

**RETELLING THE STORY OF SAUL:
A COMMENTARY ON AN UNDERLYING THEOLOGY OF HOPE**

BY

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PREFACE

In this paper I will attempt to illustrate the biblical picture of Saul, which is drawn from several conflicting biblical pictures in I. and II. Samuel, discuss how Josephus reconciled the conflicting pictures, and offer other treatments such as Browning's poem *Saul* in order to explore facets that reflect this fascinating biblical character in different ways. It is my intention to present Saul as Israel's first great king and as a key Old Testament figure who demonstrates one of the great theories of the Bible based upon the hope that lies in the imperfection of people.

I.

A literary study of the biblical text dealing with Saul, reveals different views of Saul' s character. These are blended together in the existing canonical form and confront the reader with contrasting points of view. Considering the inconsistencies found in the present biblical narrative, it may be of interest first to study how writers and poets have dealt with this problem.

In the first century, without an understanding of or an appreciation for higher criticism, Josephus approached the biblical text of I. and II. Samuel in a way that would help determine the intended effect of the biblical story as he perceived it, and he edited the narrative accordingly.¹ Josephus' s appreciation of the character of Saul demonstrates a searching, sifting method of literary study, yet an extremely interesting approach to history. He surveys the unfavorable and the favorable views of Saul, which are intermingled, and leads his readers to a logical conclusion.

Josephus seems to agree with modern biblical scholars in admitting that Saul is a tragic figure, but Josephus sees beyond the human frailties and flaws which plague Saul and beyond the overwhelming character of David who overshadows Saul, and, with full appreciation of the existing canon of his time, emphasizes certain characteristics in such a way as to present an untraditional conclusion concerning Saul' s character.

Initially Josephus cites Saul' s modesty.² Saul gains victory over enemies and over himself. Josephus avoids the problems created by different sources by blending them. An example of such blending might be Josephus' s explanation of the two anointings of Saul by Samuel: the private anointing in the Early Source (I. Samuel 9:1-10:16), and the public anointing of the Late Source (10:17-27). Josephus avoids textual problems by saying that one anointing was private; the other public.³ Meanwhile, Saul' s character remains intact. It was the mind of the people that changed, not

Samuel' s or Saul' s. Saul emerges as a valiant leader and as one who held in high esteem. The people emerge as impious because they asked for a king.⁴ Although Saul was chosen by lot from one of the meanest of all the tribes, according to Josephus, Samuel ordained a king whom God had chosen for his people. The character of Saul continues to emerge with one unsettling apology: "But, Saul will do strange things."⁵

When Saul becomes ungovernable and tyrannical, Josephus sees this as natural. For example, when Saul becomes impatient and offers sacrifice without benefit of clergy, Josephus' s translator and editor elaborates on Josephus' s original narrative and adds an explanatory note, which, with admitted anachronistic Christian insight, questions the unfavorable judgment of Saul and balances it with the favorable by commenting on the duties of the laity when no clergy are present.⁶

After the battle with the Amalekites (I. Samuel 15), Josephus' s Saul is portrayed as a practical man, keeping the spoils, including the animals. In this scene, Saul' s problem is not wickedness; it is due to the "affectation of despotic power," not an unpredictable problem for a young nation' s first great king.⁷ We might also add that Saul was being very practical.

Although Josephus admits that divine power was eventually removed from Saul and "removed to David,"⁸ he sees through the negative portrait of Saul to reflect on the general wickedness of men in higher authority. Deliberately, Josephus declines to mention the madness of Saul. In Josephus' s narrative, madness is replaced by confusion and fear. When Samuel dies, Josephus notes that Samuel supported Saul for eighteen years.⁹

Josephus is consistent with modern thinkers who note that although Saul' s reign is portrayed in the Bible under the shadow of David' s coming reign, "Saul is never stereotyped into a lifeless symbol of the rejected."¹⁰ "To Saul must be ascribed the foundation of that empire which reached

its culminating point under his immediate successors. There is much in him that was lovable; he certainly won the affection of his people so that they followed him willingly, and in spite of his late folly and madness, never conspired against him."¹¹

In Josephus' s retelling of Nabal' s fate,¹² a parallel is drawn between Saul and Nabal. Abigail is successful in convincing an angry David to spare her husband and her and her family and home, but, says David, Nabal will fall anyway, because of the general wickedness of men in authority, which brings them down sooner or later.¹³ In I. Samuel 25 no such prediction or edification is added, however. (In both accounts Nabal dies in ten days.)

