

Matthew McGuire - Box #388
 RS 4413: II Samuel
 25 March 2016

2 Kings in 1 Samuel?¹ The Regal Ramifications of Saul and David's Sins

The first two kings of Israel each commit grievous sins in the midst of their respective reigns. The consequences for these sins, however, are decidedly different for each monarch. Saul's two-part disobedience in pre-maturely offering the sacrifice at Gilgal and his subsequent refusal to kill King Agag leaves him fired and without a dynasty. On the other hand, David's successive transgressions of adultery and murder—arguably much worse than Saul's crimes—do not have the same consequences. While David indeed suffers for his actions, he will not be deprived of his dynasty. To the contrary, the dynastic promise previously given to David becomes the vehicle for his punishment. Aside the monarchs themselves, there are obvious differences between each king's respective prophets. The aged Samuel is consistently found undermining the reign of Saul, while Nathan acts as something of a neophyte in blindly approving of David's desires. The reason for this apparent disparities in how the monarchs are treated is not to be found in the respective character qualities of David and Saul. Instead, it is rooted in the unconditional nature of YHWH's election.

An analysis of the sins and subsequent consequences of kings David and Saul should not be separated from a survey of the roles of each king's respective prophet. In the monarchic period, the office of prophet is designed to function as a guiding voice for the king and nation. Moreover, prophets are all but necessary for keeping the monarch accountable, challenging his actions when they stray from Torah.² No prophet exists in a vacuum, however, and the prophets in question—Samuel and Nathan—each bring their own personal merits and shortcomings to the office. These traits in turn affect how they treat their respective monarchs and how they pronounce punishment upon them for their sins.

The relationship between king Saul and prophet Samuel could be described as rather strained, to say the least.³ After reluctantly consenting to YHWH's command to make Saul king over Israel, Samuel anoints Saul in a clandestine location with an unconventional instrument.⁴

¹ I am indebted to my esteemed colleague and personal friend Peter Daniel Fawcett for this elegant, if somewhat irrelevant, title.

² Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History*, II, *I Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 88-89.

³ Keith Bodner, *I Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 92.

⁴ The use of a *vial* rather than the more typical *horn* in anointing Saul may give the reader insight as to how (un)enthusiastic Samuel is about the event. For further discussion on the significance of Saul's "vial treatment," see Bodner, *I Samuel*, 92-93.

From the very onset of Saul's kingship, the discourse between the two figures is characterized by "unanswered questions, strange commands, [and] almost caustic remarks," demonstrating a sort of animosity towards Saul on the part of Samuel.⁵ At a number of junctures, Samuel appears to actively undermine the authority of the king that he has been commanded to anoint. This "Samuel treatment" may well be understood as contributing to Saul's characteristic uneasiness and indecision that leads him to sin in the first place.

In contrast, David's prophetic counterpart hardly resembles the authoritative Samuel. Nathan first makes an appearance in 2 Sam 7, wherein he tells the ambitious king to do as his heart pleases and even bestows a promise of the divine presence—all without any consultation of the divine will.⁶ At first glance, Nathan comes across as a "yes-man" and neophyte that has little experience in exercising his duty as a prophet. Such a "rubber-stamping" disposition may be a contributing factor in David's eventual transgressions, for the king's ambition is not closely threatened or constrained by a closely-watching, disgruntled prophet.⁷ Both the "crustiness" of Samuel toward Saul and the deferent disposition of Nathan to David should be kept in mind as major factors in interpreting the sins and consequences of the two kings.

Saul's first major trip-up in his royal career occurs only a few chapters into his reign and leads him into a long-winded spiral of losing his grip on the kingdom. 1 Sam 13 records Saul's "unsanctioned sacrifice" at Gilgal: After receiving a somewhat confusing set of instructions from his prophet,⁸ Saul finds himself "between a rock and a hard place" as he faces the imminent threat of the Philistine army and awaits the arrival of a tardy Samuel.⁹ Given the circumstances, Saul might be forgiven by the reader for his decision to offer a burnt offering in Samuel's absence. The crusty prophet, however, makes no such allowance for deviation from the original instructions. He immediately pronounces that Saul's "kingdom shall not stand" and that YHWH has already sought out another man and "appointed him prince to his people" (v. 14). Saul receives no warning for his first offense. Instead, he loses a potential dynasty to a future (and yet unnamed) king.

