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First and Second Samuel

INTERPRETATION

*A Bible Commentary
for Teaching and Preaching*




John Knox Press
LOUISVILLE



but for sharing and giving? No wonder Samuel abruptly adjourned the meeting. He did not know where such thinking would lead. Yahweh perhaps understands that this thinking will finally lead to David. Samuel and the old tradition are not as sanguine about the coming of David as is Yahweh. The old tradition, however, seems to have no recourse except to wait, along with Yahweh and the elders who yearn for a monarchy. In the very moment of such a defeat for the old tradition, that old tradition has indeed sounded one of its most vigorous warnings. It has issued an appeal, which in the end will create a future for Israel after the monarchy has failed.

I Samuel 9—11

The Authorization of Saul

The completed narrative of chapters 1–8 has prepared us for the dramatic moment of 9:1–2. Chapter 7 showed that the old order under Samuel's leadership was adequate. Chapter 8 asserted that though human kingship is a rejection of the kingship of Yahweh and therefore dimly viewed, kingship is nonetheless given reluctant authorization by Yahweh. The tension between chapter 7 (which looks back) and chapter 8 (which looks ahead) is a hint of the tension that will pervade the entire Saul literature.

Israel has by chapter 9 answered the question of monarchy with a reluctant yes. With that decision, it has now to identify the one who would become king. In the Saul narratives a commitment to kingship is assumed, but it is a shaky commitment. The Saul narrative proceeds on the basis of that rather unsettled decision. As we shall see, Saul did little to overcome the basic uncertainty that continued to vex Israel.

The Saul narrative of chapters 9–15 is an odd collection of diffuse materials. Probably this body of literature receives the awkward, disjointed treatment that it does because Saul never claimed the full attention of the Israelite narrative. All through the account of Saul we have the impression that the narrative is partly interested in other matters, either the claims of the old tradition against the monarchy or with the soon-to-come David.

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Between the old tradition and the newness of David, Saul has a difficult time claiming his own rightful place in the account of Israel's transformation.

The Saul narrative can be divided into two parts, chapters 9–11 and 13–15, interrupted by the weighty theological convocation of Samuel in chapter 12. In the first set of texts (chs. 9–11) the narrative provides three accounts of the ways in which Saul came to power. These include the idyllic account of the young boy who appears before Samuel and is secretly anointed (9:1–10:16), the public recognition of Saul (10:17–27), and the battle crisis during which the spirit rushes upon Saul (11:1–15). These three accounts tell of the ways in which Saul is empowered and legitimated as king.

In the second set (chs. 13–15), there is an account of a battle and victory (ch. 14) surrounded by two accounts of Saul's failure and rejection (13:1–15; 15:1–35). Thus the narrative is roughly organized into an account of *initial authorization* (chs. 9–11) and *final rejection* (chs. 13–15).

This diverse collection of materials surely has a complicated literary history. For our purposes it may be enough to recognize that multiple narratives about beginnings and endings inevitably cluster around crucial personalities. Saul is indeed one such personality. This sequence of narratives of beginnings–battles–rejection portrays an unstable situation, unstable because Israel's decision about monarchy is ambiguous and unsettled during the time of Saul.

I Samuel 9:1–10:16

This rather long narrative traces the ways by which Saul is chosen, designated, and empowered to be the king Yahweh intends. In this narrative there is neither any reservation about kingship (as we might have expected from ch. 8), nor is there any political activity or strategy on Saul's part. This founding of monarchy is a theological-liturgical act, making clear that Saul's authority is rooted in the will, word, and purpose of Yahweh.

The narrative proceeds on its leisurely way with the theme of kingship, and a countertheme of Saul as a boy who seeks lost donkeys. This countertheme sets the shape of the narrative; it is, however, the invisible working of Yahweh for the monarchy that provides the interest and dynamic of the narrative.

The story is framed in 9:1–14 and 10:14–16 in terms of Saul

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and his home and the loss and finding of the asses. This theme sets a frame for the matter of kingship, concluding laconically, "But about the matter of kingship . . . he did not tell him anything" (10:16).

