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Samuel Agonistes:
A Conflicted Prophet’s Resistance to God and Contribution to the Failure of Israel’s First King

J. Richard Middleton

As one of the three central characters in 1 and 2 Samuel, and the one after whom the book is named, the prophet Samuel occupies a prominent place in the narrative, second only to Israel’s first two kings. Although Samuel is not the only prophet mentioned in the book, the others are, by comparison, bit players. An unnamed “man of God” predicts the demise of the priestly house of Eli (1 Samuel 2), while the prophet Gad guides David in his flight from Saul (1 Sam 22:3) and later brings God’s word of judgment against David for the census (2 Samuel 24). Somewhat more prominent is Nathan, who communicates God’s promise of a dynasty for David (2 Samuel 7) and later brings God’s message of judgment (and forgiveness) for David’s adultery and murder (2 Samuel 12).

Yet Samuel’s role is considerably more significant than any of these. From the report of his birth (1 Sam 1:20) to his early years (1 Sam 2:18–26 and chap. 3), we are put on notice that Samuel’s life will be significant for the story that follows. Samuel is first called a prophet in 1 Sam 3:20 and his prophetic actions are prominent in significant blocks of narrative (1 Samuel 7–13, 15–16), focusing on the origin of the monarchy and the rise and fall of Saul, Israel’s first king, with two brief reprises (in 1 Samuel 19, when he protects David from Saul, and in 1 Samuel 28, when Saul summons him for a postmortem consultation). His death is reported in 1 Sam 25:1 and 28:1.

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The Interpretive Problem of Saul’s Rejection

The issue for this essay is Samuel’s role in the demise of Saul. The problem (which has long troubled interpreters of the book) is God’s evident favoritism shown toward David, given God’s earlier summary rejection of Saul. God’s quite-different treatment of the first two kings of Israel seems patently unfair. While Saul is rejected from being king and refused forgiveness even when he confesses his sin (1 Samuel 15), David receives an unconditional covenant from God (2 Samuel 7) and his sin is immediately forgiven when he confesses (2 Samuel 12). Further, while the ostensible reason given for Saul’s rejection in 1 Samuel 15 is his failure to eradicate the Amalekites in holy war (because he spares the Amalekite king and takes spoil), David twice attacks the Amalekites without eradicating them (while taking spoil) and is never condemned for this (1 Samuel 27 and 30).

There are two standard approaches to interpreting the differing treatment that Saul and David receive in the narrative of Samuel. One common explanation appeals to David’s superior fit for kingship, given Saul’s ineptitude or outright sin. This explanation assumes that God (and the narrative of Samuel) judges Saul unfit for kingship by his actions, while celebrating David’s rise to the throne with a positive evaluation of his character and accomplishments. The second approach appeals to God’s sovereign election of David as the decisive factor in the rejection of Saul. This reading assumes that God discards Saul in order to orchestrate providentially David’s rise to power.

Both approaches, the moralistic and the providential, are problematic. The idea that Saul merits rejection by his own actions is difficult to support from a close reading of the narrative. Not only does the text fail to provide any clear, compelling basis for his rejection (as we shall see), but the later portrayal of David is far from unambiguously positive. Indeed, one version of the providential approach acknowledges these difficulties and therefore understands the text of Samuel as basically a deuteronomic apologia for David, which requires the narrative to get Saul out of the way as soon as possible (even on trumped-up charges, if necessary). If the first approach is simply naive in its reading of the text, the trouble with the second approach is that it makes God morally abhorrent, or at least hopelessly inconsistent and arbitrary. Indeed, one Old Testament scholar calls the God revealed in 1 and 2 Samuel “a capricious story-world character” who undermines “all piety, all theodicy, all doctrine.”

1. K. N. Noll, “Review of T. W. Cartledge, 1 and 2 Samuel (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001) and A. F. Campbell, I Sam-
Beyond these problems, both approaches (the moralistic and the providential) are seriously deficient in failing to factor in the complex characterization of the prophet Samuel throughout chaps. 8–15. It is my thesis that attention to the nuanced portrayal of Samuel as a conflicted character vis-à-vis God, the monarchy, and Saul personally might make better sense of the complexities of the text, and might even (dare I say it) make sense theologically. This essay thus questions one fundamental assumption in many traditional readings of the rejection of Saul, namely, that Samuel adequately represents God’s intent. It will be my task to show not just that Samuel misrepresents God but where this misrepresentation is rooted.

**Samuel’s Character Zone (Prior to Saul’s Rejection in Chapter 15)**

Let us begin with what we know of Samuel prior to 1 Samuel 15, especially in relation to Saul and to the kingship, generally.

*The Similarity of the Names Samuel and Saul (1 Samuel 1)*

First of all, there is the strange similarity of the names Samuel (שְׁמוּאֵל) and Saul (שָׁאוּל)—separated by only one consonant in Hebrew. Samuel’s mother, Hannah, gives the derivation of his name (in 1:20) as the verb שלע (to ask), explaining that she had asked him of יְהוָה. But it is actually Saul’s name that is more clearly and obviously derived from this verbal root. Indeed, Saul (שָׁאוּל) is the Qal passive participle of שלע (and means

**neš (FOTL 7; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003),” in Interpretation 58 (2004) 404.**

2. A growing number of scholarly works that address Saul’s downfall are suspicious of the character of Samuel, attributing to him a significant role in Saul’s rejection. Three of the most recent (with important resonances to my own approach) are T. Czövek, *Three Seasons of Charismatic Leadership: A Literary-Critical and Theological Interpretation of the Narrative of Saul, David and Solomon* (Regnum Studies in Mission; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), esp. pp. 41–100; K. Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 19; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008); and M. J. Steussy, *Samuel and His God* (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010). Special thanks to Bodner for many stimulating conversations about Samuel, Saul, and David over the years, and to Steussy for allowing me prepublication access to her manuscript.

3. Although my critical reading of the prophet Samuel is similar at many points to that of many interpreters (including Czövek, Bodner, and Steussy), I distinguish more sharply than most between the point of view of יְהוָה and that of Samuel. My suspicious reading of Samuel is not limited to the narrative prior to chap. 15 but spills over even into chap. 15. I thus read יְהוָה and Samuel as consistently at odds right until the end. A fuller exposition of my interpretation of the role of Samuel in the rejection of Saul will be provided in my forthcoming commentary: *1 and 2 Samuel* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, forthcoming).
either ‘asked’ or ‘lent’, depending on the context). Thus, it is supremely ironic that Hannah (in 1:28) says that as long as Samuel lives he is lent (לָאָשֶׁת) to YHWH (that is, he is Saul to YHWH). The very similarity of their names, then, may put us on notice of a certain rivalry of identification between Samuel and Saul. And, indeed, it turns out they are rivals for the leadership of Israel, as the later narrative shows.