Certainly Josephus' s most deliberate attempt to describe Saul' s character is found in his longest digression from the biblical text, which is added after Saul seeks out the necromantic woman who foresees Saul' s death.¹⁴ Josephus deliberately pauses, before the demise of Saul, to emphasize the overwhelming evidence contained in the narrative, which presents Saul as a valiant and courageous man, who, with his sons, fought honorably to the end in the face of overwhelming odds.

In dying, as in living, Saul suffers many wounds. Again, Josephus blends the sources as he retells the story. The reader is confronted not with a suicidal maniac, but with a courageous warrior who, after suffering many battle wounds, begs his armor-bearer to commit euthanasia. The armor-bearer refuses. Saul tries to throw himself upon his own sword, but is too weak from his wounds to accomplish what he intended. He then begs an Amalekite to kill him.¹⁵ The Amalekite kills Saul and takes Saul' s crown and bracelet and runs away. In the Josephus narrative, it is this same Amalekite who delivers the bad news of Saul' s and Jonathan' s deaths to David. The armor-bearer sees that Saul is dead and kills himself for the sake of honor. According to Josephus, David' s greatest lament is due to the death of Saul. "Also," David lamented Jonathan' s death.¹⁶ David

composes lamentations and funeral commendations in memory of Saul "and" Jonathan; Saul is listed first.

Josephus' s obvious attempts to keep Saul in the foreground only with David assuming the kingship of Judah after the death of Saul, and with Saul' s sons and subjects becoming weaker and weaker as David' s followers become progressively stronger. Later, David' s mercy and compassion to the house of Saul is mentioned. This, along with the lament, stands out in both Josephus' s narrative and in the biblical account.

Josephus' s narrative is molded in a more favorable way than is the biblical narrative with its presentation of complex attitudes. Josephus' s Saul is not like Shakespeare' s Macbeth a noble man who pays for being wrong; Saul is a great king who simply could not control his destiny.¹⁷

As far as the character of Saul is concerned, then, what can one conclude when Josephus' s work is compared with the biblical text?

First, one must note that, except for his deliberate diversions, Josephus adheres closely to the biblical narrative. He offers only subtle changes, many of which could, in this case, be due to the attitude of his translator. One must keep in mind that, although Josephus was a Pharisee, his education was both Jewish and Hellenistic in content and approach, and he wrote his most famous books while living in cosmopolitan Rome. Eusebius noted that when Josephus died, a memorial was set up in Rome for him, but none in Jerusalem.¹⁸

What bearing would this have on the presentation of an historical figure such as Saul?

While it is doubtful that Josephus would wish to paint an unfavorable picture of the history of his nation before the Gentile world, one may assume that a person of Josephus' s position and intellect would not intentionally desire to present his country and his heritage falsely. However, his close adherence to the biblical narrative, while it presents a synthesized approach to the narrative as

a unified historical account, does not prevent him from coming to some conclusions about the character of Saul.

Josephus' s method helps those who are interested in the narrative art of the Bible to appreciate more fully the historical importance of major biblical figures. Unlike Brevard Child' s theological approach, which subscribes to a restrictive view of Old Testament narrative, limiting its significance to the canonical form, Josephus points out the necessity for a careful weighing of each story presented in the narrative.

Josephus seems to have evaluated the complex attitudes toward Saul that were presented in the biblical narrative, but, "driven to write history," and committed to writing "for the advantages of posterity," Josephus takes a deliberate philosophical as well as literary approach, which stands in sharp contrast to that of the present biblical narrative' s final editor.¹⁹

In Josephus' s narrative, Saul, facing certain death, strikes out all the more courageously, like a character in an Old Norse saga, an example of which might be the character Helgi in the Icelandic "Droplaugarsona saga."²⁰ Helgi has a dream that a companion interprets as signaling Helgi' s demise. Helgi refuses to let the bad news alter his plans. He and his followers continue on their way and are ambushed, as predicted. The horrible details of the dream become reality. "Before Helgi finally goes down, he parries a blow with his shield. His opponent' s sword glances off into Helgi' s face, strikes the front teeth, and shears off the lower lip."²¹ But Helgi stuffs his beard into his mouth in order to hold up his mutilated jaw and he continues to fight. "Shortly afterwards he is pierced by a spear thrust. Helgi struggles forward to strike his assailant, but he quickly jabs the end of the spear into the ground, leaving Helgi impaled on the shaft."²²

II.

