

Narrative strategies: the necessary failures of king saul

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King Saul is a complicated and tragic figure in the Old Testament. A new reader of the book of Samuel could misconstrue the fate of King Saul as unwarranted; an unfair and harsh punishment to an admittedly, human liability. Worse yet, it's even easier to approach the story with a sense falsified altruism from Samuel or even God himself; that The failure of King Saul was a preordained personal " lesson" for Samuel's callous use of the word " seer" or to the people of Israel, to whom God's will is fastidiously influenced and changed to accommodate the desires of its citizens.

However, there is much evidence that these are not the case, nor the reason for the inclusion of King Saul, whose reign is covered in great detail, in the over-arching narrative from Judges through 2 Samuel; Saul's failures were a necessary narrative device to diffuse the tension and gradual (if not hostile) transition from a sacred theocracy to a sacred monarchy. To demonstrate that King Saul was a necessary narrative device we first have to state and define what a narrative device actually is, and how it relates to the overarch. " This term [narrative device] describes the tool of the story teller (also used in non-fiction), such as ordering events such that they build to a climactic moment or a withholding of information until a crucial or appropriate moment when revealing it creates a desired effect." (Hernandez, 1) This notion connects Saul to the literary text as a narrative device. The narrator of 1 and 2 Samuel could have just as easily skipped or belittled Saul's arc to exonerate God's selection of King, or even merely mention the laconic information of David's arc to further emphasize the virtues of a Great King, for example; David did A, but more importantly he did not do B. The narrator, however, includes Saul as a major narrative component for the transition of

Judge to King, his characterization being the driving force of the narrative progression and leading directly to the finale of his eventual failure and the successful reign of David.

This provides evidence that the lessons of the Saul arc were not only meant to be didactic, but also to be taken seriously in the impending texts. To start things off, Samuel is the last Judge of Israel. A Judge is a hybrid between a prophet and leader of the small city state, and was a position that was held by many before him. The position came with sanctioned glory and admiration, as the history of Israel normally had a Judge save them from an impending threat and was followed by a time of prosperity. Nevertheless, at the closing of the Book of Judges, the text reads, “[...] in those days there was no king in Israel; everyman does that which was right in his own eyes.

” (Judges 21: 16-23) setting the narrative basis for which the citizens request a king, despite Samuel already being a fully competent, experienced leader. This left a contentious Samuel with the task of asking God to anoint a new king, one that would essentially replace him. Now, it was well within the power of God, or even Samuel for that matter, to reject the people’s requests or even become a self anointed king; however, the text takes a turn involving the children of Samuel, claiming that his sons, “[...] did not walk in [Samuel’s] ways, and they turned after gain, and they took bribes and perverted justice” (1 Samuel 8: 3). Thus the nation could not receive Samuel as its first king on the grounds that his own bloodline was already publicly corrupt, and Samuel himself was too old (1 Samuel 8: 4-5). Samuel was upset at the request of the people. God, however, reassured Samuel telling

him, “ They have not rejected you, but rejected me from reigning over them” (1 Samuel 8: 7).

There is still tension and hesitation from Samuel who tells the people that with a king comes new problems, and he lists them in (1 Samuel 8: 11-18). This is important; here we begin to decipher whether Saul is already destined to fail as Samuel relays the potential pitfalls that a new king will have. With further critical analysis of the text, however, it seems highly unlikely that God intended for Saul to fail. The list Samuel procures is true of any new government, military institution, and culture set to befall an established territory. The list could have been conceived by a man and was not exclusive to divine knowledge and the forewarnings do not address Saul directly, by name or otherwise. There are also two passages (among others) that stand out as examples of God’s hope that Saul would be successful but did not know whether or not he would be; “...If both you and the Kings that reign over you follow the lord your God – good! But if you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your fathers” (1 Samuel 12: 14).

This is worded like a warning, not a prophecy. The word, “ if” insinuates that Saul could turn out either way, which is also supported through this following verse, “ You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord’s command” (1 Samuel 13: 13). Thus we can move on to Saul,

establishing a characteristic that becomes contingent to his downfall:

Uncertainty. Saul begins his reign with unfavorable circumstances; he had to take a position that neither Samuel nor God wanted filled. Chapter 9 opens with the narrator letting the audience know that Saul definitely looks the part.

