

1 SAMUEL

Part Two: The Monarchy (Chapters 8-17)

In its introduction to the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, the *Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition* states: “Throughout most of its history, Israel remained ambivalent about monarchy. One of the distinguishing characteristics of its literature is the fact that it preserves both strands of thinking: pro-monarchy and anti-monarchy. By mingling negative with positive overtones, the writers prepare the reader for the negative assessment of the whole institution of the monarchy presented in the books of Kings, and for the more immediate downfall of Israel’s first king, Saul” (p.116).

Part 2: SAMUEL AND SAUL, THE INSTITUTION OF THE MONARCHY, AND SAUL’S REJECTION. (1Sam 8-17)

CHAPTER 8: The Israelites demand a king

“Appoint a king over us, as other nations have, to judge us.” (v.5)

When the Israelites see the gray hairs on Samuel, they realize that they may not have him much longer as a leader, so they ask him to appoint a king to rule over them so that they can be “like other nations.” But Israel, according to the Sinai covenant, is destined to be different, a nation apart and *unlike* other nations.

Samuel is not happy with Israel’s demand for a king, but God tells him to go along with their request for it is God himself that they are rejecting as their king. The abandonment of God as king of Israel foreshadows the eventual collapse of Israel as a nation.

In verses 11-22, Samuel warns the people of the heavy price they must pay for choosing to have a human king. But the people refuse to be persuaded. They want a king to rule over them just *like* other nations.

CHAPTERS 9-10: Saul becomes Israel’s first king

“When Samuel caught sight of Saul, the Lord assured him, ‘This is the man of whom I told you; he is to govern my people.’” (v.17)

Saul is introduced as handsome and “head and shoulders” above all others. Most likely, he is on the local basketball team and does some modeling on the side. Saul’s good looks and stature are a sign of God’s favor. Yet we know that in God’s eyes, inner beauty is more important. Saul is from the tribe of Benjamin, one of the smallest tribes. No one would have thought Israel’s first king would be from such an insignificant tribe.

Looking for donkeys, Saul finds a kingdom. Many folk stories depict their hero as someone in search of something that is lost but ends up with a much better find. Saul seeks out Samuel’s help in finding his donkeys, and his quest ends up with a crown. Saul is treated with honor at a feast, anointed as ruler, and sent away with three signs that will confirm his selection by God: Two men will tell him that the donkeys have been found (10:2); he will be offered bread intended for sacrifice (10:4); and most importantly, the Spirit of the Lord will come upon him as it had upon the Judges (10:6). Note the parallel accounts of how Saul became king: by Samuel’s anointing him (10:1) and by lot (10:17-24). The ancient writers often preserved differing accounts of the same event from the sources available to them.

Chapters 9-10 present Saul in a positive light with God using well his own natural abilities. Saul could have been an outstanding king. The act of anointing (10:1) is a sign that the person has been chosen and called by God.

Pause: Have you had the experience of finding yourself thrown a task that you did not particularly want; or that you were not prepared for—yet the experience turned out to be a very maturing one for you? If so, what was that experience like for you?

CHAPTER 11: Defeat of the Ammonites

“All the people went to Gilgal, where in the presence of the Lord, they made Saul king....” (11:15)

After Saul is anointed king, it seems that he has gone back to farming. At least that is where we find him in this chapter. The Israelites live under the constant threat of being attacked by their neighbors—in this case, by the Ammonites. As Saul listens to the

Ammonites' horrible threat on the people of Jabesh-gilead, he is seized by the spirit of the Lord and becomes very angry. He sends out an order for the men of Israel to come to the defense of the people of Jabesh-gilead. Under Saul's leadership, the Israelites win a huge victory. In triumph, Saul shows himself to be magnanimous as he spares the lives of those who question whether he should be king (vv 12-14). In so doing, Saul shows how the kings of Israel should be the saviors of the oppressed. Unfortunately, such sense of duty did not remain with Saul and was lacking in most of the kings of Israel.

