

## **SAMUEL AND SAUL: A NEGATIVE SYMBIOSIS**

**MOSHE REISS**

The prophet Samuel is an enigma. In the Psalms he is compared to Moses (Ps. 99:6). Jeremiah has God saying '*though Moses and Samuel stood before me*' (Jer. 15:1), suggesting the two are God's great intercessors. Samuel reluctantly introduced the monarchy and was concerned that the king should be a vassal of God. No one ever criticized him as a judge going from district to district, a difficult position. The problems this writer sees with him have to do with how the messenger can affect the message.

According to his mother's song (I Sam. 2:10), he was to be an anointed king; instead, he anoints a king who is a failure. He also anoints David in an account in I Samuel, but not in David's story in I Chronicles where Samuel scarcely appears at all. Even then, he almost errs again, by intending to anoint David's oldest brother (16:6-7). In short, he is a prophet who first tries to make his own worthless sons his successors (8:1-3), then chooses a king who turns out to be a failure, and then almost picks the wrong brother to be the next king.

Besides being both judge and prophet, he also acts as priest at the shrine of Shiloh. Yet he is not from the priestly tribe of Levi, but presumably from Ephraim, since his own father is called an *ephraimite* and comes from Mount Ephraim. This makes him a judge-prophet-priest combined; the only one in Israelite history.

His mother Hannah had been barren, and at the shrine of Shiloh she prays for a son. Eli, the priest, assures her that her prayer will be granted, and Hannah vows: '*I will give him to You God for all the days of his life*' (1:11). The mother who had so grieved at her childlessness and prayed so for a son, gave him up as soon as he had been weaned.

*Moshe Reiss, a former resident of New Haven, Connecticut, is a rabbi and has a B.A. from Brooklyn College and a Ph.D. in economics from Oxford University. He was a lecturer at Columbia University, and assistant to the rabbi of Yale University. He is now a resident of Israel, where he writes and lectures, and has written a book Messengers of God: An Ideological and Psychological Perspective, a commentary on the Tanakh ([www.moshereiss.org](http://www.moshereiss.org)). He was recently a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.*

She names this son "Samuel" [*Shmu'el*], because *'I asked the Lord for him'* (1:20). The word "*sha'ul*" means "asked for" or "borrowed." As a proper name, the English form is "Saul." When Hannah brings Samuel to Eli to consecrate him to God she says: *'For this child I prayed and the Lord has granted me what I asked [or: borrowed] from Him. And I, too, give him back to the Lord for all his life, lent to the Lord'* (1:27-28).<sup>1</sup> Hannah could be construed to say "I am this child's surrogate mother for God and I now return him to God, for he is God's special son." The text suggests a dual ownership of the "gift" child by God and Hannah. Who was *the anointed one* to whom Hannah refers in the last verse of her song of thanksgiving (2:10) – an apparent prefiguring of the anointed king? And did Hannah remain in Shiloh to protect her ownership? *And Elkanah went to Ramah to his house* (2:11) – Elkanah is named here, but not Hannah.

#### SAUL

The word *sha'ul* appears four times (1:27-28), in grammatical variations, with an interesting play on the word. Why, then, was the son named "Samuel" and not "Sha'ul"? Later, when the people ask him to choose a king (I Samuel 8), he anoints Saul [*Sha'ul*] and, paradoxically, the two become antagonists. Are the people asking for a king to lead them instead of a prophet? And, if Saul fails as king, is it because Samuel had failed as a prophet in anointing him?

Saul is introduced as the tallest and handsomest man in Israel. His father Kish, a rich man, tells Saul to take a servant and go find some asses that had gone astray. Saul is not then a youth; his son Jonathan is an adult or close to it. Kish might have sent the servant alone, but Saul obeys his father and goes after the asses. After a time, Saul tells the servant they should return home, lest Kish worry about them. Could he not have sent a message to his father? The servant then suggests that they consult a *man of God* in the town. We had been told that Samuel traveled all Israel and judged (7:16) and spoke *to the whole House of Israel* (7:3), yet while the servant knows about him and his whereabouts Saul does not. Apparently one needed a fee for the seer, for Saul says he has nothing to give him. The servant, however, has a quarter of a shekel. It is the servant who seems knowledgeable and decisive (and carries the silver), while Saul seems passive, submissive even to his own servant.

## SAMUEL AND SAUL: A NEGATIVE SYMBIOSIS

Nearing the town, the two men ask some young girls whether the seer is there, and they tell them where to find him. Even young girls know about the seer. Saul approaches and asks: Where is the seer? He does not recognize the seer, and the seer does not recognize the future king without God's direct statement.

