

Introduction

THE EMERGENCE OF POLITICS

The literary qualities of the Book of Samuel are rightfully considered among the supreme achievements of biblical literature.¹ It is no exaggeration to say that the author of Samuel produced what is still the best book ever written in the Hebrew language. But alongside his genius as a storyteller, this anonymous author was also an uncannily astute observer of politics and the complexities of power.² What makes his book not only a literary masterpiece but also a profound work of political thought is the way in which the beautifully crafted narratives cut to the core of human politics, bringing into relief deep structural themes that transcend the particular events and fates of the book's main protagonists and that remain resonant wherever and whenever political power is at stake. This dimension of the author's achievement, which is what makes Samuel such a penetrating and endlessly fertile exploration of political life, will be our principal focus in this book.

We part company, as a consequence, with the many gifted biblical scholars who have interpreted the Book of Samuel as a political text with partisan aims. Such scholarship has long debated whether the book is pro-David or anti-David, and whether its source was among Saul's surviving loyalists or instead among proponents of a strictly antimonarchical ideology. In our opinion, these debates, while interesting and important in their own right, can distract from the book's theoretical significance. Because the author, as we hope to show, remains

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rather critical of all sides and does not paint a flattering portrait of any of the work's principal characters, it is impossible, in our view, to pin down the party or faction that the book is meant to endorse. This quandary has led to two results in the scholarship. Some scholars have ascribed the text to a variety of authors. When the partisan outlook changes, they argue, a promonarchical author has replaced an antimonarchical one or vice versa, or a pro-Davidic voice has been supplanted by an anti-Davidic source.³ This multiple-author hypothesis, which assumes that clashing political manifestos are stitched together in the surviving text, fails to do justice, we believe, to the unity and brilliance of the authorial voice connecting many of the book's narratives. Another group of scholars, by contrast, has attributed the narratives of the Book of Samuel more or less to a single authorial voice while speculating, for example, that an ambiguous portrait of David might actually serve as an apology for his conduct.⁴ Our focus is different. In order to concentrate on the trenchant understanding of power woven consciously and deftly into the narrative, we have done our best to free the text from questions such as whether it defends or attacks David and which contemporary faction it was composed to flatter or support.

In fact, the Book of Samuel does not display a one-sided allegiance to any of the political factions that competed for power at the time. Its author didn't write a political book, therefore, but rather a book *about* politics. Every reading of a work this rich is destined to be tentative and partial, and ours is certainly no exception. But by liberating the Book of Samuel from the search for a partisan agenda and by focusing instead on its copious insights into the nature of political power in general, we hope to shed at least some new light on its outstanding brilliance and originality.

We have not attempted to write a biography of David. Nor have we surveyed the ways David has been portrayed in subsequent literature and art.⁵ Rather than offering character studies

of Saul and David, we emphasize the author's searching look into the effects of sovereign power on those who wield it, trying to tease out what the book implies, for example, about the way the newly emergent institution of hereditary monarchy shaped the motivations as well as the actions of Israel's first two kings. Our book does have a hero, of course. But this hero is not one of the protagonists of the Book of Samuel, be it David or Saul. Our hero is rather the author of this magnificently imagined history of Saul and David's sequential reigns, an author-hero who shines through his insights into the complex workings of political power.

The prestige and authority of the Bible in general and the Book of Samuel in particular have inspired numerous readers, past and present, to seek the origins of modern Western political ideas, including republicanism and egalitarianism, in the ancient biblical tradition.⁶ We have not joined this worthwhile search for precursors of modern moral ideals in the political culture of an ancient kingdom. We have chosen instead to concentrate on the fine-grained phenomenology of political power so astutely elaborated by our anonymous author. What makes the book so alive to the touch even today are not its normative teachings, if any, but rather its analysis of political power, an analysis that we believe to apply not only here and now but whenever and wherever structures of power exist.⁷

Such a rich and subtle grasp of politics finds few antecedents in the literature of the ancient Near East or in biblical literature prior to the Book of Samuel. Unlike other dimensions of biblical religion, the book's relentlessly observant and critical gaze into the dynamics of power was neither an elaboration on, nor a repudiation of, themes and concerns present in the myths and narratives of Israel's neighbors.⁸ In the Book of Samuel we hear a fresh and original voice. It is not merely the earliest extant document of its kind but arguably the earliest ever written, and one that exhibits a startling maturity of insight. When first encountering its prescient grasp of political reality, one immediately