Inside that framing, however, the theme of kingship dominates the narrative. That theme is prominent in the disclosure of Yahweh's intention by an oracle (9:15–16), in the designation of Saul (9:17–21), in the act of anointing (10:1–8), and in the rush of the spirit to authorize and empower (10:9–13). The framing of 9:1–4 and 10:14–16 might suggest that nothing really has happened, for Saul goes back home. Much, however, is accomplished in the narrative. We watch while this unsuspecting, uncomprehending Saul is transformed into a vehicle for the powerful purpose of Yahweh. In that transforming, the narrative skillfully employs the decisive speech of Yahweh, the obedient performance of Samuel, and the rush of the untamed spirit. Through the narrative Saul is given "another heart" (10:9). He has become another man. As he becomes so, he opens the way through which Israel might become a new people. For this moment of the narrative, there is no criticism of the new institution, nor yet any premature usurpation of attention by David. Saul is permitted his narrative of power and transformation.

9:1–4. After the initial characterization of Saul in verses 1–2, this story is framed as a narrative about the recovery of lost asses. The theme of lost asses is introduced at the outset (vv. 3–4) with a threefold refrain, "did not find them," "were not there," "did not find them." This framing theme of lost asses is settled by Samuel in verse 20 (cf. 10:2) and is referred to again in 10:14–16. The theme has a happy outcome. The narrative, however, has no real interest in the story of the asses. That story is only a convenient entry point into the real story concerning the monarchy.

Placed in tension with the theme of lost asses is a countertheme of kingship, the primary interest of the narrative. The key actors in the kingship theme are Yahweh and Samuel. Saul is only a passive recipient and takes no active part in coming to power. Saul receives the throne but he does not grasp power.

9:5–14. The narrative provides a long, slowly paced account of Saul coming to the presence of Samuel. Saul's servant takes initiative and provides the ideas and the means of getting to

Samuel (vv. 6–10). Even seeking Samuel is related to the overriding concern of finding the lost asses. The search for the lost asses is the only reason Saul journeys to Samuel. The narrative skillfully holds our attention to this theme for as long as possible. Even in the midst of the donkey hunt, however, the text reminds us of Samuel's awesome authority, for only Samuel can preside at the sacrifice (v. 13). This reality of Samuel's authority will later haunt Saul (cf. 13:8–9). We are not yet told of that "other theme" of kingship, nor does innocent Saul even suspect it.

9:15–16. These verses are a retrospective report of a conversation between Yahweh and Samuel that occurred the day before. Everything in the story hinges on this private communication. Saul knows nothing about this conversation, but the narrator gives the reader access to it. It is a "revelation," a report on God's firm resolve: "I will send." Yahweh takes the initiative (cf. the same initiative by Yahweh in 16:1 concerning David), which is expressed in an unusual word order in the first sentence of verse 15. Ordinarily the Hebrew word order should have the verb first (though this is not evident in English translation). Here the word "Yahweh" is first, suggesting that Yahweh will in a special way dominate this sentence.

After the "I" of Yahweh comes the "you" of Samuel, "You will anoint." After the "I" and "you," then "he": "He shall save." Saul is here anointed for a task similar to that of Moses. Birch (pp. 35–42) suggests this narrative contains standard form elements of a "call narrative"; Saul is being "called" by Yahweh for a special mission. Just as God responded to the cries of the people from Egypt (Ex. 2:23–25) with Moses, so God will now respond to the cries of the people with Samuel.

Notice that in this brief statement Yahweh says "my people" three times: "prince over my people," "save my people," "affliction of my people." This anointing is not for the sake of the monarchy, not to establish a new institution, not to enhance Saul. It is for "my people," whose affliction has evoked a firm response. The saving God authorizes Saul in the face of genuinely life-denying opponents so that Israel may live. Saul is Yahweh's answer to the affliction of Israel.

The peculiar role of Saul (still not completely caught in the ideology of kingship) is evident in the fact that God heeds the cry of Israel and answers with Saul (v. 16). In 8:18, kingship is

treated as a reason Yahweh will *not* answer Israel. In this narrative, however, God does answer. The pro-David narrative will later want to treat Saul differently, but here Saul is perceived as a positive good, given to Israel in Yahweh's goodness.