Samuel’s Initial Resistance to the Monarchy (1 Samuel 8)

Their rivalry, however, predates Saul’s appearance on the scene; it lodges initially not in a person, but in the very idea of the monarchy. When the people ask (שָׁאל) for a king in chap. 8, Samuel objects in no uncertain terms. Even after God concedes to the people’s request, Samuel is unconvinced. We may surmise that Samuel’s objection is both theological and personal. Theologically, he interprets the request for a king (as does one important strand of biblical faith) as a rejection of YHWH’s rule over Israel. But that he objects even after YHWH decides to allow the monarchy suggests that Samuel has other motivations. He seems to realize that his unique and privileged position of leadership in Israel will now be threatened.

The depth of Samuel’s resistance to the monarchy is evident if we attend to the structure of chap. 8. Twice in this chapter, we find a cycle of speeches in which the elders of the people make their request for a king to Samuel, which he reports to God, who then gives him instructions, followed by Samuel’s return to the elders to relay what God has said. The two cases of slippage between God’s instructions and Samuel’s response are telling.

In the first cycle (8:4–18), God’s response to the people’s request is prefaced by his comment to Samuel not to take it personally (it is God, not Samuel, whom the people are rejecting). Then God instructs Samuel to listen to (that is, heed or obey) the people’s voice, while also warning them about the dangers of the monarchy (8:7–9). Listening to the people’s voice “in all that they say to you” (8:7) implies giving them a king. While Samuel warns them in a rather lengthy speech about the dangers of the monarchy (8:10–18), he does not appoint a king for them.

This leads to the elders’ second request for a king, and the cycle starts over (8:19–22). God again tells Samuel to listen to or heed/obey the people’s voice (8:21), and this time God adds the explicit instruction “and appoint them a king” (8:22a), just in case he did not get it the first time.

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4. Thus, the NAB appropriately translates the phrase (in 8:7, 9, and 21) as ‘grant their request’, while the NIV renders it ‘heed their demand’. 
But Samuel’s only response is an almost brusque dismissal of the people (8:22b). He is simply not ready to appoint a king. Indeed, Samuel’s disobedience to the voice of God is so glaring that the New Living Translation is embarrassed by it and therefore inserts that Samuel “agreed” before he sent the people home. But he pointedly does not.

*Samuel’s Delay in Installing Saul as King (1 Samuel 9–11)*

Samuel only anoints a king for Israel at the end of chap. 9 after God’s explicit instructions to anoint Saul. Even then, Samuel drags out the installation of Saul as king into three stages, each of which contains elements that suggest Samuel’s prejudicial attitude toward kingship. First, there is a secret anointing, with no witnesses (9:26–10:1), followed by the public casting of lots at Mizpah (10:17–27), to discover who the new king will be (as if Saul had not already been anointed). Beyond the fact of the delay, the casting of lots is how Achan was found to be the one guilty of breaking holy war regulations in Josh 7:16–18. So the use of this technique for choosing Israel’s king looks like a public relations stunt to prejudice the people against Saul at the outset. It even suggests that Samuel has already judged Saul guilty of the disobedience of chap. 15.

Finally, we have the formal confirmation or renewal of the kingship at Gilgal at the end of the following chapter (11:14–15). That Samuel waits until after Saul’s victory in defending Jabesh-Gilead against the Ammonites suggests that he could not simply trust YHWH’s choice of Saul, but had to gain confirmation for himself that the bumbling farmer-king was up to the task of legitimate rule.

While this three-stage installation of Saul may be taken as an indication of multiple sources, each of which conceived Saul’s coming to kingship differently, I am interested in the narrator’s framing of Saul’s installation as king (whatever the underlying sources) as a long, drawn-out process, which certainly suggests Samuel’s reticence in having Saul come to the throne.

*Samuel’s Convoluted and Contradictory Instructions to Saul (1 Samuel 10)*

A key component of Samuel’s resistance to passing on the leadership of Israel to Saul is a series of seemingly arbitrary, covert instructions he gives Saul at the secret anointing, which seem intended to keep Saul under his thumb. The instructions (the first three of which are called “signs”) may be summarized as follows.

First, Saul will find two men at Rachel’s tomb in the region of Benjamin who will convey certain information to him from his father (10:2). Then he
will meet three men going to Bethel who are carrying specific items (three kids, three loaves, and a jug of wine); these men will greet him and give him two of the loaves (10:3–4). Then he will come to another location where there is a Philistine prefect and he will there encounter a band of prophets coming from the high place, accompanied by people playing four different types of musical instruments (which are listed). These prophets will be prophesying in an ecstatic state and Saul will be grasped by the spirit of YHWH (and become another man) and will prophesy with them (10:5–7).

If these signs were conveyed to Saul in an unadorned manner, we could well believe that God had given them (through Samuel) as a way to confirm that Saul’s momentous transformation from humble farmer to king of Israel had really occurred by divine consent. But the manner of their delivery, full of obfuscation, with a plethora of irrelevant details, suggests a different function. These three sets of signs are actually quite difficult to remember (I’ve found that my students cannot accurately reproduce all their details even after they have just read them or heard them read aloud). Even granted the superior memory of those in an ancient oral culture, I wonder what the effect of these convoluted instructions would have been on the newly anointed Saul (who may already be wondering why the anointing was done in secret—is he or is he not king?).

But Samuel’s final instruction is much simpler. After the third sign is fulfilled, Saul is to do whatever his hand finds to do, for God is with him (10:7). By itself, this instruction suggests that Saul is being confirmed and encouraged in his newfound authority as ruler of Israel. Yet the kicker is what Samuel then adds. Saul is to go to Gilgal and wait there for seven days until Samuel arrives to tell him what to do (10:8). These mixed messages (do what your hand finds to do for God is with you; but wait for me seven days and I will tell you what to do) suggests that Samuel is manipulating the situation to keep Saul off balance. Having had actually to anoint Saul (against his better judgment), Samuel now wants to keep the new king dependent on himself as the privileged mediator of YHWH’s will. Worse, he seems determined to jerk Saul around and so psychologically sabotage his leadership potential.

While Samuel may be setting Saul up for failure, this may not be a purposeful goal on Samuel’s part but rather the unreflective expression of his resentment of God’s decision to give the people a king and his resentment of Saul, who is, after all, the first concrete embodiment of the monarchy.