The previous day, God had told Samuel *'I will send you a king tomorrow.'* As soon as Samuel sees Saul, God tells him this is the one (9:17). Yet when God chooses David (16:6-7), He suggests that Samuel may have chosen Saul because he was tall and handsome. This seeming contradiction between the two passages is a problem. Does it represent something in Samuel's subconscious mind? Samuel tells Saul that he will meet a band of prophets and he should prophesy with them. (This will make him the only king of Israel or Judah who will also be a prophet.) Did Samuel, as the foremost prophet of the time, seek to enroll Saul among the lesser prophets to keep him subservient? Given what we can discern of their characters, it would be difficult for Samuel, a Majestic Man, not to feel superior to the submissive Saul.

Next, Samuel tells Saul, *'When these signs will come to you, do for yourself what your hand will find'* (10:7), but it is not clear just what Saul is to do. Was it something with the prophets? In a crucial statement, Samuel instructs Saul: *'Go to Gilgal and wait for me for seven days until I come and to instruct you what you are to do next'* (10:8). The connection between these commands in verses 7 and 8 is not defined.

Saul takes his leave of Samuel, and indeed meets a band of prophets and prophesizes with them. A man asks *'Is Saul too among the prophets? And who are their fathers?'* This could be a query whether Saul's father is now the authoritative Kish or the commanding Samuel. In Samuel's Delphic-like statement informing Saul of his elevation to kingship, he uses the term *'it belongs to the house of your father.'* Who indeed is the father?

## SAMUEL AND SAUL

At the start of his reign, King Saul was able to muster 330,000 men to fight the Ammonites (11:8). Later on, however, he has only 3,000 against a Philistine force *as numerous as the sand on the seashore* (13:5). (While the 330,000 seems an exaggerated figure, the narrator chooses to use that figure and then use 3,000 in the next battle.) His men are frightened and deserting

their commander and King. The judge/savior now seems unable to raise a sufficient force to fight the Philistines.

Saul waits at Gilgal for Samuel to bring the sacrifice and pray for God's help. He lingers for seven days, as his men desert him until he is left with only 600. Finally, he prepares the sacrifice himself. As soon as he has completed the offering, Samuel arrives and demands: *'What have you been doing?'* (13:11). Saul explains that while he waited in vain for Samuel his force was dwindling; he had to have God's help, and therefore had to perform the sacrifice. Samuel retorts, *'You have acted foolishly in not keeping the commandments that the Lord your God laid upon you. Otherwise the Lord would have established your dynasty over Israel forever . . . . The Lord will seek a man after His own heart'* (13:13-14).

It is difficult to understand this development. What indeed has Saul done to incur Samuel's wrath and – according to Samuel – God's wrath? He did not wait for the priest to make the sacrifice. In the past, before Saul was crowned, Samuel had told him to wait in Gilgal for seven days for a sacrifice. But could that old request still be valid now, at a desperate stage of a war against the nation's enemy? If Samuel still held it valid, then more questions arise: Why at so critical a point did he wait until the last possible minute to arrive – and after the sacrifice had been completed? Saul had waited the seven days, and Samuel had failed to come. When Saul, therefore, went on with the sacrifice, just which of "God's commands" did he break? Did not David and Solomon prepare sacrifices (II Sam. 6:17; 8:18; I Kg. 3:3)? We have noted earlier that Samuel does not appear to be from the tribe of Levi, so did he usurp the priestly position? God does not speak in this chapter. It is only Samuel who is issuing commands. Is he according Divine status to his own orders? Did Samuel, perhaps, deliberately delay his arrival until he was given an excuse to condemn Saul?

Samuel admonishes Saul that *'you have lost the dynasty that the Lord would have established'* (13:13). Does this suggest that he meant to be only a savior/judge, not really a king whose position would descend to his heirs? (That would have been in contrast to Samuel himself, who tried to appoint his own sons as his successors [8:1-3]). Were certain conditions imposed on Saul, and if so what were they? And, how does Samuel know God has rejected Saul and has decided to choose another king? (Later, in 15:1, that re-

jection seems to have been forgotten.) Is it Samuel, not God, who has disowned Saul? If so, he does it at the moment when Saul, by acting in a priestly role, seems to have diminished Samuel's status. Saul, who came to the throne as the diffident son of Kish, cannot even reply to this attack by Samuel; an attack demeaning to the King of Israel. Such is the unbecoming conduct of Samuel, the judge/prophet/priest who compares himself to Moses (12:6).

Chapter 15 begins *'I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king of His people Israel'* (v. 1). This is a very odd introduction given that, according to Samuel, God disowned Saul's dynasty. Samuel tells Saul of God's request. We do not hear God himself, and therefore do not know His exact words. Let us review Samuel's prophetic relationship with God.