He is handsome and a “head taller” than the average man. The first lesson here is in contrast to the first time David is described to the audience, informing us that the aesthetic of a man does not make a king; but it is the content of his heart (1 Samuel 16: 7). Upon seeing Saul, Samuel is informed by God that Saul will be Israel’s first King, and Samuel anoints him, to which he protests, “Am I not a Benjamite of the smallest of tribes of Israel?” (1 Samuel 9: 21). Samuel still continues the proceedings telling all the tribes to gather, but when they do Saul is not found as he is hiding amongst the baggage (1 Samuel 10: 21-22). This could be taken as a sign of modesty, humility, and a good content of heart; however, I am reminded of a relevant quote by Publus Syrus that reads, “If the spirit is weak, it will not be able to tolerate good fortune.” Perhaps the content of Saul’s heart is exemplified by his modesty but a true king needs strength and confidence of character and to fulfill his duty to the nation with or in spite of its people.

The lesson here is that Saul was not yet equipped with this intrinsic virtue, and his character would collapse under the fortunes of his kingship. Where David defeated Goliath and David’s name was celebrated in the cities, Saul hid. In chapter 11 we get the next big lesson. Israel is again being threatened with battle; however, it is now under a new ruler. Saul cuts an

oxen into pieces and sends them off to the tribes, telling them that if they do not rally to his military call, they shall end up like the oxen (1 Samuel 11: 7).

He begins forming his military with threats, as opposed to appealing to their morality and sense of patriotism. This is in contrast with a story from Judges where The Levite was seeking retribution for the public murder of his concubine. “ Such a thing has never happened nor been seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day; consider it, take counsel and speak” (Judges 19: 30). This is an appeal to a higher moral standing, and reveals a flaw in Saul’s leadership abilities; since this is an event that already happened, it highlights as well as foreshadows Saul’s comprehension of the sacred text, which he should have been instructed to have a copy of so that he may know the awe of God’s laws (Deuteronomy 17: 14-20). This is not the last time this is exhibited. Saul’s son Jonathan murders an officer and sparks a new battle with the Philistines, a sign that his descendants may be falling the way of Samuel’s.

We can begin to deduce the “ what if” situation had either God or Samuel appointed himself as the First King. To begin battle, Saul needs Samuel to perform a sacrifice to God in order to gain favor in the battle. Samuel is late, and Saul’s people begin to scatter in fear as the Philistines begin to amass. Samuel makes his next fatal mistake, and performs the sacred rituals himself (1 Samuel 10: 8). Samuel returns and is furious as Saul tries to excuse his actions as basically “ it wasn’t my fault”.

Now, there are two lessons here that are in contrast to David. First, Saul’s behavior is encumbered by his fear of what his people are thinking and

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doing. David faces Goliath armed with a slingshot and a prayer, standing alone against the human titan. A leader must perform his duty to his nation, with or in spite of it, something Saul does not do. Secondly, when David sleeps with Bathsheba and sends her husband to be killed (two sins that seem to tower above Saul impatience), he is approached by Nathan (his prophet) and he confesses that indeed, " I have sinned".

He confesses his sins and doesn't try to dilute the responsibility, a necessary mark of a leader, one that is rare in modern politics. Because of this, Saul's descendants are stripped of their right to the throne. Now here is the critical lesson learned from Saul that leads the narrative into David, the successful King. Saul is instructed to go to battle with the Amalekites and destroy everything. He brings back their leader, Agag, alive and the best of their flocks. Saul is again approached by Samuel.

Saul is reluctant to admit or take responsibility for the outcome, again trying to excuse himself, blaming the soldiers. He did not understand the gravity of his failures and lost the kingdom altogether with Samuel leaving to anoint a new King (David). Where David accepts his punishment and repents, Saul seems to try and argue his way out of responsibility, suggesting to Samuel in the process that he [Samuel], and in turn God, does not know what sin is. From here on out Saul becomes more isolated and more dangerous, ruthlessly pursuing David in order to murder him, which eventually becomes his demise. Saul then becomes a character narrative device. It is important to see Saul as a failed character who might have succeeded, if it weren't for these crucial mistakes that at first glance seem trivial.

The character then becomes a cautionary tale, and a bar to which other Kings, including David, are held. Both Samuel and Saul were not fit to be Kings, as is exemplified by their character or circumstances. Thus the narrative device was necessary for the audience to understand David's success, and how easy it was to be a failure. Though the narrator could have simply made David's virtues apparent, through this very human character we can make a connection and better comprehend that not all men can be kings; after all, it is not the virtues of kingship that we can identify with, but rather the flaws of human nature.