

**“VILLAIN OR TRAGIC HERO:
RESURRECTING THE LIFE OF KING SAUL”**

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*To Mark and Laura Pfannschmidt,
Without whom this would not be possible.*

Abstract

Perhaps one of the most forgotten and unappreciated stories from the Old Testament is that concerning the first king of Israel. Saul's successor, David, overshadows his rival in the amount of literary work completed concerning the character and life of the "man after God's own heart." There is a disturbing lack of emphasis given to Saul who offers one of the most compelling and scary lessons for the Christ-follower today. Western commentators have been quick to give King Saul short shrift with little apparent regret or mention of his relevance to everyone. Jewish commentators have not succumbed as easily to the overshadowing of David and have given King Saul more thought, depth, and sympathy. Saul's story should cause the reader's heart to jump as one realizes that Saul probably started off more humbly, spiritually mature, and wise than they did. His tragic ending does not simply conclude a tale depicting a poor wretch who "didn't have what it takes," but his end shows how fragile our faith is when suffering under the weight of pride, self-gain, and irreverence. This thesis will assert that King Saul has often been ignored/under – or at least - interpreted in the Christian west, when compared with his treatment in Jewish interpretation. His story contains a compelling, relevant lesson for today's believers.

Introduction

In the entire narrative of scripture there may be no story more gripping and internally disturbing as King Saul's. Though largely ignored in current Christian culture, his life provides a brilliant parallel to the Christian life and the battles one faces today. How can a man, such as Saul, begin in such a profoundly great manner and then end in such despair, hopelessness, and rebellion? The question, "what happened" should haunt the reader in their study of King Saul. To push aside Saul as a hopeless case from the beginning is ludicrous considering 1 Samuel 10:9 ("As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart"). Here it is plainly seen that Saul's heart was being touched and transformed by God Almighty, which makes the reader realize that Saul was no ordinary King. God was with Saul, and his beginnings display excellent character. He would seem to give his successor, David, a decent "race." Because such excellent beginnings stand in deep contrast with his horrible end, Christians must not only ask themselves what happened, but whether they are walking down the same path of Saul. In light of this, his story is one that deserves attention, not only because of the relevance to our lives today, but because of the theological quagmires his life illustrates.

The historical context of scripture serves as the primary foundation from which the average reader and scholar must launch in order to begin to appreciate and understand the beautiful intricacy of God's Word. Typically, most commentaries on scripture may give 2-5% of the written work to the historical context, while the rest is the actual commentary and interpretation. While no one can begrudge any writer for wanting to focus on scriptural commentary, any biblical scholar will be adamant that one could spend years studying the context of scripture and still not comprehend the full magnitude of the words before them. Scripture displays the unusual dichotomy between straightforward lay teaching and immense

theological depth. With this in mind, the following approach to 1 Samuel will include the context of the book in an effort to gauge the implications of what 1 Samuel has to offer concerning King Saul.

Bill T. Arnold warns the reader that even though 1 Samuel is a historical book, its real nature is to be a sermonic tract.¹ Arnold gives four guidelines to understand the historical books: (1) 1 Samuel displays truths found directly or indirectly in other areas of scripture, (2) historical books have three levels of interpretation, (a) universal: how this work contributes to God's interaction with all of creation, (b) national: God's redemptive work in Israel, and (c) individual: the thousands of stories which make up this historical incidence. (3) "The events narrated in 1 and 2 Samuel serve as the backbone for God's revelation", and (4) to understand the cultural context and implications of the book.²

First Samuel is said to take place around the tenth century B.C., but the time when the story was transcribed is not as certain.³ Part of this uncertainty surrounds a statement made in Samuel 27:6 which states that King Ziklag of Judah belonged to the kings of Judah "to this day." The significance of this statement is mostly supported by those who take a Deuteronomist's view of the historical books. Geoghegan argues that every instance similar to Ziklag's must be treated with uniformity,⁴ while Firth argues that it is a mistake to impose uniformity upon all instances in the Former Prophets.⁵ Firth continues to argue that because of the four Royal War Songs which date to the tenth century, the earliest the book could have been written was during the

¹ Bill T. Arnold, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 21.

² *Ibid.*, 22-23

³ Hans W. Hertzberg, *1st & 2nd Samuel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 20.

⁴ J. C. Geoghegan, *Until This Day: The Preexilic Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History* (2003), 221.

⁵ David G. Firth, *Apollo's Old Testament: 1st & 2nd Samuel* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 30.

reign of Jehu (c. 842-814) in the ninth century.⁶ The latest Firth believes it could have been written was during the reign of Hezekiah in the late eight century.⁷ This rationale depends upon the amount of Saulide tradition in the text, perhaps due to living supporters of Saul during that time and local memory.⁸

While many different aspects of Israelite history are discussed in 1 Samuel (i.e., the influence of social pressure, political power, and technological advances),⁹ the characters in the book and their roles are obviously given the most attention. Brueggemann argues that “key figures, Samuel and Saul, function primarily as foils for David, positioning themselves vis-a-vis David”¹⁰ while Hertzberg counters by stating that “Samuel and David make a frame round the dark, problematic figure of King Saul.”¹¹

Hannah’s Foreshadowing

Scripture continues to amaze readers and scholars in its depth, its ability to inspire and terrify, its massive foreshadowing, and in the way in which God speaks through His narrative even today. One such example of foreshadowing occurs in the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10) at the beginning of the books of Samuel. This song is beautiful, truly representing the enthusiasm of a barren woman finally having a son. However, this song does more than inspire: verse ten says, “The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give power to his king, and triumph to His anointed one.” What king? There is no king in Israel at this time, nor is there a king in the planning. Some have assumed that this reference made by Hannah represents the fact that this

⁶ Ibid., 31

⁷ Ibid., 32

⁸ Ibid., 32

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel: Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1973), 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2

¹¹ Hertzberg, 20.

song's date of origin occurs after Saul or David and was put in the beginning of the book to simply establish the story.¹² However, as Goldman states, "The idea of a king was not altogether novel to the Israelite mind. The promise to Abraham spoke of kings among his posterity; the Mosaic legislation prescribes the method of election and duty of the king; Gideon had been invited to establish a hereditary monarchy...the desire for a king was probably taking definite shape in the popular mind."¹³ If God is indeed expecting to give Israel a king, the request the people make in chapter eight is not a surprise to him, nor something that he intended to punish. Arnold makes the point that Hannah's ending remarks give the impression that the future king will be anointed and empowered by Him for His purpose.¹⁴ Unfortunately, Arnold also seems to a typically western assumption by assuming this is a direct reference to David. Tsumura suggests that viewing the reference of this passage to David is a mistake since no direct implications are necessarily made.¹⁵ Hannah's Song also sets the expectation of who Israel will have for its king, along with resounding the details given in Deuteronomy 17 concerning the responsibilities of a king. "Long before Saul or David or any king appears in Israel, the poetry has Hannah assert that the coming King will be an agent for the poor, needy, hungry, and barren. This poem anticipates the hope placed in kingship for time to come."¹⁶ Not only is this king going to support the people in physical ways, but Gordon points out that the dualistic combination of 'anointed' and 'king' give also a foreshadowing of the messianic line which is to come.¹⁷ It is not a coincidence that the king spoken of by Hannah will be a king that her son, Samuel, will anoint on behalf of the Lord.

¹² Samuel Goldman, *Hebrew Text & English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Soncino Press, 1962), 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ Bill T. Arnold, and H. G. M. Williamson, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 70.

¹⁵ David T. Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 150.

¹⁶ Brueggemann, 20.

¹⁷ Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 81.