9:17–21. These verses depict the first encounter between Samuel and Saul. The pericope is designed to bring out Samuel's capacity as seer and Saul's slowness to comprehend the movement of history as it swirls around him. The two themes of kingship and asses play off each other masterfully. Saul comes to Samuel with his mind set on the asses; Samuel wants to set Saul's mind on kingship (vv. 19–20).

Verse 17 brings us quickly back to the present after the report of "yesterday": "Here is the man." There is no ambiguity. Nor is there any rationale about why this is "the one." God's electing power is unqualified. The narrative gives Saul authority far beyond the will of the people or the inclination of Samuel. The choice of Saul is rooted precisely in the intention of God.

The exchange between Samuel and Saul is freighted and delicate (vv. 19–20). Samuel guides the exchange; Saul understands very little. Before Saul can even ask about the asses, Samuel replies with an answer intended to change the subject. The change is wrought by the double use of the word "mind" (heart). Samuel knows what is on the mind of Saul (v. 19). However, Samuel invites Saul to get his mind off the donkeys for the sake of the "desire of Israel": that is, kingship (v. 20).

Samuel's enigmatic response as a question is a subtle assertion about the monarchy. Samuel asserts that everything desirable in Israel is for "you and for your father's house" (v. 20). The statement is not excessively elusive. Even the uncomprehending Saul seems to catch the point. He quickly demurs, in a manner reminiscent of Gideon (v. 21; Judg. 6:15). Saul's protest is left unresolved and unanswered, but the die is now cast. God's way has been implemented so powerfully and with such determination that it is larger than either Samuel or Saul.

9:22–27. Samuel does not speak, in response to Saul's protest, but treats Saul in an honored and deferential way, a way befitting a king. He gives him an honored seat at the table, special food, and rest (v. 25). Because God has identified Saul as king, Samuel operates as though Saul is already king. The next morning Samuel prepares to send Saul away (v. 26). For Samuel, the

assertion of Yahweh in verse 17 has already changed Israel's historical situation, whether Saul is ready to embrace it or not. The new situation—still unrecognized by Saul, the Israelites, or the Philistines—is that Saul is Yahweh's means of resolving the threat and bringing well-being.

Samuel has alluded to kingship (v. 20). The time has arrived, however, for Samuel to speak more directly, so that Saul can come to understand his new role. Samuel therefore arranges to see Saul alone (v. 27). This secret meeting is so that Samuel can share "the word of the Lord" (v. 27): that is, make known God's resolve to be accomplished through Saul. Samuel and the narrator can speak of "the word of the Lord" without awkwardness or argument. This narrative easily accepts the conviction that the powerful word of Yahweh is a recognized and effective presence in the historical process before which everything else must yield. The word is powerful and Samuel is its bearer (cf. 3:19–21). The word decrees and asserts what Yahweh wills in the history of Israel. This notion is central to the historiography of the books of Samuel and must be taken seriously. This purpose of Yahweh is other than Samuel, or anyone else. Yahweh's word is not simply Samuel's political ideology in capital letters. That word has now decreed Saul. The narrative asserts that the larger purpose of Yahweh has been spoken in Israel and is now enacted. Saul is the means of that word becoming flesh.

10:1–8. In 10:1, Samuel acts in obedience to that word of Yahweh. Samuel anoints Saul, precisely as mandated by Yahweh in 9:16. There the commission of the new king was to "rule" and to "save." Now Samuel reiterates both words, "save" and "rule" (10:1). Saul will not only save but will reign. Saul will not only do what a judge does but also what a king does.

The two things that matter in this decisive moment are the sacramental act of anointing, which is an act of authorizing, empowering, and legitimating the new king, and the mandate to save. Saul's office exists for the well-being of "his people Israel." The act of kingmaking is soteriological. Saul is *to save*. The act is also ecclesiological. It is for the sake of the *community*. Saul is to save and to make this community freshly possible.