Samuel’s Speech at Gilgal—Good Theology, Bad Motives? (1 Samuel 12)

Also important is Samuel’s speech to the people in chap. 12, which is placed in the context of the confirmation of Saul’s kingship at Gilgal. The
speech reads like good deuteronomic theology, articulating a conditional covenant between God, on the one side, and the king and the people, on the other, warning them to follow YHWH or be destroyed (12:14–15, 24–25). Yet this traditional theology is shot through with Samuel’s self-serving motives.

What is especially disturbing about Samuel’s speech in chapter 12 is that it is given under the pretext of celebrating the confirmation of Saul’s kingship on the heels of his victory at Jabesh-Gilead. Yet the speech actually serves to undermine the fledgling monarchy. Having just installed the new king, Samuel makes a last ditch attempt to assert his own position as indispensable and to affirm the evil of the monarchy.

Samuel stresses at the outset that his own leadership has been impeccable (12:3), a claim he gets the people to affirm (12:4–5), thereby implying they did not need a king at all. He even adds his own name to the list of judges beginning with Gideon (12:11), which seems so self-serving that the Syriac Peshitta replaces Samuel with Samson. Later in the speech, Samuel portrays himself as the people’s indispensable intercessor with YHWH (promising, through an oath, never to cease praying for them) and also as their necessary teacher of the Torah (12:23). In all this, he emphasizes the “evil” of their request for a king (12:17), which he gets them to acknowledge for themselves (12:19), interspersed with a public demonstration of his authoritative standing with God by requesting (and receiving) a visible miracle (12:17–18). The tactic works. The people feared YHWH, the text says, “and they feared Samuel as well” (12:18). I wonder about the psychological impact of a speech of this sort on Saul, right after the public confirmation of his kingship.

Samuel’s Condemnation of Saul for Not Waiting (1 Samuel 13)

This brings us to chap. 13, which begins with the Philistines gathering a massive number of troops to attack Saul and the Israelite army at Michmash. The result is that nearly three-quarters of Saul’s troops have deserted due to fear. Having retreated to Gilgal and waited for Samuel for seven days (which seems to allude to Samuel’s instruction in 10:8), Saul decides to offer sacrifices to YHWH (a burnt offering and a communion offering), possibly to win God’s favor in the upcoming battle or to encourage the remaining troops by a show of piety. Although we are not explicitly told Saul’s motivation, he is clearly doing what his own hand finds to do, in fulfillment of Samuel’s prior word to him in 10:8.

But Samuel appears at the very moment Saul completes the first offering and reprimands him for being “foolish” in not keeping the commandment that YHWH gave him (13:13), though what commandment this
might be is unclear from the narrative. Could Samuel be referring back to his own instructions in 10:8 for Saul to wait for him at Gilgal for seven days? There are three problems with this interpretation, none of which rule it out. Indeed, if this interpretation is accurate despite the interpretive difficulties, this just confirms the superbly manipulative role of Samuel.

First of all, chap. 13 opens in the MT by mentioning that at least two years have passed since Saul has become king. Verse 1 (missing from the main LXX manuscripts) says that Saul was [word missing] years old when he began to reign and that he reigned for [word missing] and two years. Since the Hebrew implies there is a multiple of 10 missing before and two, this incident might be placed 12 (or even 22 or 32) years after Samuel's instructions. Are we to believe that this injunction from chap. 10 is still relevant? Why was it not considered fulfilled when Saul went to Gilgal to be installed as king in chap. 11?

But the second problem with this interpretation is that in chap. 13 Saul does in fact wait seven days for Samuel, though evidently not till the very end of the seventh day, by Samuel's reckoning. Note, however, that from the narrator's point of view not only did Saul wait “the time appointed by Samuel,” but “Samuel did not come” (13:8). So, if the command in question was the one given in chap. 10 to wait seven days, then not only is Samuel at fault, but he is a master manipulator, who has kept Saul tied up in knots years later, still waiting.

The third problem with this interpretation is that the idea of waiting seven days was certainly no commandment of YHWH, but Samuel's own rather arbitrary instruction to Saul (even the narrator attributes this instruction to Samuel, not God, in 13:8). The emphatic way, therefore, that Samuel frames Saul’s purported disobedience is all the more striking: “You have not kept the commandment of YHWH your God, which he commanded you” (13:13). Does stating it twice make it more authoritative?

Perhaps, then, Saul’s sin was that he engaged in priestly functions (offering a sacrifice), in a period when royal and priestly duties were to be kept separate. King Uzziah of Judah, after all, was struck with leprosy when he dared to enter the temple to burn incense at the altar (2 Chr 26:16–21). But not only is the Uzziah incident from a much later era, but we would have to reckon with David's own explicitly priestly actions in 2 Samuel 6, including his liturgical dance in the presence of the ark, fol-

5. B. T. Arnold accepts that on the surface Saul’s offense is not waiting for Samuel, but he claims that Saul’s underlying problem is disobedience to Samuel (and thus to YHWH). See Arnold, 1 and 2 Samuel (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 200–201.
allowed by his multiple offering of sacrifices and his blessing of the people. But David receives no reprimand for any of this. Could it be, then, as some commentators suggest, that the issue is that Saul is too superstitious or supercilious about cultic matters? But this is grasping at straws.6

The crucial point is that in 1 Samuel 13, Samuel accuses Saul of disobeying not him but YHWH, which is, on the face of it, incomprehensible. Now, I have no desire to defend Saul as a paradigm of virtue in the narrative. Although he is sometimes decisive and vigorous in action (such as when he rescues Jabesh-Gilead from Nahash and the Ammonites in chap. 11), he is often portrayed as inept, ignorant or lacking in discernment. Take, for example, the opening scene of chap. 9 about the lost donkeys, or when Saul hides among the baggage at Mizpah in chap. 10, or when his rash oath in chap. 14 precipitates the troops to break food laws and almost costs Jonathan his life.7 Then later, in chap. 15, he seems to be less than honest in his conversations with Samuel.8 However, I can find no rational explanation for Saul’s supposed disobedience in chap. 13, beyond Samuel’s resentment (which has been building for at least two years, if we follow the time-frame of 13:1). As Walter Brueggemann notes: “Samuel cites no commandment that has been broken, nor can we construe one. The commandment that seems to have been broken is, ‘Thou shalt not violate Samuel’s authority.’”9

Indeed, Samuel goes on to say that because of this (unspecified) act of disobedience, Saul’s kingdom will not stand. Instead, YHWH has already sought for himself a man after his own heart, says Samuel, and has appointed him as ruler over Israel (13:14). While commentators often as-

6. V. Philips Long cogently argues that Saul’s infraction at Gilgal in chap. 13 is not cultic. See Long, The Reign and Rejection of King Saul: A Case for Literary and Theological Coherence (SBLDS 118; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), chap. 2. However, Long’s construal of the infraction as disobedience or insubordination to YHWH through the divinely authorized prophet is valid only if we understand this as Samuel’s twisted point of view and neither that of the narrator nor of God.