After considering the text in its entirety, the next step will be to look at the separate biblical stories that deal with Saul. Treating the commonly accepted divisions of the text as noted in the Oxford Annotated Bible (RSV) and other sources, the present deuteronomic redaction can be broken down into three separate stories (Appendix).

Since the Early Source has two endings, we may treat that material as two different stories. With the Late Source, there are three stories to consider. When compiled as separate narratives, it is alarming to discover how beautifully the stories progress and how easily they flow without any alterations to the text (RSV).

In the Early Source material we find a most alarming contrast of characters due to the two extremely different endings; the two endings produce two different stories and two different Sauls. The ending in I. Samuel presents a crushed Saul who resorts to necromancy - something he had sought to banish from the land. Saul commits suicide and dies in disgrace and defeat. The only redeeming part of the ending in I. Samuel is the saving of the bodies of Saul and his sons.

In contrast to the ending in I. Samuel is the ending in II. Samuel.²³ Though both stories deal with a complex Saul - easily impressed yet distrustful - the second ending presents an entirely different character from the first. Saul dies, but there are no details. David returns to Ziklag and, there, learns of Saul's and Jonathan's deaths. The Amalekite who bears the bad news is put to death. David emerges as hero retrieving his wives, but also as one who relates an important message to the reader or hearer. When David mourns the deaths, he mourns the deaths of a beloved Jonathan and a valiant Saul (II. Samuel 1:19-27).

When considered as a separate story, the antimonarchy stance of the author of the Late Source presents a far more pessimistic view of Saul: chosen by lot, continually reprimanded by

Samuel, plagued by a progressively disastrous madness. In contrast to the story' s unfavorable casting of Saul, is a delightful David who meets Saul' s son Jonathan and “falls in love” with him. Homosexual inferences are not absent in the Early Source, but they appear to be much stronger in the Late Source, adding to the complexity of a troubled and struggling narrative.²⁴ However, at the end of this story, the mad, raving Saul does not meet a tragic end. Rather, as David emerges and Saul declines, Saul eventually comes to a point where he repents, recognizes David as king and asks David to spare his descendants. They agree. Saul goes home. David takes over. Samuel dies. The end.

Considering the three stories separately, raises interesting questions about the character of Saul. Two to one, the stories favor a dark, distrustful, later mad character, frequently plagued by uncontrolled anger. The only favorable consideration given to Saul is given in the context of an emerging David and a declining Saul. Nevertheless, David remains devoted to Saul to the end, and, upon learning of Saul' s death, is deeply mournful.

It is certainly more than interesting to learn of how someone like Josephus, as discussed above, could stay so close to the canonical narrative, which leans heavily toward a disgraced Saul, and emerge with a valiant and courageous Saul whose character is borne by a smaller amount of more favorable material.

Portraying powerful characters such as Saul and David presents great challenges to any writer, just as it would to a great film director in modern times. Josephus understood this and demonstrated a respect for the power of narrative art. Without the benefit of higher criticism, he was able to sense the powerful image of a tragic figure such as Saul and see through fate to an essential hope upon which all humankind depends - the hope that lies in the imperfection of people.

This hope becomes clearer with a comparison of Saul to other tragic figures.

III.

An interest in Saul as a tragic figure can lead one to the study of numerous tragic figures found in a great body of literature including Greek tragedy, the works of Shakespeare, and the works of modern writers who often present complex figures due to modern understandings and misunderstandings of human nature made possible by the social sciences. Here is one brief and bad example.