CHAPTER 12: A look to the past and future by Samuel

"Do not turn to meaningless idols which can neither profit nor save; they are nothing." (v.21)

As Samuel's ministry comes to an end, he addresses the people. In verses 1-5, he demands from them an evaluation of his ministry, and he passes with flying colors. But after receiving a positive evaluation, Samuel is not nearly as gracious in his remarks on the people's behavior as regards their covenant with God. He lists the ways that Israel has been ungrateful to God despite his goodness to them (vv 6-12). Then he issues a strong warning on the importance of following God's ways (vv 13-18), and he encourages them to place their trust in God and avoid all worship of false idols.

CHAPTER 13: Beginning of Saul's rejection as king

After his victory over the Ammonites, Saul faces a much greater challenge against the Philistines, which have a bigger army and superior equipment. In contrast, the Israelites are scared and cowardly. They hide in caves and cisterns. Saul is doing all he can to hold his troops together.

Saul has another problem. Before going into battle, a sacrifice must be offered to the Lord as a way to seek his blessing. However, as Saul is not a priest, he is not authorized to offer sacrifices to the Lord. He patiently waits for Samuel to come and do this task. When Samuel fails to appear after seven days (as he has told Saul), Saul goes ahead and offers the sacrifice himself, thinking perhaps that Samuel is just delayed. But right after Saul has offered the sacrifice, Samuel arrives on the scene. He is very upset and demands an explanation. Saul gives what seems to be a reasonable explanation, but Samuel is not inte-

rested. He appears to have already decided to reject Saul as king. He rebukes Saul saying: *"You have been foolish! Had you kept the command the Lord your God gave you, the Lord would now established your kingship in Israel as lasting; but as things are, your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and has appointed him commander of his people, because you broke the Lord's command"* (vv 13-14).

We can imagine Saul saying to himself: "What's up with Samuel? Why do I get the ax for doing the right thing (pray for blessing when the priest didn't show up)!" In his commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, Walter Brueggemann writes: *"It appears that Samuel plays a daring, brutal game with Saul's faith, Saul's career and eventually Saul's sanity"* (p.101). If God had already revealed to Samuel that he had in mind someone to replace Saul, then the offering of the sacrifice would not have mattered.

Commenting on the Saul and David story, Anthony Giles writes: *"As we read the story of David in 1 and 2 Samuel, we should keep in mind the familiar dictum that 'history is written from the point of view of winners.' This more than anything else accounts for David's 'good press' and Saul's 'bad press.' Saul has come down to us as a tragic, even detestable figure, while David is everyone's favorite biblical hero. Saul erred in judgment and God deposed him. David sinned grievously and managed to return to God's favor. Wherein lies the difference? More than likely only in the simple human prejudice which glorifies the memory of those who are successful and vilifies those who can't get things done. In biblical literature as in art, the portrait of David has come down to us with the positive features exaggerated and the negative features hidden or ignored"* (People of the Book, p.49).

The rest of chapter 13 is an update on the war against the Philistines. Their monopoly of iron technology gave them a distinct advantage over the Israelites.

Pause: When reading the Bible, do you ever find yourself saying: This is not fair. I don't understand God's reasoning or behavior in this incident." How do you feel about the reason given for Saul's rejection as king?

CHAPTER 14: Jonathan, son of Saul, makes his mark

“Jonathan said to his armor-bearer, ‘Come let us go to the outpost of the uncircumcised. Perhaps the Lord will help us, because it is no more difficult for the Lord to grant us victory through a few than through many.’” (v.6)

Jonathan, Saul’s son, dominates this chapter. In verses 1-14, he and his loyal armor-bearer defeat the Philistines but only after consulting with the Lord. Jonathan’s victory causes panic in the Philistine army. God pitches in with a timely earthquake. Jonathan’s victory inspires his father to attack the Philistines. During the battle, Saul makes a rash oath about a fast, vowing to kill whoever breaks it. Jonathan, not knowing about the oath, breaks the fast. Not only that, but he also makes a negative comment about his father’s leadership. *“My father brings trouble to the land”* (v.29). Saul is prepared to kill his son for breaking an oath that he was not aware of, but the soldiers who think highly of Jonathan rescue him. The chapter ends with a positive statement about Saul’s many victories. Yet we know that when one’s own son questions his father’s leadership, or when one’s own soldiers overrule their leader’s decision, it does not bode well for that leader.