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realizes that the stories the text graphically recounts are anything but initial tentative steps in an inchoate thought process awaiting a more sophisticated elaboration and refinement. Rather, the book's insights into the dynamics of power contested, gained, abused, and lost possess that rare clarity, completeness, and depth that can probably be achieved only at a moment of origin, that is, only when a new reality bursts forth in a way that cannot be repeated. Even today, the book rivets its readers with an overwhelming sense of revelation. It conveys something utterly new and unprecedented.

Spectacular acts of human creativity can never be fully explained as products of their historical context.⁹ But our author's insights into politics were made possible—though not necessary—by a revolutionary transformation in biblical political theology. A dramatic shift opened up new conceptual and experiential space within which the book's original perspective on political reality was able to emerge and develop. This theological shift and its inner logic is reflected and elucidated in the book itself, which not only introduced a new way of talking about power, but also dramatized the conditions that made such a novel way of speaking and thinking possible. It will be useful to preface our discussion, therefore, with an analysis of this prior momentous shift in political theology and the new space it opened up, always taking our lead from the way in which the author of the Book of Samuel presented both.

In the political theology typical of the great land powers surrounding ancient Israel, the king was either a God, an incarnation of a God, or a semi-mythic human king who was elected by the gods to serve as a necessary mediator between the divine order and the human world. Though there was certainly a spectrum of monarchic ideologies in the ancient Near East, kingship was not generally perceived as a historical institution that was consciously chosen at a certain critical moment in time out of the imperatives of communal life and in full recognition of the onerous burdens of taxation and conscription that would inevitably

be imposed by a human sovereign as the price of organizing collective defense.¹⁰ Elsewhere, for the most part, monarchy was understood as part of the permanent furniture of the cosmos itself. The legitimacy of monarchy, in such cases, depended more on the mythic order than on events unfolding in historical time.¹¹ In the ancient Near East, broadly speaking, the king not only governed the political community but, as a semicosmic force, played a crucial role in maintaining the order of nature itself. He did this in his ritually performed priestly role. In the canonized scribal accounts of the ancient Near Eastern kings and their deeds, the deification of kingship and general veneration of political authority meant that an unblinking look into the moral trespasses, ambiguous virtues, and personal shortcomings of monarchs and emperors was exceedingly rare.¹²

The biblical political theology that preceded the dramatic events recounted in the Book of Samuel upended this ancient Near Eastern formula. Rather than declaring that “the king is a God,” the new theology postulated instead that “God is the king.” The sole or exclusive kingship of God was fundamentally irreconcilable with a consolidated political monarchy. The kingship of God entailed, as we see in the biblical Book of Judges, a divine monopoly on sovereign authority that essentially precluded the creation of self-sustaining political institutions.¹³ In line with this new and revolutionary political theology stipulating the exclusive kingship of God, the period described in the Book of Judges was populated by heroic leaders of a special type, men who arose intermittently as charismatic saviors to deliver the Israelite tribes temporarily from their oppressors.

Such warrior-chieftains did not wield the two powers that classically define political sovereignty, namely the powers to draft and to tax. They materialized suddenly, as God-sent deliverers intervening in a violent, turbulent, and lawless historical scene without any kind of traditional legitimacy or prior planning and preparation. They summoned the tribes to follow them into battle while, for the most part, inspiring a negligible minority of genuine

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followers whose battlefield cohesion could not survive the leader's death.¹⁴ According to the Book of Judges, God's miraculous presence in history was manifested not only in his periodically fielding such leader-saviors, but also in promoting their possible successes. In this pre-Samuel period, not only was no standing army established, but no enduring unity of purpose or centralization of political-military power was achieved or enforced.¹⁵

Such a divinely inspired "savior style" of crisis leadership precluded the creation of a reliable, politically organized continuity of power. In such a context, no single stable ruler capable of asserting his supreme authority over tribes and clans that were often embroiled in blood feuds could emerge. But the enduring existence of a supreme authority is the most elemental underpinning of any human political order. This is because leaderless interregna will inevitably invite attacks by foreign enemies and spark violent succession struggles, civil wars, or even a shattering of the community. Such tangible dangers associated with political power vacuums explain why all political entities aim first and foremost to organize a smooth transfer of power from one leader to the next, with no gaps and no violent factional contestation. Dynastic monarchy offers one possible solution to the problem of regime continuity in a dangerous and unpredictable world. Through the bloodline of the king's family, hopes for a nonviolent transfer of power may just possibly be fulfilled.