In an article published in 1979, Stephen Breck Reid of Emory University cited the story of the downfall of Saul as "a lens through which an oppressed community may perceive suicide as an alternative."²⁵ Reid compares Saul to the emperor Caligula in Camus' s play, and understands both characters as being "overcome by a sense of nonbeing, nothingness."²⁶ Like Saul, says Reid, Caligula is driven to suicide.

Reid makes another analogy between Saul and Shakespeare' s Macbeth. Like Saul, Macbeth beholds his destiny via the facilities of a witch.

In both stories a witch/seer facilitates the occasion for the main figure to behold his destiny. In both cases the protagonist attempts to control his own destiny unauthentically: Macbeth through his misunderstanding of the oracle of the witches, Saul by breaking the law (I. Samuel 15:9,20). In both cases it was sheer folly to attempt to control destiny.

This folly, in the contexts of their respective stories, makes both men counterexamples. Their action is not perceived as an authentic living-out of existence. Therefore it becomes clear to the OT community and later to the black community that while suicide is a possibility it is not an option for authentic existence.²⁷

This seems to be well put, however, Reid goes on to describe suicide as an alternative to an oppressed community. Fortunately he adds two alternatives more: revenge and violence, and that of the suffering servant.

Whether in the context of black theology or in the context of Old Testament theology, such a comparison of tragic figures avoids the irony presented in Saul' s stories. Violence may be an important ingredient in tragedy, but, whether directed outward in the form of conquest or revenge, or inward in the form of suicide, it is, at most, a byproduct of a more serious human confrontation that takes place within the human being. Pessimists may call it the confrontation between existence and absurdity, but optimists might see it as a confrontation between existence and hope.

This writer prefers the latter view for, as in the story of Saul and in other tragic stories, although vengeance and violence are usually the primary ingredients in tragedy, it is the contrast drawn between these negative aspects of tragedy and the hope that is not repressed, avoided or denied and therefore unfulfilled, which creates the real impact of the tragedy.

A study of Browning' s poem *Saul*, may offer an interesting example of the hope that is present in every tragic situation.

IV.

Robert Browning's *Saul* offers fresh insights into Saul's character. Based upon I. Samuel 16:14-23, this poem presents a fascinating confrontation between a bright, dashing David and a dark, grotesque Saul.

Browning introduces David to Saul via Abner who was infatuated by David and hoped that Saul would be equally impressed. Immediately, strong contrasts are drawn between the bright, blond David who disappears out of the blinding desert sunlight into a black tent, which hides the dark, black-haired Saul, "drear and stark, blind and dumb." It is the contrast and especially the "blackness," "more black than the blackness," "blackest of all," that sets the mood (stanza 3). A single sunbeam, coming through the tent roof reveals Saul, motionless and silent.

In contrast to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, who is cast in a dark setting as one succumbed to the hidden evil power of darkness, Browning's *Saul* is a great man overwhelmed, gloomy, agonizing, who stands over and against everything represented by a fresh, eager, alert young man with a radiant body and a sweet mind.

In the midst of Saul's gloom, David unwraps the lilies from this harp and sets about the task for which he was summoned. He sings seven songs, which in Browning's mind were probably based on Longus's romance of *Daphnis and Chloe*,²⁸ and, "As the ministry of the minstrel becomes more and more effective, so the appeal of the poem becomes more and more urgent."²⁹

Although the songs arouse Saul and touch him, they do not free him. The songs are of the ordinary human experiences of ordinary people: grief, gladness, boldness, fellowship, worship are explored. Next David concentrates on Saul's praiseworthy experiences, then on the general themes of the immortality of good and the everlasting fame of great deeds. It is inferred that Saul should be

lifted out of his gloom by such a song, for these are the very characteristics of Israel' s first great king.

The poem ends with a II. Samuel (Early Source) picture of David' s admiration for Saul, characterized more by genuine esteem than by what others might call “love.”

Studying the poem, it is interesting to note the division between the sections. The first nine stanzas were written by Browning in 1845. The remainder of the verses were probably written in 1852-53, but the entire poem did not appear until 1855.³⁰

Much speculative thought has been offered as to why Browning stopped where he did in the first version of nine sections. Was he overwhelmed or underwhelmed by his subject or by his model poet, Christopher Smart?

