making Yahweh angry. As Qohelet emphasizes, sometimes we don’t know why Yahweh brings disaster to people. The event does recall the calamity the chest brought at Bet-shemesh, as well as among the Philistines. It implies a warning about the chest’s dangerous nature; one might take Exod 19:21-24 as an anticipatory commentary on the event. It reminds people how (as the New Testament puts it) falling into the living God’s hands is dangerous (Heb 10:31). But the narrative focuses more on David’s responsive anger (it uses the same expression of him as of Yahweh, but it does not indicate the object of his anger), his responsive fear or awe in relation to Yahweh, and his decision to leave the chest where it is in the care of Obed-edom. “In view of the circumstances it is doubtful that Obed-edom was overjoyed to receive the custody of the awesome ark.”[[358]](#footnote-358)

Whereas the chest’s time with the Philistines brought trouble on them following their desecration of it, here the chest’s time with a Philistine following the Israelites’ desecration of it brings blessing on him, which encourages David to complete the project. Further dancing and rejoicing follow, more enthusiastic than the first time, perhaps more like cartwheeling or acrobatics.[[359]](#footnote-359) People are dancing before the Ten Commandments![[360]](#footnote-360) David in particular manifests himself full of life on this second attempt at the retrieval (though his whirling is the lead in to the Michal scene).[[361]](#footnote-361) “He was a Palestinian, I confess, from a people that is more emotional and unrestrained than our European people.”[[362]](#footnote-362) While Irenaeus did not quite say that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive,”[[363]](#footnote-363) the story does enthuse over someone being full of life in worshiping God – not just David but everyone. The sacrifices offered on the way continue in the tent: like most First Testament sacrifices, they are not offerings for sin but expressions of commitment (whole offerings) and of a joy shared between God and people (well-being offerings).

So the covenant chest brings a new representation of Yahweh’s presence to Jerusalem. David has been able to inquire of Yahweh before (2 Sam 3:1) and Yahweh has been with David before (2 Sam 5:10). Now David can come in and stay in Yahweh’s presence in this sanctuary (7:18; in other contexts one would take *yāšab* to mean sit, but there are no other references to sitting in Yahweh’s presence, and the verb means “stay” or “live” in 7:1, 2, 5, 6).

Now David wants to build Yahweh a proper house rather than having him live in a home that is made only of “curtaining” (*yər‘îâ*, 7:2). The Shiloh sanctuary was already described as both a house and a palace, and it had a doorpost and doors (1 Sam 1:7, 9; 3:3, 15), but evidently David has in mind something more substantial and impressive. He has a palace after all, and building a temple for the deity is something else that kings do.

The prophet Nathan (who appears for the first time, out of the blue) recognizes that it is wise to affirm the king’s bright ideas, then has Yahweh tap him on the shoulder during the night and ask whether he might be allowed an opinion on the king’s idea; he is, after all, the one who will have to live in this house. “Even when directed by God's prophet . . .,the king could still act against his and Israel's best interests.”[[364]](#footnote-364) Traditional critical theory sees the simultaneously entertaining and frightening aspect to this story as the result of Deuteronomistic redaction, which brings credit to the redactors.

Yahweh raises a number of questions with David about the project. First, “Are *you* the one to build a house for me, for my living in?” (2 Sam 7:5). Although the narrative does not wholly follow a chronological order, even on its order there are battles ahead (8:1-14; 10:1 – 12:31) as well as behind (5:17-25).[[365]](#footnote-365) The Chronicles theory that David cannot build the temple because he’s too busy shedding his enemies’ blood (1 Chr 22:8; 28:3) is not far wrong.[[366]](#footnote-366) Yahweh will give David relief, but the time has not yet come (2 Sam 7:11). It is David’s son who will build the house “for my name” (7:13; cf. 1 Kgs 5:3-5 [17-19]). That expression recurs in the account of the temple dedication in 1 Kings 8 – 9, where it picks up from Deuteronomy 12 – 16. It does not otherwise come in Samuel, and even here the idea of the name “dwelling” does not feature. The expression is thus not as technical as it is elsewhere. It is one of a number of images by which one may speak of God’s presence. When Christians mutter the name “Jesus,” especially in the “Jesus Prayer,” the uttering of the name conveys a sense of the presence. In Israel, the uttering of Yahweh’s name in the sanctuary suggests the reality of Yahweh’s presence there; even when there is no one there, the name is there, and Yahweh is there. Speaking in terms of the name being present affirms the reality of that presence but takes account of what 2 Samuel 6 has recognized: the actual presence of God could be so electric or so nuclear that no one could survive it.

Second, regarding “a house for me, for my living in,” Yahweh adds: “I have not lived in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up from Egypt until this day. I have been going about in a tent- dwelling. Whenever I went about among all the Israelites, did I speak a word with one of the chiefs . . ., saying ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” (7:6-7). Whatever the precise nature of the house at Shiloh, again the assumption is that it was more like a Bedouin tent than a proper building. And the narrative in Joshua through Samuel has implied that the meeting tent has been at several places, in continuity with its being on the move during the Israelites’ journey before their arrival in Canaan. Yahweh has liked it that way. This objection by Yahweh has far-reaching implications. It hints that the temptation of the people of God is to want to get God to settle down, whereas he always wants to be on the move. It coheres with the First Testament narrative’s portrayal of the tent sanctuary as preceding the building of the temple. Temple, like kingship, is an institution that Yahweh now allows to Israel, but it is not his preference. When the church subsequently turns the word “church” into a word for a building and builds “sanctuaries,” the pattern continues.

Third, Yahweh says, whereas you have spoken about building me a house, “a house is what Yahweh will make for you” (7:11). I took hold of you, I appointed you, I have been with you wherever you have gone, I intend to give you a great name, and in this relationship I am the one who does the house-making (7:8-11).[[367]](#footnote-367) In effect the reminder harks back to the process whereby Yahweh took hold of David long ago (1 Sam 16:1-13).

# Yahweh Who Watches a King (2 Samuel 11:1 – 24:25)

The story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah, and its immediate aftermath, are the great turning point in David’s story.[[368]](#footnote-368) “There are not many places in the Bible where a character's reputation is so suddenly and effectively demolished as in 2 Samuel 11.” Yet “at the center of the story of David we find something much more akin to the bursting of a bubble than to the relaxed deflation of a balloon. The tragic turn of events that follows chapters 11 – 12 is but a consequent reverberation of the explosive events of . . . earlier chapters,” 1 Samuel 16 – 2 Samuel 10. “The success and adulation that have constantly accompanied David up to now were only questioned by the Deuteronomist's subtle hints, which, here or there, helped us to wonder whether there was more—or less—to David than met the eye.”[[369]](#footnote-369) Nevertheless it comes as a revelation to the auditors, and to David, and perhaps to Yahweh. Yahweh summoned Samuel and commissioned him to anoint Saul, commissioned him to anoint David, made extravagant promises to David, but now declares that he will cause dire events to arise from his household. Then for the most part he simply watches them do so.

## David’s Victims

The story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah links with a number of ways of thinking about ethics. Ethics involves rules; its basic principles are written into human nature; it is tied up with theology; it can find expression in narrative; and it involves personal moral qualities that manifest themselves in actions and are also developed by actions.

Given that ethics involves rules for life, there is some irony in David’s installing the covenant chest in Jerusalem. It contained the stones inscribed with the basic rules of Israelite spirituality and ethics, of relationships with God and with other people. He now ignores at least half of the latter. He has sex with someone else’s wife and has someone murdered; these acts involve him first wanting someone else’s wife and then stealing her.

Second, in light of the way David ignores an ethic of rules, Nathan’s eventual challenge to him has several significant features. Nathan doesn’t quote the rules, as other prophets rarely allude to the Decalogue though they presuppose its expectations. Nathan’s parable about the man with big flocks and the man with one sheep implicitly appeals to a sense of right and wrong that David has in his heart and mind, by virtue of being human. His assumptions compare with Paul’s in Romans 1 – 3. A person can quash this sense of right and wrong, as Paul also implies. It turns them into a foolish and worthless person (*ben bəliyya‘al*)like Nabal (1 Sam 25:25). David is neither fool nor wise, but something in between.

In addition, thirdly, Nathan accuses David of despising Yahweh (12:10). If one is to relate David’s actions to the ten rules for life, then, David has ignored the ones about spirituality and relationship with God as well as the ones about other people. Or rather, Nathan presupposes (like the Decalogue itself) that the two are inextricably linked. Dishonoring one’s neighbor is an expression of dishonor to God; we honor God by honoring our neighbor. Ethics and spirituality, relationships with other people and with God, cannot be separated. Ethics is theological; theology is ethical. Nathan’s expresses the point differently accusing David of despising Yahweh’s word (12:9). The charge recalls Samuel’s confronting Saul for flouting Yahweh’s word of command (1 Sam 15:13, 23, 24, 26), though on that occasion Saul was ignoring a concrete command. It recalls the description of the Decalogue itself as Yahweh’s word (Deut 5:5).[[370]](#footnote-370) Closer in implication and nearer to hand is Nathan’s own declaring of Yahweh’s word of promise concerning what Yahweh intended for him (2 Sam 7:4, 21, 25). In this respect, too, ethics is tied up with spirituality and theology. The point emerges in the forms of expression Yahweh uses: “I am the one who anointed you . . . and I am the one who rescued you,” but “Uriah the Hittite you struck down with the sword, and his wife you took for yourself as wife, and him you killed” (12:7, 9). The point is implicit in David’s acknowledgment that he has “done wrong in relation to Yahweh” (12:13), even if this admission is worrying in its omitting mention of Uriah, Bathsheba, and the other victims of Joab’s stratagem.

Fourthly, the principle finds yet earlier expression in the punchline of the preceding chapter: “the thing that David did was dire in Yahweh’s eyes” (11:27), “the only unambiguous statement in the narrative.”[[371]](#footnote-371) The chapter relating the (un)ethical actions of David is a narrative, and narratives generally “show” rather than “tell,” leaving implications, feelings, and motivations unstated. While the narrative in 11:1-27 thus does finally comment on Yahweh’s feelings about the events, it leaves ambiguous the feelings of the people involved.[[372]](#footnote-372) Why does David stay behind in Jerusalem? Why does he want Bathsheba when he has all those other wives? Is something political going on?[[373]](#footnote-373) What does Bathsheba feel about David’s summons, their sexual relationship, and her pregnancy?[[374]](#footnote-374) What do David’s staff think? What does Uriah think and what is his motivation in his response to David, and what is the significance of his being repeatedly labeled a Hittite?[[375]](#footnote-375) What does Joab think about the task required of him? What does Bathsheba think about Uriah’s death (“mourning” denotes simply the formal process) and about her marriage to David and her baby’s death? Why does Yahweh stay uninvolved until he sends Nathan? Interpretations of the story give a variety of plausible answers to these questions that reflect the perspectives of the interpreters (e.g., feminist, postcolonial). Their variety underscores the story’s inherent ambiguity. And this ambiguity is an aspect of its ethical significance. Not knowing the answers to those questions means finding ourselves in the stories and making ethical judgments about them, which tell us something about ourselves through our reflection on our reading of them, on the interpretation we bring to them, and on the different interpretations offered by other people.

Fifth, however, the ambiguity about the characters in the story contrasts with a further aspect of its ethical implications. Ethics involves the personal qualities of a community or an individual. Behavior expresses moral character, in virtues and vices. Even where it leaves unclear whether David manifested different qualities, the story implies a positive evaluation of some (and a negative evaluation of their opposites).