⁵ Ibid., 89.

⁶ "Whatever is in your heart, go, do, for the LORD is with you." Note that Nathan does indeed change course after being corrected by a word from YHWH. This quick turnaround, however, only emphasizes the inexperienced nature of Nathan, as he "changes sides" just as often as he is spoken to; Scripture citations, unless otherwise indicated, will be adopted from Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 & 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999). Tolerance is petitioned for capitalization of divine pronouns in citations thereof.

⁷ Note the juxtaposition: Samuel works against the will of YHWH by undermining the reign of Saul, while Nathan works against the will of YHWH by "rubber-stamping" David's actions.

⁸ Note the potential disparity between "do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you" (1 Samuel 10.7) and "Seven days shall you wait until I come to you, and I shall inform you what you must do" (v. 8).

⁹ Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 120.

Only a few chapters later, Saul again finds himself in trouble for not having rigidly followed the instructions of Samuel. This time his charge is to “attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have” (15.3, NRSV). Saul does successfully defeat the Amalekites, but he spares king Agag and the best of the spoils in the process. For the Benjamite king, this is the final straw on the camel’s back. Despite Saul’s eventual confession of guilt, Samuel declares that YHWH has rejected him from being king over Israel. The formulaic wording of v. 26 implies a conditionality inherent to Saul’s right to reign: “for you have cast aside (מֵאַס) the word of the LORD and He has cast you aside (מֵאַס) from being king over Israel.” Saul has violated the terms of his contract. Samuel therefore dismisses Saul from his position and makes mention of his “better” replacement in the same breath. Saul is thus left without an appeal, and he will deal with divine silence for the remainder of his reign.

David’s twin sins of adultery and murder occur well into the establishment of his own reign. By the time of 2 Sam 11, David has entrenched himself as leader over all Israel and Judah, ruling from the seat of Jerusalem. Moreover, he has recently been the object of an eternal covenant with YHWH that guarantees the Judahite king an everlasting dynasty.¹⁰ It is at this apex of David’s royal career that the sight of a woman initiates his own downfall.¹¹ While David has certainly been involved in some questionable marriages,¹² the Bathsheba episode will turn out to be both the most scandalous and consequential of his entire career.

Alter notes that the language of David’s taking of Bathsheba suggests “rapid, single-minded action.”¹³ The successive chain of verbs is indicative of a carefully planned, premeditated transgression, contrasting David’s actions with Saul’s last minute improvisation at Gilgal. Furthermore, David’s subsequent cover-up operation ends up with the king brazenly ordering the death of a faithful soldier. This “part two” of David’s transgression contrasts again with Saul’s second sin of *not killing* a hostile king.

It would be natural for one to presume that David’s proactive sins far outweigh the passive, hesitant sins of his predecessor. If Saul lost a dynasty and was effectively fired from his

¹⁰ The eternal dynasty promised to David in 2 Sam 7 is the same dynasty that evaded Saul in 1 Sam 13.13. The implications of this covenant will be explored in further detail later.

¹¹ Note the similar language of Samson (Judges 14.1; Samson is also the object of a covenant.) and David’s (2 Sam 11.2) sight of a woman (וַיִּרְא אִשָּׁה), indicating that this event will precipitate a downward spiral of immorality and consequences thereof.

¹² The persistent description of Abigail as “the wife of Nabal” (beginning in 1 Sam 25) even after her marriage to David underscores the dubious nature of their matrimony, and it anticipates the similar reference to Bathsheba as “the wife of Uriah” that will linger to the opening genealogies of the New Testament. Furthermore, David’s taking of Ahinoam of Jezreel simultaneous to Saul’s taking away of Michal provides room for believing that the former was originally the wife of Saul (1 Sam 14.50). For further discussion on David’s early multiplying of wives, see Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 271-273.

¹³ Alter, *The David Story*, 251. Note David’s rapid actions of *sending*, *inquiring after*, and *fetching* the wife of Uriah in vv. 3-4.

reign, then one could only expect a similar, more severe lot for David. But a close look at the consequences that follow the Bathsheba episode show that his punishment is much different, if not less severe, than that suffered by Saul.

