CHAPTER 11

I Samuel

In this chapter we examine the First Book of Samuel. Different threads of the story—the earlier narrative of the birth and call of the prophet Samuel, the story of the Ark of the Covenant's capture and recovery, the move to an Israelite monarchy and the trials of the king, Saul, and David's early career in Saul's court and then as an independent mercenary and outlaw—are all part of the story of David's rise to power. As we shall see, different narrative interests are at work in the story.

The two books of Samuel were originally one book in Hebrew. They were divided in Greek and Latin manuscripts because of the length of the book. In the Greek, the Septuagint (LXX), they are grouped with the books of Kings as 1–4 Reigns. The Greek text of Samuel is longer than the traditional Hebrew text (MT). Some scholars had thought that the translators had added passages, but the Dead Sea Scrolls preserve fragments of a Hebrew version that corresponds to the Greek. It is now clear that the Greek preserves an old form of the text and that some passages had fallen out of the Hebrew through scribal mistakes.

There are various tensions and duplications in 1 Samuel that are obvious even on a casual reading of the text. Samuel disappears from the scene in chapters 4–6, and then reemerges in chapter 7. In chapter 8 the choice of a human king is taken to imply a rejection of the kingship of YHWH. Yet the first king is anointed at YHWH's command. There are different accounts of the way in which Saul becomes king (10:17-27; chap. 11) and different accounts of his rejection (chaps. 13 and 15). There are two accounts of how David came into the service of Saul (chaps. 16 and 17). David becomes Saul's son-in-law twice in chapter 18, and he defects to the Philistine king of Gath twice in chapters 21 and 27. He twice refuses to take Saul's life when he has the opportunity (chaps. 24 and 27).

The Deuteronomistic editor does not seem to have imposed a pattern on the books of Samuel such as we find in Judges or Kings. Deuteronomistic passages have been recognized in the oracle against the house of Eli in 1 Sam 2:27-36 and 3:11-14, in Samuel's reply to

the request for a king in 8:8, and especially in Samuel's farewell speech in chapter 12. The most important sign of editorial activity is the presence of two quite different attitudes to the monarchy. First Samuel 9:1—10:16; 11; 13–14, had a generally favorable view of the monarchy. Chapters 7–8; 10:17-27; 12; 15, viewed the kingship with grave suspicion. The easiest explanation is that the first Deuteronomistic edition in the time of Josiah was positive toward the monarchy, and that the more negative material was incorporated in a later edition during the exile, after the monarchy had collapsed. Both editions may have drawn on older traditions. The net result, however, is a complex narrative that shows the range of attitudes toward the monarchy. The historical accuracy of these stories is moot, since we have no way of checking them. They have the character of a historical novel, which clearly has some relationship to history but is concerned with theme and character rather than with accuracy in reporting.

THE BIRTH AND CALL OF SAMUEL (1:1—4:1a)

The story of Samuel's birth is similar to that of Samson's, but more elaborate. His mother Hannah is barren, but eventually the LORD answers her prayer and Samuel is conceived. In thanksgiving, Hannah dedicates her son as a nazirite to the LORD. Unlike Samson, who was also a nazirite, Samuel is dedicated to service at the house of the LORD at Shiloh. Psalm 78:60 describes the shrine at Shiloh as a *miškan,* or tent-shrine, and Josh 18:1 and 19:51 refer to the tent of meeting there. Some scholars have argued that the tabernacle described in the Priestly source was located at Shiloh.

The Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2 is a hymn of praise, which refers to God's ways of dealing with humanity rather than to a specific act of deliverance. It was probably chosen for this context because of v. 5: "The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn." The theme of the song is that God exalts the lowly and brings down the mighty. Hannah's song is the model for the Magnificat, the thanksgiving song of the virgin Mary in the New Testament (Luke 1:46-55).

The manner of Samuel's birth links him with the judges. His call anticipates that of the later prophets. The call of the prophets takes either of two forms: it can be a vision (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1), or it can be an auditory experience (Moses, Jeremiah). Samuel's call is of the auditory type. Unlike Moses or Jeremiah, however, Samuel is not given a mission. Rather, he is given a prophecy of the destruction of the house of Eli. The revelation establishes his credentials as a prophet. We shall find that he functions as a prophet in other ways. He is a seer, who can find things that are missing (chap. 9). In 1 Sam 19:20, he appears as conductor of a band of ecstatic prophets. More importantly, he anoints kings and can also declare that they have been rejected by God. Samuel's interaction with Saul prefigures the interaction between kings and prophets later in the Deuteronomistic History.