* Attentiveness or focus as opposed to lethargy or apathy (11:1-2, 9-13). While David is enjoying a long siesta at home, the covenant chest and the army are on the battle field. David’s attitude contrasts with his earlier discomfort about being at ease (7:1-2) and with the attitude implied by Joab’s later exhortation 12:27-28). David “has ceased to be the king requested by Israel who would ‘go out before us and fight our battles’” (1 Sam 8:20);[[376]](#footnote-376) indeed, eventually he is “lampooned as a pagan king” (12:26-31).[[377]](#footnote-377)
* Resistance to “fleshly” inclinations as oppose to indulgence of them (11:2-3).
* Using one’s power to protect rather than to dominate (11:4, 6-21). Further, idealizing David’s “hegemonic masculinity” brings “an ethical cost,”[[378]](#footnote-378) and simply describing his relationship with Bathsheba as adultery understates the significance of the power differential between them.
* Giving as opposed to taking. With the narrative’s took, took, took, took (11:4; 12:4, 9, 10), compare Samuel’s take, take, take (1 Sam 8:11-16). “David has become. . . the king of whom Samuel warned.”[[379]](#footnote-379)
* Restraint, in recognition of religious commitments as opposed to ignoring them, in connection with sex (11:4, if she was still purifying herself) and war (11:6-8), since engagement in battle on Yahweh’s behalf requires one to abstain from sex (as David knows: 1 Sam 21:5 [6]).
* Smartness as opposed to folly (11:4), if Bathsheba’s washing implies the completion of her purifying after her period (when she was therefore particularly liable to conceive).[[380]](#footnote-380) Much more significant is the smartness in following what is good in Yahweh’s eyes (11:27b)
* Recognition of the ease with which one thing can lead to another (11:6-15): maybe at the beginning David would have been unable to imagine where the story would end.
* Resistance to immoral expectations as opposed to obedient implementation of them (11:14-25).
* Authenticity as opposed to cynicism (11:25).[[381]](#footnote-381)
* Gratitude for and recognition of God’s giving as opposed to ignoring it and focusing on taking (12:7-8).
* Respect for Yahweh’s word as opposed to despising it(12:9).
* Respect for Yahweh as opposed to despising him (12:10). “Arrogance is more basic than adultery . . . . David has become contemptuous of God.”[[382]](#footnote-382)
* Commitment (*ḥesed*) to a person such as Uriah (cf. the appearance of this motif in 9:1, 3, 7; 10:2) as opposed to disdain for his rights and person (12:9-10). “Hierarchically organized power is defined by the powerwielder’s capacity to act from a distance.”[[383]](#footnote-383)
* Transparency in relationships with one’s community as opposed to a secrecy that needs to conceal dishonor (12:12).
* Giving Yahweh’s enemies reason to honor Yahweh as opposed to reason for feeling contempt for Yahweh (12:14). “There is no crime deserving of greater guilt than to give to the heathen a reason for blaspheming.”[[384]](#footnote-384)

## How Yahweh Responds to David’s Wrongdoing

“David sent Joab . . . sent to inquire . . . sent aides . . . sent to Joab . . . sent by the hand of Uriah . . . sent and collected” (11:1-27), but then “Yahweh sent Nathan”(12:1).[[385]](#footnote-385) David may not have tried hard to conceal his affair but had kept the second half of the story a secret (12:12); army gossip had apparently not exposed the truth about how Uriah died. And on earlier occasions David has acted in secret with impunity (1 Sam 19:2; 20:5, 19, 24; 23:19; 26:1). But Yahweh somehow knew the whole of what had happened, and did not need to ask David embarrassing questions. It is the second time Yahweh has sent Nathan to see David (see 7:4); their third meeting (see 1 Kgs 1:11-40) will be different again.[[386]](#footnote-386) Nathan’s parable has a devastating effect. Part of its force lies in the background of the king’s responsibility to oversee the faithful exercise of authority (8:14). The rich man’s faithless exercise of power (he “took”) needs confronting. So “David the royal judge condemns David the rich oppressor.”[[387]](#footnote-387) Yahweh’s reaction to David’s killing of Uriah sits alongside his apparently not faulting him for executing one in every three of the Moabite military (8:2). Uriah, too, wasn’t ethnically an Israelite, which perhaps gave David an excuse both for appropriating his wife and for having him killed.[[388]](#footnote-388) Yet Uriah was in the Israelite military (indeed, he was one of the elite “Thirty” in 23:39) and his name means “Yahweh is my flame/light”; he was a foreigner who served Yahweh. And Yahweh’s strategy worked. When Nathan told the parable, “David’s anger flared” (12:5). It is his first expression of feelings. And Nathan condemns him both in respect of Uriah, and in respect of Uriah’s wife.

God’s reproof of adulterous King David is ample testimony that men deserve greater punishment than women in violating the marriage bed. He said nothing to Bathsheba, who fell on being tempted by the king. Your lying insulting tongues never cease preaching that the *fons et origo* of all fornication and adultery is woman. As they are supposedly cunning and shrewd in hiding their desires, they inveigle men to their dooms with charms and flattery—at least, this is how your evil minds would have it. Many of you are enemies of our sex, and still you know how to go to extremes, without opposition, or any fault on woman’s part, in a way that deserves the most burning outbursts of God’s anger, since only Heaven’s fire is a fitting scourge for them. [[389]](#footnote-389)

Issuing the rebuke implies that Yahweh wants David to recognize his wrongdoing. The pattern follows a regular one in the Prophets, where indictment leads into a “therefore.” Perhaps it implies that the recognition will benefit David as a human being; Yahweh’s confrontation honors him as a person. It will benefit the readers of Samuel. It will vindicate Yahweh himself in David’s eyes and in their eyes. And it will affirm the moral integrity of the way things work out in the world, which can often raise questions (as they will in a moment in this story, at least for modern readers).

Yahweh wants to tell David about the consequences that will follow his wrongdoing (12:10-12). The principle concerning chastisement enunciated to David in connection with Solomon applies to him, too. Actually, if the man in Nathan’s parable deserves to die (he is a *ben māwet*, a son of death;12:5), how much more does David (to whom Saul applied that expression in 1 Sam 20:31). But instead of David dying, the dire consequences that will follow from his dire action will affect him by affecting his wives and the rest of his household.

Typically, Yahweh combines the idea that events will see a “natural” working out, “the sword will not depart from your household for all time,” and the idea that he himself will act: in response to David’s dire action, Yahweh will take dire action (*ra‘*; 12:9, 11). “What do you say to this, you who believe that God does not judge our actions?”[[390]](#footnote-390) There will be some poetic justice about what happens:[[391]](#footnote-391) it will involve sword, wives, and public exposure. There is a moral and theological link between the natural and the deliberate action: the “natural” result will issue from the fact that “you despised me.” The words about the natural outworking also make for a grievous link with David’s offhand comment that “the sword devours this one and that one” (11:25).[[392]](#footnote-392)

David duly acknowledges, “I have done wrong in relation to Yahweh” (*ḥāṭā’tî lyhwh*; 12:13). The verb is traditionally translated “sin,” but its implications are more relational than this rendering implies; Samuel uses it about wrongdoing in human relationships (e.g., 1 Sam 2:25; 19:4-5). “Offended” is closer, though that expression could imply merely a point about Yahweh’s feelings and not about objective wrongdoing. The stark simplicity of David’s words, without excuses and without appeal, emerges more clearly when set alongside the confession in Psalm 51. The two confessions are not incompatible. Either could be uttered in words but not in reality, and linking the two could make for some irony. But for David, “the subsequent history indicates that this moment of self-recognition does not mark any fundamental change.”[[393]](#footnote-393)

Meanwhile, Nathan’s response is: “Indeed, Yahweh has passed on your wrongdoing – you will not die. Nevertheless, because you definitely made Yahweh’s enemies feel contempt through this thing, indeed the son born to you will definitely die” (2 Sam 12:13-14).

“Passed on” or “removed” (*‘ābar* hiphil) is an unusual expression, and not a regular term for forgiveness or pardon, though David himself later uses it (24:10). To “forgive” (*nāśā’*) is literally to carry; Saul spoke of Samuel’s carrying his wrongdoing (1 Sam 15:25), which would mean absorbing the consequences and not making him carry them. To “pardon” (*sālaḥ*) is a creative, almost miraculous, act whereby a person with proper authority makes a wrongdoing effectively cease to exist. Nathan’s verb can mean “transfer” (cf. 2 Sam 12:31); its frightening implication could be that Yahweh transfers the wrongdoing to David’s son along with its punishment. But the other occasions when the verb relates to dealing with waywardness (Job 7:21; Zech 3:4) do not suggest passing it onto someone. Yet on both occasions when David is the wrongdoer, taking away the wrongdoing is accompanied by calamity coming on people other than David. David does not do wrong simply as a private individual but as a father and a king.

And although the First Testament forbids the punishing of children instead of their parents (Deut 24:16; Jer 31:29-30; Ezek 18:20), it also speaks of Yahweh “attending to” (*pāqad ‘al*)children as well as their parents in connection with the parents’ wrongdoing (Exod 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:18; Deut 5:9; Jer 29:32), or “requiting” (*šālam* piel) children as well as parents (Jer 32:18). The second kind of statement may presuppose that the children are adults continuing in their parents’ wrongdoing. Yet it may also see children as “bound up in the bundle of the living” with their parents (1 Sam 25:29), and parents with their children. Emotionally and physically, parents and children are mutually dependent at different stages of their life. In David’s case it also applies in a politically.

Here and elsewhere Yahweh recognizes these realities. They are aspects of the way he created the world and the way he makes it work. He has already affirmed it in connection with the rest of David’s household, and the ensuing narrative will portray it working out in connection with his children as well as his wives. Tamar will be raped, Absalom will attempt a coup, and Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah will die violently. Bathsheba’s child is not the only one who will die as a result of Yahweh’s David’s wrongdoing bringing trouble on his family and nation. “The violence he had earlier avoided” in his relationship with Saul “spirals out of control in his own life.”[[394]](#footnote-394)

So Yahweh afflicted the child (*nāgap*), as he afflicted Nabal (1 Sam 25:38). The child got ill, in the way that children do, but in a premodern society, they often then die. David therefore inquires with God (*bāqaš* piel) concerning the child. The First Testament knows that Yahweh’s declarations of intent do not close down conversation with him about a matter, any more than they do for children in relation to parents. “Crying out to God is advantageous for a person both before the issue of a decree and after the issue of a decree” (*b.* Rosh Hashanah 16b). Yahweh can relent of dire trouble he has said he would do, as he did at Sinai. “Who knows” (cf. Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:9) whether Yahweh may be gracious (*ḥānan*; 2 Sam 12:22)? This verb also appears in the Sinai narrative, in a context where you cannot know whether Yahweh will act that way: I decide who to be gracious to, he says (Exod 33:19). So who knows? Prayer means taking the risk of asking for things without knowing whether God will grant them. Like the Sinai narrative, the David story walks around the mystery and complexity of Yahweh’s response to his people’s waywardness, in the way that narrative can.

David fasted, as one may fast in penitence and prayer (1 Sam 7:5-6), and for some days would come in (to the sanctuary, the tent he had erected for the covenant chest, in the former Jebusite sanctuary?)[[395]](#footnote-395) and stay the night and lie on the ground (2 Sam 12:16). But after a week the child died. Then David got up, bathed, smartened himself up, changed his clothes, came into Yahweh’s house (the same place?), and bowed down there. Then he went home and ate. David’s behavior is logical but unconventional: he looks as if he is mourning when the child is still alive, then stops mourning when it has died. The combination of logical and remarkable sums up aspects of David.

Why would David care so much about this baby among the umpteen he has fathered, a number of whom have presumably died in infancy (his second son, Chileab, certainly seems to have died at some point)? This child’s death somehow becomes a symbol of the grim nature of this turning point in David’s story. Yes, the man who acted as David did is “a son of death,” almost “a dead man” (12:5).[[396]](#footnote-396) “I am going to him,” David says (12:23). From now on, David is on his way to dying.

He consoles Bathsheba (no one consoles him), they make love, and she gets pregnant with Solomon. And “in that Yahweh loved him” he sends again by means of Nathan, and calls the baby Yedidyah (loved by Yahweh), “on account of Yahweh” (12:24-25). Several subtleties combine to underscore the positive nature of the paragraph, before the narrative returns to conclude the account of the battle with the Ammonites within which this story has been a huge interruption. That first clause (“in that . . . “) has an unusual word order, with the subject before the verb, which points to its leading into what follows. In referring to “love” (*’āhēb*)it uses the verb that can also suggest affirming and being loyal to, and often has political implications. It is a significant and prophetic comment on Solomon. But Nathan’s new sending that contrasts with the earlier sending to confront also brings a new name for the child. This second name does not occur anywhere else, and the functional interrelationship of the two names is not clear, but the second name may safeguard against any possibility that the first refers only to a political commitment. Further, the element that apparently means “loved” (*ydyd)* is close to “David” (*dwd*). The child is “Yahweh’s David.” The grimness of David’s deeds is not the end of the story, and Bathsheba will be instrumental in bringing this replacement child to the throne in succession to David.[[397]](#footnote-397)

## What’s Love or Smartness Got to Do with It

The narrative that follows (13:1 – 14:33) is a kind of palimpsest of the preceding story, though a heightened one.[[398]](#footnote-398)

* Amnon takes David’s place, though he “loves” (as David did not) but also rapes and repudiates
* Tamar takes Bathsheba’s place, though she suffers more and more explicitly
* Jonadab takes the place of David’s staff, though he is (supposedly) smarter
* Joab plays himself, acting (he thinks) in David’s interests and the people’s interests
* The smart woman takes Nathan’s place, though she follows Joab’s script rather than Yahweh’s
* In the parable, the widow and the surviving son take the places of the rich and the poor man
* In reacting to the parable, David plays himself
* As a mourner, the smart woman also takes Bathsheba’s place and David’s place
* Absalom takes the place of the sword

“Tamar’s rape is unbearable to read. Because the narrator provides us with so much preliminary information about Amnon’s scheme, we watch in dread.”[[399]](#footnote-399) Tamar is the daughter of David and the sister of Absalom. Like them, she is beautiful, and “beauty causes an awful lot of mayhem in this cycle of stories.”[[400]](#footnote-400) For her, it means she becomes “a woman of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”[[401]](#footnote-401) Her story begins with a recurrence of that verb for “love,” used here with a meaning that suggests emotion rather than allegiance; indeed, it errs on the other side of this range of meaning (NRSV has “fell in love,” NJPS “became infatuated”). “Every time we read or hear the word "love," we do well to be alert to what is going on . . . . No word in our language is in more need of probing and testing of the kind that this story gives it.”[[402]](#footnote-402) The person who suggests to Amnon the ploy by which he can seduce or rape Tamar is their cousin Jonadab. As David’s nephew, Jonadab counts in a broad sense as a member of David’s household, from which Yahweh has warned David that dire trouble would arise (12:11). To describe Jonadab, the story also introduces the word “smart” (*ḥākām*, 13:3) for the first time in Samuel, again used with negative connotations. Jonadab is either smart in a bad sense, or not really smart in light of what happens. He is “a smart man for faithlessness” (*riš‘â*).[[403]](#footnote-403)

Threatened with rape, Tamar suggests (desperately but plausibly?) that David would not be legalistic about her being Amnon’s half-sister. She is beside herself to avoid being raped and also forced to have illicit sex. Such a thing “is not done in Israel” (13:12). It “would run counter to the accepted values of the whole nation” and be an outrage (*nəbālâ*); it commonly refers to sexual wrongdoing (hence Tg’s *qālān*) and to acts that cost the perpetrators their death.[[404]](#footnote-404) LXX and Vg have words denoting “folly,” which vastly understates the enormity of the kind of action to which the word refers. Forcing Tamar to have sex will be the kind of thing done by dissolute and morally blind people (*nəbālîm*, people such as Nabal), people who don’t care if they outrage the entire community and imperil their relationship with it. And like the words of a person such as Nabal in relation to David (1 Sam 25:39), it would bring reviling on Tamar (13:12-13).