The unqualified rejection of dynastic succession in the Book of Judges was echoed in God's direct political rule as apotheosized in the revolutionary new theology of "God is the king." Hostility to hereditary kingship was powerfully expressed in Gideon's answer to the men of Israel who longed for monarchy and the continuity of political sovereignty that monarchy seemed to promise: "And the men of Israel said, 'Rule over us, you and also your son and also your son's son, for you have rescued us from the hand of Midian.' And Gideon said to them, 'I will not rule over you nor will my son rule over you. The LORD

will rule over you’” (Judges 8:22–23). From the perspective of the pre-Samuel political theology of the Book of Judges, then, the absence of a widely accepted supreme ruler in the interval between one leader and the next was no vacuum at all. It was filled by the everlasting presence of God, the one true king.

Although the new political theology implied by “God is the king” was radically opposed to the traditional political theology that still dominated most contemporary political communities in the surrounding Near East, it too discouraged a probing and unsqueamishly critical examination of the ruling power. Human politics in the full sense of the word did not and could not exist in such a state of divinely supervised anarchy, a weak political order in which factious tribes were only tenuously knit together by a shared religious cult administered by territorially dispersed prophets and priests.¹⁶ Although God the sovereign was sometimes disobeyed, he was certainly no subject for systematic critical scrutiny and political analysis.

The conditions for the emergence of genuine *political* thought, as a result, were established only when a third alternative emerged between these two radically opposed outlooks, between “the king is a God” and “God is the king.” The first part of the Book of Samuel narrates, among other events, a dramatic break from God’s direct sovereignty over political events. This is the essence of the shift from “God is the king” to “the king is not a God.” That theological change allowed for the establishment and recognition of purely human sovereignty which, in turn, gave birth to a vividly insightful way of thinking and speaking about the newly emergent and self-sustaining political reality.

In the Samuel narrative, both the shift away from the political theology of the Book of Judges and the initial appearance of monarchy in Israel are presented as events occurring in human history. They do not belong to the mythic past. The biblical king, enthroned before our eyes, is a thoroughly human being, not a God. He is not a pillar of the cosmic order. He plays a negligible and wholly dispensable role in religious ritual, does not convey

divine commands to his people, does not maintain the order of nature, and is not the prime lawgiver.

Admittedly, mythical conceptions of monarchy are not entirely absent from the biblical material. The royal hymns in the Book of Psalms (chapters 2, 45, and 110), for example, offer striking examples of a political theology very similar to that of other communities in the ancient Near East.¹⁷ Yet the Book of Samuel reflects a radically different conception. For one thing, monarchy is described as emerging rather late in the history of Israel. It arose under emergency conditions, from the worldly needs of a rickety confederation of tribes that, at this particular moment, were seeking protection from the better-armed and better-trained Philistines—a new and threatening enemy nation that had dealt them one defeat after another. To the Israelites, pressed by an aggressive and militarily superior adversary, God the king seemed absent and remote. The people therefore yearned for a human sovereign able to muster and command a visible standing army, a worldly sovereign who could marshal and coerce them into a coordinated military response to a lethally powerful external foe.¹⁸ They demanded that Samuel, the last of the judges, establish a dynastic monarchy to ensure continuity of sovereignty over all Israel through the bloodline of a king. The monarchy for which they were pleading would thus answer the people's two most pressing and existential political concerns: the need for unity and the need for continuity. In this telling of the worldly founding of biblical kingship, the people, united by consanguinity and their covenant with God, preceded the monarchy and caused it to be instituted. The kingship was not a mythic force, therefore, but rather an institution that was voluntarily embraced for strategic reasons in historical time. Its emergence reflected the people's incapacity or refusal to keep faith with the radical theological notion of God's exclusive kingship when faced with the threat of extinction or enslavement by a mighty foreign army.