THE ARK NARRATIVE (4:1b—7:1)

The story of Samuel is interrupted in 4:1b—7:1 by the story of the ark, in which he plays no part. The ark is variously called the ark of God, the ark of YHWH, the ark of the covenant, or the ark of testimony. In Deut 10:1-5 Moses is told to make an ark of wood as a receptacle for the stone tablets of the covenant. The story in 1 Samuel 4–6, however, makes clear that it is no mere box. It is the symbol of the presence of the Lord. It is carried into battle to offset the superior force of the Philistines, in the belief that YHWH is thereby brought into the battle. But YHWH's enemies are not scattered before him. The capture of a people's god or gods, represented by statues, was not unusual in the ancient Near East. Nonetheless, the capture of the ark in battle was a great shock to the Israelites and led directly to the death of Eli.

The story of the ark, however, has a positive ending for the Israelites. YHWH mysteriously destroys the statue of the Philistine god Dagon and afflicts the people with a plague. As a result, the Philistines send back the ark. Nonetheless, it is significant that shortly after this episode the Israelites begin to ask for a king. The old charismatic religion of the judges, which relied heavily on the spirit of the Lord, was not adequate for dealing with the Philistines.

THE MOVE TO MONARCHY (1 SAMUEL 7–12)

Samuel reappears on the scene in 1 Sam 7:3, and is said to judge Israel after Eli's demise. Unlike the older judges, however, he is not a warrior. He secures the success of the Israelites in battle by offering sacrifice.

Like Eli, Samuel has sons who do not follow in his footsteps, and so the people finally ask for a king. The exchange between Samuel and the people in 1 Samuel 8 represents the negative view of the kingship. The people are said to have rejected YHWH as king. Moreover, the prediction of "the ways of the king" reflects disillusionment born of centuries of experience and is quite in line with the critiques of monarchy by the prophets, beginning with Elijah in 1 Kings 21.

There are two accounts of the election of Saul as the first king. The first is a quaint story in which he goes to consult the seer Samuel about lost donkeys. This story speaks volumes about early Israelite society. Lost donkeys were a matter of concern for prophets and for future kings. This is the first case in which a king is anointed in ancient Israel. The king was "the Lord's anointed" par excellence. It is from this expression that we get the word "messiah," from the Hebrew *mashiach*, "anointed."

According to the second account of the election of Saul, he was chosen by lot (1 Sam 10:20), the formal method for discerning the divine will favored by the Deuteronomists. Also distinctively Deuteronomistic is the notice that Samuel wrote the rights and duties of the kingship in a book and gave it to Saul (compare the law of the king in Deut 17:14-20). Initially, Saul acts like a judge, summoning the tribes by sending around pieces of

oxen, and being inspired by the spirit of the LORD. After the victory over the Ammonites, the people assemble at Gilgal to make him king. There are several steps, then, in the process by which Saul becomes king: divine election, designation by a prophet (Samuel), and finally acclamation by the people.

The accession of Saul is completed by the apparent retirement of Samuel in chapter 12. Samuel's protestation of innocence provides a concise summary of the conduct expected from a good ruler. He should not abuse the people by taking their belongings, or defraud them, and he should not take bribes to pervert justice. Samuel seems reluctant, however, to yield the reins of power. He chides the people for asking for a king. In the end he grants that things will be all right if they do not turn aside from following the LORD. What is important is keeping the law, regardless of whether there is a king.