Tamar has a lot more to say than Bathsheba,[[405]](#footnote-405) who uttered only the two words “I’m pregnant.” But “her rational argument was designed to appeal to the mind, and in that moment Amnon was not thinking with his mind.”[[406]](#footnote-406) Amnon’s not being open to persuasion raises more sharply the question whether in any sense his feeling for Tamar was actually love. “He was too strong for her and overpowered her and laid her” (13:14). The question about his supposed “love” is underlined when he then “repudiates” her (*śānē’*; 13:15). This word is the antithesis of the word for love; whereas it is conventionally translated “hate,” it is also an attitude and action word as much as an emotional one. It is thus expressed in sending her off (*šālaḥ* piel, the word for divorce), which she sees as an even more profoundly dire action than raping her. She is quite incoherent about it: “No, the cause . . . . This big dire thing . . . . More than the other thing that you did with me, sending me off . . . ” (13:16). After having sex with her, he would be morally and socially obliged to marry her, not send her off (Exod 22:16 [15]; Deut 22:28-30). He won’t even do the right thing in that sense. Thus she is desolate (*šāmēm*; 13:20), someone abandoned and left on her own like a town that has been attacked, conquered, devastated, and depopulated, with a desolation a little like Michal’s childlessness.[[407]](#footnote-407) Crying out (*zā‘aq*), shouting something like “rape!” or “woe” or “somebody do something”[[408]](#footnote-408) as she walks, she goes backto the house she apparently shares with her full brother Absalom.

Tamar’s story anticipates the way rape still works.

* Tamar was sexually assaulted, not by a stranger, but by someone she knew.
* The violation took place not in a dark alley or in a desolate park, but by a member of her own family in his home.
* Tamar was exploited through one of her most vulnerable traits—her kindness and her upbringing to take care of the other.
* Tamar said no; her no was not respected.
* When Tamar sought help, she was told to keep quiet.
* The process for achieving justice and restitution was taken out of her hands entirely and carried forward by her brother—it became men's business.
* In the end, it was her perpetrator for whom her father mourned, not her.
* The end of Tamar's story happens without her.[[409]](#footnote-409)

When she gets home, Absalom tells her to keep quiet and not set her mind on the thing for now (13:20), but his words hint that this urging will not be the end of the matter, and Jonadab will later tell David that Absalom is plotting action over the next two years (13:23-36). On hearing of the rape, David is very angry (13:21), but he doesn’t do anything. Nor does Yahweh send someone, as he sent Nathan.[[410]](#footnote-410) But two years later, when no one would still be suspecting him, Absalom has Amnon killed. In the execution of this event, “David is . . . set up as an accomplice to the murder of his son, just as Amnon had previously set him up to be an accomplice to Tamar’s rape.”[[411]](#footnote-411) Perhaps Absalom maneuvers David into taking the action he should have taken anyway, like the other Tamar in relation to David’s ancestor Judah (Gen 38).

Absalom flees and takes refuge with his grandfather (13:37). Knowing that David’s mind was on Absalom (though the implications of that statement are unclear),[[412]](#footnote-412) Joab gets a smart woman (the second time the adjective occurs in Samuel) to tell David another parable, about someone killing his brother. The recurrent expression “put words in her mouth” means telling her the kind of thing to say (e.g., Ezra 8:17); her skill means she can formulate the words, as is required by the conversation in which she keeps interrupting the king.[[413]](#footnote-413) If anything, “she shows that she might have been trained by Abigail,”[[414]](#footnote-414) who was not described as “smart” but was “good in her insight” (25:3). The parable again portrays a situation that requires the king to take action, in this case restraining an executioner (whose action would be quite proper; to speak in terms of “blood-revenge” gives a misleading impression). Again David fails to see that the parable is about him in a more personal sense, that he is colluding with a sort-of execution in the form of Absalom’s self-imposed banishment. You’re smart, too, the woman tells David. If only he had been. “Just as her phony widowhood duped David, her flattery obstructs David from interrogating her further. She is indeed wise.”[[415]](#footnote-415)

David gets Absalom brought back, but confines him to his own house, but then has him brought back to see David after two more years. He bows to the ground before David, and David hugs him.

## The Sword Never Departs

While the story of Tamar has a significance in its own right, it starts with Absalom and with a reference to Tamar as his sister, and it leads directly into the account of Absalom’s coup that occupies 2 Samuel 15 – 20. “David's strategically motivated marriages have resulted in numerous offspring, initially symbols of his power, who become a gravely destabilizing force.”[[416]](#footnote-416) The Tamar story has portrayed the enormity of Amnon’s wrongdoing, Tamar’s suffering and loss, Absalom’s hardnosed cunning, Joab’s manipulative shrewdness, and David’s simple-minded naivety. “The bitterness of David's tragedy is that he not only cannot spare his children misery, but he even plays an unwitting role in the tragic fates they suffer.”[[417]](#footnote-417) He doesn’t know what to do, and Joab wants to get a grip of the situation.[[418]](#footnote-418) The narrative hasn’t necessarily implied that Absalom acted outrageously. Given David’s softness, he might seem to have taken proper redress on Amnon. Nevertheless, “if the death of Bathsheba’s firstborn to David began the fulfillment of Nathan’s dark prophecy, the actions of Amnon and Absalom brought it to a full flowering that would ultimately bear even more bitter fruit in Absalom’s revolt.”[[419]](#footnote-419) The account of his popularity and further ruthlessness (14:25-33) especially forms background to what will follow. The narrative thus hints that Absalom’s restoration will not be the end of the story, as 11:1 – 12:31 hinted that the death and birth of the two sons would not be the end of its story. Perhaps even “David’s failure to address the rape of Tamar and his unwillingness to acknowledge the justice of Absalom in executing Amnon for this crime were the chief factors that pushed Absalom to the point of usurping his father’s throne.”[[420]](#footnote-420) It’s questionable whether Joab was acting in David’s interests or in Israel’s, and whether the woman was being smart with Joab’s message, like Nathan. She/he says David is acting against the people and she/he is doing the opposite – and they love Absalom and thus would agree (14:25-27). Joab is always problematic in the way he “serves” David.

The narrative goes on to portray the fulfillment of Nathan’s threat that dire trouble would arise out of his own household, that someone else would bed his wives, and that a sword would be whirling through his household, for all time (*‘ad-‘ôlām*; 12:10-11). The story of Tamar and Amnon has not referred to Yahweh’s activity (though the smart woman and David speak of him); although it has points of comparison and contrast with 1 Samuel 25, this lack of reference to Yahweh is one of the contrasts (see especially 25:38).[[421]](#footnote-421) In the chapters that follow, Yahweh does not need to intervene to make things happen, as he did to bring Saul to the throne and David to the throne. Things happen by the natural course of events as human beings (especially Absalom) make their decisions. Does trouble regularly arise naturally – it is grace that needs divine intervention?

“David is ultimately decrowned by Absalom.” In Samuel as a whole, “as a dialogic hero, David is crowned and decrowned.”[[422]](#footnote-422) It is impossible to make coherent sense of his successive attitudes after Absalom’s return and then in light of his coup. There is negligent administration of justice, if Absalom’s insinuations are justified (15:1-6). There is careless ingenuousness that suggests David is affected by “middle-aged torpor”[[423]](#footnote-423) when Absalom is taking Yahweh’s name in vain (15:7-12). There is panicked disarray and retreat that involves David’s leaving his wives behind for Absalom, unwisely and coldly (15:13-18). There is generous concern for a Gittite (15:19-23). There is tentative hopefulness in Yahweh and prayerful calculation, both hinting that David still has something of his old trust in Yahweh (15:24-37). There is unquestioning credulity (16:1-4). There is charitable forbearance with someone who sees him as guilty for the death of the various members of Saul’s household who have lost their lives in connection with David’s becoming king (16:5-14).

In contrast, Absalom’s actions manifest a coherent but ineffective logic. Things begin with his ongoing preparing of the way (15:2-6),[[424]](#footnote-424) then he asks if he may go to Hebron to fulfill a vow (15:7-12) – but that rationale is “padding.”[[425]](#footnote-425) He accepts the support of his father’s aide, Hushai, who is actually a spy (16:15-19). He consults a renowned adviser who bids him publicly bed his father’s wives and formulates a smart plan to kill David that gives himself a key role (16:20 – 17:4), but follows the bad advice of the aide who gives Absalom himself a prominent role but is secretly still supporting David and is a more skilled persuader (17:5-14).[[426]](#footnote-426) He uncovers an intelligence operation, but fails to silence it and loses impetus, while the smart adviser hangs himself in anticipation of events confirming the wisdom of his rejected plan (17:15-23). He leads a huge force in pursuit of David across the Jordan, but loyalists provision David’s company and David regroups (17:24-29). When David proposes to lead his forces out in battle and they urge him to leave it to them, David bids his commanders spare Absalom, but they take no notice, defeat Absalom’s forces, and kill Absalom himself (18:1-15). He had set up a monolith for himself near Jerusalem for his burial, but the troops bury him in the forest under a heap of stones (18:16-18).

David still doesn’t know what he’s doing. He’s so distraught about Absalom that he threatens to demoralize the troops (18:19 – 19:8a [9a]). He gets the Judahites (who had presumably supported Absalom) to conduct him back across the Jordan but sacks Joab in favor of Abner and thereby signs Abner’s death warrant (19:8b-15 [9b-16]). He pardons Shimei (19:16-23 [17-24]), operating by Prov 26:4-5,[[427]](#footnote-427) though Shimei would be wise to read the small print in the pardon (see 1 Kgs 2:8-9). He throws up his hands over Ziba and Mephibosheth in a way that has still not resolved the questions about what had actually happened (19:24-30 [25-31]).[[428]](#footnote-428) He expresses his appreciation to Barzillai for his provisions (19:31-40 [32-41) and is then faced with conflict and rivalry between Judah and the northern clans (19:41 [42] – 20:2). He sequesters the wives he had unwittingly surrendered to Absalom, commissions Abner to deal with the northern clans’ rebellion under Shebna, then panics and intervenes in a way that leads to Abner’s death but does issue in Joab sorting out Shebna with the help of another smart woman who doesn’t mind causing some violence (20:3-22).

The narrative from 13:1 to 20:26 makes many references to Yahweh and includes many statements that people attribute to Yahweh, but in themselves the chapters’ meaning is “more than usually elusive.”[[429]](#footnote-429) It is on the basis of what precedes that one can see the narrative as describing how David pays “the wages of sin.”[[430]](#footnote-430) And everything in the sorry story is humanly explicable. It issues from decisions and actions that are intelligible in light of who the people are.

There is one crucial exception, the decision by Absalom and his forces to follow Hushai’s plan rather than Ahithophel’s. Arguably, the very fact that Absalom was asking his staff for advice is cause for concern. “A plan of Ahithophel’s that he gave, in those days, was like when one would ask for a word of God – so was every plan of Ahithophel both for David and for Absalom” (16:23). Actually we haven’t ever heard of David asking for a plan, but we have often heard of him asking for a word from Yahweh (e.g., 2:1; 5:19, 23), which was how to discover the wise thing to do. There’s been no talk of counsel or counselors before Absalom’s coup. Sayings such as Prov 20:18 do commend the taking of counsel,[[431]](#footnote-431) but this narrative half-implies that “the very introduction of the practice of royal counsel, like the introduction of royalty itself, contaminated Israel and turned its Yahwistic spirit into foolishness.”[[432]](#footnote-432) And only in connection with this one decision does the narrative report that Yahweh did something, commanding the nullification of Ahithophel’s battle advice (17:14). Ahithophel’s plan was “good.” Perhaps it was obviously good and it is therefore a mystery why Absalom turned it down, or perhaps Hushai had massaged his ego, or perhaps only the way things worked out showed that it would have been a good plan. With hindsight, at least, rejecting it did not make sense, and this mistake is the turning point in the narrative. The making of this decision is the one point when Yahweh intervenes, answering David’s prayer (15:31).

Why would Yahweh so act in order to deliver David and bring a “dire fate” on Absalom, which in light of events likely implies bringing about his death?[[433]](#footnote-433) Once more, it was not because David was a better or wiser man than Absalom, any more than he had been a better or wiser man than Saul. He was simply the man after Yahweh’s heart, the man Yahweh had decided to use. Presumably Yahweh could have chosen to intervene to stop Absalom’s coup at some earlier point, but he had already decided not to do so but to let the sword have its way, and no one urges him to relent over that decision. He has already concluded that “something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”[[434]](#footnote-434) As had happened with Eli’s priesthood and Saul’s monarchy, and will in due course happen with Ephraim and with Judah, there can come a time when Yahweh says, “That’s it,” and lets events take their natural course. All Yahweh does is watch. Perhaps that fact links with Samuel’s holding back from condemning Ahithophel for taking his own life, as it did not condemn Saul, and nor will the Gospels condemn Judas. They were acts of self-assertion illustrative of regular human self-assertion rather than being the acts of distinctively wicked people.[[435]](#footnote-435)

A summary of David’s administration, restating an earlier one from happier times (8:15-18), brings 2 Samuel 13 – 20 to a close (20:23-25).