What is the significance of this foreshadowing upon the life of Saul? If the inferences about to be made are correct, then the significance is great indeed! First, the future king predicted will not be like other kings: “This new priesthood will be part of a coming monarchical system, and priesthood and monarchy will be coeternal.”¹⁸ This new kingdom will be divinely ordained and God will be an integral part of this new system. Therefore, if God is so invested in this arrangement, why choose Saul? Since Saul is assumed by some to have been a lost case from the beginning, why, then, did God choose him? Might Saul have been the best possible king for Israel at that time? Might not God have ordained him to be just as great as his successor would be? Could not God have easily brought about the messianic line through Saul instead of David? Since there is no confirmation that David’s line will endure forever until *after* his monarchy is successful and he has followed faithfully after God, it can be inferred that it was possible. Saul could have been part of the messianic line because the punishment for his transgression was the fact that his kingdom would not endure forever. Instead of Jesus being called the son of David, he could have been called the son of Saul. This may seem slightly unusual, yet it is difficult to envision God establishing a king with the possibility to rule forever when he was secretly waiting for his disposal so as to establish someone else. This also coupled with the fact that Saul and David’s beginnings were practically identical in promising possibilities (which will be shown later), shows little doubt that the foreshadowing which occurred in Hannah’s Song was a reference to a future king which Saul had the first chance of being. Obviously, it is no mystery that Saul utterly failed in this role of fulfillment, but this possibility ought not to be overlooked. Gunn points out that with both Saul and David there is the impression that both kings are on trial with subsequent tests spattered throughout their reign to prove their claim to the throne.¹⁹ As

¹⁸ David Jobling, *1st Samuel*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 55.

¹⁹ David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story*. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 18.

neither David nor Saul had an initial claim on the eternal kingdom, both David and Saul had to have had equal chances at proving their faithfulness to such a kingdom. With this view of Saul in mind and the deep foreshadowing of Hannah's Song, I hope we can enter into Saul's life with a more critical and open mind concerning this tragic hero.

Contrast

In any discussion concerning King Saul, it is inescapable that a contrast between him and his successor, David, will occur. It is a natural compare and contrast, but one that may be underdeveloped. Many have stated and assumed that Saul's main function is to be a foil for David,²⁰ but Hawkins "sought to make the case that the portrayal of Saul in 1 Samuel is not that of a one-dimensional character whose sole function is to serve as a foil for David."²¹ Before a contrast can occur, and in the spirit of describing Saul beyond a one-dimensional aspect, the foundation of King Saul's character and personality must be established. Youngblood gives a well-encompassing introduction into the issue of Saul when he states, "Scholarly studies of Saul, the first king of Israel, have depicted him as (among other things) a villain, tragic figure, flawed ruler, naïve farm-boy, degenerate madman, fate-driven pawn, reluctant king—the list goes on and on. Such characterizations are at least partially true; Saul was surely one of the most complex persons described in Scripture."²² With this complexity, the question of Fate versus Flaw is again raised by interpreters and authors. Hastings sees the narrative as a tragedy of Fate,²³ in contrast to a Jewish perspective which sees Saul's life as a contest between good and

²⁰ Brueggemann, 1.

²¹ Ralph K. Hawkins, *The first glimpse of Saul and his subsequent transformation*. Bulletin For Biblical Research 22, no. 3: 353-362. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed February 17, 2014), 362.

²² R F. Youngblood, *1 & 2 Samuel: The Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan. d.),1.

²³ James Hastings, *The Greater Men and Women of the Bible*.(Vol. 3. 1914), 65.

evil.²⁴ It is an unfortunate truth that most Bible expositors seek to make the moral individuals in scripture complex in character but prefer to assume the “fallen” in scripture are simple, one-dimensional, calculable, and predictable people. As Youngblood infers, Saul is anything but simple.

One cannot help but see an Arthurian style of introduction to the life of Saul. As in many cases in the King Arthur legend, a younger, handsome, strong man appears into the scene and becomes the plots hero and sometime tragic character. First Samuel 9:12 gives Saul the stereotype which says “There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people.” Tsumura points out that sometimes “the tallness of Saul is contrasted with the shortness of Athtar in the Baal myth. He was to be made king in place of Baal.”²⁵ There is no question that Saul fits the outward perspective of how a King should appear to the public eye. Even though it was not God’s preferred choice to give Israel a king (1 Sam. 8:7, “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king”), it should be noted that God did not give Israel some scrawny, unimpressive, sickly king; he chose someone they could outwardly follow and be inspired by Saul’s presence and aesthetic appeal. In that culture and time, such unmistakable kingly stature appeared to be a sign of divine favor to the populous.²⁶

Even though outward aesthetic appeal has its importance, it takes little argument to prove that such qualities pale considerably in comparison with inward status and the heart of an individual. Indeed, what was the status and situation of Saul’s heart when he became king? There is sometimes the unfortunate “hindsight” bias when reading scripture. “While Jewish tradition

²⁴ Gunn, 16.

²⁵ Tsumura, 298.

²⁶ McCarter Jr., P K. *The Anchor Bible: 1st Samuel*. Garden City: (Doubleday & Company, 1980), 193.

has treated this first king of Israel with some sympathy, Christian tradition has shown him a large measure of hostility.”²⁷ Many read of certain Biblical characters which ended poorly (like King Saul, Judas, Samson) and generalize that the character traits which led to their demise, could be found in the beginning of their lives. This is the scary truth about Saul: there is no evidence to suggest that he started off any worse than David himself. Quite to the contrary; Saul’s initial start put many modern Christians’ beginnings to shame in light of his worthy character.

Given these tenuous widely-held western assumptions about Saul, let us examine the biblical account itself. The first major proof of Saul’s character is found in 1 Samuel 10:9: “As Saul turned around to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart; and all those signs were fulfilled that same day.” Walter Brueggemann comments on the significant shift in this verse in contrast to verses before. Up to this point, Saul has been the quiet recipient of all of the attention and title, but this phrase “contains a powerful vitality that has in fact changed life for Saul.”²⁸ Jewish commentators take it a step further than Brueggemann and state that not only is Saul’s life changed, but in fact, God gave him another personality—a new identity.²⁹ This moment seems very similar to the redemptive story portrayed in the New Testament: “the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Hawkins supports this opinion when he stated,

When the text states that Saul "will be turned *הפך*, into a different person," the word for "turned into" or "changed" is the same word used for the transformation of Moses' rod into a snake (Exod 7:15), as well as the waters of the Nile into blood (Exod. 7:20) In these passages *הפך* clearly carries the meaning of a complete constitutional transformation. The transformation of a person's inner constitution may be a subjective experience, not discernable to him or herself. The word however, can also carry a much

²⁷ Gunn, 23.

²⁸ Brueggemann, 75.

²⁹ Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 579.

more dramatic connotation, as when it הִפֹּךְ , is used for the "overthrow" of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:21, 29).³⁰

It is commonly held that the major characteristic of King David was his devoted heart to God in all things. "A man after God's own heart" (13:14) are the words that must have haunted Saul when he first heard them after his rebuke. Even though it appears, and has often been speculated that God favored David, McCarter argues that this phrase says nothing of "any great fondness of Yahweh for David or any special quality of David."³¹

There are signs that Saul's personality characterized as wise and respectable, as well. Though he is more remembered for his later outbursts in anger, implications are that such management issues were not always the case. Hertzberg gives an intriguing perspective on the description of King Saul in relation to Samuel's opinion: "True history is surely reflected here; despite his critical attitude towards the institution of the monarchy and the first king, Samuel was deeply attached to Saul."³² How does Hertzberg make this assumption? He argues that the vivid way in which the narration was given by Samuel reflects upon the intimate pleasure which the author took in describing the person and subject involved.

The Spirit seemed to come upon Saul in power and the verses afterwards, which portray "the spirit of God gripping him" (1 Samuel 10:10), give conformation that God was indeed working very significantly in his life. However, Hertzberg would disagree with the notion that this was a spiritual conversion, though he gives little conclusive evidence as to why he states such an opinion.³³ Walton makes an interesting distinction that while witnessing the Spirit coming upon people in the Old Testament is not rare, seeing the Spirit come upon them in

³⁰ Hawkins, 360.

³¹ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 329.

³² Hertzberg, 78.