Nathan's immediate response to David's transgression is quite different from that of Samuel. While the latter responded with an unambiguous condemnation following both of Saul's mistakes,¹⁴ Nathan comes to David with a parable reflective of the actions of the guilty king. Janzen argues that a parable, rather than a straightforward judgment, is delivered in order to "accomplish the goal of auto-condemnation."¹⁵ David is effectively given a chance to examine his actions and recognize his guilt, whereas Saul is confronted with both an accusation and its respective punishment in the same instance.¹⁶ Furthermore, David's relenting from condemning the rich man of the parable to death¹⁷ "is paralleled by Nathan's insistence that God will not kill David." Based on his reaction to the parable, then, David is allowed "to set the terms of his own punishment," something that can hardly be said of Saul.¹⁸

Although David is certainly worthy of the death penalty,¹⁹ this is not the fate that he will suffer. Gordon notes the role of contrition as "a necessary precondition for forgiveness."²⁰ That David does not suffer death is an indication that his repentance is accepted. The consequences that David does suffer are twofold: Firstly, "the sword shall not swerve from your house evermore" (2 Sam 12.10), reflecting David's use of the sword against Uriah. Secondly, YHWH "will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your fellowman, and he shall lie with your wives" (v. 11), echoing David's seizure of the Hittite's wife. This sword and household evil will prevail over David and his house for the remainder of his career, and "the first piece of trouble in his house will be the death of the child just born."²¹ The ensuing rape of Tamar, murder of Amnon, and usurpation of the throne by Absalom are what David will have to suffer for his actions. Furthermore, both the sword and household evil will plague David's successors for the duration of the Judahite monarchy.²²

¹⁴ See 1 Sam 13.11, 13-14 and 15.14, 26-28.

¹⁵ David Janzen, "The Condemnation of David's 'Taking' in 2 Samuel 12:1-14," *Journal Of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 2 (2012): 209.

¹⁶ Cf. the confessions of Saul and David and their prophets' diverse responses: Saul's confession (הטאתי) is met with a cold shoulder by Samuel (1 Sam 15.24-26), while David's admission of guilt (הטאתי) is met with a declaration that YHWH has taken away his sin (2 Sam 12.13).

¹⁷ Although David declares in anger that the man "deserves to die," (2 Sam 12.5, NRSV) he demands only that he make a fourfold restitution for what he took.

¹⁸ Janzen, "The Condemnation of David's 'Taking,'" 218.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁰ R. P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 258-259.

²¹ Graeme A. Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL; (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 468.

²² Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 258.

What, then, is the reason for these two divergent routes of punishment for kings Saul and David? Ultimately, the answer is to be found in the mystery of election. From the beginning, David's character zone is fraught with election motifs. The very first reference to David in the Deuteronomistic History—before he is even named—calls him a man according to YHWH's own heart (1 Sam 13.14). Such terminology may be understood not so much as having to do with a quality of David himself, but rather as referring to God's willful choosing of David to be a "prince to his people."²³ Two chapters later—in the context of YHWH regretting his decision of anointing Saul king—David (yet unnamed) is referred to as a neighbor who is "better than" Saul (15.28). Such wording suggests that he is *the one who should have been anointed from the beginning*. Furthermore, the fact that he hails from Judah certainly does not hurt his royal prospects, in light of the regal promise given to the tribe in Gen 49.10.²⁴ The choice of David over his older brothers echoes a reversal of primogeniture theme common to the Torah, which is itself often connected to the motif of election.²⁵ Without a doubt the most important of these election themes is the eternal covenant cut between YHWH and David's house in 2 Sam 7. This covenant resembles that of Abraham in Gen 15, insofar as "Yahweh's favour is not made conditional upon the fulfilment of certain obligations" by the recipient of the covenant.²⁶ Each of these details build upon one another to make the case that David is the object of a special election by YHWH, something which he does not have in common with Saul.