## A Famine and an Epidemic

At some point in David’s reign, there was a famine (21:1). Actually there likely were a number; the vagaries of Middle Eastern rainfall mean failure of the harvest from time to time. And generally the First Testament’s accounts of famine treat it as “just one of those things,” like the famines that affected the families of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Elimelech and caused them to migrate (Gen 12:10; 26:1; 42:5; Ruth 1:1). These stories show that people do not take a famine as an indication that God is angry. But this famine goes on for three years, and David therefore asks Yahweh what is going on. Literally he “inquired of Yahweh’s face” as one inquires of a king’s face (1 Kgs 10:24); the expression suggests going to the sanctuary rather than consulting Urim and Thummim.

The answer is that there is bloodshed (*dāmîm*, literally “bloods”), “bloodguilt,” hanging over from the reign of Saul. Saul had apparently slaughtered some Gibeonites, breaking the Israelites’ promise to spare them (Josh 9). David asks the Gibeonites how to put things right, how to make expiation (*kāpar* piel), the verb’s only occurrence in Samuel. It suggests cleansing or eliminating something that stands as an obstacle between two parties, usually Israel and Yahweh, but sometimes two human parties (Gen 32:20 [21]; Prov 16:14), which could make sense here. In effect the Gibeonites say they believe in capital punishment (cf. Num 35:30-34).[[436]](#footnote-436) They want to see seven of Saul’s sons killed in compensation for the Gibeonite deaths and to level things out, on the implicit basis that the king’s entire household shares in responsibility for the king’s actions as it shares in the privileges of belonging to his household. And/or, execution is the recognized consequence of breaking a solemn pledge, as the pledge-making ceremony suggests (Gen 15:10-18; Jer 34:18).[[437]](#footnote-437) They say they want to execute the men “for Yahweh,” though the narrative says they execute them “before Yahweh” (21:6, 9).[[438]](#footnote-438)

David agrees. The narrative does not comment on whether he was wise or whether he might have gone back for a further consultation with Yahweh;[[439]](#footnote-439) the story is a little reminiscent (ironically) of the story of Saul and Jonathan that almost issued in Jonathan’s death (1 Sam 14) and of other unwise promises such as Jephthah’s (Judg 11). But perhaps David the powerful king was right not to refuse redress to people who had been treated in the way the Gibeonites had been treated.[[440]](#footnote-440)

The story is at least as interested in the aftermath. One of the mothers of the dead men is Rizpah, already (allegedly) the victim of Abner’s political sex act (3:7). She takes action to stop the vultures attacking the bodies of the victims, so that in due course they can be properly buried and find their rest. While David is the person who has all the political and judicial power in this situation, as the mother of some of these young men, Rizpah has some moral power.[[441]](#footnote-441) “Emotionally and dramatically, Rizpah commands the center of this story . . . . Her defiance of convention sets her apart from and above the world in which she suffers.”[[442]](#footnote-442) “Although Rizpah’s protest, unlike Antigone’s, is silent, it is not without its own literary eloquence . . . . impassioned pleas and angry outbursts would lessen the impact of the story and detract our attention from the act itself. Silence gives Rizpah a preternatural magnitude and underscores the gravity of the ritual she performs.”[[443]](#footnote-443) Her action leads David not only to collect up the men’s remains but to fetch the remains of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh-gilead and bury them all in Saul’s family tomb. And it is after she has taken her action and inspired David to take his action (not just after the executions) that “God let himself be petitioned (‘*ātar* niphal) for the country” in connection with the famine (21:14).[[444]](#footnote-444) Thus “Second Samuel 21:1-14 brings to a close the chain of tragic events which has beset the house of Saul.”[[445]](#footnote-445) The story has “brought to a conclusion the contorted relationship between David and Saul.”[[446]](#footnote-446)

Finally in Samuel, there is another famine. “Yahweh’s anger again flared against Israel and he incited David against them: ‘Go count Israel and Judah’” (24:1). If the famine was Saul’s fault, this one is David’s, but Yahweh is angry with Israel as a whole. Although it is David who makes the mistake of commissioning the census, it is the people who are already destined to be Yahweh’s victims.[[447]](#footnote-447) Perhaps there was a reason, as on the previous occasion when Yahweh’s anger flared (6:7), and on the occasion of the previous famine (21:1), though that story did not refer to Yahweh being angry. Perhaps the event was even more mysterious than that previous occasion (cf. the great wrath in 2 Kgs 3:27). “I don’t know why,” says Rashi.[[448]](#footnote-448) If there was a reason, Samuel doesn’t reveal it (once again, who says narrators are omniscient?). “Honest readers of the Bible spend much of their time scratching their heads” and need to be content to stay that way rather than inventing answers to their questions.[[449]](#footnote-449) Or perhaps the anger followed on the census, as 1 Chronicles 21 infers.

David himself has already spoken of Yahweh “inciting” someone (*sût* hiphil) – on the earlier occasion, of Yahweh inciting Saul to pursue him (1 Sam 26:19). Inciting suggests putting into someone else’s head the idea of doing something that is at least surprising and quite likely dire in some way (e.g., Deut 13:6 [7]; Josh 15:18; 1 Kgs 21:25; 2 Kgs 18:32; Jer 38:22). Elsewhere Yahweh speaks of an adversary (a *śāṭān*) inciting him to send trouble to Job for no reason (2:3), and 1 Chr 21:1 sees such an adversary behind the inciting of David. “There is less theological distance between these two forms of the introduction to this narrative than most commentators suggest;” the adversary was not independent of Yahweh.[[450]](#footnote-450) Inciting overlaps with the idea of toughening someone’s mind (“hardening their heart”) in Exodus, encouraging them to do something dire.

Everyone knows that counting things is a bad idea: it suggests pride[[451]](#footnote-451) and/or reliance on resources rather than Yahweh,[[452]](#footnote-452) and/or it facilitates collection of taxes or conscription into the military. Even Joab, bless him, knows it, but he can’t dissuade David, and David’s insistence shows that Yahweh must be mysteriously at work. But afterwards, David’s conscience (literally, his heart) struck him down, as happened once before (1 Sam 24:5 [6]), and he acknowledged it to Yahweh in terms that featured in connection with Nathan and Uriah, “I have done very wrong . . . . Please make your servant’s waywardness pass on,” and that featured in connection with Samuel and Saul, “I’ve been stupid” (1 Sam 13:13). Once again Yahweh will not simply make the waywardness go away, but he allows David to choose the consequence: famine, defeat, or epidemic. “Let us please fall into/by [*bə*]Yahweh’s hand, because his compassion is plenteous” (2 Sam 24:14). It’s a brave choice, because Yahweh’s hand is the means whereby he brings calamity (cf. 24:16-17); it is not in itself a safe place (compare the hands in 21:9, 22). “It’s a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31).[[453]](#footnote-453) An epidemic follows in which thousands die, and Yahweh’s aide threatens to destroy Jerusalem, until Yahweh says, “Stop.” It is the only appearance of such an aide (*mal’āk*) in Samuel; such figures are members of Yahweh’s supernatural entourage and work force, like the adversary in Job and Chronicles, implement decisions of the heavenly cabinet.

David is standing by a Jebusite threshing floor, and Yahweh bids him erect an altar there for the offering of sacrifice. A Middle Eastern king cannot simply appropriate land, so David buys it from Araunah.[[454]](#footnote-454) And this location is where Solomon will build the temple. That’s another story, but here the motifmakes this narrative an apt close to Samuel and teaser for Kings, as 1 Chr 22:1 makes explicit. Once again, Yahweh “let himself be petitioned for the country” (cf. 21:14), and the action of Araunah and David leads to Yahweh’s answering prayer as the action of David and Rizpah led to it previously. In a sense, Araunah plays Rizpah’s role.[[455]](#footnote-455) As Hannah’s psalm almost began Samuel with some unrealistic declarations about Yahweh’s involvement with ordinary people, the stories of Rizpah and Araunah almost end Samuel with stories that illustrate Hannah’s theology. The nature of narrative is not to say that God always acts that way but to say that he sometimes does and that these acts are clues to the true nature of his relationship with his people and with the world.

## The God of David

Whereas Yahweh acts in unpredictable ways in the two stories in 2 Samuel 21 – 24,[[456]](#footnote-456) the two poems at the center of the chapters affirm the logic and consistency of his acts. They, too, link with Hannah’s psalm of thanksgiving, which almost started Samuel yet did not relate very specifically to her own life but to Yahweh’s relationship with Israel and his commitment to “his anointed.” Samuel almost ends with a psalm of thanksgiving on the lips of David that does not relate very specifically to his life but to Yahweh’s relationship with Israel, though also to his commitment to “his anointed” (2 Sam 22:1-51, a variant of Ps 18). It is a testimony to put on the lips of a king, like other such testimonies in the Psalms. As a more general affirmation about Yahweh’s dealings with Israel it might be an encouragement (e.g.) after 587 to people invited to trust that Yahweh will deliver them if they start being faithful people. Such an affirmation of “the traditional theological system”[[457]](#footnote-457) might be welcome. Or, “‘while your experience of God may be as capricious as the events in this book, your hope, however, must be grounded in the God of these Songs of Hannah and David.’”[[458]](#footnote-458) It works well as a synagogue lection during Passover, when one could see the reference to the sea as an allusion to the deliverance at the Red Sea, see the faithfulness as Israel’s faithfulness in the wilderness, and see the refractory one as Pharaoh (22:16, 27).[[459]](#footnote-459)

It has been interpreted as evidence that David was self-deceived, with the implication that it needs to be read ironically. Indeed, heard on David’s lips, it raises questions parallel to the hearing of Psalm 51 on his lips, or of Psalm 72 on Solomon’s. Really, David? But as David’s testimony, summing up his experience of Yahweh’s faithfulness and deliverance, its statements about his own unwavering faithfulness might be read as antedating the wrongdoing with Bathsheba and Uriah. It would then make sense coming from the time just after Saul’s death; it does refer to his being rescued from Saul (v. 1) and his faithfulness in that context (1 Sam 24 – 26).[[460]](#footnote-460) And/or it might imply that this wrongdoing was the great exception that doesn’t disprove the psalm’s general statements (cf. 1 Kgs 15:5).[[461]](#footnote-461) Subsequent positive comments about David (e.g., 2 Kgs 18:3; 22:2) may treat David as a model of faithfulness to Yahweh even if he was not a model of righteousness; English translations are misleading in using the word “righteousness.”

The psalm begins plausibly in this connection, as testifying to Yahweh’s delivering him from all his enemies, and specifically Saul. Yahweh is a cliff, a fastness, a means of escape, a crag, a refuge, a peak, a means of deliverance, a haven, a refuge, a deliverer from violence (22:2-3). The complex of images (parallel to but much more extensive than Hannah’s) suggests that David or Israel is a bird that needs to escape from a hunter or from a wild animal, and that Yahweh is a high ledge in a rock face onto which it can flit and find safety. No hunter or animal can reach it there. Thus one can call on Yahweh and find deliverance.

This psalm is more overtly a thanksgiving or testimony than Hannah’s; it now makes a transition to speaking in the past tense of what Yahweh has done. That opening praise is the truth about Yahweh that Samuel has illustrated in connection with Israel and with David. The psalm also switches to another metaphor to describe a predicament: I was drowning and about to be overwhelmed by death’s torrents. It is a complication that the psalm then varies over the use of qatal and wayyiqtol verbs or yiqtols, so one cannot be sure when it refers to a past event and when it makes a generalization. At this point, however, it seems to declares that, threatened by death, I called out from the depths of the sea, and Yahweh listened from his palace in the heavens. He took action, which the psalm describes in yet other metaphorical terms, as one thundering from the heavens. He plucked me out of the overwhelming water and deposited me on land. It is also at this point that the psalm makes a move to statements that raise eyebrows about David or Israel, so the transition to yiqtol verbs is fortuitous.

Yahweh recompenses/will recompense me in accordance with my faithfulness (*ṣədāqâ*),

in accordance with the cleanness of my hands he makes/will make things return for me

Because I have kept Yahweh’s ways

and not been faithless (*rāša‘*) in relation to my God . . . .

With the committed (*ḥāsîd*) you show yourself committed

with the upright (*tāmîm*)warrior you show yourself upright.

With the pure you show yourself pure,

with the refractory you show refractoriness. (22:21-22, 26-27)

It’s just possible to take David’s “because” statements as meaning something like “insofar as” and not quite claiming to have been obedient, faithful, and so on. One would have to make the same assumption about Israel, in a way that fitted the promises and warnings of the Torah and the arguments of the Psalms. It would still make for a tension with Samuel as a whole, where there has been no tight relationship between Israel’s faithfulness or David’s faithfulness and Yahweh’s faithfulness. While Yahweh sometimes brings calamity on David or on Israel that results from their faithlessness, over the long haul it is despite their faithlessness that he continues to be faithful. His commitment to Israel and to David continues because of who he is not because of who they are, and because of his purpose not because of their cooperation with his purpose. But the apparent implausibility of the statements increases as a result of the Septuagint’s using a word meaning “blameless” where I have “upright,” for the word *tāmim* which more literally means “whole” with the implication of “wholly committed”; some English translations follow. This integrity of commitment means that “all is in order between God and man.”[[462]](#footnote-462) But “blameless” suggests the absence of any failure, which is more than the word claims. The word recurs as a description of Yahweh:

God is upright in his way,

Yahweh’s word is [silver] refined.