7. Saul’s rash oath may, however, be attributed to the fallout of Samuel’s condemnation in chap. 13; it could be overcompensation for a sense of guilt in not living up to Samuel’s standards. Czövek likewise suggests that “the purpose of 1 Samuel 14 is to portray a king handicapped due to the incident in chap. 13” (Three Seasons of Charismatic Leadership, 38).

8. Saul (like Samuel) is a complex, multidimensional character, whose “character zone” is dynamic and changes over time. He moves from bumbling farmer to confident king/military deliver and then to an increasingly constricted/conflicted person, gradually deconstructing under Samuel’s manipulation.

sume that this is prophetic foreshadowing of David (three chapters early), I read Samuel’s words of condemnation, including the claim to know God’s mind on the matter of a replacement for Saul, quite differently. Given what we have seen of his conflicted character and motives so far, I take this as a bit of extemporaneous bluster on Samuel’s part.

The relevant question, in my opinion, is not what Saul did wrong (here the text simply does not help us), but what effect Samuel’s forceful condemnation has on Saul’s psyche. Indeed, it is possible that God chose Saul (9:15–17) precisely because he wanted a humble farmer as Israel’s first king, someone who had no aspirations to power and could therefore be expected to rule without the sort of oppression Samuel warned the people of in chap. 8. But this sort of farmer king would require significant mentoring to achieve the leadership qualities and administrative competence (not to mention knowledge of YHWH) required for the job, something he does not get from Samuel. Thus, I have to wonder whether Samuel’s use of his prophetic office to manipulate Saul does not push Saul (who is initially a rather inept figure, without much self-confidence) farther over the edge, into the sort of emotional instability that begins to surface after David comes on the scene.

The Role of Samuel in God’s Rejection of Saul (1 Samuel 15)

We now come to 1 Samuel 15, perhaps the most complex chapter in the book. Instead of carefully working though the chapter, highlighting the many ambiguities and tensions, space constraints require me to proceed differently. Here I simply advance a series of intertwined interpretive claims or theses that together constitute my hypothesis concerning the rejection of Saul and God’s later (seeming) favoritism toward David. The final thesis will explore Samuel’s fundamental failure in his prophetic function vis-à-vis Saul, by comparing him with Moses, the paradigmatic prophet.

Thesis 1. Samuel has maintained inappropriate control over Saul, instead of mentoring the fledgling king into becoming a leader in his own right.

Samuel’s misuse of the authority of his prophetic office to maintain control over both Saul and the people, which has been sabotaging Saul’s fledgling kingship, is evident also in chap. 15, which opens with Samuel emphasizing his own role in anointing Saul king. “It was me,” he says (the personal pronoun is emphatic), “whom YHWH sent to anoint you king over Israel” (15:1). This assertion of prophetic priority and authority is striking, because Samuel had previously resisted anointing Saul as king.
Now he is emphatically taking the credit. So Samuel’s very first statement to Saul ought to raise questions about his motivations. Is he reminding Saul who is really in control here, so that Saul will not even think of questioning his instructions (in YHWH’s name) to execute holy war against the Amalekites (15:2–3)?

After the battle, when Samuel questions Saul about the sound of sheep and cattle that he hears (15:14), Saul explains that the people spared some of the best animals to sacrifice to YHWH “your God” (15:15). This is the first of three references that Saul makes in this chapter to YHWH as Samuel’s God (also 15:21 and 30). This telling phraseology certainly indicts Saul for his sense of distance from the God of Israel (I have no interest in defending Saul here). But it also suggests that Samuel has been so successful in positioning himself as YHWH’s unique spokesman (in all his dealings with Saul) that Saul has been unable to develop any independent relationship with God. This language thus serves also as an indictment of Samuel, who has failed to mentor his replacement adequately.10 This may also explain why later in the chapter Saul tells Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed against YHWH’s mouth and against your words” (15:24). This close linkage of God and Samuel throughout the chapter suggests that their authority is well-nigh interchangeable in Saul’s consciousness.11

Thus, far from appropriate mentoring of his successor, Samuel’s heavy-handed exercise of prophetic authority over Saul (since their first meeting, in chap. 9) constitutes an illegitimate attempt to maintain control over the fledgling monarchy, which has effectively sabotaged Saul’s ability to rule. Indeed, the negative mentoring Saul receives from Samuel leads T. Czövek to conclude that charismatic leaders (such as Saul or David) cannot afford to have mentors at all if they are to be successful.12

**Thesis 2. Samuel, not God, initiates the rejection of Saul.**

Samuel’s misuse of prophetic authority (which has been intensifying since chap. 9) culminates in chap. 15 with his instructions to Saul to eradicate the Amalekites. Samuel claims (15:2–3) that he has a word from YHWH that directs Saul to punish the Amalekites for their ancient sin against

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10. Note that this same terminology (“your God”) was used by the people when addressing Samuel in 12:19.

11. To see just how indispensable Samuel becomes for Saul, we need only think of Saul’s desperate attempt to get advice from the dead prophet, even from the grave (1 Samuel 28).

Israel during the wilderness period (Exod 17:8–16; Deut 25:17–19). Saul and the people are instructed to destroy them totally (חרם). Contrary to what commentators sometimes claim, the חֶרֶם does not always involve the total and immediate destruction of all life (see Num 31:7–12, 17–18; Deut 2:34–35, 20:13–14, 21:10–14; Josh 8:28, 11:7, 9, 14). Yet in this case Saul is instructed quite specifically to “spare” none (1 Sam 15:3).

The central question for us is whether this reactivation of holy war against Israel’s ancient enemy is really from God or derives from Samuel’s initiative. There is no record in the narrative of God actually giving this particular word to Samuel, so we are left to discern, from his prior actions, if Samuel is a trustworthy character. Given his treatment of Saul leading up to the present chapter, I read Samuel’s instructions to destroy Amalek as one more attempt to keep Saul under his thumb, subject to the prophetic will.

One consideration in favor of this reading is that this is a strange assignment to give to Israel’s first king, especially as the monarchy is beginning to take root; it looks designed to throw the king off track from the task of governance. If we follow the narrative time of the story, this assignment comes fully three centuries after the original Amalekite incident (assuming a 13th-century date for the exodus). Why reactivate this ancient feud centuries later? No one in Israel is portrayed as even attempting to fulfill this old statute from the wilderness period. If this was an important task for the new king, why is David not given any similar command? Indeed, he attacks the Amalekites (without attempting to eradicate them) on at least two occasions (1 Samuel 27 and 30), while taking spoil (with no rebuke from anyone, neither God nor prophet).