³³ *Ibid.* :88

permanence is rare.³⁴ The words used to describe the Spirit coming upon Saul seem very similar to the language used to describe Samson's experience with the Spirit. This situation is repeated once again in when Saul experiences the Spirit come upon him in power when he hears about the city of Jabesh. Two intriguing points about this scenario must be brought to light: 1) Saul's amazing spiritual responsiveness to oppression is synonymous with Isaiah's (61:1-3) and Jesus' (Luke 4:18-19) response to social oppression, and 2) Saul possessed a openness and "remarkable availability for the visitation and invasion of God's spirit."³⁵ Again, Watson makes the point that the Spirit coming upon Saul may have been just to empower him for a set purpose and time,³⁶ but it is undeniable that God was working through Saul in powerful ways. David appears to be one of the first recorded to experience the Spirit's presence permanently (16:13). An earlier interpretation by Augustine agrees with the conclusion of Hertzberg, Watson, and Walton that it was not a sign of conversion. Augustine makes the point that the Spirit did "not come only to saints, but even Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar saw what neither of them were able to understand."³⁷

However, Jewish commentators use verses 10-12 of chapter 10 to restate and prove their original point: Saul has indeed become another man.³⁸ Interestingly enough, these verses also show a different aspect of Saul than immediately apparent. When Saul started prophesying and incurred the reactions of disbelief by the surrounding people, they asked three questions in response: "What happened to the son of Kish?" "Is Saul too among the prophets?" And "who are their fathers?" The first two questions makes relative sense, but the third raises a question in

³⁴ John H. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 317.

³⁵ Brueggemann, 83-84.

³⁶ Walton, 317.

³⁷ John R. Franke, *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 233.

³⁸ Berlin, 579.

response: who cares about who their fathers were? It appears to be more of a rhetorical, disdainful question to suggest that being counted among the prophets was more of an embarrassment to Saul's wealthy family and background than a notable achievement.³⁹ According to Jewish commentators, most prophets of that time came from undistinguished families; hence, it would be a group of people very foreign to Saul's usual circle of acquaintances.⁴⁰ It is commendable that Saul was not afraid to expose himself to ridicule for the sake of prophesying in God's name. Fear of social acceptance has crippled many an individual and it is no small feat to rise above such reproach. However, Gunn takes a more hesitant stance when approaching this scenario and he states that the verse is too elusive since "prophesying" can be interpreted as "raving."⁴¹ He is not as convinced that a significant change has taken place in the life of Saul.

A part of the narrative which Firth describes as "bizarre" is the section which describes Saul hiding from the public recognition of his kingship.⁴² 1 Samuel 10:17-24 appears to give Saul the aura of humility and reluctance when entering the kingship; but Hertzberg cautions making such an assumption and says it seems unlikely,⁴³ yet this conclusion seems odd when considering what the situation implies and what occurs in 9:21. Saul acknowledges the humble position of his tribe being "the smallest tribe of Israel...least of all the clans of Benjamin." Baldwin views this as indeed the reluctance of Saul to take on the role of King over Israel.⁴⁴ It is very likely that Saul's reluctance was a commentary on the realization that being the first king of

³⁹ Brueggemann, 75.

⁴⁰ Berlin, 579.

⁴¹ Gunn, 63.

⁴² Firth, 132.

⁴³ Hertzberg, 88.

⁴⁴ Joyce G. Baldwin, *1st and 2nd Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 94.

Israel was not a position to be entered into lightly or with huge enthusiasm. Knowing that this was not God's perfect will probably brought a slight amount of uneasiness to his new position.

After Saul was acclaimed by the people, 1 Samuel 10:27 states that "some scoundrels said, 'how can this fellow save us? They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent.'" This verse sets up the response Saul has in 11:12-13 after his first victory, which was vital in proving that he was a worthy king and that God was with him. After he won the population's heart the people spoke up against the men who doubted Saul. They started encouraging him to end the lives of these men but Saul refused, stating the day belonged to the Lord. Western commentators are strangely quiet on this series of events, perhaps because these verses may not be significant. They make no assumptions of Saul's character in this scenario, but Jewish commentators saw this moment as a reflection of his capacity to forgive the transgressions of his people.⁴⁵ Saul "the forgiver" is not a title ever attributed to ascribed to him in interpretation or commentary, yet it would appear that Jewish commentators have no qualms in describing him in such a way.

We have attempted to show Saul's character and his forgotten or overlooked initial qualities. Part of the reason was to establish and support the fact that Saul started very strongly and had every possibility to be as successful as his successor would someday be. But the main purpose of this contrast was to set aside the unwarranted idea that David was a favorite child of God whereas King Saul was the proverbial "bad wolf." For every good quality David possessed, Saul (at one point) could boast the same quality - sometimes to an even greater extent. We might imagine the account of Saul without the unfortunate circumstances of chapters 13-15. What would Israel have looked like and what would Saul have done? Could one envision that Saul

⁴⁵ Berlin, 580.

becomes the Messianic figure that David became after Saul's demise? Working in Saul's heart might God have been crafting him to be such a figure in the history of Israel? Also, what if Saul's apparent and remarkable openness to the Spirit of God caused him to prophesy more than what we see in the book? Instead of David's Psalms, would we have a book called Saul containing the prophecies of the first king of Israel? How fascinating that would be! Simultaneously, the world would see what kind of king Jonathan would have made for Israel. It can only be speculated the kind of nation Israel would have become, but it would have looked vastly different than what we read in the Bible today. However, this is not how King Saul ended, nor how he spent the majority of his reign. His negative attributes are well known and easily quoted; but how well known are those of his successors? King David is praised often, as he should be; however, it is unwise to ignore the very striking similarities that exist between these 'foils', not only in their positive, but as well as in their negative qualities and equivalent rebellion. As Steussy states,

David is hardly the model of Sunday-school virtue, but neither does the Samuel story read like heavy-handed anti-Davidic propaganda; its problematic details are too subtle. Most readers like David, and our imaginations latch onto him as an image of divinely favored success. Yet the dark undertones of the story haunt us. Our questions about David reflect back onto the God who supports him. How wonderful that God would embrace a fallible human! How terrifying that divine power might flow in such a flawed channel!⁴⁶

Chapter thirteen (which will be discussed in more detail later) shows the impulsive and impatient side of Saul that is known very well. His unwillingness to wait for Samuel reveals a variety of attitudes, and impatience is one of them. However, in the spirit of contrast, what about David's impulsive and impatient side? Are his life examples to be praised? David's impulsive side

⁴⁶ Marti J. Steussy David, *Biblical Portraits of Power*. (University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 91.

is clearly narrated in his unfortunate interaction with Bathsheb; the wife of Uriah. Brueggemann gives a concise view of the scenario King David succumbs to:

David does not pause, however, because he is the king. The mention of Uriah might have given David pause, but it does not. David acts swiftly, as he had always done. He is not a pensive or brooding man but one who will have his way. The action is quick. The verbs rush as the passion of David rushed. He sent; he took; he lay. The royal deed of self-indulgence does not take very long. There is no adornment to the action. The woman then gets some then gets some verbs: she returned, she conceived. The action is stark. There is nothing but action. There is no conversation. There is no hint of caring, of affection, of love—only lust. David does not call her by name, does not even speak to her. At the end of the encounter she is only “the woman.”⁴⁷

Though David’s relation with Bathsheba is probably the focal point of anyone’s discussion of his failings, it ought not to be underestimated. Not only does this story show the almost anamialistic lustful desires of David and the disregard and lack of empathy for her feelings, David seems to have no qualms that his entire court knew about his actions. Alter comments that the fact David sent messengers to seek out Bathsheba “means that the adultery can scarcely be a secret within the court.”⁴⁸ This sin of David is not just a little slip, but it was planned and carried out in blatant fashion. He then attempts to hide his sin. Why was he so blatant and supremely confident? Anderson makes the point that “Uriah could hardly have been a threat to David...even if the death penalty were mandatory for men caught in *flagrante delicto*, it is highly doubtful that there was any court in Israel which could try and convict a king.”⁴⁹ One need not necessarily “demonize” David. But the possibility that David and Saul are not significantly different or more virtuous than the other must be explored.

There is no doubt that if Saul had been presented with the opportunity to kill David he would have gladly ended his life. Because of the Lord’s provision, David is consistently spared,

⁴⁷ Brueggemann, 273.