He is a shield to everyone,

people who take refuge in him.

Because who is God apart from Yahweh,

and who is a crag except our God? (22:31-32)

“David’s last words” (23:1-7) restate this understanding of Yahweh, David, and Israel, again describing David as “the anointed of the God of Jacob.” And like Hannah, David speaks like a prophet (23:2-3). It is the only passage apart from the account of David’s original anointing (1 Sam 16:13) that associates the spirit of Yahweh with David. Either David himself, or someone on his behalf, describes what he needs to be committed to being, in a way that again recalls the vision for kingship in Psalm 72.

One who rules over people as a faithful person,

rules in awe of God,

And is like the light of morning when the sun rises,

a morning that has no clouds:

From sunshine and from rain

there’s growth from the earth.

My household is like this with God, isn’t it,

because he has set up a pledge for all time for me . . . .

But the scoundrel is like a thistle,

thrown away, all of them.

“The election of a man is that in spite of himself God makes this kind of man a witness to His will, the will of His grace. Election stands or falls with that which God purposes and will effect and accomplish with him, and on this very account it can only stand and not fall.”[[463]](#footnote-463) So it is with Israel, and with David.

# Samuel in Its Theological Context in the Scriptures

The theology of Samuel is set in a series of contexts within the Scriptures. The works with which one can see points of comparison and contrast share the assumption that Yahweh is the only God and that lesser deities do not really deserve the designation God, and that Yahweh has made a distinctive commitment to Israel. Some of the points of comparison and contrast point to possible ongoing significances of Samuel.

Samuel leads into Kings, and both works assume that kings are integral to the life of Israel and to Yahweh’s working with it. Both assume that in particular Yahweh made a commitment to the royal line of David and will be faithful to it. Both assume that kings go wrong in their relationship with Yahweh and in their lives. Both assume that Yahweh occasionally intervenes to keep Israel’s story on track. Both assume that prophets stand alongside kings, often in confrontation of them. Both see a particular sanctuary as integral to the nation’s life. Kings puts some emphasis on Moses’s Torah, which Samuel does not mention. It emphasizes the building of the Temple in Jerusalem and its role as (ideally) the sole location for the nation’s corporate worship. It emphasizes the importance of serving Yahweh rather than the traditional deities of Canaan, which is less of an issue in Samuel. It is less ambiguous about the propriety of kingship than Samuel and more ambiguous about the relationship of Judah and Ephraim. Indeed, Ephraim has a theological significance a little like that of Saul’s monarchy in Samuel: it ought never have existed but Yahweh is prepared to stay with it if it submit itself to him, but it does not do so.

Samuel links retrospectively with Joshua and Judges, and along with Kings it is thus part of “The Former Prophets.” Prophets make hardly any appearance in Joshua or Judges, but Joshua to Kings as a whole has a prophetic perspective on Israel’s story as it challenges Israel about its commitment to Yahweh and promises Yahweh’s involvement in taking it to the destiny he has in mind. The four works follow on from Deuteronomy, and this entire sequence has been seen as part of a Deuteronomistic History. Like Kings, Deuteronomy and Joshua emphasize the importance of Moses’s Torah, which we have noted Samuel does not mention. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 makes brief mention of kingship, speaking of Yahweh choosing Israel’s king as Samuel does, but it focuses more on Yahweh’s choosing a place of worship and choosing Israel as his people. Joshua, Judges, and Samuel have no equivalent to Deuteronomy’s stress on worship at the place Yahweh will choose to settle his name there. Judges compares with Samuel in suggesting some ambiguous reflection on kingship. A hero like Gideon refuses to rule over the people, and one of his sons dismisses the idea of kings, while another of his sons who aspires to be king is a murderer who pays for his wrongdoing with his life. On the other hand, Judges makes a link between there being no king in Israel and the moral, social, and religious disorder of the period it covers, and it lets this judgment lead into Samuel. LXX’s order has Ruth between Judges and Samuel and providing on one hand an alternative contrast and on the other an anticipatory parallel to the opening chapters of Samuel. The two books both offer instructive realistic visions of family, which in Samuel also offers a anticipatory contrast to the grim portrayal of Saul’s and David’s families.

Samuel also forms part of the broader work from Genesis to Kings, Israel’s “First History.” While Yahweh does not speak of making a pledge or covenant to David as he does to Abraham, there are parallels in the dynamic of the relationship between God and Abraham and that between God and David. God makes a commitment to both of them that emerges from his grace and purpose and not from some deserve of theirs, but God expects a responsive commitment from them so that the relationship becomes a mutual commitment. Conversely, the dynamics of the relationship in Exodus 32 – 34 between Yahweh’s commitment, his chastisement, and his relenting compare and contrast with the dynamics in Saul’s story and in David’s story. The dynamics of Yahweh’s delivering Israel from the Egyptians reappear in his delivering Israel from the Philistines. And Yahweh looks back positively to the subsequent time when he lived among the Israelites on the move.

Israel’s “Second History” comprises Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah; Chronicles retells the entire story covered by the First History. In particular, 1 Chronicles 10 – 29 retells the story in 1 Samuel 31 to 1 Kings 2, from the death of Saul through David’s life. If Joshua to Kings is a prophetic history, one might call Chronicles a priestly history in the sense that it focuses on the importance of the temple and in connection with David thus focuses on his role in planning and providing for its building. Whereas Samuel’s narrative centers on his activity in the world of battle, politics, and family life, in Chronicles such stories do not feature as the narrative centers on his activity in relation to the temple. This concentration also means it lacks reference to some of his wrongdoings and failures, though it does not exactly whitewash him; the census features (1 Chron 21) because it relates to the temple. That story illustrates how it does safeguard against some of the ambiguity in the portrait of Yahweh in Samuel. In 1 Chronicles 21 it is a supernatural adversary who gives David the idea of a census, not Yahweh himself.

The Psalms have a threefold connection with Chronicles and Samuel. The narrative introductions to twelve psalms make links with stories in Samuel; without Samuel, these links would be impossible. Conversely, 2 Samuel 22 is a variant on Psalm 18, Hannah’s song follows the form of a psalm, as less directly do David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan, and his “last words” (2 Sam 1; 23). Second, the Psalms thus draw readers’ attention to the David story as undergirding Yahweh’s relationship with them in the present, and invite them to take David’s relationship with Yahweh as a model for their relationship with Yahweh as ordinary Israelites. Third, the Psalms and Samuel are the great repositories of First Testament reference to Yahweh’s Anointed, Israel’s current king, as someone commissioned by Yahweh. Like the rest of the First Testament, individual psalms do not use the term to refer to a future king, though the collected Psalms may presuppose that reference. They do take up the hints in 2 Samuel 7 that Yahweh’s words about David’s offspring have implications for kings going beyond the promise that his own son be his immediate successor who will build the temple.

The Latter Prophets hardly refer to Yahweh’s Anointed, but Jeremiah’s reference to Yahweh’s indissoluble pledge with “my servant David” that he will have someone to ensure the exercise of faithful authority or right decision-making (*mišpāṭ ûṣədāqâ*) in the country (Jer 33:14-22) recalls 2 Sam 7:12-16; 8:15; 23:5. And one of the two undisputable New Testament references to Samuel, in Heb 1:5, quotes 2 Sam 7:14; there are also plausible allusions to that chapter in John 7:42; Acts 2:30; 2 Cor 6:18. The significance of 2 Samuel 7 in itself is that Yahweh really makes a commitment to David that invites his people’s response in the now and for the next generation, while Jeremiah and such New Testament references remind readers that Yahweh’s promise in that chapter will turn out to invite extending and reapplying. The other indisputable New Testament quotation from Samuel comes in Acts 13:22, referring to 1 Sam 13:14; there are also references to either 2 Sam 22 or Ps 18 in Rom 15:9 and Heb 2:13. In addition, the story of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Mary and of the births and early years of John the Baptizer and Jesus follow patterns from the story of Hannah and Samuel. Hebrews 11:32 regrets not having time to tell of Samuel and David, but its omission has not hindered readers from taking David as an example for a relationship with God and in connection with Western concern with leadership, but Samuel does not look as if it sets David forward as an example in either connection and interpretations of this kind have to be selective in their reading of David and read it with criteria that come from elsewhere.

One further link of substance rather than of words lies with Proverbs and Qohelet. Yahweh affirms that he honors people who honor him, while people who slight him get slighted (1 Sam 2:30). Faithful people find that their lives work out well; faithless people find that they do not. Eli’s family illustrate the first aspect to the principle; Nabal illustrates the second. Samuel thus affirms “the “traditional theological system”[[464]](#footnote-464) that underlies Proverbs (and Deuteronomy, and most other books in both Testaments). On the other hand, the stories in Samuel also illustrate the way this principle does not work out, in the lives of people such as Ahimelech, Jonathan, and Tamar (as most books in both Testaments also recognize). Things often turn out tragically for people, in a way that morally and religiously one cannot see why they should. This aspect of the reality of life underlies Qohelet, though it does not trouble Samuel as it does Qohelet. But like Qohelet, after all the toughness of its story Samuel lets the moviegoers leave the theater with a little encouragement. David sets up an altar where the temple will be built and offers whole offerings and well-being offerings, Yahweh let himself be petitioned for the country, and the epidemic ceases from Israel.

# Further Reading

I have not had access to a number of books on Samuel because of the pandemic in 2019, and omission of a book from this list may reflect that difficulty rather than my not recommending it. Actually Samuel parallels Job in being such a rich work that it’s hard to write a bad book on its literary and theological potential.

Alter, Robert. *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*. New York: Norton, 1999. Independent translation by Jewish literary scholar, with substantial notes.

Auld, A. Graeme. *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*. OTL. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011. Exegesis with a text-critical and redaction-critical focus.

Bodner, Keith and Benjamin J. M. Johnson, eds. *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*. LHBOTS 669. London: T & T Clark, 2020. Studies of individual characters.

Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox, 1990. Exposition with a focus on ideology, power, and psychology.

Chapman, Stephen B. *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016

Cooper, Derek, and Martin J. Lohrmann, ed. *1 – 2 Samuel, 1 – 2 Kings, 1 – 2 Chronicles*. Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 5. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016. Excerpts from Reformation and post-reformation authors.

Edelman, Diana Vikander. *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah.* JSOTSup 121. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991. Cross between a literary and historical study.

Eslinger, Lyle. *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1 – 12*. Sheffield: JSOT, 1985. Literary study focusing on the characters in the narrative and their interaction.

Firth, David G. *1 & 2 Samuel*. Apollos Old Testament Commentary 8. Nottingham: Apollos, 2009. Detailed exegetical commentary paying substantial attention to the way the story works.

Fokkelman, J. P. *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. Vol. 1. *King David (II Sam. 9. – 20 & 1 Kings 1 – 2)*. Assen: van Gorcum, 1981.

-- -- --. -- -- --. Vol. 2. *The Crossing Fates: I Sam. 13 – 31 & II Sam. 1).* Assen: van Gorcum, 1986.

-- -- --. -- -- --. Vol. 3. *Throne and City (II Sam. 2 – 8 & 21 – 24)*.Assen: van Gorcum, 1990.

-- -- --. -- -- --. Vol. 4. *Vow and Desire (I Sam. 1 – 12)*.Assen: van Gorcum, 1993.

Monumental detailed literary exposition.

Franke, John R. *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 4. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005. Excerpts from early Christian authors.

Goldingay, John. *Men Behaving Badly*. Reprinted Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021. Exposition looking at the male characters.

Green, Barbara. *How Are the Mighty Fallen: A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel.* JSOTSup 365. London: Sheffield Academic, 2003. Application of Mikhail Bakhtin’s “dialogical” approach to narrative.

Gunn, David M. *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story*. JSOTSup 14. Reprinted Sheffield: JSOT, 1989. Literary study considering Saul as a tragic figure.

Hertzberg, H. W. *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*. OTL. London: SCM, 1964. Classic theological and exegetical commentary.

Jobling, David. *1 Samuel*. Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998. Thematic literary study taking a structuralist approach.

McCarter, P. Kyle. *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*. AB 8. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980.

———. *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*. AB 9. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984.

A substantial pair of commentaries with detailed treatment of textual and redactional questions.

Miscall, Peter D. *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. Literary study emphasizing ambiguity in the text.

Morrison, Craig E. *2 Samuel*. Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2013. Literary study making links with other literary works.

Murphy, Francesca Aran. *1 Samuel*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010. Theological commentary making links with systematical and historical theology.

Polzin, Robert. *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History*. Part Three: 2 Samuel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993

-- -- -- *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History*. Part Two: 1 Samuel. Reprinted Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Two studies focusing on the characters and teasing out ambiguities.

Rosenberg, A. J. *Samuel I.* ReprintedNew York: Judaica, 1984.

Sosevsky, Moshe C., and A. J. Rosenberg. *Samuel II.* New York: Judaica, 1989.

Both include translations of Rashi’s commentary and excerpts from other classic Jewish commentaries.

Tsumura, David Toshio. *The First Book of Samuel*. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

-- -- --. *The Second Book of Samuel*. NICOT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019.