14. L. Eslinger’s suggestion that we should not automatically identify the narrator’s point of view with that of the characters in chaps. 8–12 is applicable also to chap. 15; see Eslinger, “Viewpoints and Point of View in 1 Samuel 8–12,” JSOT 26 (1983) 61–76.

15. M. Steussy, who is typically suspicious of Samuel’s motives, accepts the divine origin of this command, because it is introduced with a standard prophetic formula (Steussy, Samuel and His God, 68). Note, however, that Hananiah also introduces his prophetic oracles with a similar formula (Jer 28:2, 10), but they are not from YhWH.
Nevertheless, Saul dutifully musters the troops and attacks the Amalekites, although he does not completely follow Samuel’s instructions. He and “the people” spare both Agag the Amalekite king and the best of the animals (15:4–9)—something he was explicitly told not to do.  

Thesis 3. Samuel thinks God was wrong to allow the monarchy in the first place.

We have already seen that, beyond a specific antimonarchial strain in ancient Israel (that Samuel may indeed share), we cannot discount his personal resentment toward Saul for his sense that his leadership position is threatened. But is it possible that, beyond both these motivations, Samuel’s opposition to Saul’s kingship is tied to a particular theological understanding of what is appropriate for God? Could it be that Samuel believes that God should not be influenced by human beings, specifically in the case of allowing the monarchy in the first place? Does he think that this sort of mutability is beneath the divine character?

The starting point for this possibility is the intratextual tension within chap. 15 concerning the use of the verb ‘repent’ (נחם in the Niphal stem). In 15:11, יהוה tells Samuel (privately) that he has “repented” of making Saul king because Saul has turned away from him and has not fulfilled or established his words. That יהוה has, indeed, “repented” of making Saul king is confirmed by the narrator at the end of the chapter (15:35). However, between these two statements, when Saul confesses his sin and pleads for forgiveness, Samuel tells him (15:29) that God is not a human being that he should “repent” (twice). Indeed, Samuel equates God’s repentance with deception, thus indicating how reprehensible he finds the idea. The evident contradiction between these two statements about God’s “repentance” in the chapter is unlikely to be unintentional in such an astute narrative.

There are, however, at least three typical attempts to avoid interpreting this prima facie contradiction as a genuine disagreement between God and Samuel. One way is to take the force of the verb נחם in 15:11 and 35 (as the NLT and the NIV do, following a long tradition) to signify that

16. Although Samuel will castigate Saul for sparing the animals, he utters no word of objection to sparing the Amalekite king (the precedent might be the people bringing the king of Ai to Joshua for execution in Josh 8:29).

17. R. Polzin thinks the narrator clearly indicates that Samuel’s denial of God’s repentance is “off the mark”; see Polzin, Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, part 2: 1 Samuel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989) 142.
God is *sorry* or *grieved* over Saul’s kingship, without implying that God has actually changed his mind about Saul. Part of the motivation for this translation (which is linguistically possible) might be a theological attempt to deny that God changes. The trouble is that this solution would require differing translations of נחם in 15:1 and 29, which is unlikely, without further argument.

Furthermore, even if we admit differing translations in 15:11 and 29, so that 15:11 does not imply that God has actually rejected Saul, this would not solve much. It would still put Samuel at odds with God, because God (on this reading) has not explicitly rejected Saul, but Samuel claims unambiguously (twice) that God has rejected Saul, using a different (more unambiguous) verb (15:23 and 26). And by the end of the chapter, when the narrator affirms that “YhWH had repented of making Saul king over Israel” (15:35), the meaning is clear—that Saul’s kingship is rejected.

God has indeed changed his mind. Thus, I am inclined to think that God’s original statement of “repentance” in 15:11 actually implies the rejection of Saul’s kingship.

A second tack taken by interpreters to avoid a contradiction between Samuel and God is to limit the meaning of Samuel’s denial of God’s repentance to a claim that God will not change his mind about rejecting Saul. That is, having once changed his mind and rejected Saul, God will not go back on that decision. Yet God’s rejection of Saul would have been precisely a ‘change of mind’ on God’s part. So we are left with the paradox that God will not change his mind about changing his mind! But, why not? Why one change and not another?

A final approach that tries to avoid a contradiction between Samuel and God is to take God’s lack of repentance in 15:29 as pointing ahead

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18. Klein also softens the contradiction by translating נחם in 15:11 and 35 as ‘am sorry’ or ‘felt sorry’ and in 15:29 as ‘change his mind’/‘changes his mind’ (*I Samuel*, 144–45).

19. McCarter finds the contradiction between Samuel’s words and God’s words to be so “blatant” that he suggests v. 29 may be a late addition to the text of chap. 15, possibly derived from Num 23:19, meant to contradict the idea that God does in fact repent (*I Samuel*, 268). Long also feels the force of this “intervening, prima facie contradictory statement” (*The Reign and Rejection of King Saul*, 141).

20. The basis for God’s repentance is that Saul has not established/fulfilled God’s words, though what particular words these may be is maddeningly unspecified (especially because God’s words about repentance in 15:11 are the only words the narrator has God speak in the entire chapter). A surface reading, however, would suggest these words constitute the instruction given by Samuel to eradicate the Amalekites. In the end, the narrative judges Saul to be disobedient to what he took to be YhWH’s word.

21. This is McCarter’s position (*I Samuel*, 268).
to the election of David (1 Samuel 16), perhaps even to God’s unconditional promise to his line (2 Samuel 7). This seems initially plausible because 15:29 directly follows Samuel’s statement that God has (already) torn the kingdom from Saul and will give it to someone else who is better than he (15:28)—a covert reference perhaps to David? This approach makes a connection between 1 Sam 15:29 and God’s lack of repentance in Balaam’s oracle to Balaak in Num 23:19, where repentance is also identified as a human quality and linked to deception. There we are told that God will not repent (חנמ) of his commitment to bless Israel (Num 23:20; 24:1). In both cases, then, God refuses to repent of his promise to bless his chosen (people or king, as the case may be). Confirmation for this reading is often sought in Pss 110:4 and 132:11, both of which refer to YHWH’s oath to David of which he will not “repent” (whereas the former text uses חנמ, the latter uses שׁוּב). So perhaps what God will not change his mind about in 1 Samuel 15 is the election of David.

This interpretation assumes that the deuteronomistic author/editor already knows that God is committed to David’s line and has Samuel assert that this decision is irrevocable. The trouble is that this still does not explain what the basis of Saul’s rejection is from Samuel’s point of view. It is an appeal to the world behind the text; but this historical reconstruction does not address with any integrity the text’s own narrative world. The question remains: Why has God rejected Saul in the first place and become irrevocably committed to David?