⁴⁸ Robert Alter, *The David Story* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1999), 251.

⁴⁹ A. A. Anderson, *World Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 156.

but Saul's attitude betrays the murderous and jealous spirit within. When chapter nineteen arrives there is now no hidden agenda: Saul made it blatantly known that he was desperate and wanted David to be killed. Saul was so bent on having David killed that his own son, Jonathan, had to become the mediator between his father and brother-in-law in chapter nineteen.⁵⁰ However, before this we see an interesting parallel between Saul and David: while Saul attempted to indirectly kill David in chapter eighteen by putting him into harsh battle, so David attempted to indirectly end Uriah's life by sending him to the heat of battle.⁵¹ Saul did not succeed in his attempt but David did and took Uriah's wife as his own. And here once again the similarities between these two men must be established. Saul's ruthlessness is not a personality trait known only to the house of Saul: David was just as ruthless, and we see that his son Absalom inherited this trait as well. Anderson also points out that in light of David's being near untouchable, his ruthlessness was seemingly unnecessary in his interaction with Uriah:

It is ironic in the extreme that the one who ought to be the loyal guardian of the people's rights and justice should murder his loyal servant and cause the death of other faithful soldiers in order to protect the façade of his honor which he himself had already disgraced....Perhaps the most serious charge against David was this: that he was more concerned with the protection of his badly dented honor than with the caring for the divine law.⁵²

It is difficult to see how there is any real considerable difference between the first king of Israel and "the man after God's own heart." There is a strange cynicism and hilarious irony in how David responds to Joab's report ("Do not let this thing be evil in your eyes" [2 Sam. 11:25]), as if David was the moral arbiter to Joab after he just ordered the murder of one of his best men! Brueggemann sees two possible conditions that David was in during this time: 1) David is

⁵⁰ Tsumura, 489.

⁵¹ Ibid. 489

⁵² Anderson, 156.

morally numb to all things at this point, or 2) he is incredibly cynical because he no longer cares to notice what he can discern.⁵³

This brief exploration into David's life serves as a contrast with Saul's virtuous side, but it also functions to contrast Saul's fall which will be discussed next. David obviously possessed many positive characteristics worth emulating, but not many are aspects that Saul did not possess at some point. Christianity is very familiar with David's largest failing, but yet, he was able to recover from it spiritually and continue on in his walk with God. Why couldn't Saul do so when he fell? What was so different? One must be puzzled by this seemingly apparent inconsistency. The fall of King Saul is one of the most intriguing and dynamic scenarios of the king's life. The following section will be devoted to delving into the most tragic and dramatic section of the account of Samuel.

The Fall

There is of course no debate over whether King Saul ended poorly. However, debate and mystery does tend to surround his first set of transgressions. Indeed, "set of transgressions" appears to be the best way to describe the account given in chapters 13-15 since a number of events seem inseparably linked. Consequences of the aforementioned events are different, but the underlying reasons behind the rebellion are identical.

The stage is set when Saul is thrust into a military conflict in which the odds are very overwhelming against him. Saul was supposed to wait for the prophet Samuel, but when Samuel didn't show and Saul witnessed his own men fleeing, he took it upon himself to perform the burnt and fellowship offerings. Suddenly, Samuel shows up and responds very negatively to the

⁵³ Brueggemann, 278.

events which have transpired. While Samuel's response of "Foolish!" to Saul's transgression is not completely surprising because of our familiarity with the story, it may come as more of a surprise and mystery when taken at face-value. As Walter Brueggemann states, "This is a remarkable statement because Samuel cites no commandment that has been broken, nor can we construct one. The commandment that seems to have been broken is, 'Thou shalt not violate Samuel's authority.'"⁵⁴ It is indeed strange that Samuel's reaction was so negative, for it is not hard for the interpreter to understand *why* Saul performed the sacrifices. Saul had the mind of a military leader and yet watched his army dwindle for seven days. The internal frustration and pain must have been excruciating. Not only does Samuel call Saul foolish, he then reveals the fact that the Lord is raising up another to take Saul's place one day.

We return to consider what Brueggemann's observations that it is perhaps shocking that Saul was chided so strongly for his transgression. Why it was such a heavy sin against God? Firth states that "Saul's sin is not some cultic irregularity" and does not reflect God's legalistic attitude towards sacrifices.⁵⁵ This idea is supported by the events which occurred years later in 2 Samuel 24. In that instance, King David has incited God's wrath by counting the fighting men of Israel. He makes burnt and fellowship offerings the Lord and God decides to end the plague against Israel and listens to David's prayer. The remarkability of this fact should not be lost upon the interpreter. Saul performed the exact same type of offerings as David, yet one was punished and the other was rewarded. Why the difference? Some have argued that the punishment upon Saul was a reflection of him taking on the priestly role,⁵⁶ but as already mentioned, this claim is not consistent in light of David's actions. According to Gordon, "Saul's

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, 100.

⁵⁵ Firth, 155.

⁵⁶ Franke, 242.

sin could not have been that he usurped the priestly prerogatives in offering the sacrifice. David and Solomon offered sacrifices without censure....as the Talmud and Jewish commentators recognize.”⁵⁷ The key difference is a very common adage used to describe David: a man after God’s own heart. Their hearts were in completely different places during the events that transpired. David realized his own sin and humbly came before God not willing “to offer a sacrifice that cost him nothing” (2 Sam 24:24). In further support of this point, Samuel declares that God does not desire sacrifices over obedience (1 Sam 15:22-23). It is such a realization that could have prompted David to write, “You do not delight in sacrifices, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Psalm 51:16-17). Saul’s later actions confirm the belief in his heart during this time: he believed God to be a deity which could be appeased and manipulated. This conclusion is supported by Firth when he stated,

The verb, ‘to seek favor’ suggests a view of Yahweh open to manipulation: if Saul acted in the right way, Yahweh is bound to bring blessing. This will be explicit when Saul acts through his curse in ch. 14, so his defense prepares for such a possibility. But the ark’s story (4:1b-7:1) has already demonstrated that such a view of Yahweh is inappropriate. That Saul knew his actions were inappropriate is indicated by his claim to have ‘restrained himself’ in making the offering, perhaps suggesting he might have gone further.⁵⁸

It is not a stretch of the imagination to assume that this was the prevailing view which surrounded Saul in the different cultures and kingdoms of that time. This idea is reflected by Saul and his companions in chapter nine when they inquired about the location of their donkeys. Before they felt able to converse with the man of God, they felt compelled to have a gift ready for presenting before favor could be bestowed. There was very little resembling a relationship between Saul and God and there is little evidence to suggest otherwise. This lack of relationship

⁵⁷ Goldman, 71.

⁵⁸ Firth, 155.

and understanding of God is confirmed later on in chapter fifteen where Saul attempts to appease God's wrath through offering sacrifices.

King Saul's initial response is not catalogued, but his actions directly afterwards are: he counted the fighting men remaining with him. It is intriguing that Saul's response was not that of immediate despair or loss of drive. Saul was no stranger to the power of Samuel's words, nor a stranger to the divine almighty power of God. There was probably no doubt in Saul's mind that Samuel's words would come to pass eventually. Saul faced incredible odds, watched his army dwindle before his very eyes and witnessed the initial attack by his son. After the prophet of God he relied upon came late, he did his best to keep his troops together by making the sacrifice. Then Samuel shows up and rebukes, and now Saul is told that his kingdom will be inherited by another, a person after God's own heart. After witnessing and hearing all of these terrible events, why would Saul even continue? Why wouldn't his reaction be, "So be it! The 'man after God's heart' can go fight this hopeless battle!" Saul could have just left the situation and given Samuel the responsibility. Intriguingly this was not Saul's reaction, especially considering that the Philistine army split and was attempting to encircle Saul in a position where victory seemed nigh to impossible.⁵⁹ Also, the Philistines controlled the Israelites' output and maintenance of any iron weapons they possessed, thus making Saul's army hilariously unequipped.⁶⁰ For Saul, this seemingly impossible circumstance possibly appeared as God's judgment upon Saul for his transgression.⁶¹ Even though Saul can be commended for not leaving the situation, he does fail to rise and give the victory. Instead this function is served by his son, Jonathan.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 156.