In Chapter 3:9, Eli instructs the young Samuel on how to address the Lord, but in 3:10, Samuel does not entirely follow the instructions. In Chapter 8, God tells Samuel three times to listen to the voice of the people and accept a king (vv. 7, 9, 22). Samuel, however, does not listen. Rather, he tries to dissuade the people from wanting a king, and sends them home. He does not even admit to them that God has given consent for them to have a king (8:22), and when God tells him to announce rules of kingship Samuel he is very selective and again attempts to dissuade the people.

In Chapter 10:1, Samuel anoints Saul as *nagid* [ruler] and not as *melekh* [king] as God specifically instructed him in 8:22. The difference between *nagid* and *melekh* in ancient Israel is unclear, but God's orders are perfectly clear. Furthermore, Samuel tries to intimidate the people into rejecting a monarchy (vv. 17-19), as he does again in Chapter 12. Then, in Chapter 13, declaring that he speaks in the name of God, he dismisses Saul and his dynasty – but we do not hear God's word. (By Chapter 15 the declaration appears to be forgotten.) Thus, when Samuel declares "God's words," we have a right and an obligation to be cautious.

Samuel instructs Saul, as the word of God: *'Now go, attack Amalek, and put under herem, all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!'* (15:3).<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word *herem* is ambiguous. A Hebrew-English dictionary defines it as "to confiscate, to excommunicate, to dedicate, to destroy, or to dry up."<sup>3</sup> Philip Stern defines it as "consecration to or through destruction."<sup>4</sup> Jacob Milgrom, the translator of the JPS commentary on the Book of Numbers, says

*herem* means a "devoted thing."<sup>5</sup> Samuel mandates a sequence; first put the Amalekites in *herem*, then kill them. If *herem* here connotes destruction, then the two orders are merely repetitious. Otherwise, there are two separate and different commands here; first consecrate the Amalekites and then kill them. We will see the importance of this shortly. Whether the command(s) indeed originate from God, or this is a "mishearing" by Samuel, will never be known.

Saul makes war on Amalek and crushes it. Agag, King of Amalek, is captured and brought to Gilgal. The best of the sheep and cattle are reserved for sacrifice; the rest are slaughtered, as are the asses and camels. Now we have the direct word of God: *'I regret that I made Saul King, for he has turned away from Me and has not carried out My commands.'* Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night (15:10). We are told that Samuel cried, but not the content of the cry. Did he implore God to forgive the offender, as Moses always did?

Presumably, God intended Saul to kill Agag, and the cattle, immediately, rather than bring them to Gilgal. If this indeed is a valid interpretation, then either Samuel misrepresented God in using the word *herem*, or God was intentionally being ambiguous. The use of two words suggests two different commands, distinguishing between "*herem*" and "kill." When God told Joshua to put the people of Ai under *herem*, the people were destroyed, the king was brought to Joshua, Joshua hanged him and built an altar.<sup>6</sup>

Samuel comes to Gilgal and Saul greets him: *'Blessed are you of the Lord, I have fulfilled the Lord's commandments.'* Samuel sarcastically replies, *'Then what is this bleating of sheep in my ears?'* (15:13-14). Samuel accuses him of disobeying the Lord, and Saul rejects the accusation, saying, *'But I did obey the Lord . . . [I] have captured Agag of Amalek, and I proscribed Amalek, and the troops took from the spoil some sheep and oxen . . . to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal'* (15:20-21). He argues that he obeyed the command by putting those not killed into *herem*. Samuel retorts that it is better to obey than to sacrifice, for rebellion is idolatry. Saul, bested once again by Samuel, says, *'I have sinned. I pray you to pardon my sin.'* Samuel responds: *'The Glory [God] of Israel does not deceive or change His mind, for He is not human that He should change His mind'* (15:29).

Saul assumed that he had carried out the command of the Lord. He had not yet killed King Agag, or slaughtered all of the cattle, because he meant to slay Agag in front of the altar. Some of the beasts, he noted, had been taken by the people, who perhaps wanted them for themselves. He was strong enough a leader to command them to sacrifice these beasts placed under *herem*. His inadequacy in leadership may have derived in part from some lack of core identity, and in part from the way Samuel had undermined his position since the start of his reign. Nevertheless, he got the cattle to the altar and devised a plan to sacrifice them.

Samuel may have created Saul's problem by suggesting there were two separate commands in "*herem*" and "kill." Now the prophet does not give the King any benefit of the doubt. He indicts him for rebellion and idolatry. Even if Saul had disobeyed God (which, given the ambiguity of the situation, he may not have done), he had not committed idolatry.

Samuel at this time avers that '*God does not deceive or change His mind.*' Yet, God has just said (according to Samuel) that He had changed his mind about bestowing the kingship on Saul. Moses had often persuaded God to withdraw decrees of punishment. Samuel, who compared himself to Moses, does not appeal to God to forgive Saul. It seems as though Samuel himself cannot forgive the people for rejecting him, and Saul is the embodiment of that rejection.