At a narrative level, it is highly implausible that Samuel has David in mind when he utters his pronouncements of 1 Sam 15:28 and 29, since David does not appear on the scene until the following chapter, and even then Samuel has a difficult time recognizing him as God’s choice. Not only does the Samuel of the narrative have no prior knowledge of David, but the very circumstances that generate Samuel’s denial of God’s repentance suggest this is an unplanned comment on his part, uttered on the spur of the moment out of indignation and resentment.


23. Although a different word is used for deception, Balaam’s oracle in Num 23:19 is the closest statement in the Hebrew Bible to 1 Sam 15:29. Balaam’s later oracles even proclaim Israel’s victory over Agag and Amalek (Num 24:7, 20), thus suggesting some sort of connection to the narrative of 1 Samuel 15.
When Samuel tells Saul that God has rejected him, Saul confesses his sin and pleads unsuccessfully for Samuel’s forgiveness (15:23–26). When Samuel turns to leave, Saul grasps Samuel’s robe, which tears (15:27). Seizing the moment, Samuel turns this into a symbolic prophetic act, telling Saul that Yahweh has torn the kingdom of Israel from him “today” and will give it to his fellow man who is better than he (15:28). Given that Samuel bases his oracle on an unplanned occurrence (his robe tearing), this is clearly extemporizing on Samuel’s part. He is making this up as he goes along.

The extemporizing feel continues as Samuel adds, “and moreover” (וְגַם). We can imagine the prophet wagging his finger at Saul, sputtering with righteous indignation, as he utters what amounts to a run-on sentence in Hebrew: “And what’s more . . . the Unchanging One of Israel does not deceive . . . and he does not repent . . . for he is not a human being . . . that he should repent” (15:29). So, there!

It is further intriguing that Samuel’s statement of God’s lack of repentance in 15:29 is linked to an unusual designation for God (נֵצַח), used as a title or name of God nowhere else in the Bible, and usually translated here as the Glory or the Eternal One of Israel. It is possible that this title encapsulates Samuel’s distinctive theological perspective. Given that the semantic range of נֵצַח (in its nominal, adjectival, and adverbial uses) typically includes forever, perpetual, unceasing, enduring, this suggests that Samuel is emphasizing God’s temporal transcendence of the human condition. And when linked to the statement that God does not repent, it

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24. Is there an intended tension between Samuel’s statement that God has torn the kingdom from Saul today and the fact that it was the previous night that God said he “repented” of making Saul king?

25. Whereas the NRSV, NIV, NAB, NLT, NASB, NJPSV render the phrase as ‘the Glory of Israel’, the New Century Version and Holman Christian Standard Bible have ‘the Eternal One of Israel’ (compare McCarter, I Samuel, 260, who has ‘Israel’s Everlasting One’). Other variants are ‘the Strength of Israel’ (KJV) and ‘the Faithful One of Israel’ (Klein, 1 Samuel, 145). Although not functioning precisely as a divine title in 1 Chr 29:11, נֵצַח is one of a series of five epithets used there to ascribe glory to God and is often translated in that context as ‘victory’, presumably because the LXX renders it as nikē. The LXX can make no sense, however, of נֵצַח יִשְׂרָאֵל in 1 Sam 15:29 and so has an entirely different phrase at this point (‘and Israel shall be divided in two’).

26. Verbal uses are a bit different. In the Niphal (which is rare), it also means ‘enduring’; but it is more typically used in the Piel (as a participle or infinitive construct), meaning ‘to direct’ or ‘supervise’ (esp. in regard to the temple). If applied to God, this might suggest that, along with transcending temporality, God is at the same time sovereign (an ancient precursor to the later doctrine of divine impassibility?).
may well designate God’s immutability or unchanging nature. The issue for Samuel thus seems to be a contrast between God’s character, which is transcendent and unchanging, and human mutability.

It seems, therefore, that one of the factors at play in Samuel’s opposition to Saul’s kingship is a distinctive understanding of what is appropriate for the divine nature. Samuel believes that the God of Israel should not be influenced by human beings. If this reading is correct, it implies that Samuel thinks he knows better than God what God should do. This generates Samuel’s resentment toward God for not living up to his (Samuel’s) expectations, initially in being influenced by the people’s request for a king (in chap. 8), but then here (in chap. 15) for changing his mind about Saul’s kingship.

**Thesis 4. Samuel is himself internally conflicted over the rejection of Saul.**

Samuel is in conflict with Saul and he is in conflict with God over allowing the monarchy (and over whether God should/could repent). But beyond this, Samuel seems to be internally conflicted over the rejection of Saul. Various dimensions of Samuel’s conflicted psyche are manifest in chap. 15.

First of all, we have Samuel’s unexplained anger in 15:11. Immediately following God’s statement that he has repented of making Saul king, Samuel is angry and cries out to YHWH all night (15:11). However, we do not know for sure who Samuel was angry at, whether God or Saul. Nor do we know why he was angry; but we may surmise that he was angry both at Saul for his failure as king (specifically for his failure to submit to the divinely authorized prophet) and at God for rejecting Saul.

Some commentators also suggest that Samuel’s anger is due to his perceived loss of face with the people, now that the king he had installed (even against his will)
anger at God would stem from his realization that God has once again
condescended to act at a human level. In other words, Samuel is upset
with YHWH that he changed his mind in response to Saul’s failure, since this
compromised Samuel’s ideal sense of divine autonomy.

Evidence for Samuel’s anger at God may be found in the slippage in
Samuel’s report to Saul in 15:16–19 of what God had told him the previ-
ous night. Samuel actually interrupts Saul so he can report YHWH’s words
(15:16). Yet when Samuel speaks (15:17), he pointedly does not report
what YHWH actually said (15:10–11). He specifically omits telling Saul that
God has “repented” of making him king. Instead he castigates Saul for
thinking too little of himself, an outburst that makes little sense in the con-
text, but which would have the effect of putting Saul on the defensive.31
Then, after Saul attempts (unsuccessfully) to defend himself (15:20–21),
Samuel utters an oracle in elevated poetic speech, meant to indict Saul for
disobedience, even idolatry (15:22–23).32 It is in this oracle that Samuel
first states that God has rejected Saul (in response to Saul’s supposed rejec-
tion of God).33

But the paradox is that Samuel does not seem to grasp the full impli-
cations of his own statements. While Samuel avoids stating that God has
repented of making Saul king (and will twice deny that God repents, in

is rejected. Of course, none of these options necessarily rules out the others, given the
complex nature of the human psyche.