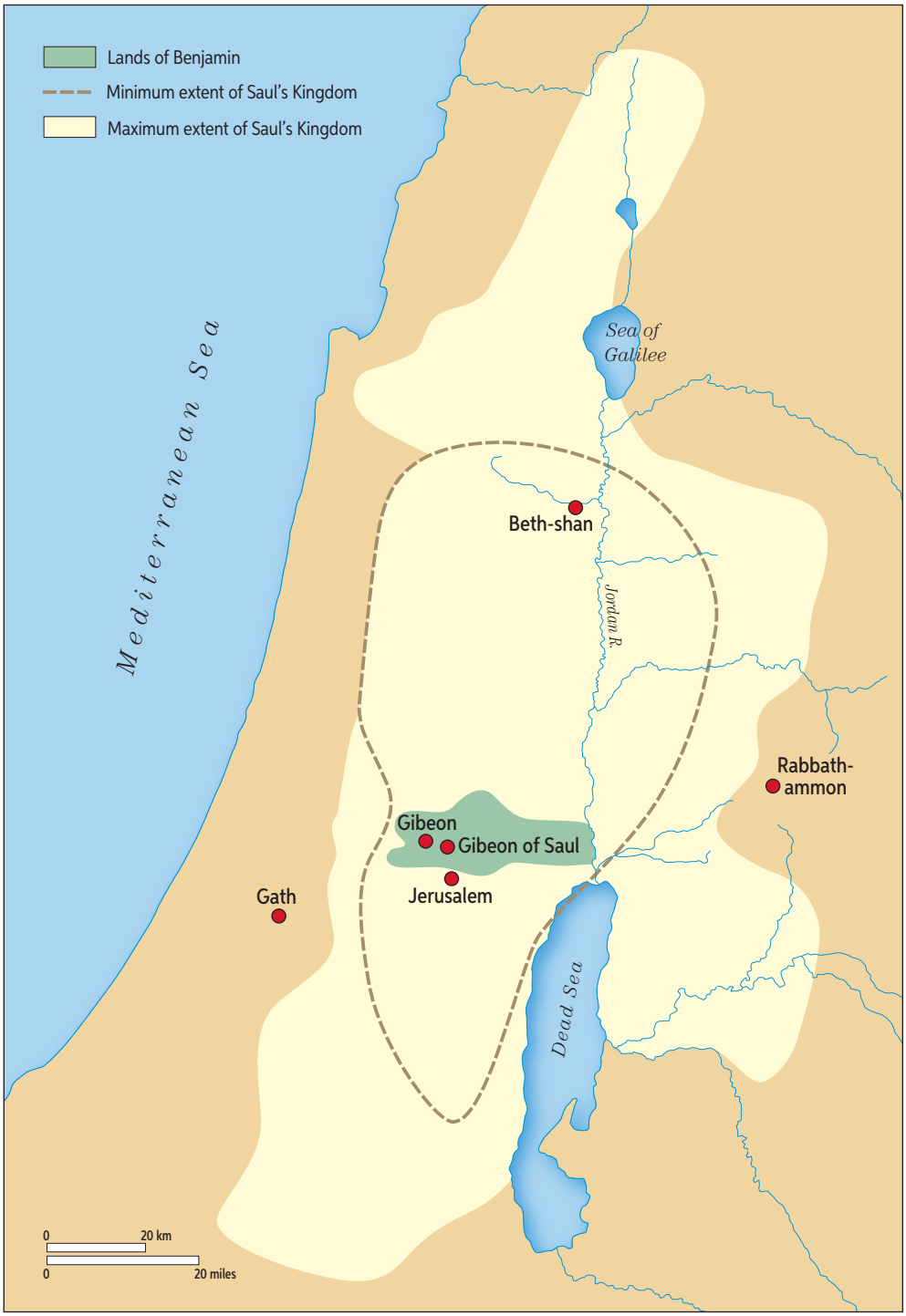
THE TRIALS OF SAUL (1 SAMUEL 13–15)

Samuel does not stay retired. He clashes with Saul in two incidents, in chapters 13 and 15. The first concerns the preparation for a battle against the Philistines. Samuel is late, and Saul is concerned about the morale of his soldiers. So he presumes to offer the sacrifice himself. No sooner does he do so than Samuel appears, and judges him harshly. If he had kept the commandment, his kingdom would have been confirmed, but now it 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. The ritual is not automatically efficacious but depends on the obedience of the performer.

There is a blatant conflict of interest between the two men, as to which of them is ultimately in control. This is plausible psychologically, although we have no way to verify whether it has any historical basis. There is also, however, a conflict between two theologies. 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. The claims of figures like Samuel to speak for God must be viewed with some suspicion in view of their own interests.

The conflict between Saul and Samuel is resumed in chapter 15. This time Samuel orders Saul to attack Amalek and slaughter every man, woman, and child—and even the animals. Saul partially complies, but spares the king and the best of the animals to offer them as sacrifice. Because of this he is again repudiated as king. Once again, the issue is authority and control. It is not apparent that Samuel's command, either here or in chapter 13, is for the greater good of the people, unless one assumes that it is always better to obey the prophet who claims to speak for God.



Saul's Kingdom

Samuel's rebuke to Saul has a prophetic ring to it: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and in sacrifices 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). There is a close parallel to this in the prophet Hosea: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hos 6:6). Hosea and Samuel agree that sacrifice is no substitute for right conduct, but they have rather different ideas about what constitutes right conduct. For Hosea, it is steadfast love and the knowledge of God. For Samuel everything comes down to obedience, even if what is commanded is the slaughter of other human beings.