Samuel, ancient Israel's last premonarchical leader, having planned for his own wayward children to succeed him in the role of prophet and judge, was mortally offended by the people's request for a worldly king. He felt personally rejected:

And it happened when Samuel grew old that he set his sons up as judges for Israel. And the name of his firstborn son was Joel and the name of his second born was Abijah—judges in Beersheba. But his sons did not go in his ways and they were bent on gain and took bribes and twisted justice. And all the elders of Israel assembled and came to Samuel at Ramah. And they said to him, "Look, you yourself have grown old and your sons have not gone in your ways. So now, set over us a king to rule us, like all the nations." And the thing was evil in Samuel's eyes when they said, "Give us a king to rule us." And Samuel prayed to the LORD. And the LORD said to Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for it is not you they have cast aside but Me they have cast aside from reigning over them. Like all the deeds they have done from the day I brought them up from Egypt to this day, forsaking Me and serving other gods, even so they do as well to you." (1 Sam 8:1–5)

Wallowing in a sense of personal betrayal, Samuel failed to perceive the larger and more momentous turning away implicit in the people's demand for a worldly king. God needed to remind Samuel that what was at stake was the kingship of God himself, and that in the people's request for a king like all the other nations, God the king was being popularly dethroned. Earlier in Israel's history, Gideon was faced with the same demand by the people, and he dismissively replied that kingship was an exclusive attribute of God, nontransferable to human beings. Any attempt to establish a human monarch was therefore idolatrous, since idolatry is the transfer of attributes and gestures that are exclusive to God to other beings. It is no

wonder that God himself, in his words to Samuel, experienced the new request as yet another example of his people forsaking him in order to worship other gods.

Elsewhere in biblical literature, such an idolatrous violation of divine exclusivity would naturally provoke God's anger and jealousy. At this point, therefore, we might have expected a harsh denunciation by God of the people and their implicitly idolatrous plea for a human king. And yet God, in a startling act of self-limitation, abdicated his monopoly on the throne. By commanding Samuel to fulfill the people's request, God renounced his exclusive supremacy in the political domain. It is as if God understood that the worldly and especially the military consequences of his monopolistic claim to kingship, which implicitly denied the possibility of a self-sustaining political sphere, were simply too punishing for the people to bear. For a precarious community surviving in an unforgiving environment, the vacuum that opened in the intervals between episodic savior-leaders, and the incapacity of such transient chieftains to impose unity of action on a flimsy, fractious tribal confederation or to establish a standing organized force during their occasional appearances, created conditions of ultimate political anxiety that made God's direct kingship untenable. God had to readjust to human expectations. In so doing, he relinquished what had been his exclusive claim on sovereignty, thereby exculpating human kingship from the charge of idolatry. Between the collapse of the utopian ideology of God's kingship on the one hand and the refusal to deify the king on the other, a semiautonomous sphere of human politics was born. God is not the king, and the king will be accepted only so long as he renounces all claims to be a god.

Although magnanimous, in a way, God's remarkable renunciation of kingship was by no means free of a residual bitterness. This bitterness is essential to the basic attitude of the author of the Book of Samuel toward the human political sphere. It permeates the book's systematically ambivalent perspective on politics as a sphere of action indispensable to the material and

spiritual survival of human communities but also originating in a troubling and haunting compromise. With a lingering sense of betrayal, God instructed Samuel not only to yield to the elders' and the people's demand for a king like all the other nations, but also to "solemnly warn them and tell them the practice of the king that will reign over them" (1 Sam 8:9). Samuel's catalog of the king's onerous privileges, proclaimed at the very moment when the unified Israelite polity came into being, introduces the reader to the fundamentally problematic nature of mankind's political project. For one thing, if the sovereign amasses enough power to provide security for the people against their enemies, he will also be strong enough to threaten and oppress the people he is supposed to protect. Indeed, the very act of organizing the people for self-defense inescapably involves a painful degree of tyrannical subordination, resource-extraction, and unfreedom.