31. It particularly makes no sense of the fact that someone had just reported to
Samuel that Saul was erecting a monument to himself (15:12), which might indicate
just the opposite (hubris). Commentators sometimes suggest that Samuel is referring
to Saul’s self-deprecation at his anointing (9:21); but these words are part of the stereo-
typically expected response of the call narrative Gattung (compare Moses and Jeremiah;
Exodus 3 and Jeremiah 1). Indeed, similar self-deprecating words are uttered by David
(2 Sam 7:18) and Solomon (1 Kgs 3:7–8) at the cusp of their power. Unlike them,
however, Saul actually sounds surprised and sincere in wondering why God chose him.

32. Notice that Samuel harps on idolatry in various speeches he makes to Saul and
the people. While his plea in chap. 7 for the people to put away their false gods (7:3)
is actually fulfilled (7:4), this is the last time the narrative mentions idolatry as an is-

sue for the people; and YHWH only mentions idolatry as past disobedience (8:8). Yet,
in Samuel’s speech of chap. 12, he cites the idolatry of the Judges period (12:10) and
exhorts the people to put away their current idols (12:21). And in chap. 15 he iden-
tifies disobedience with “teraphim” (a synecdoche for idolatry). This might suggest
that Samuel is living in the past, and that his typical concerns diverge from that of the
narrator. Thanks to my student Mike Micklow for pointing out this intriguing pattern.

33. Notice that the people’s rejection of God in 1 Sam 8:7 (also mentioned in 10:9)
does not automatically generate God’s rejection of them. The question for this essay is
why Saul’s (supposed) rejection of God generates God’s rejection of Saul (according to
Samuel in 15:23).
15:29), he nevertheless states unequivocally that God has rejected Saul (15:23, repeated in 15:26). But what can it mean that God has rejected Saul, yet he does not repent or change his mind? Does Samuel not understand that either statement (rejection or repentance) implies that God’s decisions are influenced by human action (it is, after all, Saul’s disobedience that has triggered this change in God)? Or is rejection a more abstract term that does not demean God in Samuel’s eyes, whereas repentance reduces Yhwh to a human level? Could Samuel’s theological disagreement with God (if we may ironically call it that) be at cross-purposes with his prophetic judgment against Saul, in a manner of which he is not even aware?

Finally, Samuel’s conflicted psyche results not just in his contradictory statements about God’s rejection of Saul and his anger in 15:11 (whether at God or Saul or both), but also in his grief or mourning (15:34) over Saul’s rejection (despite the fact that he has, in effect, engineered this rejection). I say “in effect” because whatever indictments this essay brings against Samuel for contributing to the demise of Saul, I do not read him as a cold-blooded, calculating sociopath. Rather, Samuel is no different from many people in the real world, who operate out of unexamined and often conflicting beliefs and commitments, with destructive effects on the lives of those around them.

Thesis 5. God has chosen to be constrained by the choice of Samuel as the authoritative representative of God’s will.

I have argued that God did not initiate a decision to find someone to replace Saul (chap. 13); the reference to someone after God’s heart was an extemporaneous utterance by the prophet, made in anger. Nor did God give a command through Samuel for Saul to destroy the Amalekites (chap. 15); that was Samuel’s own invention. However, God clearly ends up backing Samuel on both counts. So the question is: Why? Why would God support Samuel’s self-serving moves to have Saul rejected, or, to be more precise, Samuel’s self-serving moves to keep Saul under his control, which resulted in Saul’s failure and rejection.

The key text for understanding this matter is 1 Sam 3:19–20, which states (right after the call of Samuel) that Yhwh did not allow any of his words to “fall to the ground,” with the result that Samuel was known as a ‘faithful’ or ‘trustworthy’ (נֶאֱמָן) prophet throughout all Israel. The very ambiguity of “his words” in 3:19 (Samuel’s words? God’s words?) reinforces the point. As a prophet, Samuel’s words are God’s words. God is henceforth committed to supporting the prophetic word uttered by
Samuel. Thus, God can legitimately say in 1 Sam 15:11 that Saul has not established my words (even though God did not initiate the command about the Amalekite war).

What this means is that God’s rejection of Saul ultimately results from God’s decision to be constrained by his commitments to human beings, in this case, to Samuel as his authoritative prophet. God committed himself to supporting Samuel’s words and he will abide by that commitment.

This view of how God operates helps us understand a major interpretive conundrum between 1 Samuel 2 and 3. Commentators are generally stumped by the fact that whereas chap. 2 expects Samuel to become a priest, he becomes a prophet instead in chap. 3. Samuel’s mother dedicates him to God as a priestly replacement for Eli’s corrupt sons, then he is apprenticed to Eli at the Shiloh temple, and is portrayed as engaging in priestly duties (clad in a priestly ephod). Yet by the end of chap. 3 Samuel has filled not a priestly, but a prophetic office. This shift is precisely an instance of God adapting—here (with foresight)—to the upcoming monarchy. Well aware that kings tend to abuse their power, God changes his plans to have a renewed priesthood (in 2:35 God had promised that he would raise up a ‘faithful’ or ‘trustworthy’ נֶאֱמָן priest). Instead, God anticipates the people’s request for a king and prepares in advance to have an authoritative prophet to balance the power of the king, because that is the more pressing historical need. The trouble is that the prophet misuses his authority and significantly overbalances the king.

But note that the principle at work in God’s commitment to support Samuel as an authoritative prophet is the very principle that Samuel cannot accept, namely that God is influenced and affected by human beings. Paradoxically, the fact that God has chosen to support Samuel’s word (even when that word does not reflect God’s intent) itself contradicts Samuel’s idea that God should not be influenced by humans.

**Thesis 6: God’s commitment to adapt to human needs leads to a change in modus operandi vis-à-vis the next king (and all future kings).**

That God has chosen to be constrained by his commitments to the human creature does not only lead God to adapt to Israel’s request for a king, by allowing the monarchy and by providing a prophetic voice to balance and oversee this new institution. God’s commitment to adapt to human needs leads God to change his modus operandi in relation to the next king (and all future kings in the Davidic line). I propose that YHWH came to the realization through the experience with Samuel that one resentful, crotchety old man (who has the status of an authoritative prophet, whose word God is committed to supporting) can undermine God’s own long-term
purposes for the covenant people. So God decides to put his relationship with the next king on a different (unconditional) footing. In 2 Samuel 7, יְהֹוָה tells David that while he will discipline any king in his line who is disobedient, he will not take his favor/love (חֶסֶד) from that king, “as I took it from Saul” (2 Sam 7:15). Paradoxically, then, Samuel’s inflexibility (his resistance to God changing) has precipitated a further change in God.