⁶⁰ Berlin, 584.

⁶¹ Firth, 156.

A certain amount of space must be given to Saul's son Jonathan, which may seem like a digression from focusing on Saul. But as Firth points out, throughout the battle which occurs after Saul's rebuke, it is Jonathan who take the initiative in battle and expects God's provision.⁶² Jonathan's astonishing initiative against the Philistines, could have (according to Brueggemann) be perceived by Saul as an immediate threat against him and his future leadership.⁶³ Also, Brueggemann suggests that the recent introduction of Jonathan directly after his father's rebuke is no accident, but instead sees Jonathan's entry as an attempt to contrast Saul's disappointing choice against Jonathan's daring conviction.⁶⁴ The fact that Jonathan means "gift of the dove" or "gift of the spirit" may not be coincidental seeing how the spirit is probably departing from Saul at that time.⁶⁵ Gunn sees this instance as proof that God divinely used Jonathan at this time to save Israel from disaster.⁶⁶ Regardless of whether or not Jonathan's appearance is a sign of God leaving Saul, it cannot be denied that the king is steadily falling into pathetic state. Saul used to be a man who had the spirit come upon him in power; now after his rebuke he is staying behind and letting his son take the role of savior of Israel.

The previous events between Saul, Samuel, and Jonathan are the precursors to the incident which occurs concerning the Amalekites. Chapter fifteen's context and beginning is familiar enough to summarize. In short, Saul was commanded to completely destroy the Amalekites: their livestock, women, children, everything. Saul disobeys and keeps some of the best livestock and possessions for his own and the drama begins in verse ten. God spoke to Samuel and there is a key word used in verses eleven and thirty-five: regret. The Lord felt regret over making Saul king; what an intriguing word used to describe Yahweh! Brueggemann makes

⁶² Ibid., 157.

⁶³ Brueggemann, 103.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 103.

⁶⁵ Franke, 257.

⁶⁶ Gunn, 68.

an interesting observation that this regret is probably not a recent discover, by God, but the reaction to consistent disobedience and attempted manipulation of God's favor.⁶⁷ This word 'regret' is also where the debate concerning whether Saul was fated to fail or simply flawed takes a profound boost. Tertullian, Cassian, and other early commentators agree on the opinion that Saul was indeed fated to fail.⁶⁸ However, this is hard to reconcile. It is entirely possible that most balking reactions against the idea of fate represents a very western and modern mindset. Control and free will being the cry of the secular and religious world today, it makes complete sense why that idea is hard to swallow. However, even in light of an obvious western influence, challenging the ideology of fate is not unwarranted. Tsumura sees the word 'regret' to represent the idea that God is not impassive or static, but that he intervenes with creation and has dynamic interaction.⁶⁹ Even though the word 'regret' is used later on in verse thirty-five, the Hebrew word used in verse eleven (*nihanti*) is only used one other time as a performative perfect verbal phrase with God being the speaker: Gen. 6:7 in which God says "I regret I have made them" in reference to the human race.⁷⁰ Birch describes this regret by saying "God's experiment with Saul is over," however, to view Saul as a 'lab rat' not only seems slightly demeaning but also gives the impression that God did not wish to invest in the possibility that Saul could have faithfully served his entire reign.⁷¹ It seems unlikely that God would invest in a king fated to fail.

At the end of verse eleven is a moving description which depicts Samuel crying out to God on behalf of Saul. Even though it says Samuel was angry, Gordon sees it as very obvious that Samuel was attempting a form of intercession for the young man he had personally anointed

⁶⁷ Brueggemann, 110.

⁶⁸ Franke, 254.

⁶⁹ Tsumura, 396.

⁷⁰ Ibid. :395

⁷¹ Bruce C. Birch, *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume II*. edited by Leander E. Keck, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1088.

and watched over.⁷² However, Alter does not see it in the same light as Gordon and describes Samuel's reaction as rage; a rage over what Saul had done and perhaps over the fact that the people asked for a king.⁷³ While Samuel may have still been upset in response to the people's asking for a king, the end of the chapter gives the reader an image of Samuel mourning on behalf of Saul, therefore, it seems unlikely there was rage, extreme anger, or hate involved.

Though it is obvious that Saul transgressed the Lord's commandment through Samuel, it must be asked why did Saul disobey a direct order from God? Was he completely aware of his transgression? Did his answer suffice to quail God's wrath? Brueggemann provides valuable insight to these questions:

Saul has not only a plausible but pious answer ready for Samuel's question about the significance of the cattle round about. Is it not the same thing for him to set aside the cattle for sacrifice and to offer them now at this holy place as to put them to the 'ban' in the place where they were taken? But sacrifice and 'ban' is not the same thing; the 'ban' is complete destruction, the surrender of the whole, whereas sacrifice (*zebah*) usually presupposes a portion for men as well. Above all, however, Saul, by bringing the plunder undestroyed from the place of the 'ban', has thereby introduced it into the profane sphere of life, where it is exposed to the usual contamination.⁷⁴

It would appear that Saul's seemingly adequate and righteous excuse would be sufficient enough, but as already mentioned, sacrificing gives the men the right to portions of the plunder, which is a direct violation of God's command through Samuel. Jewish commentators tend to still think it is possible that Saul was unaware of his transgression,⁷⁵ however, Firth would disagree stating that, "Although Saul's response sounds noble, his disassembling is effectively a cover for theft, although attributed to the people."⁷⁶

⁷² Gordon, 144.

⁷³ Alter, 89.

⁷⁴ Brueggemann, 127.

⁷⁵ Berlin, 589.

⁷⁶ Firth, 175.

Breuggemann and Firths' conclusion seems to be more likely than the opposing view that Saul was unaware. Since Saul appears to change his story in verse twenty-four (he states, "I was afraid of the men so I gave in"), a picture starts forming of a very aware Saul who was more afraid of his men's respect than God's. Even if Saul's motives were pure, it is still delayed obedience. And as the adage goes, "delayed obedience is disobedience." An unknown source once stated concerning Saul, "obedience always involves sacrifice; but sacrifice is not always obedience." This passage is the climax of the turning point of Saul's spiritual interaction with God. After this moment, God and Saul seem alienated for good, and Saul's life takes a drastic downturn after Samuel states that the kingdom is torn from him.

Saul's Susceptibility

We now turn to another biblical passage which demonstrates the deep mystery and ambiguity surrounding the character of Saul. First Samuel 16:14-16 states: "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him." This has to make the biblical community uncomfortable: what is God doing controlling an evil spirit? Why did God's spirit leave Saul? Throughout Saul's life, there is a deep sense of spiritual susceptibility. To understand the grand life of Saul, this puzzling issue must be delved into.

The particular verse mentioned above does not stand in isolation to the event surrounding, but it is very much an integrated part of a cause and effect relationship. Directly before the spirit leaves Saul and is replaced, David experiences the spirit coming upon him in a powerful way. How the evil spirit can be defined will be discussed, but it cannot be denied that it seems to function partially as a contrast of events: David is ushered into the new role of the anointed and Saul is promptly dethroned, spiritually. Not only is Saul emptied of God's spirit,

but one who now possesses the anointing appears to be the one person who can subdue Saul's evil spirit! What irony! David witnessed a king who had stood in favor with God and had sadly lost the beautiful communion. When David later committed adultery and murder, perhaps he recollected Saul's situation and wrote the words "do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (Ps. 51:11) as direct inspiration from his time as an armor-bearer.