Samuel's final mission before his death is to find a future king among the sons of Jesse. God tells him, '*I have decided on one of his sons to be king . . . I will make known to you what you shall do; you shall anoint for Me the one I point out to you*' (16:1, 3). The use of the pronoun "I" in these two verses may imply that only God, neither Samuel nor the people, will choose the next king. Samuel goes to Jesse and interviews his sons in the order of their birth. The eldest, Eliab, is tall and handsome, and Samuel supposes '*Surely, the Lord's anointed stands before me*' (v. 6).<sup>7</sup> Once again, Samuel is impatient for the Lord's voice, and jumps to his own conclusion. Eliab is tall and handsome as was Saul, selected for outward appearance rather than inner qualities. One might expect that a seer would have learned from his experience with Saul not to repeat his earlier error. The Lord says to Samuel, '*Pay no attention to his appearance or his stature, for I have rejected him. For not as man sees does the Lord see, man sees only what is visible, but the Lord sees into the*

*heart'* (v. 7). Is God stating that Samuel or the people were unduly impressed by Saul's presence? The word "see" is repeated six times in this chapter before God finally tells Samuel, *'This is the one'* (v. 12).

This is the last encounter between God and Samuel, and it might be seen as a damning indictment of Samuel, after he had been a "seer" for decades. What kind of seer has Samuel indeed been?

#### CONCLUSION

The question of Saul is best posed by Peter Gunn: "Does Saul fail as king because of his own inner inadequacy as a human being, or because he is brought low essentially by external forces or circumstances?"<sup>8</sup> Gunn's conclusion is that Saul is "an innocent victim of God." Edwin Good puts it that Saul is "a man not fitted for a job that should not have been opened."<sup>9</sup> Saul is inadequate as a king (and also as a father). Samuel has his own self-interest in the king's failure.

The King of Israel was to be a vassal-king under God. A relationship among God, king, priest and prophet had to be developed, and that required a very strong ruler. Saul, who lacked self-esteem, was not that leader. Samuel might have been a father figure who encouraged him, but instead he meant to destroy Saul and the very idea of monarchy. Saul needed his help, but got only his antagonism.

[Saul] remains elusive, a politically and psychologically persuasive conjunction of suggestive contradictions: inept, foolishly impulsive, self-doubting, pathetically unfit for kingship and also a heroic and poignant figure, especially maligned by Samuel and by circumstances, sustained by a kind of lumbering integrity even as he entangles himself in a net of foolhardy and self-destructive acts.<sup>10</sup>

He could not compete with Samuel, and when the time came he could not compete with David.

Saul's kingship was thrust upon him; he never sought it and tried to evade it. Had he been chosen by God? Or by Samuel? Or, since the people demanded a king, did God allow them to choose one by lot? The reward for their demand was a flawed king, installed by a prophet who felt rejected by the people. Saul as king is his own worst enemy; Samuel, like a jilted lover,

orchestrates his tragedy. David Gunn stated a hostile God said, "let us see what we shall see."<sup>11</sup> It is clear that Saul is fated to fail.

NOTES

1. Translation by the author.
2. JPS translates *herem* as "proscribe."
3. Chaim Shachter, *The New Universal English-Hebrew Dictionary*, Vol. I (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Publishing House, 1987) p. 264.
4. Philip Stern, *The Biblical Herem* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) p. 1.
5. *The JPS Torah Commentary on Numbers*, translation and commentary by Jacob Milgrom (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) p. 428.
6. In Joshua 8:2, God tells Joshua to do to the people of Ai what I commanded you to do to the people of Jericho. When we go back to the story of Jericho we find Rahab the harlot, who hid Joshua's spies telling them that God decided to put the people of Jericho into *herem* (Josh. 2:10). She, of course, is saved from that fate, as are the Kenites that Saul saves. The fact that he is not criticized for that tells us he was intended to use his own reason.
7. Given that sibling rivalry is found in the Bible, should we be surprised that David will displace Saul who, like Eliab, is tall and handsome?
8. David Gunn, "The Fate of King Saul," *JSOT* 14 (1980) pp. 115, 123.
9. E.M. Good, *Irony In The Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965) p. 58.
10. Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) p. 151.
11. B.O. Long, ed., "The Story of King Saul," in *Images Of Man And God* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981) p. 110.

---

-----

-----

QUESTIONS from Rabbi Hayyim Hal-  
pern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

- 1. Do you believe that Jacob ever discovered the truth about Joseph's disappearance? [Gen. 47:28 - 50:26]**
- 2. We usually think of women in the Bible as playing secondary parts. Exodus 1-5 is exceptional in the number of women acting in crucial roles. Which of them can you recall?**
- 3. The Midrash notes that Pharaoh was extremely zealous to pursue the Israelites. Which phrase in Exodus 14 is the basis for this?**

MOSHE REISS

RESPONSES ON PAGE:

57