

Books of Samuel
3. Saul and Samuel

The shadow of Samuel still hovers over Saul in the early part of his short and ill-fated reign. The tension between the two comes to a head in two incidents, reported in 1 Samuel 13 and 1 Samuel 15.

The incident at Gilgal

The first incident concerns the preparation for a battle against the Philistines. Saul was instructed by Samuel to wait seven days; then Samuel would come and offer sacrifice. Samuel was late, however, and Saul was concerned about the morale of his soldiers. The Philistine army, we are told, was like the sand on the seashore in multitude. When the Israelites saw them, people hid themselves in caves and cisterns. Some crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul waited the seven days, but when Samuel had not arrived he presumed to offer the sacrifice himself. No sooner did he do so than Samuel appeared and told him: “You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which he commanded you. The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom will not continue.”

This is clearly a theological reading of the failure of Saul’s kingship. According to the Deuteronomists, success comes from keeping commandments and failure from disobedience. As a prophet, Samuel speaks for God and is not to be questioned. Also, implicit in the story is the assumption that success in battle depends on ritual rather than on strategy or force of arms, but the efficacy of the ritual depends on the obedience of the performer. It does not matter to the Deuteronomist that half the army is deserting. The important thing is that Samuel must be

obeyed, and the sacrifice must be offered properly. Saul's action, in this episode, is not arrogant or unreasonable. He waits seven days, the time indicated by Samuel, but he is a pragmatist. In the circumstances, his judgment seems unduly harsh.

The clash between Saul and Samuel can also be viewed in less theological terms. There is a blatant conflict of interest between the two men as to which of them is ultimately in control. Samuel seems unwilling to yield power to the younger man. He seems to set Saul up in this incident, by arriving late, and refusing to acknowledge the problem he had posed for Saul. All of this is plausible psychologically, although we have no way to verify whether it has any historical basis.

There is also a conflict between two theologies in this story. Samuel represents an ethic of unconditional obedience, while Saul represents a moderate pragmatism. From the viewpoint of the Deuteronomists, the trouble with kings was that they took things into their own hands instead of deferring to the word of God as revealed by the prophets. But the word of God is always mediated by human agents who have their own interests in the proceedings. In this case, the word of God, as pronounced by Samuel, confirms the authority of Samuel over Saul. The claims of figures like Samuel to speak for God must be viewed with some suspicion in view of their own interests.

The Amalekites

The conflict between Saul and Samuel is resumed in chapter 15. Samuel orders Saul to attack Amalek and slaughter every man, woman, and child, and even the animals. This is called the *herem*, or ban, which is invoked a few times in the Book of Joshua. The slaughtered victims are considered as sacrificed to a god. The custom is attested outside of Israel in ancient Moab, on the

Moabite stone, erected in the ninth century by King Mesha, who boasted that he took Nebo from Israel and slaughtered all the inhabitants, “for I had devoted them to destruction for (the god) Ashtar-Chemosh.” One practical implication is that no one can take booty for himself. The ritualized slaughter enhances the sense of solidarity in the group perpetrating the killing. It is uncertain whether this practice was actually implemented in ancient Israel. Some of the instances in the Book of Joshua, such as the capture of Jericho, are clearly fictional. In the case of the Amalekites, the slaughter is said to be punishment for the fact that the Amalekites had opposed Israel when it came up out of Egypt. The *herem* or ban could also be undertaken on human initiative. In Num 21:1-3, the Israelites respond to a setback at Arad by making a vow to the Lord that “if you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns.” The fulfillment of the promise shows that people as well as property were involved. If the custom seems brutal, even savage, we would do well to remember that modern warfare is hardly less savage, and perpetrates destruction on a much larger scale. This is not to lessen the offence of the *herem*. The fact that modern warfare may be even worse does not excuse the savagery of biblical slaughter. Neither does the fact that some of the incidents are fictional lessen the offence. What is shocking to the modern reader is that the *herem* is allegedly demanded by God. We cannot suppress the suspicion that the human desire for bloodshed is foisted onto God. The case of the *herem* should give us pause before we accept something as a divine command just because it is reported as such in the Bible.

Saul partially complies with Samuel’s command, but spares the king and the best of the animals to offer them as a formal sacrifice to the Lord. Saul apparently thought that he was complying with the spirit of Samuel’s command, but that he had some discretion as to exactly how he should fulfill it. Samuel, however, is not satisfied. “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt

offerings and sacrifices,” he asks, “as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22). The prophet Hosea likewise says, in the name of the Lord: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). Hosea and Samuel agree that sacrifice is no substitute for right conduct, but they have different views as to what right conduct entails. For Hosea, it is steadfast love and the knowledge of God. For Samuel, everything comes down to obedience. He proceeds to hew the king, whom Saul had held back for sacrifice, in pieces.