The new mandate and transformation of Saul is so drastic that it requires verification (v. 1b). Samuel offers three signs, which in verse 9 are said to be fulfilled. The first is that Saul will meet men who will give assurances about the lost asses (v. 2).

The fulfillment of this sign is not narrated in the text, but this is unnecessary because assurance about the asses had already been given by Samuel (9:20). The second sign will be the appearance of two men who will give food to Saul (vv. 3–4). Fulfillment of that sign also is not explicit in the narrative. The third sign will be a "band of prophets" with whom Saul will prophesy (vv. 5–6). The promise of this third sign is that Saul will be "turned into another man," a new creature empowered for God's special purpose. In his final instructions, Samuel asserts once more that he himself is in charge (cf. 9:13) and Saul must defer to him (vv. 7–8). This last assertion is made in modest tones, but it is an ominous signal that will bear heavily on Saul's future. Samuel's prominence may be modestly stated, but it is aggressively enacted in time to come.

10:9–13. These verses narrate Saul's empowerment and transformation. Up until now, Saul has been the passive, silent recipient of this remarkable authorization. We have had no clue that Saul either understood or embraced the new summons. Now it becomes clear that Samuel's acts and words of anointing are not empty. They contain a powerful vitality that has in fact changed life for Saul.

Saul is given "another heart" (v. 9). He meets the anticipated band of ecstatic prophets and joins them. They play musical instruments (v. 5), and Saul engages in self-transcending acts that sweep away conventional perceptions and usual categories of understanding. Saul becomes filled with energy and freedom beyond himself. The narrative strains to find words adequate for the new reality. This is the gift of the spirit. It is the power of God that works a newness in the face of established structures, order, and assumptions. Saul, by the work of the spirit, is a genuine newness in Israel. The monarchy, so the text asserts, is not a human mechanism but rests in the inexplicable, unadministered power of God.

Here, at the edge of Israel's newness, is the gift (charisma) of freedom, ecstasy, and self-transcendence yielding to a purpose beyond Saul's own self. The response of those who heard the gossip about this event was one of disbelief (vv. 11–13). Could this tall, handsome son of a wealthy farmer (cf. 9:1–2) yield himself to something that embarrassing? Could well-ordered wealth be open to the power of the spirit that would give energy and courage beyond everything conventional? Subse-

quent events (especially ch. 11) answered yes. The emergence of the monarchy, at least in this episode, is not wrought by cold bargaining about power arrangements. It is about the release of new power in the midst of the political process, power that changes the shape of the conversation and opens Israel to new social possibility.

10:14–16. The conclusion to this long narrative about asses and kingship is wonderfully anticlimactic. “Where have you been?” “I have been to seek the asses.” “I have been to see the seer” (v. 14). The seer told me not to worry. They had been found. Saul obviously tells his family as little as possible. He does not want his uncle or his family to know about the astonishing work of Samuel, the awesome coming of the spirit, or the embarrassment with the prophets. We might have expected more of a report when he returned home. In terms of narrative construction, the conclusion (vv. 14–16) corresponds to the introduction (9:1–4). Thus far the story of kingship is fully contained within the account of the asses. The kingdom is still invisible and unannounced. Saul wants the newness kept quiet. Neither Samuel nor Yahweh insists just yet on public notice. No one insists on proclamation of the kingship.

Yahweh is shown in this narrative to be the one who presides with power over the life and future of Israel. There has been argument, disagreement, and negotiation in chapter 8 about kingship, as there will be again in chapters to follow. In this episode concerning Saul, however, there is no debate, no uncertainty, no ambiguity. Yahweh moves swiftly to revamp the power in the community so Israel may be saved. God wills the rescue of this people from every danger, even if that rescue must happen in ways (i.e., kingship) long regarded in Israel as unorthodox, unwelcome, alien, and unacceptable. The leadership of Samuel and the commissioning of Saul are in order that this community may live.

The initiative of Yahweh over the life of Saul, a man who thought he was on a donkey hunt, is staggering.