If, then, David the Judahite is chosen by YHWH as the "right king," as it were, why was Saul the Benjamite ever anointed ruler over Israel, especially at the behest of YHWH himself?²⁷ The answer will draw attention back to the aforementioned theme of primogeniture reversal as well as to the role of the monarchy in Israel. If, as some commentators have concluded, the "having of sons" is akin to the "having of kings" in the books of Samuel,²⁸ then the choice of Israel's *second-born king* over and instead of the *firstborn Saul* would be a prime instance of reversal of primogeniture. In this scenario, David becomes Jacob while Saul becomes Esau, and the promise that "the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen 25.23, NRSV) may be appropriated to the kingship in Israel: Saul's dismissal from and David's succession to the throne is all but inevitable. Furthermore, the "two nations in [the] womb" (v. 23) motif will develop throughout

²³ Bodner, *I Samuel*, 123.

²⁴ "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his" (NRSV). Certainly this promise ultimately applies to a messianic figure, but such does not diminish its significance for the first ruler in this kingly line.

²⁵ Cf. Joseph's divine appointment over his older brothers in Gen 37, and notice especially the parallel between their subsequent plotting to get rid of Joseph and Saul's eventual quest to murder his successor. Similar comparisons can be drawn from Jacob's election (Gen 25.23) and Esau's later desire to kill his younger brother (27.41).

²⁶ Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 236. While Saul is appointed king under a "contract" with certain conditions (which he fails to uphold), David is given a rather permanent position of tenure.

²⁷ Although the original request for a king comes from the elders of Israel (1 Sam 8.4-5), the choice of Saul is by YHWH himself (9.16).

²⁸ Bodner, *I Samuel*, 13.

the course of the Deuteronomistic History: David persists as the archetype for the southern kings of Judah, while Saul becomes paradigmatic of the “various northern kings and their short-lived reigns.”²⁹

Such a paradigm would cause the reader to infer that—although he is indeed made king at YHWH’s command—Saul is “set up to fail” from the very beginning.³⁰ David’s coronation, on the other hand, is understood to be inevitable and not based on any qualities inherent to him. Perhaps the best way to understand YHWH’s purpose in these events is as a polemic against the human kingship in Israel. Although the Torah provides guidelines for a potential king (Deut 17.14-20), the “theocratic ideal” of the Hebrew Scriptures is invariably antagonistic toward the idea of a human monarch.³¹ Perhaps the strongest voice of this ideal in the Deuteronomistic History is that of Gideon in Judges 8.23, when he declares, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you” (NRSV). YHWH’s granting of the people’s request for a king in 1 Sam 8, then, can be seen as a concession or indulgence, not as part of his ideal government for Israel.³² YHWH, then, brings about an “aborted kingship” prior to his establishment of an eternal dynasty in order to remind the children of Israel that he is yet their king. His disruption of the people’s plan for the monarchy is followed by his redemption of the same in David.

In light of this, the fact that Saul suffers near-immediate dismissal for his transgressions while David retains his dynasty for comparatively worse crimes is not to be understood as injustice on the part of YHWH. Instead, it must be observed that Saul and David are appointed under drastically different terms—Saul under a conditional contract and David under an unconditional covenant. Saul’s circumstances are organized so as to cause a failure for the “firstborn” king of Israel, which constitutes a polemic against the arrogant desire for a human king over Israel. This aborted kingship, however, is followed by a redeemed kingship in the person of David. Although David sins and suffers consequences like his predecessor, the unconditional nature of the covenant means that he will not likewise lose the eternal dynasty promised to him.

²⁹ Ibid., 93. Note also that, just as Esau was the progenitor of a nation often hostile to the children of Israel, so does the (Saulide) northern kingdom become a perennial foe of the southern Judahite kingdom. In either case the “children” of the reprobate firstborn become a persistent snare to the children of the elect.

³⁰ E.g. Samuel’s poor treatment of Saul, along with the “less than positive ambiance that envelops his character zone” (Bodner, *I Samuel*, 79). Although it is outside the scope of this article, a *dual causality* factor may be at play, wherein the independent actions of the people who surround Saul are positioned by YHWH to accomplish his ultimate purpose for the monarchy.

³¹ Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 109.

³² This is made clear by YHWH’s statement to Samuel—preceding his command to grant the people’s desire—that “it is not you they have cast aside but Me they have cast aside from reigning over them” (1 Sam 8.7).