The two stories of conflict between Samuel and Saul, in 1 Samuel 13 and 15, frame another engrossing story that illustrates a similar conflict in values. In the battle against the Philistines after the incident at Gilgal, Saul laid an oath on the troops, cursing any man who tasted food before the enemy was defeated. His son Jonathan, the hero of the battle up to this point, was unaware of the oath and ate some honey. When he is told of the oath, Jonathan shrugs it off: the men would fight better if they had food. Here again we see a clash between a moderate pragmatism, on the one hand, and an ethic that attaches great importance to oaths and vows, on the other. 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 either that of Abraham and Isaac or that of Jephthah and his daughter. Jonathan is not executed, and the reprieve does not come from divine intervention. Instead the troops intervene to rescue Jonathan from his father's oath. In this case, pragmatism wins out.

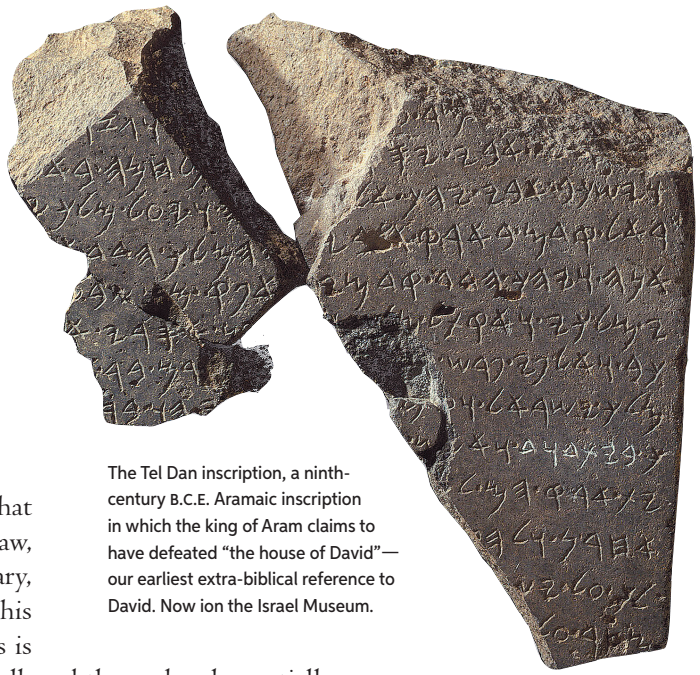
The stories in 1 Samuel 13–15 capture brilliantly the sense of a society in transition, where deference to custom and to religious authorities collides with a growing sense of pragmatism.

THE RISE OF DAVID

The second half of 1 Samuel and the opening chapters of 2 Samuel tell the story of David's rise to power. It is widely agreed that the Deuteronomist drew on an older source document here. The "History of David's Rise" is usually identified as 1 Sam 16:14—2 Samuel 5; 1 Sam 16:1-13 is sometimes included. A major turning point in this story is the death of Saul.

The story of David reads like a historical novel rather than the kind of chronicle we find in Kings. It cannot be verified from nonbiblical sources. Some scholars have gone so far as to question whether David ever existed, but most would regard this as undue skepticism. The ruling family in Judah for some four hundred years was known as the "house of David." This title has now been found in an inscription from Tel Dan. It is reasonable to assume that David was a historical person, like Omri, who gave his name to a dynasty in northern Israel. That said, we have simply no way of checking whether the historical David bore any resemblance to the figure described in the biblical narratives.

Related to this issue is the genre of the story. One influential hypothesis is that it was composed as an apology for King David—that is, a propaganda document, intended to refute charges that might be brought against him. It shows that David was not an outlaw, a deserter, or a Philistine mercenary, that he was not implicated in Saul's death or in the deaths of some of Saul's family and followers. Nonetheless, for the modern reader, at least, the story conveys the impression that David at various times *was* an outlaw, a deserter, and a Philistine mercenary, and he was at best conspicuous by his absence when Saul was killed. If this is apologetic literature, it is exceptionally subtle, and only partially successful. The appeal of this story lies precisely in the ambiguity of its hero. He is chosen by God, but he is by no means flawless or innocent.



The Tel Dan inscription, a ninth-century B.C.E. Aramaic inscription in which the king of Aram claims to have defeated "the house of David"—our earliest extra-biblical reference to David. Now ion the Israel Museum.

THE ELECTION OF DAVID

As in the case of Saul, there is more than one account of how David became king. First, he is anointed by Samuel (1 Sam 16:1-13). This story follows a familiar biblical pattern in the exaltation of the lowly: David is the youngest of the sons of Jesse, and initially thought to be of no account.

First Samuel 16:14-23 gives a different account of the discovery of David. He is picked out because of his skill as a musician. Saul has now lost the spirit of the Lord, and instead is afflicted by "an evil spirit from the Lord" (16:14). Saul is unaware that David has been anointed as his replacement.