Two exegetical and historical commentaries

Wijk-bos Johanna W. H. van. *A People and a Land 2: The Road to Kingship*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020.

-- -- -- *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary.* Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2011.

Two different literary and theological commentaries with feminist insights.

1. Stephen B. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1-2; Robert Alter’s title for his study is *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, e.g., David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Moshe Garsiel, “The Book of Samuel: Its Composition, Structure and Significance as a Historiographical Source,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 10/5 (2010); Andrew Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, Writings from the Ancient World 4 (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 161-248; Lester L. Grabbe, “Mighty Men of Israel: 1–2 Samuel and Historicity,” in W. Dietrich (ed.), *The Books of Samuel. Stories – History – Reception History*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 84 (Leuven: Peeters,2016), 83-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., Antony F. Campbell, *Of Prophets and Kings: A Late Ninth-Century Document (1 Samuel 1 – 2 Kings 10)*, CBQ Monograph Series 17 (Washington, DC: CBA, 1986); P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, A8 8 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 18-23; he emphasizes the northern background of the story. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, e.g., Richard D. Nelson, *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 18 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981; P. Kyle McCarter, “The Books of Samuel,” in Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham, ed., *The History of Israel's Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth*, JSOTSup 182 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 260-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to traditional critical theories, it then forms part of the Deuteronomistic History: on which see, e.g., Cynthia Edenburg and Juha Pakkala, ed., *Is Samuel Among the Deuteronomists? Current Views on the Place of Samuel in a Deuteronomistic History*, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 16 (Atlanta: SBL, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, e.g., Philippe Hugo and Adrian Schenker, ed*., Archaeology of the Books of Samuel: The Entangling of the Textual and Literary History*, VTSup 132 (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Philippe Hugo, "1–2 Kingdoms (1–2 Samuel)," in *The T & T Clark Companion to the Septuagint*, ed. James K. Aitken (London: T & T Clark, 2015), 127–146; Frank Moore Cross et al., *Qumran Cave 4.XII: 1 – 2 Samuel*, Discoveries in the Judaean Desert 17 (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005); Ariel Feldman, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Rewriting Samuel and Kings: Texts and Commentary*, BZAW 469 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, e.g., John Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Susan M. Pigott, “Wives, Witches and Wise Women: Prophetic Heralds of Kingship in 1 and 2 Samuel,” *Review and Expositor* 99 (2002): 145-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See further Rachelle Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel*, VTSup 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1964), 64; cf. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Marsha White, “The History of Saul’s Rise”: Saulide State Propaganda in 1 Samuel 1–14,” in

    Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley, *A Wise and Discerning Mind: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*, Brown Judaic Studies (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2020), 271-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See the survey in Michael Avioz, “The Literary Structure of the Books of Samuel: Setting the Stage for a Coherent Reading,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 16 (2017): 8-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See David G. Firth, “Some Reflections on Current Narrative Research on the Book of Samuel,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 10 (2019): 3-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Adapted from David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, “1 Samuel 1: A Sense of a Beginning,” *ZAW* 102 (1990): 33-48 (39). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel,* Vol. 4. *Vow and Desire (I Sam. 1 – 12)* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1993), 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. Gale A. Yee, “The Silenced Speak: Hannah, Mary, and Global Poverty,” *Feminist Theology* 21 (2012): 41-57 (42-47). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Randall C. Bailey, “The Redemption of Yhwh: A Literary Critical Function of the Songs of Hannah and David,” *BibInt* 3 (1995): 213-31 (217-19). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Francesca Aran Murphy, *1 Samuel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 4:99. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 2:947-1383 (980); cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 4:40. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Whether or not the poem is a later addition to the story, it is the product of a creative author (imagining what Hannah might appropriately be pictured as saying, like the account of conversations in 1 Sam 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Tg sees her as prophesying of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Augustine (*City of God* 17:4) sees her as looking beyond David to Jesus, in keeping with messianic interpretation in Liber antiquitatum biblicarum: see Hannes Bezzel, “Hannah’s Prayer(s) in 1 Samuel 1 – 2 and in Pseudo-Philo’s Liber antiquitatum biblicarum,” in *Prayers and the Construction of Israelite Identity*, ed. Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher and Maria Häusl (Atlanta: SBL, 2019), 147-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Francisco O. García-Treto, “A Mother's Paean, a Warrior's Dirge: Reflections on the Use of Poetic Inclusions in the Books of Samuel,” *Shofar* 11/2 (1993): 51-64 (56). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Leila L. Bronner, “Hannah’s Prayer: Rabbinic Ambivalence,” *Shofar* 17/2 (1999): 36-48 (43-44). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See April Westbrook, *“And He Will Take Your Daughters": Woman Story as Didactic Narrative in the Biblical Account of King David.* (Diss., Claremont, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Marti J. Steussy, “The Problematic God of Samuel,” in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw*, ed. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 127-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Joel Rosenberg, “I and 2 Samuel,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, ed., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 122-45 (123). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 4:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Carol L. Meyers, “Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?” *JBL* 133 (2014): 8-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 4:53. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Wayištaḥû* (missing in LXX and NRSV) can be understood as singular (Eli?) or plural. In v. 19 *wayištaḥăwû* was unambiguous, but Vg and Syr have a plural here and for the plural at Gen 43:28 K has *wyštḥw* and Q *wayištaḥăwû*. Tg has singular. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (revised ed., New York: Bantam, 2011), chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Koowon Kim, *Incubation as a Type-scene in the Aqhatu, Kirta, and Hannah Stories*, VTSup 145 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. David Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Solomon O. Ademiluka, “Interpreting the Hannah Narrative (1 Sm 1:1–20) in Light of the Attitude of the Church in Nigeria towards Childlessness,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40/1 (2019): 1-10 (4-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-bos, *A People and a Land 2: The Road to Kingship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Yung Suk Kim, “The Story of Hannah (1 Sam 1:1 – 2:11) from a Perspective of *Han*,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 4/2 (2008): 26.1-9 (26.1, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Joan E. Cook, *Hannah’s Desire, God’s Design: Early Interpretations of the Story of Hannah*, JSOTSup 282 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 49-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them* (London: DLT, 1985), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See Yairah Amit, “‘Am I Not More Devoted to You Than Ten Sons?’ (1 Samuel 1.8): Male and Female Interpretations,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Samuel-Kings* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 68-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Kim, *Incubation*,299. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Barbara Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen: A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel*, JSOTSup 365 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Johannes Bugenhagen, *Annotationes . . . in Deuteronomium. In Samuelem prophetam, id est, duos libros Regum* (Nuremberg: Petri, 1524), 187, as translated in Derek Cooper and Martin J. Lohrmann, ed., *1 – 2 Samuel, 1 – 2 Kings, 1 – 2 Chronicles*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016)*,* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Cook, *Hannah’s Desire*, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Lancelot Andrew[e]s, *Apospasmatia Sacra: Or A Collection of Posthumous and Orphan Lectures* (London: Moseley, 1657), 567; cf. Cooper and Lohrmann, *1 – 2 Samuel*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Jenni Williams, “Hannah: A Woman Deeply Troubled,” in Keith Bodner and Benjamin J. M. Johnson, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*, LHBOTS 669 (London: T & T Clark, 2020), 42-58 (56). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7:7 (cf. John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 4 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005], 199). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. John Chrysostom, commenting on Eph 6:18, *Homilies on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians,* Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers XIII (reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, no date), 170 (cf. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, 197). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Jobling, *1 Samuel* 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Tsumura, *First Book of Samuel*, 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. LXX, 4QSama refer to his being someone “consecrated” and mention abstaining from alcohol. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. John Chrysostom, *Sermones V de Anna*, Patrologia Graeca 54, 631-76 (658); cf. Robert C. Hill, “St. John Chrysostom’s Homilies on Hannah,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 45 (2011): 319-38 (328). Hill notes that Chrysostom does not imply that Hannah is an example only for women. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. John Chrysostom, *Old Testament Homilies* Volume 1 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003), 2 (as quoted in Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, 199). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Rosenberg, “I and 2 Samuel,”124. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. LXX and Vg take *yittēn* as jussive rather than yiqtol, but this makes less sense in the context. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. CEB’s “give back/given” is as near as one can get with a translation; contrast KJV “lend/lent.” [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Serge Frolov, *The Turn of the Cycle: 1 Samuel 1 – 8 in Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives*, BZAW 342 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 102-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. More explicitly “slighting God,” if MT’s text includes a tiqqun sopherim, censoring the direct reference to slighting God; seeCarmel McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim and Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament,* Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 36 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1981), 77-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Marvin A. Sweeney, “Eli: A High Priest Thrown under the Ox Cart,” in Bodner and Johnson, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*, 59-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 4:142. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Cf. A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (A8 8; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Uriel Simon, “Samuel's Call to Prophecy: Form Criticism with Close Reading,” *Prooftexts* 1 (1981): 119-32 (128). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-bos, *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2011), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History. Part Two: 1 Samuel* (reprinted Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 49; Marvin A. Sweeney, “Samuel’s Institutional Identity in the Deuteronomistic History,” in Lester L. Grabbe and Martti Nissinen, ed., *Constructs of Prophecy in the Former and Latter Prophets and Other Texts*, Ancient Near East Monographs 4 (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 165-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Mark Leuchter, *Samuel and the Shaping of Tradition*, Biblical Reconfigurations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), gives one chapter to each of these roles. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Marti J. Steussy notes that readings of the story normally stops before we get to that bit (*Samuel and His God*, Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament [Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010], 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. So Rashi and more explicitly Qimchi in *miqrā’ôt gәdôlôt*. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 4:190. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC 10 (second ed., Nashville: Nelson, 2008), 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. LXX has an extra sentence explaining that the Philistines started the conflict (cf. NRSV). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986),38-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Cf. David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 8 (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen*, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 4:201. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Lyle Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1 – 12*, Bible and Literature Series 10 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Polzin, *Samuel*, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Israel Finkelstein (ed.), “Excavations at Shiloh 1981-1984: Preliminary Report,” *Tel Aviv* 12 (1985): 123-80 (173). [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. van Wijk-bos, *Reading Samuel*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Polzin, *Samuel*, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Antony F. Campbell, *1 Samuel* (FOTL 7; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis*, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. See the section above on “Prayer and Promise.” [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Rosenberg, “I and 2 Samuel,” 125-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. But the expression is odd, and KJV follows Tg, Vg in making the last clause, “are after…” (which is unique as an alternative to “go after” Yahweh) the apodosis. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis*, 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 4:532. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Viktorin Strigel, *Libri Samuelis, Regum et Paralipomenon*, 41; cf. Cooper and Lohrmann, *1 – 2 Samuel,* 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Michael Widmer, *Standing in the Breach: An Old Testament Theology and Spirituality of Intercessory Prayer* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 202-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Lyle Eslinger, *Into the Hands of the Living God*, JSOTSup 84 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*: *A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM, 1964), 97, following Martin Noth. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Rachelle Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel*, VTSup 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2011) 187, 194, 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 2, 4, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. J. G. McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An* *Old Testament Political Theology Genesis-Kings*, LHBOTS 454 (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. V. Philipps Long, *I & II Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), Introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1 (reprinted London: T & T Clark, 2010), 438. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Van Wijk-bos, *Reading Samuel*, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Jerry Hwang, “Yahweh’s Poetic *Mishpat* in Israel’s Kingship,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 (2011): 341-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 98-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Marcel V. Măcelaru, “Israel in Transition: Liminality and Status Change In 1 Samuel 8 – 15,” in *Bible, Culture, Society*, ed. Corneliu Constantineanu and Marcel V. Măcelaru (Osijek: Evanđeoski teološki fakultet, 2009), 39-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Rosenberg, “I and 2 Samuel,” 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Barbara Green, *David’s Capacity for Compassion: A Literary-Hermeneutical Study of 1–2 Samuel* (LHBOTS 641; London: T & T Clark, 2017), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Barth, *Dogmatics* III/1, 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Van Wijk-bos, *A People and a Land 2*, on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Birch, “First and Second Books of Samuel,” on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. See Gale A. Yee, “‘He Will Take the Best of Your Fields’: Royal Feasts and Rural Extraction,” *JBL* 136 (2017): 821-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Cf. McConville, *God and Earthly Power*, 138-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. See Jonathan Kaplan, “1 Samuel 8:11–18 as ‘A Mirror for Princes,’” *JBL* 131 (2012): 625-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Diana Vikander Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah* (JSOTSup 121; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Polzin, *Samuel*, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Augustine, “Letter 130,” in *Letters* (Washington: Catholic University of America, reprinted 2008) 2:376-401 (396); cf. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (AB 9; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Cf. G. F. Hasel, *TDOT* 9:199. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Cf. Eslinger, *1 Samuel*, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Rashi, in *miqrā’ôt gәdôlôt*. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Andrew Willet, *An Harmonie upon the First Booke of Samuel . . . .* (Cambridge: Greene, 1607), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Cf. Jeffrey L. Cooley, “The Story of Saul’s Election (1 Samuel 9 – 10) in the Light of Mantic Practice in Ancient Iraq,” *JBL* 130 (2011): 247-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. 4QSama gives a fuller version of the background: see NRSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Edelman, *King Saul*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. So Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Van Wijk-bos *Reading Samuel*, 153-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Cf. David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 8 (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Steven L. McKenzie, “Saul in the Deuteronomistic History,” in Carl S. Ehrlich with Marsha C. White, ed. *Saul in Story and Tradition* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 47; Tübingen: Mohr, 2006), 59-70 (59). [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1 (reprinted London: T & T Clark, 2010), 442, 443. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. The phrase is traditionally attributed to the Prussian general Carl von Clausowitz, though there is no record of his using the actual expression. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Cf. David Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 79-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel,* Vol. 2: *The Crossing Fates (I Sam. 13 – 31 & II Sam. 1)* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1986), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Diana Vikander Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah,* JSOTSup 121 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 79-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. So Bede, *In primam partem Samuhelis libri iv* 2:14, as quoted by John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 250-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Antony F. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, FOTL 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 2:947-1383, in his “Reflections” on 13:1-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History. Part Two: 1 Samuel* (reprinted Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 150, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. See, e.g., David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story*, JSOTSup 14 (reprinted Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 129, on “the dark side of God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. See, e.g., Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville: WJK, 2014), 193-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Cf. Francesca Aran Murphy’s comments on the approach of “the Western medieval Christian tradition” to this story (*1 Samuel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010], 133-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. C. L. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History*, BZAW 407 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. See, e.g., Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 194, 197, 198 [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. See, e.g., Avi Sagi, “The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 323-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Philip R. Davies, “Saul, Hebrew and Villain,” in Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, ed., *Remembering Biblical Figures in the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods: Social Memory and Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 131-40 (137-38). [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 2:87. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Cf. Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical* Ḥerem*: A Window in Israel’s Religious Experience*, Brown Judaic Studies 211 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 165-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Jean-Pierre Sonnet, “God’s Repentance and ‘False Starts’ in Biblical History (Genesis 6 – 9; Exodus 32- 34; 1 Samuel 15 and 2 Samuel 7),” in *Congress Volume Ljubljana 2007*, ed. André Lemaire, VTSup 133 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 469-94 (487). [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992) 1:112; as quoted in Derek Cooper and Martin J. Lohrmann, ed., *1 – 2 Samuel, 1 – 2 Kings, 1 – 2 Chronicles*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. For MT *yəšaqqēr*, 4QSama has *yšyb*; LXX “turn back” (cf. NRSV). [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 2:110. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (reprinted London: T & T Clark, 2010), 178, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Gunn, *Fate of King Saul*, 40, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Gunn, *Fate of King Saul*, 30, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), commenting on 15:11. Steven J. Duby has a careful study of anthropopathic or metaphorical approaches in “‘For I Am God, Not a Man’: Divine Repentance and the Creator-Creature Distinction, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 12 (2018): 149-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Benjamin J. M. Johnson, “Characterizing Chiastic Contradiction: Literary Structure, Divine Repentance, and Dialogical Biblical Theology in 1 Samuel 15:10–35,” in *Theology of the Hebrew Bible, Volume 1: Methodological Studies*,ed. Marvin A. Sweeney (Atlanta: SBL, 2019), 185-211 (206). [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Polzin, *Samuel*, 140-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-bos, *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2011), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Terence E. Fretheim, “Divine Foreknowledge, Divine Constancy, and the Rejection of Saul's Kingship,” *CBQ* 47 (1985): 595-602 (597-98). [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Edelman, *King Saul*, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Qimchi, in *miqrā’ôt gәdôlôt* on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Rashi, in *miqrā’ôt gәdôlôt* on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Lyle Eslinger, “‘A Change of Heart’: 1 Samuel 16,” in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, ed. Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor, JSOTSup 67 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1988), 341-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Joel Rosenberg, “I and 2 Samuel,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, ed., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 122-45 (128). [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Robert B. Chisholm, “Cracks in the Foundation: Ominous Signs in the David Narrative,” *Bibliotheca* *Sacra* 172 (2015 ): 154-76 (156). [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, “Narrative Coherence and Theological Intentionality in 1 Samuel 18,” *CBQ* 55 (1993): 225-43 (239-40). [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel,” in his comments on 18:1-30. He refers to David M. Gunn, "David and the Gift of the Kingdom (2 Sam 2 – 4, 9 – 20, 1 Kgs 1 – 2)," *Semeia* 3 (1975) 14-45; see further David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation*, JSOTSup 6 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Polzin, *Samuel*, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC 10 (second ed., Nashville: Nelson, 2008), 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Yairah Amit, “The Delicate Balance in the Image of Saul and Its Place in the Deuteronomistic History,” in Carl S. Ehrlich with Marsha C. White, ed. *Saul in Story and Tradition*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 47 (Tübingen: Mohr, 2006), 71-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Brueggemann, “Narrative Coherence,” 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. See the excerpt from Augustine’s Sermon 162A in John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 287-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 2:180; cf. Alter, *The David Story*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. See David J. A. Clines, “David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible,” in David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible,* JSOTSup 205 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 212-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. J. Richard Middleton, “The Battle Belongs to the Word: The Role of Theological Discourse in David’s Victory over Saul and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17,” in *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith: Studies in Honor of James H. Olthuis*, ed. James K.A. Smith and Henry Isaac Venema (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 109-31 (121). [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Murphy, *1 Samuel*,167. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Cf. Barbara Green, *David’s Capacity for Compassion: A Literary-Hermeneutical Study of 1–2 Samuel*, LHBOTS 641 (London: T & T Clark, 2017), 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. See P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel*, AB 8 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 281-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. *Homilies on Genesis 46 – 67*, Fathers of the Church 87 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1958), 11; and *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers I, 12(reprinted Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 393 (cf. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. See Jonathan Y. Rowe, *Sons or Lovers: An Interpretation of David and Jonathan’s Friendship*, LHBOTS 575 (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 102-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (revised ed., New York: Bantam, 2011), chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Malcolm Cohen, “The Transparency of King Saul,” *European Judaism* 39 (2006): 106-15 (106). [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Alter, *The David Story*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. *Treatise on the Priesthood* 1:8, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers I, 9(reprinted Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Keith Bodner and Ellen White, “Some Advantages of Recycling: The Jacob Cycle in a Later Environment,” *BibInt* 22 (2014): 20-33 (33). [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. See Jonathan Y. Rowe, *Michal’s Moral Dilemma: A Literary, Anthropological and Ethical Interpretation*, LHBOTS 533 (London: T & T Clark, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1993), 45, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 186, quoting from C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Cf. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 342; Rowe, *Sons or Lovers*, 129; Markus Zehnder, “Observations on the Relationship Between David and Jonathan and the Debate on Homosexuality,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 127–74; Randall C. Bailey, “Reading Backwards: A Narrative Technique for the Queering of David, Saul, and Samuel,” in Tod Linafelt et al., ed., *The Fate of King David: The Past and Present of Biblical Icon*, LHBOTS 500 (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 66-81; James E. Harding, *The Love of David and Jonathan: Ideology, Text, Reception* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Alter’s translation, *The David Story*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Paul S. Evans, “From Head above the Rest to No Head at All: Transformations in the Life of Saul,” in Bodner and Johnson, *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*, 101-20 (103). [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Barbara Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen: A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel*, JSOTSup 365 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Cf. Rowe, *Sons or Lovers*, 54-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 2:313, 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Francesca Aran Murphy, *1 Samuel,* Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Diana Vikander Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah,* JSOTSup 121 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 109, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Barbara Green, *David’s Capacity for Compassion: A Literary-Hermeneutical Study of 1–2 Samuel*, LHBOTS 641 (London: T & T Clark, 2017), 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM, 1964), 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. See Daniel Pioske, “Material Culture and Making Visible: On the Portrayal of Philistine Gath in the Book of Samuel,” *JSOT* 43 (2018): 3-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Joel Rosenberg, “I and 2 Samuel,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, ed., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 122-45 (133). [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Cf. Robert P. Gordon, “David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24 – 26,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980): 37-64 (43), reprinted in Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville, eds. *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 8; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 319-39 (324); he actually puts it the other way around. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. L. Juliana Claassens, " An Abigail Optic: Agency, Resistance, and Discernment in 1 Samuel