Here again, the story suggests a power struggle between Saul and Samuel. Saul’s transgression was not flagrant. He claimed, credibly enough, that he was abiding by the spirit of the command. Yet he does not challenge Samuel’s authority, or his claim to speak for God. He confesses that he has sinned and asks for pardon (15:24-25). But there is no pardon forthcoming. Samuel tells him that he has rejected the word of the Lord, and that the Lord has therefore rejected him from being king. This was the last encounter between Saul and Samuel. We are told that Samuel grieved for Saul (15:35) but he seems to be upset because he could not control Saul rather than out of genuine sympathy for him. The Lord, too, we are told, was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel. (In Gen 6:6 the Lord was sorry that he had made humanity on earth). There is a certain irony in the Lord’s regret in 1 Samuel 15. Just a few verses earlier, in 15:29, when Samuel told Saul that the Lord had torn the kingdom from him, he added: “Moreover, the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind.” Yet we find that he does change his mind about the choice of Saul as king. The God of Hebrew Scripture is not as immutable as Samuel makes him out to be.

Should Jonathan die?

The two stories of conflict between Saul and Samuel in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 frame another story that is indicative of changing values. In a battle against the Philistines, Saul laid an oath on the troops, cursing any man who tasted food before the enemy was defeated. (Recall the oath of Jephthah in Judges 11, which also seeks to influence the outcome of a battle by making a promise to God). Saul's son Jonathan was the hero of the battle up to this point, but he was unaware of the oath, and ate some honey. When he is told of the oath, Jonathan shrugs it off: "my father has troubled the land; see how my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if today the troops had eaten freely of the spoil taken from their enemies" (14:29-30). His response represents a moderate pragmatism, in contrast to the traditional piety of oaths and vows. Jonathan questions the efficacy of oaths as a means of success in battle. It would be better if the troops were well fed.

In this case, Saul is cast as the defender of the ethic of obedience. He declares that if Jonathan is guilty, he must die. This story, however, ends very differently from that of Jephthah and his daughter in Judges. Jonathan is not executed. He is not saved by divine intervention, as Isaac was in Genesis 22, but by the intervention of the troops: "Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great victory in Israel? Far from it! As the Lord lives not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground, for he has worked with God today." In this case, pragmatism wins out. The Deuteronomistic editor prepares the way for this outcome by declaring that Saul's oath was rash (15:24). The oath sworn by Jephthah in Judges 11 would seem to be at least as rash, but it is not explicitly said to be so. In traditional religious practice, even rash oaths are binding.

The stories in 1 Samuel 13-15 convey a sense of a society in transition, where deference to custom and to religious authorities collides with a growing sense of pragmatism and human

responsibility. The Deuteronomist clearly sides with Samuel in his conflict with Saul, but the stories are not simplistic. It is still possible to see both sides of the issues. The fact that the story of Jonathan, which affirms the pragmatic waiving of the death penalty, is sandwiched between the two stories where Saul is condemned for disobedience, allows us to deconstruct the message of the Deuteronomist, and to see that it is too simple to put all the blame on Saul.

Prophecy and kingship

The fraught relationship between Saul and Samuel is replayed many times in the later history of Israel and Judah, in confrontations between kings and prophets. The first such confrontation takes place already in 2 Samuel between David and Nathan, but Nathan is exceptional insofar as he does not simply denounce the king but gets him to pass judgment on himself. Later in the Deuteronomistic history we have the cases of Elijah and Elisha. Elijah is even more confrontational with Ahab than Samuel is with Saul. Think, for example, of the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21. In the prophetic books, Amos sets the tone in his preaching against Jeroboam II, although he does not confront the king in person. Jeremiah is relentless in his critique of the last kings of Judah. See Jeremiah 21-22. Among the prophets who were active under the monarchy, only Isaiah appears to have had a working relationship with the king of the day.

The stories of Saul and Samuel represent the Deuteronomists' view of the problematic relationship between kings and prophets. In all the later cases, there is some substantive issue of justice involved. Nathan accosts David over the murder of Uriah the Hittite. Elijah confronts Ahab over the murder of Naboth. Jeremiah accuses Jehoiakim of making his neighbors work for nothing and not giving them their wages. In the case of Samuel and Saul, however, the only issue

is obedience. No doubt, the Deuteronomist would have considered murder and social injustice as violations of the Law, but the prophets do not usually frame their accusations in those terms, but focus on the substance of the charge. The Deuteronomist, in 1 Samuel, frames the issue in more formal theological terms, in accordance with his belief that failure to obey the Law was what led to the downfall of the monarchy.

Questions for reflection:

Should obedience to a religious authority always take precedence over pragmatic considerations?

Are oaths and vows always binding, regardless of the consequences?

What should be the role of a prophet over against the leaders and rulers of a people?

Further Reading:

McCarter, *First Samuel*, 222-71.

D. M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980).