These were the privileges of any worldly king as Samuel bitingly listed them to the people following God's request:

And Samuel said all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking of him a king. And he said, "This will be the practice of the king who will reign over you: Your sons he will take and set for *himself* in his chariots and in *his* cavalry, and some will run before *his* chariots. He will set for himself captains of thousands and captains of fifties, to plow *his* ground and reap *his* harvest and to make *his* implements of war and the implements of *his* chariots. And your daughters he will take as confectioners and cooks and bakers. And your best fields and your vineyards and your olive trees he will take and give to *his* servants. And your seed crops and your vineyards he will tithe and give to *his* courtiers and to *his* servants. And your best male and female slaves and your cattle and your donkeys he will take and use for *his* tasks. Your flocks he will tithe, and as for you, you will become *his* slaves." (1 Sam 8:10–17, italics added)

In this passage, Samuel states the obvious about worldly kings. They possess the privilege to tax, which means to confiscate their subjects' property, and to draft, which means the right to enlist able-bodied young men in the army whether they wish to serve or not. These immense extractive powers are constitutive aspects of any political sovereignty, be it a monarchy or a liberal state. Without them, there can be no defense against predatory enemies. And yet, for all the good these powers can achieve, they are also very likely to be redirected toward purposes unrelated to a people's own safety and well-being. The critical tone informing the recitation of this stock list is subtly conveyed by Samuel's repetitive use of the third-person singular. The king will exploit these privileges for *his* wars, *his* chariots, *his* fields.¹⁹ The manpower and property he will extract from his people will not necessarily be put to use as efficient instruments for the protection of the common good by defensive wars. Rather, the powers that are presumably granted to the monarchy for collective purposes may well be commandeered to serve his personal or dynastic interests. While pursuing his own glory, the king and his immediate loyal entourage will be sorely tempted to enslave the very people whom the monarchy was allegedly established to defend from being enslaved by enemy powers.

The people made their choice with full knowledge, after ample warning. They did not accept and celebrate worldly monarchy in a bout of absentmindedness, naively unaware of its toilsome burdens and trade-offs. They reasoned that subordination to a king was better than conquest by an enemy. As a result, God, who has been betrayed and in response has willingly resigned his monopoly on kingship, warns the people that he is not going to intervene on their behalf. "And you will cry out on that day before your king whom you chose for yourselves and he will not answer you on that day" (1 Sam 8:18). The people will be left to their own devices. They will be granted political autonomy, allowed or compelled to pay the price of their choice after having been duly informed of the consequences. God's self-removal

from the political sphere is therefore dramatic and consequential, if not definitive or complete. Though God did not seek to punish the people when acceding to their request for him to relinquish his monopoly, his refusal to intervene at that moment of crisis indirectly set the naturalistic machinery of punishment in motion. This is what it means to deny that God's self-limitation was unreservedly magnanimous. It left a rueful residue of misgiving behind.

Neither Samuel's warnings about the king's inevitable abuse of royal privileges nor God's threat to refrain from coming to the people's rescue when they fully understand the suffering inflicted by their king was enough to overcome the people's acute anxiety about the lethal consequences of the breakdown of political authority in the intervals between successive savior-leaders. Single-minded in their desire to bridge these perilous stretches of leaderless anarchy between charismatic saviors, the people disregarded Samuel's warning: "And the people refused to heed Samuel's voice and they said, 'No! A king there will be over us! And we, too, shall be like all the nations and our king will rule us and go out before us and fight *our* battles'" (1 Sam 8:19–20, italics added). Inverting Samuel's emphasis on the third-person singular, the people resort to the first-person plural, insisting that the king will fight "our battles."

At the heart of politics lies an existential urge for physical security, and the people proved willing and even eager to relinquish whatever unsupervised freedom and entitlements they enjoyed in the state of divine anarchy, and to surrender to a political sovereign who will freely tax and conscript them so long as he can also safeguard them from their pitiless enemies. Sovereignty does not emerge in the Samuel narrative out of a Hobbesian state of nature, therefore. It does not arise out of an imaginary war of all against all, but rather out of a historical state, realistically described as a weak confederation of frequently feuding tribes where political and military power was fragmented, intermittent, and dispersed. Although sharing

a common religious bond, the various Israelite tribes had been unable to achieve unity and stability. They clashed repeatedly among themselves and were increasingly vulnerable to attacks from outside forces. The constituent building blocks of a proposed united kingdom, therefore, were not atomistic individuals but extended families or tribes.