Smart's *Song to David* presents a lustrous David. The poem concentrates on consolation and edification. It speaks of victory and power, of knowledge and reason, praise and adoration. It appeals to the senses. All in all, it presents David as the Psalmist - the greatest poet of all - and, but for a stanza (27), concentrates on David. The Saul stanza paints a picture of Saul that is quite different from Browning' s, leading to the thought that although Smart may have influenced Browning' s approach to the character of David, he seems not to have been affected by his attitude toward Saul:

Blest was the tenderness he felt
When to his graceful harp he knelt,
and did for audience call;
When Satan with his hand he quell' d,
And in serene suspense he held
The frantic throes of Saul.³¹

Browning' s Saul is not in the hand of Satan. He is not mad. He is simply lacking in willpower and is in need of spiritual conviction.

Although even a casual reading of Browning' s poem presents David as a very unhistorical character, a question is easily raised concerning the historical basis for Browning' s Saul.

David is more than David; David is more than Browning. The last line of the eighteenth stanza assures us of this: "See the Christ stand!" But Saul remains Saul. Of course, the question is, which Saul: Saul the failure (Early Source, No. 1.), Saul the ruin (Early Source, NO. 2.), or Saul the mistake (Late Source)? They are not the same and it should not be assumed that the true character of Saul was meant to be the sum total of all the negative characteristics alluded to or described in scripture.

V.

It seems to be more than coincidental that both a Romantic poet of deep Christian understanding and warmth and an ancient Jewish historian and philosopher whose works have been preserved and cherished by the Christian Church, have portrayed a similar Saul, whose biblical character indeed bears the evidence of a courageous and valiant king. Unlike Shakespeare's Macbeth, who suffers without repentance and justifiably dies for his crimes, Saul was capable of repentance (Late Source).³² Although the narrative maintains suicide as an alternative reaction of the cowardly to the absurdity of human oppression and guilt, the Saul of scripture instead shows evidence of a courageous Saul who, in spite of impending doom, continues to fight valiantly. Only because of numerous wounds does he react to the absurdity of his situation and resort to self-destruction (Early Source, No. 1.). Of course, Josephus would carry things a step further, as noted above.

Combined with the mourning and lamentation of a devout David (Early Source, No. 2.) and later accounts of David's mercy and compassion for Saul's family, perhaps there is sufficient reason for a re-evaluation of the character of Saul. Even though extremely complex attitudes toward the monarch remain, Israel's first great king remains unforgettable.

G. K. Chesterton considered the uniqueness of Browning's *Saul* and raised a complex but worthwhile argument for supporting a theory, perhaps also a theology, based upon "the hope that lies in the imperfection of man."³³ Some hope may be based on human deficiency itself.

We live in a strange, overpowering world. It is all that we have known and yet it remains so strange. All that the social sciences have taught us in recent times, all that scripture offers in the way of revealed truth and enlightenment, all that the wisdom of the ages and accumulated knowledge of modern humanity sets before us, proves and affirms only the universal truth that we

live in a strange world in which our humanity is simultaneously our greatest hope and our greatest threat.

The hope that lies in the imperfection of people may have been only surmised at the time of the formation of the Old Testament canon, but the evidence of its existence remains. The New Testament also bears witness to that hope. There, the motive becomes action and the hope becomes a human event in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Its practical value is demonstrated through a passionate interest in existence and a genuine love of people.

Browning' s David emphasizes a Christian perspective over and against an Old Testament picture of Saul while remaining true to a theology of hope that underlies both. For all practical purposes, Browning' s David may have been Browning himself the Christian optimist, who found the real meaning of life in the overall workings of God, not merely in the opinions of people, even those expressed by Old Testament authors.

Many good things in life go wrong, but faith is founded upon the good, not upon the bad, upon the true, not upon the false. In a way, the goodness of people is a blend of what good they do and of what good they would do given the opportunity.

Browning' s poem and Josephus' s story, like Jesus' beatitudes, underline the importance of accepting the irony and the complexity of life and the imperfection of people with a sense of hope that transcends the human situation. There is a Presence and a purpose behind it all. As the life of Saul demonstrates, that purpose may remain a mystery, and that Presence may become a stranger, but the practical value of the gift of life remains a fact.