Yet another account of the discovery of David follows in the story of his combat with Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. There are actually two stories here. The first is found in 17:1-11, 32-40, 42-48a, 49, 51-54. The second is in 17:12-31, 41, 48b, 50, 55-58; 18:1-5, 10-11, 17-19, 29b-30. The verses that make up the second story are missing from the Old Greek translation. It is generally agreed that in this case the Greek preserves the older text.

Few stories in the Hebrew Bible have such popular appeal as that of David and Goliath. It has become the proverbial story of the underdog. David triumphs by wit and agility over the huge but rather immobile Philistine. The Deuteronomist sees another dimension in the conflict. Goliath comes with sword and spear but David comes in

the name of the Lord of hosts (17:45). Despite its legendary character, the story of Goliath fits the most plausible scenario of David's rise. He was successful in battle and outshone Saul. Hence the popular acclaim: Saul has killed his thousands, but David his tens of thousands.

The relationship between Saul and David is complicated by David's friendship with Saul's family. Jonathan, Saul's son, loved David as himself (18:1). Much has been made of the relationship between David and Jonathan as a possible homosexual relationship. Homosexual attraction is certainly a factor in male bonding, especially in all-male institutions like the army (up to recent years). But if there is a sexual dimension in this relationship, it is never acknowledged explicitly.

David also has relationships with Saul's daughters. In I Samuel 18 the initiative for marriage comes from Michal, who loves David, with Saul's approval. David, then, cannot be accused of marrying for expediency. When David is estranged from Saul, Michal becomes the wife of another man, but David recalls her after Saul's death, when he is trying to secure the kingship over all Israel. After the kingship has been consolidated, however, she is cursed with childlessness, ostensibly for disapproving of David dancing before the ark. The story may be intended to defend David from allegations that he used Michal and dumped her when he no longer needed her, but it is difficult not to read between the lines and suspect that he was motivated by political expediency.

The stories of interaction between David and Saul in I Samuel 19–24 provide the closest analogies to the genre of apology. Saul repeatedly tries to kill David, for no reason other than jealousy. Members of Saul's own family, Jonathan and Michal, side with David. Saul commits an outrage by slaughtering the priests of Nob (a shrine north of Jerusalem, near Gibeah), for befriending David. Nonetheless, when David has Saul at his mercy he refrains, declaring, "I will not raise my hand against the Lord's anointed" (24:10). Even Saul admits, "You are more righteous than I" (24:17). Finally, Saul acknowledges that David will succeed to the kingship, and asks only that David not "wipe out my name from my father's house."

DAVID AS OUTLAW AND MERCENARY

The later chapters of I Samuel paint a more complex picture of David as bandit leader and mercenary. When he is not in the service of a king, he must support his troops by whatever means available. In I Samuel 25 he does this by demanding a protection payment from a sheep farmer in Carmel. The farmer is named Nabal, which means "fool." His folly lies in his failure to recognize the threat posed by the bandit's demand. In contrast, his wife Abigail is clever and beautiful, and she intervenes to buy David off. When Nabal hears what happened, he dies suddenly, and David takes Abigail as a wife. Frequent invocation of the name of the Lord cannot hide the fact that David is engaged in extortion.

Finally, David is called on to join the Philistines in battle against Israel. He declares his willingness, and the king of Gath does not doubt his loyalty. Other Philistine commanders, however, are distrustful, and so David is sent back. Thus he is saved from the dilemma of

either fighting against his own people or being disloyal to his current master. Here again the story serves as an apology, to defend David of complicity in the death of Saul.

The death of Saul has a certain aura of heroism. He falls on his sword rather than be captured by the Philistines. Suicide has generally been condemned in Jewish and Christian tradition, but some cases have always been admired—most notably the mass suicide of the Zealots at Masada at the end of the Jewish revolt against Rome in the first century C.E. There is no hint of disapproval of the suicide of Saul. For all his faults, he is recognized as a champion of Israel in its struggle with the Philistines and other neighboring peoples.

FOR FURTHER READING

Commentaries

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

Bruce C. Birch, "1 and 2 Samuel." In *NIB* 2:949–1383.

A. J. Campbell, *1 Samuel* (FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).

D. Jobling, *1 Samuel* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).

Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (WBC 10; Waco, TX: Word, 1983).

P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *1 Samuel* (AB 8; New York, Doubleday, 1980).

Literary-Historical Analyses

Joel Baden, *The Historical David: The Real Life of an Invented Hero* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).