

1 Samuel 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Saul himself comes from Gibeah compared to Sodom in Judges. As we read on in the story, it will invite comparison with that earlier story. Saul means asked. In 1 Samuel chapter 1 verse 20, the meaning of Samuel's name is given.

And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son and she called his name Samuel, for she said, I have asked for him from the Lord. The language of lending Samuel to the Lord in chapter 1 verse 28 also relates to Saul's name. It seems that there's some connection between the identities of Saul and Samuel. They're connected in some strange way. Saul becomes, in some respects, a new son to Samuel.

Just as Samuel replaced the unfaithful sons of Eli, Haphni and Phinehas, Saul replaces the unfaithful sons of Samuel, Joel and Abijah. Saul is introduced as a physically attractive and physically imposing man. In the Old Testament, the attractive physical appearance of characters can be a sign of the positive role that they have to play. It's an auspicious sign of someone who's going to play a significant role at the head of the people. Joseph, Moses, Saul, David, Solomon are all described in these sorts of ways. Saul is also taller than everyone else. He is the giant of Israel. That's important to remember when we read the story of David and Goliath. Saul is the most handsome man in Israel. He is also the tallest man in Israel. From the outset, he is introduced to us more as a romantic hero than as a future political operative. As we shall see, however, that is no accident. The king is the lover of his people. Politics is suffused by Eros. The king is someone who excites love, loyalty and desire. He is someone who ideally has a strong physical presence, charisma, charm, virility. The connection between politics and Eros is perhaps most overt in the Song of Solomon, but it is everywhere in the book of Samuel too. In choosing a king for his people, the Lord is choosing a bridegroom for them. Our own politics continue to have such elements. Nations don't elect their leaders purely on the basis of policy and competence, but can be drawn to them as persons.

[9:12] This story is told in a way that draws the reader's attention to this dimension of kingship. The story of Saul begins with lost donkeys. In the book of Judges, donkeys appear on several occasions, representing the princely authority of Judges' sons. Donkeys are also associated with Judah's royal status in Jacob's blessing in Genesis chapter 49 verses 10 to 11.

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine, and his vesture in the blood of grapes. There might be subtle reminders here of the tragic story of Gibeah too, which Saul reverses in some senses, but ends up repeating in others. That horrific story began as follows, in Judges chapter 19 verses 1 to 3. In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. And his concubine was unfaithful to him, and she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months. Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her, and bring her back. He had with him his servant, and a couple of donkeys. Both of these stories are a quest for the lost. The lost concubine in Judges, and the lost donkeys in 1 Samuel. Both involve an accompanying servant, and some donkeys, and both involve a woman.

In Judges, the woman is the concubine, who ends up being dismembered, a concubine that also symbolises the people, with the Levites symbolising the wicked rulers. In 1 Samuel, the woman is the bride, Israel, represented by the women Saul meets in the city. In the story of Saul, the appalling end to Judges is being repaired. A better bridegroom is coming for the bride. Benjamin, the son, the tribe that was almost utterly destroyed at the end of the book of Judges, is also being restored. The way that the story is told highlights the lack of intention of the figures involved. Saul and his servant are following lost donkeys. As Saul is about to turn back, his servant happens to mention that there is a man of God in the city, who might be able to tell them where the donkeys are. The servant happens to have a quarter of a shekel of silver to give to the man of God. The seer just happens to have come into the city for a sacrifice, etc. The point of all of this is that the Lord is superintending all events. This is not something engineered by man. Rather, these are the signs that the Lord is orchestrating events. As they go to the city, Saul meets young women coming out to draw water.

Now, we've read in scripture of many people meeting women drawing water at wells. It's what's been called a type scene. Abraham's servant meets Rebekah at a well. Jacob meets Rachel at a well. Moses meets Zipporah at a well. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at a well. Saul's encounter with the women here should attract our attention, especially when we look more closely and see further parallels with the story of Abraham's servant meeting Rebekah. There is a similar series of events in both places.

The women come out to draw water. This phrase is very rare, but it's found both here and in Genesis chapter 24. They are both looking for someone. Abraham's servant is looking for a bride for Isaac.

[12:38] Saul and his servant are looking for the donkeys. However, Samuel, unbeknownst to Saul, is looking for the new king of Israel. In both cases, the Lord will identify the person he has selected to the seeker.

In both cases, the one who is sought comes out soon afterwards. So we read, Behold, Rebekah came out. And then, Behold, Samuel was coming out. In both cases, there is then a meal and the revelation of a secret and a great and significant match made that would shape Israel's history thereafter. These are two stories of chosen persons, one selected for marriage, the other selected for kingship. Rabbi David Foreman observes the importance of what is occurring here. Isaac and Rebekah was the marriage of the son of Abraham and Sarah. It was the first step towards the fulfillment of the fruitfulness and multiplication of Abraham's seed that had been promised to him, a first step in moving towards a greater people. Saul was the first step towards the fulfillment of the promise that Israel would become a kingdom. It constitutes Israel on a greater level. Israel is not just a multitude of people. It isn't just a nation. In relating to a king, they are far more robust as a collective entity. They become a we, symbolized by the king himself. Coronation is a sort of marriage on a national scale. And this story is the betrothal, the point when Samuel appoints Saul as the future bridegroom, as the designated prince. Recognizing the character of this relationship will help us to observe things about marriage and things about kingship that we might not otherwise have recognized.

For instance, consider Samuel's warning to Israel in the previous chapter. They wanted a king to act on their behalf, yet the king would rule over and oppress them. This is similar to the dynamic that intrudes upon marriage after the fall. The woman desires her husband. She wants a man to act on her behalf, but he will end up ruling over her and oppressing her. The story switches from Saul's perspective to Samuel's perspective. We learn that Samuel has been told beforehand that he will encounter Saul, and then the Lord identifies Saul to Samuel. Samuel here is like Abraham's servant, but seeking a bridegroom for the daughter of the Lord. Samuel delivers his secret to Saul, much as Abraham's servant delivered the secret to Rebekah. Yet it's still cryptic at the beginning. It's not necessarily clear at the outset that it is the kingdom that is in view. Saul's response to Samuel reminds us of Gideon's response to the angel of the Lord in Judges chapter 6 verses 12 to 15.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valour. And Gideon said to him, Please, my Lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?

[15 : 35] But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian. And the Lord turned to him and said, Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Do not I send you? And he said to him, Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house. Saul is a humble man. He is a dutiful, faithful, and considerate son.

God is not giving Israel a bad man, but a man suited for the role in a great many ways. We will see Saul replaying the sins of the Judges in many respects in the chapters that follow, and it draws our minds back to specific stories in the specific failures that he makes. But this will be a tragic twist for a man who has so much going for him. Samuel gives Saul the priestly portion of the peace offering. In Leviticus chapter 7 verses 33 to 34 we read, This portion only belonged to the priests and their sons. So what's happening here is, among other things, a sort of adoption ceremony. Saul is seated in the seat of the firstborn. He's given the firstborn's portion, the portion that belongs to the priest, Samuel himself. Samuel will now act as his father. Saul is now the one appointed to become the guardian of Israel to succeed his new father, taking the place of Joel and Abijah. This story is one of the raising up of Saul, with a number of literal ascensions. Saul goes up the hill to the city. He goes up to the high place. He goes up to the head of the table, and then he goes up to the roof to sleep. Saul is being elevated as the new ruler here. The chapter ends on the cliffhanger. Saul is about to hear from Samuel the message concerning the kingdom, that the Lord has appointed him to become the king who will lead Israel.

A question to consider. At the end of this chapter, what are some of the features of Saul and his character that set him apart as someone who's a good potential king?