Thesis 7. Samuel has not fulfilled the central intercessory role of the prophet vis-à-vis Saul.

The depth of Samuel’s culpability in the rejection of Saul comes into even clearer focus when his prophetic role is compared to that of Moses, the paradigmatic prophet (according to Deut 18:15, 17), especially to Moses’ intercession on behalf of the people’s sin in the episode of the golden calf. In Exodus 32–34, we find Moses interceding on behalf of the people after their sin of idolatry. The parallels between this event and the case of Saul’s rejection in 1 Samuel 15 are striking (for both their initial similarities and their ultimate divergence).

In Exodus 20, יְהֹוָה gives the ten commandments through Moses, the second of which (Exod 20:4–6) is an explicit prohibition against idolatry (with a motive clause concerning punishment). Nevertheless, while Moses is away on the mountain, Aaron the priest leads the people in disobedience to this very commandment (they construct and worship a golden calf, Exod 32:1–6), which generates God’s word to Moses that the covenant is over and that he has rejected the people (Exod 32:9–10). When confronted by Moses, Aaron refuses to take responsibility for constructing the idol and passes the blame to the people (32:21–24).

In the case of 1 Samuel 15, we have Samuel’s claim that God has commanded Saul to execute the חֶרֶם against the Amalekites (although no explicit consequences are mentioned for disobedience). In the absence

34. This is why the many statements that God was with David (and helped him succeed) should not be taken as affirming God’s approval of David’s action. The key point is that God’s support of David is unconditional.

35. Note the parallels to the flood narrative, where the human heart’s resistance to change after the flood (compare Gen 6:5 with 8:21) precipitates God’s commitment never again to bring a flood as judgment on the whole earth. The inability of humans to change leads God to act differently.

36. Abraham is specifically called a prophet in Gen 20:7 in connection with his prayer on behalf of Abimelech (see also his extended intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18). And Jeremiah’s prophetic prayers on behalf of Israel are well known. On the intercessory role of Moses, see Michael Widmer, Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14 (FAT 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).
of Samuel, Saul, the king, leads the people in disobedience (they do not fully execute the חֶרֶם), which generates God’s word to Samuel that he has changed his mind about Saul’s kingship. When accused by Samuel, Saul tries to avoid responsibility by emphasizing the people’s role in sparing the animals (1 Sam 15:15).

But herein lies the fundamental difference between the two accounts. Whereas Moses pleads with God in an extended series of intercessory prayers for God to forgive the people’s sin and to change his mind about rejecting them, in 1 Samuel 15 there is absolutely no intercession by Samuel on behalf of Saul.

Moses even explicitly includes the people in the special favor he has with God and uses this as part of his appeal on their behalf (32:31–32; 33:12–13; 34:9), with the result that God “repents” of the evil he was going to perform (32:14) and eventually agrees to accompany Israel on the journey to the promised land (33:16–17). In the end, YhWH offers forgiveness for sin and reestablishes the covenant with Israel on an unconditional footing (34:6–7a), a significant change from the conditionality of divine חֶסֶד in the motive clause for the second commandment.37

By contrast, Samuel declares that God will not change his mind, and he categorically refuses Saul’s plea for forgiveness (even though the request for forgiveness would not automatically imply a request for Saul’s kingship to be restored). While Moses has to plead with God to change his mind, in Samuel’s case it is the prophet’s mind that is made up.

Further, because of Moses’ faithful intercession on behalf of the people, Aaron remains in his role as priest and founder of the priestly line, even after so blatant a sin as idolatry (explicit disloyalty to YhWH). But the lack of (indeed refusal of) intercession on Samuel’s part results in the rejection of Saul’s kingship, and his dynasty comes to nothing. Or perhaps that is too strong a statement, because Samuel’s lack of intercession is only the final nail in the coffin. While Samuel’s intercession on behalf of Saul may

37. Whereas the motive clause for the second commandment (Exod 20:5–6) includes first a statement of punishment for sin followed by an affirmation that God’s חֶסֶד will be shown to “a thousand generations” of those who love and obey God, the restatement of this motive clause after Moses’ intercessory prayer (Exod 34:6–7) is characterized by three significant changes. First, the order of punishment and love is reversed; love receives the priority. Second, the vocabulary of love by which YhWH is characterized is expanded exponentially to include compassion, grace, and patience (slow to anger), even “abounding” in חֶסֶד and faithfulness. But third, the enactment of חֶסֶד (“to the thousandth generation”) has lost any conditionality and is paired with the forgiveness of iniquity/transgression/sin (two of these are terms that Samuel uses in his poetic indictment of Saul in 1 Sam 15:23).
well have averted his rejection, this rejection is actually the result (the final consequence) of Samuel’s consistent mistreatment of Saul.

Samuel’s refusal to intercede for Saul in chap. 15 (as the final linchpin in a series of manipulative actions) clearly sets him apart from Moses in his paradigmatic prophetic intercession on behalf of Israel’s sin. But this refusal is also in direct contradiction to the oath Samuel himself swore in his farewell speech to Saul and the people that he would not “sin against YHWH” by ceasing to pray for them (1 Sam 12:23). The irony is that Samuel’s emphatic oath hoodwinked not just Saul and the people, but many commentators as well, who seem not to have noticed that Samuel reneges on this oath vis-à-vis Saul. The result is that it is typical to find summary statements such as the following: “The tragedy of Saul is in large part the tragedy of his inability to accept God’s choice of David and live accordingly.” But this is tantamount to blaming the victim. Without defending Saul’s actions, just a few changes to the above quotation would make it a much truer statement: The tragedy of Samuel is in large part the tragedy of his inability to accept God’s choice of Saul and live accordingly!

The narrative of Samuel thus does not simply expose the underside of the first two kings of Israel, both of whom are found wanting in significant ways (something widely acknowledged in contemporary scholarship). It exposes also the fragility of the prophetic office in the person of Samuel, who is the foremost representative of this office at the crucial point of transition to the monarchy. Given the negative portrayal of Samuel in the narrative, it is no wonder that after chap. 15 he recedes into the background, with no significant role vis-à-vis the new king. His seeming replacement, Nathan, certainly has no relationship with David analogous to Samuel’s relationship with Saul. Not only does Nathan have to frame his critique of David’s adultery and murder initially in a parable, presumably so that he might even get a hearing (2 Samuel 12), but when Nathan affirms the new king’s project to build a house for YHWH (2 Sam 7:3), he gets YHWH’s word wrong and must deliver a revised message (7:4–17). Paradoxically, then, the very prophet who resisted change generated significant transformations in both God and the prophetic office in the book that bears his name.