14:41 – Urim and Thummim ...were sacred objects (one negative and one positive) kept in the priest’s bag and used to determine God’s will in various and sundry situations.

CHAPTER 15: Obedience over sacrifice

“Obedience is better than sacrifice.” (v.22)

God rejects Saul’s kingship and Samuel tells Saul: “It was I the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel. Now, therefore, listen to the message of the Lord...” (v.1). In these words, Samuel is saying that “the king is not a free man with policy options. He is under the tight mandate of God’s will, mediated only through Samuel. Thus the real power is...the voice of the mediator, to which the king must give total allegiance” (Brueggemann).

Samuel orders Saul to *“attack Amalek, and deal with him and all that he has under the ban. Do not spare him, but kill men and women, children and infants, oxen and sheep, camels and asses”* (v.3). Saul defeats Israel’s old enemy but contrary to his “mandate of complete doom”, he fails to carry out a ‘ban of

destruction’. He spares the Amalek king, Agag, and the *best* of the Amalekite spoil. (See article 18, page 4 for commentary on the infamous practice called ‘ban of destruction’.) When confronted by Samuel for his act of disobedience, Saul defends himself by blaming the people (v.24). But by now, God regrets making Saul king (v.11).

Samuel proclaims: *“Obedience is better than sacrifice”* (v.22). Sacrifice, unless accompanied by a wholehearted desire to do God’s will, is empty and useless. The above verse was also intended to serve as a warning to future kings, i.e., that disobedience to God would result in the dissolution of their kingship.

In John 4:34, Jesus says: *“My food is to do the will of him who sent me.”* In the incident with the Amalekites, Saul chooses to follow *his* will over God’s. While the practice of total destruction is indeed reprehensible to us, it is not the primary focus of this chapter. The primary focus is Saul’s decision to disobey God’s command.

When we come to the New Testament and meet Jesus, we will find that our God is decidedly a non-violent God. In the Old Testament era, the Israelites had yet to learn much about the true nature of God.

Even though Saul asks for forgiveness, he is rejected as Israel’s king. Saul will continue as king, but his fate is sealed from here on. Neither Samuel nor God will recognize his kingship. We are not sure why Saul’s plea for forgiveness was not accepted. Perhaps it was not sincere.

Despite his outright rejection of Saul, Samuel grieves over God’s renunciation of Saul.

Pause: “Obedience is more important than sacrifice.”
Could one be a faithful, churchgoer and obey the rules outwardly and yet be disobedient to God? How can this happen?

1Samuel 16 through 2 Samuel 5 could be titled *The Rise of David*. The narrative begins with David as an unknown, undervalued shepherd boy, and ends with David fully established as the “shepherd of Israel” (2Sam 5:2). David is introduced to us in three distinct ways: as a shepherd (16:143), as a young musician (16:14-23), and as a young unknown warrior (ch. 17).

CHAPTER 16: Enter David

“Do not judge from appearance.... Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord sees the heart.” (v.7)

Samuel continues to grieve over Saul’s rejection, which displeases God: *“How long will you grieve for Saul...?” (v.1)*. God wants Samuel to get going and anoint God’s new choice for a king.

When Samuel enters Jesse’s home in search of a potential king, he is asked if his visit is peaceful. This is recognition that the prophetic word could be good or not so good. On seeing Jesse’s son, Eliab, who is of lofty stature, Samuel immediately thinks that he must be God’s choice, but then the Lord rejects Eliab and speaks perhaps the most important words in the chapter and maybe in 1Samuel: *“Do not judge from appearance. Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart” (v.7)*. Then, one by one, Jesse presents his other sons but none of them are God’s choice. But when Jesse sends for his youngest son, David, who is tending sheep, the Lord makes known to Samuel that he is the chosen one. Once again we see, as we often do in scripture, that the least likely choice in human estimation turns out to be God’s choice. David was “handsome to behold” (v.14), (also probably did some modeling on the side ☺), but much more importantly, he was a man anointed by the spirit of God (v.13).