Walter Kaiser, who seeks to help readers struggle through the harder sections of the Bible, offers no real conclusive evidence as to what is the answer to the problem of the evil spirit. He does offer three possibilities: possession, oppression, and mental disorder.⁷⁷

Possession, it would seem, is highly doubtful. Hertzberg observes that, "this evil spirit is not permanent."⁷⁸ He goes on to say,

The fact, at first surprising, that even the evil spirit comes 'from Yahweh', expresses how all things in the end are caused by the one God. Whence else should it come? The Old Testament speaks of Satan only three times, all in later passages, and one of them in Job, and expressly describes the 'accuser' as subordinate to the Lord. So, too, it is with the evil spirit. Saul's suffering is described theologically, not psychopathically or psychologically. And rightly so, for in an obscure way the hand of God invades the life of this man, as can be seen often, exerts himself so much for Yahweh.⁷⁹

It seems likely that the writer of Samuel/Kings lacked any developed notion of Satan as a personal being. If this is true, responsibility for the origination of an evil spirit is probably not going to fall on anyone else's shoulders but God's - the supreme heavenly being. Given the entire Christian canon, it is entirely possible the evil spirit came from Satan and was allowed by the Lord to torment Saul. Josephus does not even mention the apparent role of God in sending the spirit, but simply describes the interaction as a strange demonical disorder which came upon

⁷⁷ Walter Kaiser Jr., *More Hard Saying of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 152.

⁷⁸ Hertzberg, 140.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

Saul.⁸⁰ Firth also acknowledges that he believes the problem was spiritual and not mental, but he makes an important distinction: the Hebrew term ‘*ra*’ (evil) may be translated ‘grievous’ and the Old Testament rarely sees moral forces.⁸¹ Tsumura also points out that the wording would be better translated as “the spirit which brings forth disaster,” according the Hebrew original.⁸² Brueggemann supports both Hertzberg and Firth’s findings and reminds the reader that this ancient biblical world view did not see secondary causes (like Satan), but traced all causes back to God who created all and causes all.⁸³ Obviously, there is a very real possibility that the evil spirit is simply an explanation for Saul having a severe mental disorder. Some would suggest that it is manic depressive psychosis,⁸⁴ others would say it chronic depression,⁸⁵ but this could simply be a combination of effects. To state that Saul was possessed by a demon does not seem to make theological or literary sense in the passage. Oppression seems to be the most likely possibility in the grand scheme, and this oppression could have resulted in severe mental affects.

One argument that the spirit could have come from a different source than God is the fact that David was the instrument of the spirit’s defeat. How could a spirit from the Lord be manipulated by the anointed if he possessed the same spirit? As Jesus later comments on spiritual warfare, “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (Mark 3:25). There is very little sense in the action of God battling back and forth for the mind of Saul. Appears more likely that God’s spirit was working through David to combat the oppressive spirit over Saul. Thus, it is more likely the spirit was demonic, and the wording in Samuel is reflective of that mindset, as previously mentioned.

⁸⁰ Flavius Josephus, *In The Works of Josephus, Volume 2*. Translated by William Whiston (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 375.

⁸¹ Firth, 98.

⁸² Tsumura, 427.

⁸³ Brueggemann, 125.

⁸⁴ Goldman, 96.

⁸⁵ Gordon, 152.

A similar passage to 16:14-16 is 18:10:11-12 which says, “The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully on Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, ‘I’ll pin David to the wall.’ But David eluded him twice.” This is strange since it apparently shows two spirits at work: Saul’s spirit of prophecy and the evil spirit. Was this legitimate prophecy that Saul was experiencing? Goldman explains that ‘prophesying’ can be interpreted as ‘he raved’ and this is literally translated as ‘he played the prophet,’ which was the displaying of psychical manifestations consisting of excitement and frenzies.⁸⁶ According to this possible interpretation Saul could have been more excited than spirit-led in his prophesying. However, Firth believes the interpretation of ‘raved’ loses the fact that this passage shows a deep parallelism between Saul’s spirit of prophecy in 10:10, 18:11, and 19:23. “The experience at 10:10 was a largely positive sign of Saul’s election, while 19:23 effectively points to his rejection because it occurs in the context of an attempt on David’s life.”⁸⁷ The function of 18:10 seems to be that of a road-sign pointing to the end result of 19:23: Saul’s kingdom has been rejected and the spirit has left him.

While it is incredibly easy to think poorly of Saul, Hertzberg points out that “Saul is by nature extremely susceptible to such attacks in one way or another.” The whole tragedy of his life is linked up with this. We should not fail to notice that we have here an attempt to understand Saul’s nature and forgive him much because of it. The whole passage is suffused with an understanding sympathy.”⁸⁸ Saul’s susceptibility is plainly seen through the entire narrative, for unlike his messengers in ch. 19, Saul stripped off his clothes in response to the spirit. Even in his

⁸⁶ Goldman, 112.

⁸⁷ Firth, 209-210.

⁸⁸ Hertzberg, 158.

rebellion, the spirit of God was still able to affect him in dramatic ways. However, Josephus takes an interesting perspective on Saul's spiritual experience in ch. 19.

These violent and wild agitations of Saul seem to me to have been no other than the demoniacal; and that the same demon which used to seize him, since he was forsaken of God, and which the divine hymns and psalms which were sung to the hard by David used to expel, was now in a judicial way brought upon him, not only to disappoint his intentions against innocent David, but to expose him to the laughter and contempt of all that saw him, heard of those agitations; such violent and wild agitations being never observed in true prophets when they were under the inspiration of the Spirit of God.^{89 90}

Josephus is perhaps reflecting the earlier view that all things, evil and good come from God. This despite the fact that by this point in Jewish history, this was not the only view which existed. Regardless, Saul's reactions seem to be severe in response both to God's spirit and an "evil" one. We might, as did Hertzberg feel a sense of pity concerning this haggard king who seems to be constantly afflicted from without and within. To a certain extent, it must have been maddening for Saul to rely on David for his spiritual peace when his unrest was because of the jealousy he held for the shepherd boy turned warrior.

The conclusion that can be drawn concerning Saul's spiritual affliction is that it was not just simply a mental disorder, though the possibility of some combination is likely. It should not deeply disturb the reader that the description asserts that it was an evil spirit from the Lord. Also, since David's singing and spiritual aptitude was the decisive factor, defeating Saul's spirit, we are left with the impression that Saul's affliction was indeed demonic. Certainly, this experience would have had a profound effect upon David as he witnessed Saul's ravings and escaped his murderous spirit multiple times. The confusing later chapters which give description of Saul prophesying and simultaneously being afflicted give rise to the question of what the definition of

⁸⁹ Josephus, 377.

⁹⁰ Other copies which say which say the Spirit of God came upon Saul, seem not so right here as in Josephus's copy, which mentions nothing of God at all. Nor does Josephus seem to ascribe this impulse and ecstasy of Saul to any other than his old demonical spirit, which on all accounts appears the most probable.

Saul's prophesying was. The interpretation offered by Goldman and Josephus seems preferable to that of Firth. While the parallelism is important, it seems more likely that Saul was experiencing fanatical ecstatic moments rather than a deep spiritual one (hence, the word 'raving' being used to describe his actions). In the end, Saul was clearly easily influenced and very susceptible to the spirits around him. While it is easy to "demonize" Saul in these instances, pity is perhaps most in order. Few can understand the agony that Saul endured during his reign. Who among us could have done better than him? Perhaps the fact that Saul has become a one-dimensional character in Christianity is less a reflection of scripture than of our reluctance, in the west, to tolerate ambiguity and complexity in biblical characters. Perhaps "a resurrection" of his life is warranted.

The Witch of Endor

Of all the odd things which happen in the Bible (which are numerous!), Saul's consultation of the witch of Endor is one of the most intriguing. Why? Was desperation so instilled in Saul that he partook of the very thing he was ordered to destroy according to Deuteronomic law.

Brueggemann paints a grim picture of Saul's mentality at this point.

Saul belongs to the old order. He has no future, only a past....Saul tries to act like the convinced Yahwist that he is. He turns to Yahweh for guidance and assurance...however, heaven is closed to him. Samuel rejected Saul and Yahweh will not deal with him....Saul becomes more desperate. He acts finally like a person with a diagnosed terminal illness. First that person may try all the clinics and experts; when nothing avails, the fearful one may turn to any possible treatment. Any available quack.⁹¹

Oh how the king has fallen! Not only has God stop communicating with Saul but Saul has none given up on God. It is a pitiful picture and arguably the lowest point of Saul's entire life. This event was seemingly foreshadowed when Samuel said, "For rebellion is like the sin of

⁹¹ Brueggemann, 192.

divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king” (1 Sam. 15:23). It cannot be known if these words rung in Saul’s mind, the sad irony is that he swears by Yahweh that he will not harm the woman’s life.