NOTES

I.

1. Flavius Josephus, "The Antiquities of the Jews," *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, Volume 2, Books 6 and 7, 7th ed., under "Whitson."
2. *Ibid.*, Book 6, Chapter 4., Paragraph 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 6.4.2., 6.5.4.
4. *Ibid.*, 6.5.6.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 6.6.2., f.n.
7. *Ibid.*, 6.6.4., f.n.
8. *Ibid.*, 6.8.2.
9. *Ibid.*, 6.13.5.
10. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1979), 279.
11. William Deane, *Samuel and Saul: Their Lives and Times* (New York), 211-212.
12. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 6.13.
13. *Ibid.*, 6.13.7.
14. *Ibid.*, 6.14.4.
15. *Ibid.*, 6.14 (and I. Samuel 1.).
16. *Ibid.*, 7.1.1.
17. Could this have been a deliberate Jewish commentary on Greek-Homeric literature? There are examples in biblical narrative where one can find attempts to create Homeric-like narrative spectacles. For instance, in the Saul narratives, the Late Source material portrays Saul, from the beginning, as a mistake. He is cursed, doomed from the start. His fate is clearly marked. This is precisely what Paul Borgman ("Story Shapes That Tell a World: Biblical, Homeric, and Modern Narrative," *Christian Scholars Review*, vol. 9, No. 4 (1980), 42.) and others have said biblical narrative does not do and Homeric epic does. The lines of differences are not that clearly drawn, i.e. the Late Source narrative poses Saul as cursed from the beginning, in Greek-Homeric format.

But the fact remains that the Saul narratives demand more interpretation than Homeric tales, which are more easily analyzed. This is to admit that although Borgman' s argument is useful, the application of his theory must be understood in a larger context than the one Borgman chooses.

18. Josephus, Preface to *Antiquities*.

19. Ibid.

20. A full text of "Droplaugarsona saga" was not available at the time of this writing.

21. Paul Schach, *The Icelandic Saga* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1962), 83.

22. *Icelandic Sagas*, ed. Leif Sjoberg (New York, 1984), 132.

II.

23. Another interesting account to add to one' s study of Saul is the brief narrative in I. Chronicles 10:1-14. In spite of this author' s dislike of Saul, he gently portrays the historical character mainly in contrast to the greater character of David. One should note the additional information this story includes concerning the recovery of the bodies of Saul and his sons by "all the valiant men (v.12)."

24. Josephus avoided the topic of homosexuality completely.

III.

25. Stephen Breck Reid, "Violence and Vengeance: Ingredients for Tragedy," *Encounter With the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Martin J. Buss (Philadelphia, 1979), 154.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 155.

IV.

28. Edward Berdoe, *The Browning Cyclopaedia: a Guide to the Study of the Works of Robert Browning* (London, 1906), 468.

29. A. A. Brockington, *Browning and the Twentieth Century: a Study of Robert Browning's Influence and Reputation* (New York, 1963), 11.

30. William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* (New York, 1955), 254-256.

31. Christopher Smart, "A Song to David," *The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart*, ed. Norman Callan (London, 1949), vol. 1.

V.

32. It is interesting how Shakespeare departed from the historical Macbeth whom history remembers favorably as a good king.

33. G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (London, 1903), 177.

APPENDIX

Early Source: The Story of King Saul

I. Samuel 9:1-10:16

11:1-15

13:1-7.a., 13:15.b.-14:52

16:14-23

17:1-11, 32-40, 42-48.a., 49, 51-54

18:6-9, 12-16, 20-29

19:11-17

21:1-9

22:1-23

23:1-13

25:1.b.-44

26:1-25

27:1-28:2

29:1-11

30:1-31

Ending No. 1, I. Samuel

28:3-25

31:1-13

Ending No. 2, II. Samuel

1:1-16

1:17-27

2:1-11

Late Source: The Story of King Saul

8:1-22

10:17-27

12:1-25

15:1-35

16:1-13

17:1-31, 41, 48.b., 50, 55-58

18:1-5, 10-11, 17-19

19:1-10

21:10-15

23:14-24:22

25:1

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