Verses 14-23—A melancholy Saul. As the spirit comes upon David, he leaves Saul. The biblical writer states that Saul was “tormented by an evil spirit.” Today, we may say that Saul had psychological problems (we are careful not to attribute every illness to God). Yet, “the biblical writer for his part recognized that the same God who gives one man special powers and abilities permits another man (or in this case the same man) to suffer from problems which enfeeble him” (David Payne).

One of Saul’s attendants firmly believes that music therapy will help Saul. Saul has no idea that the harpist chosen to be a soothing presence for him is none other than the one God has chosen to replace him. Saul is immediately attracted to David and gives him the office of armor-bearer, which amounts to on-the-job training for kingship. But David’s closeness to Saul will soon cause problems.

Pause: What speaks to you most in Chapter 16? Can you think of a time when God was training you for a task he was going to ask of you at a later time in your life?

CHAPTER 17: David and Goliath

“You come out against me with the sword...but I come out against you in the name of the Lord....” (v.45)

The story of David and Goliath is one of the best known and best loved stories in the Bible. As we read Chapter 17, it is as if we are meeting David for the first time. Obviously, two traditions of the David story have been intertwined. In Chapter 16, we met David as a shepherd boy and a harpist. Now he comes as the soldier empowered by God to defeat the Philistine who is presented to us as a mighty opponent.

The Philistines continue to be a huge threat to Israel, embodied in the mighty Goliath. Goliath’s gigantic stature and awesome armor are only matched by his arrogant challenging words when he yells at the Israelites to come out and fight him: *“I defy the ranks of Israel today. Give me a man and let us fight together” (v.10)*. When Saul and his men hear Goliath’s challenge, they are terrified.

Verses 12-31—David arrives and prepares for battle.

As stated above, David is introduced here as if for the first time. He is sent by his father to bring food supplies to his brothers on the battlefield as he is deemed too young to fight.

David arrives just in time to hear Goliath taunt the Israelites for a second time. The narrator states: *“When Israel saw the man, they all retreated before him, very much afraid” (v.24)*. David asks: *“Who is this uncircumcised Philistine...that insults the armies of the living God?” (v.26)* David’s brother Eliab is not happy with David’s presence and proceeds to verbally attack him. His words remind us of the jealousy that Joseph’s older brothers showed him.

Verses 32-51—David fights Goliath. David, the anointed one of God, says to his king: *“Let your majesty not lose courage....” (v.32)*. David then persuades the king, that he is the one to fight the mighty Philistine. David says: *“The Lord, who delivered me from the claws of the lion and the bear, will keep me safe from the clutches of this Philistine” (v.37)*. David displays great trust in the power of God

to protect him and help him win a battle against impossible odds. David's rejection of Saul's armor is a symbolic way of saying David's victory is entirely due to God and is in no way due to Saul.

When David finally gets into the ring with Goliath, his big opponent curses David by his gods (v.43). Undaunted, David responds: "*You come against me with the sword.... I come against you in the name of the Lord, the God of the armies of Israel that you have insulted. Today, the Lord shall deliver you into my hand....*" (vv 45-16).

The *theological* meaning of the story is that God is in charge and that he is the one who can be trusted to win Israel's battles even against incredible odds. Walter Bruggemann writes: "*The purpose of David's victory is not simply to save Israel or to defeat the Philistines. The purpose is the glorification of God in the eyes of the world. The intent of the encounter is to make clear yet again that God 'saves' not with the conventions of human warfare but in God's own inscrutable ways*" (ibid, p.132).

In the actual battle, Goliath is outmaneuvered; he is not permitted to even make his first move. David does what he said he would do in verse 46. He strikes down Goliath and cuts off his head. Israel's God roundly defeats the gods of the Philistines with the defeat of their prize-fighter. When the Philistines witness the defeat of Goliath, they become frightened and run away. At the end of the chapter, we notice that David and Saul are still strangers. Saul asks: "Who is this kid?"—a question that underlines the intertwining of two traditions.

Pause: What speaks to you most in the David and Goliath story? Do you have a similar story, a time when you achieved some victory against incredible odds?