The part if this narrative which is confusing is why Saul, knowingly rebelling against God, would bring up his prophet? Of all people in previous existence to talk to, Saul wanted to bring up the agent who ended his reign and gave it to another? There cannot but be a sense of searching in Saul. His end was to speak to God, but his means were not the means to Yahweh. Once again the ideology of God’s ability to be manipulated is expressed through this attempt to reach Him through an apparent backdoor. When the medium does conjure Samuel up, Hubbard gives an intriguing context: “No ritual is recounted. Perhaps, as suggested, Samuel beats the woman at her own game by coming up as a prophet of the living God before she could conjure up a dead ghost.”⁹² What a powerful and terrifying moment! Tsumura agrees with Hubbard’s assumption that the woman’s “divine” powers to raise the dead were never evoked and something else, something that she didn’t expect happened in the process that frightened her.⁹³ There doesn’t seem to be a break between Saul’s request and Samuel’s appearance, which makes sense in light of the meduim’s apparent late recognition of Saul by Samuel’s presence. This woman realizes that she has no control and screams in horror at the representation of God almighty before her. However, Tertullian disagrees that Samuel or God was involved at all during this episode and state that if Satan could masquerade as an angel of light, why not a man of light?⁹⁴ An interesting perspective, supported by Alexander Heidel,⁹⁵ is that it is no demonic

⁹² David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1st Samuel. Volume 10* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 271.

⁹³ Tsumura, 624.

⁹⁴ Franke, 321.

⁹⁵ Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (1946), 189.

allusion that Saul is on the receiving end of a prophetic denunciation.⁹⁶ Early Jewish interpreters allows the possibility of necromancy or divination; Samuel may indeed have been real. However, today most Jewish interpreters are divided as to the legitimacy of spirit's presence.⁹⁷ A third perspective held by western and Jewish commentators is that medium conjured up nobody and simply wished to disheartened Saul to ensure the success of her countrymen.⁹⁸ While the attempt dive into demonology is beyond the scope of this paper, that Satan or any demonic creature could possess a prophetic knowledge of the future lacks significant scriptural support. However, others may disagree and the topic can be left at an impasse. However, for our purposes, it will be assumed that the person whom Saul saw was indeed Samuel.

Perhaps this abrupt entry sets up Samuel's anger that is directed to Saul. It is also interesting that even she knows that there is only one person who wants Samuel, and that person is King Saul. After Samuel's angry query as to why he is being disturbed, Saul replies with the regurgitated realization that God no longer speaks to him and that there is deep trouble with the Philistines. Another moment of deep irony occurs this scenario: Saul claims God no longer speaks to him and this is apparently a mystery to him as he speaks to a medium. The king was clearly not in his finest moment of cognitive functioning as he asked a spirit why God no longer speaks. Samuel's prophetic reaction is well known; he reminds Saul of his sins and foretells the oncoming death of him and his sons. It is intriguing that Samuel brings up Saul's sins as a reminder, almost displaying the fact that Saul had yet to truly repent of his sins before God. Though there is little room for speculation concerning Saul, one cannot but wonder what would have happened if he had approached his transgressions the way David did in 2 Samuel 24.

⁹⁶ Gordon, 192.

⁹⁷ Berlin, 614.

⁹⁸ Goldman, 169.

Saul's Tragic Death

Given the immense variety of possible deaths that Saul could have experienced, suicide is among the least acceptable. However, we might consider the possibility that this reflects a more western and later Jewish standpoint. At one point Brueggemann describes Saul's death being pitiful.⁹⁹ Arnold describes it as "ignoble."¹⁰⁰ For Gordon it is "inglorious."¹⁰¹ Walton sees it as "cowardly."¹⁰² Yet even Brueggemann admits that he finds the last fleeting moments of Saul's life to be more heroic than pitiful.¹⁰³ Why this dichotomy of opinions? Perhaps even commentators have mixed feelings when witnessing the tragic death of a man with so much previous potential. Early Jewish perspectives and the Bible did not view the suicides recorded in the Old Testament in any negative light.¹⁰⁴ However, Firth opposes Berlin (et al.) stating that "No accounts of suicide in the Bible are considered noble deaths: each is the outworking of tragic circumstances and sin."¹⁰⁵ Both Berlin and Firth claim Jewish sources for their opinions, therefore, the debate reflects a bit of an impasse. In either case, accounts of suicide in scripture are rare and deserve adequate attention. For the best perspective, it would be wise to see how the people surrounding Saul reacted to his death. Did he die pitifully or in honor? According to Tsumura, "The honorable death of the tragic hero Saul was courteously treated by the people who had been greatly benefited from his heroic leadership against their enemy. So Saul's life ends not in dishonor but in honor, as befit the Lord's anointed."¹⁰⁶ We ought not to let the intense drama of this scene escape the reader. Saul, in essence, is a dead man walking since his death

⁹⁹ Brueggemann, 206.

¹⁰⁰ Arnold, 399.

¹⁰¹ Gordon, 203.

¹⁰² Walton, 388.

¹⁰³ Brueggemann, 207.

¹⁰⁴ Berlin, 618.

¹⁰⁵ Firth, 314.

¹⁰⁶ Tsumura, 656.

sentence in 28:19, yet he still walks into battle as the king of the country for which he has bled and will knowingly die. There is no record of him being squeamish since his fit of terror in 28:20 and with cold resolve he carries his sword to his death, from which there is no escaping.

Josephus, the Jewish historian puts it beautifully:

The Philistines became the conquerors, and slew a great number of their enemies, but Saul the king of Israel, and his sons, fought courageously, and with the upmost alacrity, as knowing that their entire glory lay in nothing else but dying honorably, and exposing themselves to the upmost danger from the enemy (for they had nothing else to hope for); so they brought upon themselves the whole power of the enemy, till they were encompassed around and slain, but not before they had killed many of the Philistines.¹⁰⁷

As with Hertzberg's analogy of a captain going down with his ship,¹⁰⁸ a lesser man may have fled from battle, but not Saul, stubborn as he was. His one last effort is typical of the way he lived his life. For the last time takes matters into his own hands (quite literally) and ends his life. It is a fine ending, in the best 'Roman' fashion."¹⁰⁹ Ever since Saul's fall there seems to be a loss of control and an even erratic series of events, but not so with his last moments: "there is a reasoned and controlled quality in this final act—'lest these uncircumcised come and slay me and make mockery of me'—that stands in marked contrast to his earlier rashness."¹¹⁰ Saul went to his death realizing that in a few moments he would stand before almighty God to give an account. Whether there was fear or hope in this moment cannot be known for sure. C.S. Lewis stated that death happens

In the twinkling of an eye, in time too small to be measured, and in any place, all that seems to divide us from can flee away, vanish; leaving us naked before Him, like the first man, like the only man, as if nothing but He and I existed. And since that cannot be

¹⁰⁷ Josephus, 410.

¹⁰⁸ Hertzberg, 231.

¹⁰⁹ Gunn, 111.

¹¹⁰ Frank E. Gaebelien, and Richard P. Polcyn, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 799.

avoided for long, and since it means either bliss or horror, the business of life is to learn to like it. That is the first and great commandment.¹¹¹

There are a multitude of poetic symmetries surrounding Saul's life as well as his death. His glorious career and beginnings starts with the heroic rescue of Jabesh-gilead. His life ends with these very men rescuing his body from the battle field and burying it in honor.¹¹² Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the seven days fasting is unusual practice for mourning.¹¹³ Fokkelman makes the interesting proposal that "the seven days of fasting are a counterpart to the seven days Nahash the Ammonite allowed Jabesh-gilead for a deliverer (who turned out to be Saul) to appear."¹¹⁴ These men must have been honorable for David later invites them to join his cause soon after he hears the news of Saul's death.