     25," in *Feminist Frameworks and The Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Carolyn J. Sharp (London: T & T Clark, 2017), 21–38 (26). [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. See Marjorie O’Rourke Boyle, “The Law of the Heart: The Death of a Fool (1 Sam 25),” *JBL* 120 (2001): 401-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Edelman, *King Saul*, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Alter, *The David Story*, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Paul Borgman, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel*, AB 8 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 367. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. In a chapter titled “To Every Bad There Is a Worse,” Sarah Nicholson argues that when Samuel has two accounts of something, regularly the second is tougher on Saul: see *The Three Faces of Saul: An Intertextual Approach to Biblical Tragedy* (JSOTSup 339; London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 53-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Ellen van Wolde, “A Leader Led by a Lady: David and Abigail in I Samuel 25,” *ZAW* 114 (2002): 355-75 (367-72). [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-bos, *A People and a Land 2: The Road to Kingship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Philip F. Esler, “Abigail: A Woman of Wisdom and Decisive Action,” in Keith Bodner and Benjamin J. M. Johnson, ed., *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*, LHBOTS 669 (London: T & T Clark, 2020), 167-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 401. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Cf. Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History. Part Two: 1 Samuel* (reprinted Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Peter D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Semeia Studies; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983), 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Antony F. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, FOTL 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Walter Brueggemann, “Narrative Coherence and Theological Intentionality in 1 Samuel 18,” *CBQ* 55 (1993): 225-43 (239). [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Barbara Green, “Enacting Imaginatively the Unthinkable: 1 Samuel 25 and the Story of Saul,” *BibInt* 11 (2003): 1-23 (3). [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 129, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Polzin, *Samuel*, 212-13, 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Cf. David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 8 (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen*, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 2:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Marcel V. Măcelaru, “Saul in the Company of Men: (De)Constructing Masculinity In 1 Samuel 9-31,” in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creanga and Peter-Ben Smit (Hebrew Bible Monographs 62; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 51-68; cf. Rowe, *Sons or Lovers:*, 32-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. See Siegfried Kreuzer, “Saul – Not Always – At War: A New Perspective on the Rise of Kingship in Israel,” in Carl S. Ehrlich with Marsha C. White, ed. *Saul in Story and Tradition* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 47; Tübingen: Mohr, 2006), 39-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Cf. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry* 2:353-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) use the words paranoid and paranoia twenty-four times of Saul. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen*, 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Brad E. Kelle, “Moral Injury and the Interdisciplinary Study of Biblical War Texts: The Case of King Saul,” in John J. Collins et al., ed. *Worship, Women and War: Essays in Honor of Susan Niditch* (Brown Judaic Studies 357; Providence, RI: Brown University, 2015), 147-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Klaus-Peter Adam, “Nocturnal Intrusions and Divine Interventions on Behalf of Judah: David’s Wisdom and Saul’s Tragedy in 1 Samuel 26,” *VT* 59 (2009): 1-33 (31). [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-bos, *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2011), 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Matthew Michael, “The Prophet, the Witch and the Ghost: Understanding the Parody of Saul as a ‘Prophet’ and the Purpose of Endor in the Deuteronomistic History,” *JSOT* 38 (2014): 315-46; cf. also Dolores G. Kamrada, *Heroines, Heroes and Deity: Three Narratives of the Biblical Heroic Tradition*, LHBOTS 621 (London: T & T Clark, 2016), 105-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. See Ora Brison, "The Medium of En-Dor and the Phenomenon of Divination in Twenty-First Century Israel," in *Samuel, Kings and Chronicles I: Texts@Contexts*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan and Archie C.C. Lee (London: T & T Clark, 2017, 124-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. See Tali Stolovy et al., “Dissociation and the Experience of Channeling: Narratives of Israeli Women Who Practice Channeling,” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 63 (2015): 346-64. Suzie Park also looks at the story against a Korean background in “Saul’s Question and the Question of Saul: A Deconstructive Reading of the Story of Endor in 1 Sam. 28:3-25,” In *T & T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (London: T & T Clark, 2019), 241-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. See David Toshio Tsumura’s comment, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), on 28:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen*, 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 328, 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 268, 257. The first internal quotation is from Edwin R. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965), 77-78. On the notion of an inverted version of the first meeting, see Grenville J. R. Kent, *Say It Again Sam: A Literary and Filmic Study of Repetition in 1 Samuel 28* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2012), 148-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. See Esther J. Hamori, “The Prophet and the Necromancer: Women’s Divination for Kings,” *JBL* 132 (2013): 827-43; Daewook Kim, “Saul, the Dead Samuel and the Woman (1 Sam 28,3-25),” *Biblische Notizen* 178 (2018): 21-34. J. Kabamba Kiboko, *Divining the Woman of Endor: African Culture, Postcolonial Hermeneutics, and the Politics of Biblical Translation*, LHBOTS 644 (London: T & T Clark, 2017), 191–216. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. But for selections from early Christian and Reformation writers, see Derek Cooper and Martin J. Lohrmann, ed., *1 – 2 Samuel, 1 – 2 Kings, 1 – 2 Chronicles*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. The texts from Tertullian and Origen, the substantial treatise of Eustathius, and works of other writers appear in Rowan A. Greer and Margaret Mary Mitchell (ed.), *The “Belly-Myther” of Endor: Interpretations of 1 Kingdoms 28 in the Early Church,* Writings from the Greco-Roman World 16 (Atlanta: SBL, 2007); cf. the quotations in John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 320-23; also K. A. D. Smelik, “The Witch of Endor: I Samuel 28 in Rabbinic and Christian Exegesis till 800 A.D.,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1977): 160-79; Patricia Cox, “Origen and the Witch of Endor: Toward an Iconoclastic Typology,” *Anglican Theological Review* 66 (1984): 137-47; and for the view that the Samuel figure was actually a demon, Johannes Bugenhagen, *Annotationes . . . in Deuteronomium. In Samuelem prophetam, id est, duos libros Regum* (Nuremberg: Petri, 1524),276-77 (cf. Cooper and Lohrmann, *1 – 2 Samuel*, 129); Andrew Willet, *An Harmonie upon the First Booke of Samuel . . . .* (Cambridge: Greene, 1607), 313-14 (cf. Cooper and Lohrmann, *1 – 2 Samuel*, 130); Grenville J. R. Kent, “‘Call up Samuel’: Who Appeared to the Witch at En-dor? (1 Samuel 28:3-25),” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 52 (2014): 141-60; Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 261-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Christopher James Blythe, “The Prophetess of Endor: Reception of 1 Samuel 28 in Nineteenth Century Mormon History.” *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 4 (2017): 43-70 [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC 10 (second ed., Nashville: Nelson, 2008), 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Green, *David’s Capacity for Compassion*, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 286, adapting thinking from Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Joseph Ratzinger. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Cf. Alter, *The David Story*, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Cf. Robert Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History.* Part Three: 2 Samuel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 5-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Craig E. Morrison, *2 Samuel*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2013), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Edelman, *King Saul*, 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 2:947-1383, in his comments on 1:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Anthony F. Campbell, *2 Samuel*, FOTL 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, AB 9 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Polzin, *David*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Tod Linafelt, “Private Poetry and Public Eloquence in 2 Samuel 1:17–27: Hearing and Overhearing David’s Lament for Jonathan and Saul,” *Journal of Religion* 88 (2008): 497-526 (500). [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. K. L. Noll, *The Faces of David*, JSOTSup 242 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Arnold A. Anderson,. *2 Samuel*, WBC 11 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. 1 Chr 8:33; 9:39 have Esh-baal; here, *bōšet* (shame) replaces *ba‘al*, which in later usage would sound like a reference to Baal, but in origin will refer to Yahweh as Master. Either *’îš ba‘al*, “Man of the Master” or *’ēš ba‘al* “The Master Exists” might be the original form. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 57-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 106, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Anthony F. Campbell, *2 Samuel*, FOTL 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-bos, *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2011), 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Barbara Green, “Joab’s Coherence and Incoherence: Character and Characterization,” in Keith Bodner and Benjamin J. M. Johnson, eds., *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel* (LHBOTS 669; London: T & T Clark, 2020), 183-204 (186). [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. A. Graeme Auld *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 392-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 238-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Donald F. Murray, *Divine Prerogative and Royal Pretension: Pragmatics, Poetics and Polemics in a Narrative Sequence About David (2 Samuel 5.17-7.29)*, JSOTSup 264 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. See Richard G. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness During David’s Reign: Narrative Ethics and Rereading the Court History according to 2 Samuel 8:15 – 20:26,* LHBOTS 508 (London: T & T Clark, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Robert Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History.* Part Three: 2 Samuel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 47-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Lilian R. Klein, “Michal, the Barren Wife,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Samuel and Kings*, A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 37-46 (39). [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Craig E. Morrison, *2 Samuel*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2013), 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, AB 9 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Robert Barron, *2 Samuel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Peterson, , *First and Second Samuel*, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Alter, *David Story*, 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 414. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. See Gary Stansell, “Honor and Shame in the David Narratives,” *Semeia* 68 (1994): 55-79 (65-68). [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Wijk-bos, *Reading Samuel*, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 442. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. 3: *Throne and City (II Sam. 2 – 8 & 21 – 24)* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1990), 16; compare the volume’s subtitle. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. James B. Pritchard, ed., [*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*](http://fulleripac.fuller.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=13124149T366V.14350&profile=main&uri=search=ATL%7E%21The%20Ancient%20Near%20Eastern%20texts%20:%20relating%20to%20the%20Old%20Testament%20/&term=The%20Ancient%20Near%20Eastern%20texts%20:%20relating%20to%20the%20Old%20Testament%20/%20edited%20by%20James%20B.%20Pritchard.&aspect=basic_search&menu=search&source=%7E%21horizon)(3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 328-29, 483-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Barron, *2 Samuel*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. The name looks like a contracted from of *mippî bōšet*, “Out of the Mouth of Shame”; contrast *mippî yahweh* in Jer 23:16; cf. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 439. In 1 Chr 8:34; 9:40 he is Merib-baal or Meri-baal, “The Master Contends” or “He Contends with the Master” or “Rebellion of the Master.” [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Anthony R. Ceresko, “The Identity of ‘the Blind and the Lame’ (‘i*wwër ûpissēah)* in 2 Samuel 5:8b,” *CBQ* 63 (2001): 23-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 2:947-1383, in his reflection on 9:1-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. *Lectures on Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), 114 (cf. Derek Cooper and Martin J. Lohrmann, ed., *1 – 2 Samuel, 1 – 2 Kings, 1 – 2 Chronicles*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 5 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016], 176). [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Against Marcion, Book III, 20 (cf. John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 4 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005], 351). [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. “Brief Confession on the Incarnation 1544,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1986), 419-54 (436) (cf. Cooper and Lohrmann, *1 – 2 Samuel*, 177). [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 458. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 459. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992) 1:387, as quoted in Cooper and Lohrmann, *1 – 2 Samuel*, 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Rachelle Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel*, VTSup 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 77-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 493-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Polzin, *David*, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner’s, 1932). [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. David A. Bosworth, “David, Jether, and Child Soldiers,” *JSOT* 36 (2011): 185-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. See the sections on “Saul Desperately Seeking” in chapter 5 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. So the seventeenth century Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Sara M. Koenig, “Make War Not Love: The Limits of David’s Hegemonic Masculinity in 2 Samuel 10 – 12, *BibInt* 23 (2015): 489-517. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. On the broad question with consideration of Saul, David, and Uriah, see Jan Grimell, “To Understand and Support Contemporary Veterans Utilizing Biblical Combat Veteran Types*,” Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 72 (2018): 232-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 159-60, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. And where Nathan and Zadoq had once ministered? (so, e.g., Gwilym H. Jones, *The Nathan Narratives,* JSOTSup 80 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990]). [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Victor A. Hurowitz, “The Inauguration of Palaces and Temples in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions,” *Orient* 29 (2014): 89-105; cf. David Toshio Tsumura, *The Second Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 104-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Sarah Schulz, “The Dancing David: Nudity and Cult in 2 Sam. 6,” in *Clothing and Nudity in the*