Yesterday God said, “I will send you a man” (9:16)

Today Yahweh said, “Here is the man” (9:17)

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Saul (and the monarchy) is Yahweh’s work, Yahweh’s initiative, Yahweh’s plan, Yahweh’s choice. The initiative of God continues when we are invited to notice the effect on Saul:

God gave him another heart (10:9)
The spirit of God came mightily upon him
(10:10, cf. v. 6)

This narrative is a study in what happens to one man when he is caught up in Yahweh’s purpose of powerful rescue and new governance.

“Another heart” (10:9) suggests a total revisioning of the world in a way that shatters old perceptions, invites new commitments, and requires new actions. In the old wilderness memory of Israel, Caleb is marked as a man with “a different spirit” who will therefore live and prosper in the land (Num. 14:24). In the exilic prophecy of Ezekiel, it is asserted that those with conventional “business as usual” hearts will not save Israel and will not return home or enter the land. The only possibility of a future for exilic Israel is that God will give a “new heart” and a “new spirit” (Ezek. 11:19). A new heart and spirit will replace the heart of stone (Ezek. 36:26).

Our narrative concerning Saul is placed midway between the hopelessness of the wilderness and the despair of exile. Saul participates in a crisis and a drama not unlike that of Caleb before him and Ezekiel after him. God claims Saul and God transforms Saul. Israel can again participate in God’s promises. Thus Saul receives a new heart, a new way to be in the world. This narrative momentarily holds the possibility that Saul (and therefore Israel) may become a “new creation” for whom “the old has passed away” and “the new has come” (II Cor. 5:17).

The immediate outcome for Saul is that he behaves as if he had lost his mind [heart] (v. 10). Indeed, he has lost his old heart [mind] (v. 9); he has become available for God’s power and God’s purpose in remarkable ways. He is transformed in ways that others find embarrassing (vv. 11–12). This experience of the rush of the spirit is an odd moment in the total narrative of kingship. Surely those who requested a king in chapter 8 were sober and realistic. They wanted a planner and a budgeter who would manage the economy and the army. They surely did not intend a king who would be moved by the wind of God out beyond their own hoped-for vision of Israel. But Saul is seized! He is made new! The surprising empowerment of Saul is perhaps paralleled in Pope John XXIII. He was chosen through carefully managed bureaucratic processes but was available to the spirit and was led in astonishing (and, to many, objection-

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able) directions. This seizure of Saul must have made many in Israel nervous. Is it too much to say that, for the moment, we are watching an adumbration of Pentecost in which the community of faith turns toward God's newness with inexplicable power and freedom?

This narrative asserts that Israel's world is not closed and settled. The personal world of Saul and the public world of Israel are both available to Yahweh, for shattering and for starting again, the very shattering and starting anticipated by Hannah (2:1-10). The world and Israel's history have working in them a dangerous possibility. At least in the moment of this narrative, Saul is not prepared for or inclined to resist that strange working.

This transformation of Saul by the spirit must have frightened and intimidated others in Israel. Perhaps the "elders" did not have something this dangerous in mind. Israel is not so sure it wants to follow where such a leader might go. The next unit, verses 17-27, perhaps expresses reserve and fear about this newness wrought by God.

I Samuel 10:17-27

Critical scholarship is agreed that this unit is not an easy or obvious continuation of the preceding verses. Rather, it appears to be a continuation of chapter 8, which takes a more critical view of the monarchy. This text reports a formal meeting convened by Samuel at Mizpah (cf. 7:15). It is an exceedingly solemn and ominous meeting.

10:17-19. These verses are a formal announcement by God. Samuel is able to speak God's word directly and is credited in Israel with doing so (cf. 3:19-21). The first half of the speech of Yahweh is a characteristic review of Yahweh's past graciousness to Israel. As Yahweh has been gracious to Israel all through its history (v. 18), so now Israel rejects this gracious God (v. 19). The contrast between graciousness and rejection is expressed in the powerful initial pronouns "I" and "you" and in the verbs "delivered" and "rejected." In verses 18-19, Israel's desire for a king is understood as a nullification of the saving past and of the God who saves.

We have already seen in chapters 4-6 that the Philistine threat is taken as a parallel to the Egyptian oppression. The