First Chronicles 10 gives a viewpoint that is not expressed in Samuel: it explains exactly *why* Saul died. "Saul died for trespass that he had committed against the Lord in not having fulfilled the command of the Lord; moreover, he consulted a ghost to seek advice and did not seek the advice of the Lord; so he had him slain and the kingdom transferred to David son of Jesse (10:13-14)." Stating that this is a definite rewrite of parts of 1 Samuel 28:8-23, some interpreters see this as the chroniclers attempt to contrast David with Saul so that David's reign was a undisputed divine ordination.¹¹⁵ In 1 Samuel 28 it is clear that God is not communicating with Saul, but the chronicler says Saul was punished for not seeking advice, among other things. The writer of 1 Samuel makes no attempt to make Saul's death seem deserved. Instead, it is more

¹¹¹ C S Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 47.

¹¹² Berlin, 618.

¹¹³ Alter, 192.

¹¹⁴ J P Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel. Volume 3* (Van Gorcum, 1981-1990), 192.

¹¹⁵ Berlin, 1734.

as an epic tragic end to the life of Israel's first king.¹¹⁶ *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*: do not speak ill of the dead.

The account of Saul's death does not end in the first book of Samuel because another character is brought into the picture in the first chapter of the second book. A man, an Amalekite, appears claiming to have killed Saul himself! While it appears to introduce a dissonance between the two accounts, the Amalekite claims to have found King Saul barely alive and "finished him off, for I knew that he would never rise from where he was laying" (2 Sam. 1:10). There is a bitter irony in this passage. Saul's main failing and rebellion was his unwillingness to wipe out the Amalekites in chapter fifteen and here it is that the people he couldn't eradicate came and killed him.¹¹⁷ Perhaps it is just coincidence, but there seems to be more poetic justice in this account. As Saul's eyes are dimming in the last moments of his life, he sees a young man and asks him to finish him off...only to realize that this man represents the turning point of life and kingdom before God. This may have evoked fear in this realization or maybe a bitter-sweet smile in the face of the irony and justice which stood before him. Obviously no one knows the exact drama of the story which unfolded, but the Amalekites presence is not extremely random. Goldman explains that the position of the Amalekite in Saul's story give the impression that he was probably a member of Saul's army in some fashion.¹¹⁸ Seemingly, it seems very odd that Saul would have Amalekites in the same troop or army, considering that the reason the kingdom was torn from him related to these people in a direct way. The Amalekite's timing to relate this news to David is almost hilariously poor. David and his men are freshly returned from fighting Amalek and now an Amalekite comes bearing news he ended the king's life. Whether David felt

¹¹⁶ Hertzberg, 321.

¹¹⁷ Berlin, 619.

¹¹⁸ Goldman, 187.

strongly about the slaying of the Lord's anointed or not gives the Amalekite zero affect since this man represents the slayers of David's men just days before.¹¹⁹ This man's fate was sealed from the onset of his appearance. However, Firth would state that his man's ethnicity has nothing to do with his final fate. David's main concern was whether he could be subjected to Israelite justice concerning bloodguilt.¹²⁰ Since the Amalekite has aligned himself in the Israelite social context, he is found guilty and executed. Whether it was because of this man's ethnicity or social context is not expressed explicitly, but it can be supposed that it was combination of factors which led to the quick death of the Amalekite.

If there is any question as to how Saul's death be approached, then let the reader follow the example of David, the man after God's own heart. When David hears the news of Saul's death, what does he do? "This is a moment where a lesser person might have rejoiced and thanked the bearer of good tidings. David, however, is not a lesser person. David responds not in glee but in pathos, for the king is dead."¹²¹ Not only does David grieve, but the lament he writes is touching and beautiful.

A gazelle lies slain on your heights, Israel. How the mighty have fallen! For there the shield of the mighty was despised, the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil. 'From the blood of the slain, from the flesh of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied. Saul and Jonathan—in life they were loved and admired, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.' Daughters of Israel, weep for Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and finery, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold. 'How the mighty have fallen in battle' (2 Sam. 1:19-27)!

This lament does not give the impression that David ever felt that Saul was the villain: the essence of David's lament and Saul's life is that he is Israel's tragic hero.

¹¹⁹ Hertzberg, 237.

¹²⁰ Firth, 323.

¹²¹ Brueggemann, 212.

Discussion

So what? During any exegesis and interpretation process one must continually ask this guiding question. Speculation has its place, but it offers readers little substance to leave with unless there is a direct revelation or application to their current life. In terms of applicability, King Saul's is arguably one of the scariest stories and it directly relates to Christians today in a profound way.

As previously stated, the commonplace opinion that Saul was disadvantaged from the beginning is highly dubious. Hannah's foreshadowing and the intricate way God work in Saul's life shows he had all the opportunities to become as spiritually great as his successor David would one day be. The fact that God worked in Saul's heart and personality to change it shows a divine hand and influence upon his life that all Christians have experienced. But it does not stop there. Soon thereafter Saul experiences the ability to prophesy as a sign that God has indeed confirmed Saul as king over Israel. This is quite the spiritual experience that few of us can boast of in our lifetime. Saul's personality traits were to be admired to certain extent, also. His temperance, mercy, devotion, and courage constitute many of the excellent qualities one would desire in a king of Israel. The list of qualities seen in Deuteronomy 17 show that Saul followed almost all of them, and in one case did so better than his successors would. However, it appeared that Saul still lacked something and as God continued to put him on trial, a weakness was exposed. Chapters thirteen and fifteen show the "crack" in Saul's armor and it appeared God attempted to refine his life through fire, hence the apparently strenuous circumstances in which he was placed. When Saul failed God on both occasions, he displayed the crux of his struggle: he believed God was something to be manipulated and appeased for his own purpose. Influenced by the Ancient Near Eastern culture of his time, this is not deeply surprising. Saul made it clear that

he was a poor king, and spiritual warfare surrounded his life from that point on. To assume that God gave up on Saul and punished him would seem to undermine the redemptive themes constantly displayed throughout scripture. Theologically speaking, it is more likely that God was still trying to bring Saul to him during his whole life. Though Saul's jealousy raged on, in his most desperate hour, whom does he bring up but Samuel? Even in Saul's place of complete despair he goes back to the one representation of God he knew of (though he obviously went through the wrong means to communicate with God). When Saul's life ended, we do not see dishonor, but courage. Here was a man who fulfilled his God-given duty to the end, even though he knew with absolute certainty that his sons and himself would perish that day.

There is no way of knowing where Saul went after his death, but this open question is a sobering one. How could a man whose heart was transformed end so far from his Creator? It is possible that people like Saul may fulfill Jesus' warnings in Matthew 7:21-23:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

There is no doubt that Saul did great things and started off as a good man. But one cannot help but see the connection between Jesus's mention of "prophecy" and Saul's episodes of prophecy. Might Saul indeed be a fulfillment of this warning?

How do we apply these lessons and avoid such a danger? Jesus also warned of another characteristic that Saul seemed to have displayed in his downfall. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus states, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules" (Matt. 15:8-9). Saul's apparent inward belief that God can be manipulated and appeased seems reflected in the prophet's words of warning. While

it is easy to assume that this was Saul's problem and not our own, is that really the truth? Have we not suffered from trying to appease God in our spiritual lives? I have heard of many people who pick up their Bible as result of sin's guilt in an attempt to appease their guilt, not to change their lives. We measure out time spent with God as if meeting a quota rather than as essential to building a relationship with Him. Certainly, there is no need to condemn consistency and faithfulness in Christian disciplines. Furthermore, we all wander through spiritual valleys, from time to time. But are our spiritual activities, like volunteering, going to church, scripture reading, worship, and acting morally our attempts to fulfill a requirement or are they the result of knowing God in a deep way? This is the difference between David and Saul that needs to be noted. One desired knowledge of God and one did not. The Christian life is not a casual walk through the park, but it involves making God the desire of our hearts and -- in all facets -- the God of our lives. This is the challenge the story of Saul gives me: I must daily examine my faith to ask whether it is a reflection of knowing God, or my attempts to appease God so I can get on with life? Honestly, sometimes I do not know the answer. But Saul won't let me forget the question

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