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360. Barron, *2 Samuel*, 59-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. See the section on “Family” earlier in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Martin Bucer, *De regno Christi* *Iesu seruatoris nostri: Libri II* (Basel: Oporinus, 1557), 207, as translated in Cooper and Lohrmann, *1 – 2 Samuel*, 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Book Four, 20:7; cf. Barron, *2 Samuel*, 64. Irenaeus actually says, “The glory of God is a living human being, and a living human being consists in beholding God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Polzin, *David*, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. McCarter, *II Samuel*, 241, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Cf. Gregory Goswell, “Why Did God Say No to David? (2 Samuel 7),” *JSOT* 43 (2019): 556-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. See further the section on “Dymasty” earlier in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Robert Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History.* Part Three: 2 Samuel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 117, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 466-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Gale A. Yee, “‘Fraught with Background’: Literary Ambiguity in II Samuel 11,” *Interpretation* 42 (1988): 240-53 (244). [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. See Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, “The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process,” *Poetics Today* 7 (1986): 275-322; cf. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985); John Ahn, “Murder, Adultery, and Theft,” in *Landscapes of Korean and Korean* *American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Ahn, International Voices in Biblical Studies 10 (Atlanta: SBL, 2019), 73-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. So Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10 – 12*, JSOTSup 75 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. See, e.g., Lilian R. Klein, “Bathsheba Revealed,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Samuel and Kings*, A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 47-64; Winfred Omar Neely, “The Wife of Uriah the Hittite: Political Seductress, Willing Participant, Naive Woman, or #BathshebaToo? The Preacher as Sensitive Theologian,” *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 20 (2020): 51-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. See Uriah Kim, “Uriah the Hittite: A (Con)Text of Struggle for Identity,” *Semeia* 90/91 (2002): 69-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Richard G. Smith, *The Fate of Justice and Righteousness During David’s Reign: Narrative Ethics and Rereading the Court History according to 2 Samuel 8:15 – 20:26,* LHBOTS 508 (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. Sara M. Koenig, “Make War Not Love: The Limits of David’s Hegemonic Masculinity in 2 Samuel 10 – 12, *BibInt* 23 (2015): 489-517 (517). [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 8 (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Though it may more likely refer to purification after having sex: see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002), on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Cf. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 277-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. Barbara Green, *David’s Capacity for Compassion: A Literary-Hermeneutical Study of 1–2 Samuel*, LHBOTS 641 (London: T & T Clark, 2017) 201, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Salvian the Presbyter, “The Governance of God,” 122 (cf. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, 366). NRSV and other modern translations think the original reading was “definitely felt contempt for Yahweh”; Rashi (in *miqrā’ôt gәdôlôt*) describes MT’s expression as a euphemism. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 182-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, AB 9 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Cf. Johanna W. H. van Wijk-bos, *Reading Samuel: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2011), 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Arcangela Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 112; cf. Derek Cooper and Martin J. Lohrmann, ed., *1 – 2 Samuel, 1 – 2 Kings, 1 – 2 Chronicles*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Salvian the Presbyter, “The Governance of God,” in *The Writings of Salvian, the Presbyter* (reprinted Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2008), 62 (cf. John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 – 2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 4 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005], 361). [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Cf. H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*: *A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM, 1964), 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 517. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Ellen F. Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 2:947-1383, in his introductory comments to 2 Samuel 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. See the section on “Sanctuary” in chapter 6 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Cf. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Cf. Cheryl You, “The Historian’s Heroines: Examining the Characterization of Female Role Models in the Early Israelite Monarchy,” *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 9 (2019): 178-200 (192, 193). [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Smith, *Fate of Justice and Righteousness*, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Craig E. Morrison, *2 Samuel*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2013), 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Robert Barron, *2 Samuel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives,* Overtures to Biblical Theology 13 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. *B.* Sanhedrin 21a; cf. Rashi, in *miqrā’ôt gәdôlôt*. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOTSup 70 (reprinted Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 262, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
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410. Barron, *2 Samuel*, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Barron, *2 Samuel*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. See the discussion of David’s heart/mind in Marti J. Steussy, *David: Biblical Portraits of Power*, Studies on the Personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 53-70 (esp. 65-66). [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
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414. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 492. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Joel Rosenberg, “I and 2 Samuel,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, ed., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 122-45 (135). [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Jeremy Schipper, *Parables and Conflict in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 57-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 544. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Smith, *Fate of Justice and Righteousness*, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Cf. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 484. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. SuJung Shin, “A ‘Dialogic’ Hero David from the Perspective of ‘Internally Persuasive Word’ in the Narrative of Samuel,” in Ahn, *Landscapes*, 59-72 (70, 71). [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Barron, *2 Samuel*,141. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
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425. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art* 2:170. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 223-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Andrew Willet, *An Harmonie upon the Second Booke of Samuel . . . .* (Cambridge: Universitie of Cambridge, 1614), 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. On interpretations of who is telling the truth between these two, see Jeremy Schipper, *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story,* LHBOTS 441 (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 49-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Anthony F. Campbell, *2 Samuel*, FOTL 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 135; cf. Rachelle Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel*, VTSup 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 198-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. See Gillian Keys, *The Wages of Sin: A Reappraisal of the “Succession Narrative”*, JSOTSup 221 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Van Wijk-bos, *A People and a Land 2*, on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Polzin, *David*, 176-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Smith, *Fate of Justice and Righteousness*, 187-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act I, Scene 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (reprinted London: T & T Clark, 2010), 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Michael Widmer, *Standing in the Breach: An Old Testament Theology and Spirituality of Intercessory Prayer* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Arnold A. Anderson,. *2 Samuel*, WBC 11 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Cf. László T. Simon, *Identity and Identification: An Exegetical and Theological Study of 2 Sam 21 – 24*, Tesi Gregoriana Serie Teologia 64 (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2000), 70; LXX and Vg make this distinction, but Tg and modern English translations do not. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Cf. You, “The Historian’s Heroines,” 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Cf. the South African response to the story recorded by Gerald West, “Reading on the Boundaries: Reading 2 Samuel 21:1-14 with Rizpah,” *Scriptura* 63 (1997): 527-37 (529). [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel,” in his reflections on 21:10-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. J. Cheryl Exum, “Rizpah,” *Word &* World 17 (1997): 260-68 (264). [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Cf. West, “Reading on the Boundaries,” 530. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Morrison, *2 Samuel*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 605. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. In *miqrā’ôt gәdôlôt*, on the verse. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
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451. John Mayer, *Many Commentaries in One* [on Joshua through Esther] (London: William, 1647), 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
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453. Willet, *Harmonie*, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. See Stephen C. Russell, *The King and the Land: A Geography of Royal Power in the Biblical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
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457. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 658. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Randall C. Bailey, “The Redemption of Yhwh: A Literary Critical Function of the Songs of Hannah and David,” *BibInt* 3 (1995): 213-31 (231).. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. So Rashi, in *miqrā’ôt gәdôlôt* on the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 519. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. See K. L. Noll, *The Faces of David*, JSOTSup 242 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 118-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 396. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (reprinted London: T & T Clark, 2010), 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 658. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)