In describing what is lost as well as what is gained in unifying the Israelite tribes under a single dynastic monarch, the Book of Samuel provides us with our earliest account of the arduous, contested, and historically contingent emergence of this-worldly sovereignty. The centralization of political-military authority is admittedly accompanied by priestly anointment and bestowed by the grace of God. But as will become evident as the narrative unfolds, sovereign authority is actually consolidated much less sacramentally, through a hard-fought struggle, by tactically ingenious applications of force and fraud deployed to overcome considerable human resistance.

To summarize: A thoroughly human and demythologized political sphere emerged in a space that had been opened between the two basic alternatives that characterized much of the ancient Near East and the prior biblical tradition. That purely human political domain constituted the baseline condition that made possible the book's distinctive voice and its unblinkingly observant and critical perspective on human politics. In its richly detailed account of this pivotal political breakthrough, the Book of Samuel infused the moment of origin with a deep ambivalence. The narrative notoriously lacks the celebratory features that usually accompany any coronation or heroic founding of a new political regime. Instead, this moment of origin is starkly colored by Samuel's, and especially God's, resentment. The pervasive shadow of divine resentment is what differentiates the all-too-human world of biblical politics from a cloudlessly secular or "disenchanted" realm. Our author is acutely aware of the troubles and tragedies of the political endeavor on the one hand and of its irresistible necessity on the other. The entire book is

marked by a refusal to shield its readers from this excruciating but truthful ambivalence.

As our exploration widens and deepens, we will address a series of deep puzzles that the Book of Samuel presents. From which point of view, if not that of a political partisan, is the book written? Is the author an insider to politics or an outsider? Is he someone from the court or at its margin? What was the vantage point from which such an astonishingly original book could have been produced?

God has to find his place within the new dispensation as a retired king who is no longer active in his role and who is one of Samuel's characters. Though God threatened to become fully removed and inaccessible, in fact, as we shall see, he continued to be involved at every stage of political life, although his mode of intervention changed dramatically from the time when he was the king. The exploration of this transformation, which among other things permits the emergence of an autonomously human political realm, is one of the Book of Samuel's main concerns and achievements. The author does not exactly tell the story from God's point of view, admittedly. Yet the book was certainly fueled and inspired by what the narrator imagined to be God's viewpoint. When trying to convey God's perspective on the establishment of human sovereignty in the form of dynastic monarchy, the author employed the following tone: *I did not recommend that decision. It wasn't the initial plan I had for you. Human kingship was your choice, which you insisted upon even after being warned. You wanted it and I couldn't refuse you. So let us see how it unfolds, and what it means. And what will be my place in it.* God's ambivalence toward the political realm permeates the book with its nuanced and exploratory yet smolderingly critical force. Precisely because of its uncomfortable ambivalence, therefore, the Book of Samuel sets forth the proper attitude that should be assumed toward the political project as a whole. Illuminated from this systematically ambivalent stance, politics is seen as an overpowering human necessity that

can never fully escape a potentially self-defeating betrayal at its very core.

Our author graphically portrays the acute insecurity at the origins of sovereignty. Yet he also formulates with unrivaled clarity the problematic essence of the human political project. He articulates these twin insights while giving an account of the emergence of the purely human political space that accompanied the replacement of one political theology by another, a revolutionary change that did not pass without leaving visible scars. In providing this unflinching account of political origins, our author also positions himself and his reader as skeptical observers of the dynamics of human power. His warily mistrustful perspective sharpens his vision. It allows him to give one of the most penetrating accounts ever written of the internal workings of human politics.

In analyzing Samuel's view of politics and the way in which its author unearthed and elucidated structural concerns that permeate the political endeavor, we do not strictly follow the chronological order of the book and its narrative. Instead, we examine sequentially a constellation of specific themes developed in the book and that are woven into some of the most dramatic moments in its narrative. As we explore each of these themes in turn, we carefully attend to the exquisite details of the narrative; our larger themes are embedded in these details, subtly and inextricably.