

Rise & Fall of King Saul, II

I have discussed the first three chapters of 1 Samuel at some length, and I will not spend that much time on every chapter of the book. I will, however, probably spend even more time on a few significant verses that we will encounter. For now I will move on to the next section of 1 Samuel, which deals with the ark narrative. The first three chapters of the book established God's new man on the scene, Samuel. Now in the ark narrative we have a demonstration of God's power. That is why this narrative is so important at this point in the book.

To summarize the ark narrative, the people were involved in a battle with the Philistines and things were not going well. The people then thought they should bring the ark with them in order to draw the presence of God into their affairs. They did not ask if they should do it. They brought the ark, more or less, as a talisman, or good luck charm. The Philistines were frightened when they heard about the coming of the ark, because they had heard what God had done for Israel in bringing them out of Egypt. They may have been confused about what had actually taken place. This confusion is evident when they say in 1 Samuel 4:8, "They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert." They have a mixed up understanding of what actually took place. There was only one God, of course, not gods, and the plagues were in Egypt, not the desert. But the Philistines had some idea of what the Lord could do. Yet they said, "Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!" The Philistines did fight, Israel lost, and the ark was captured. It might be better to say, perhaps, that the ark left. As we read into chapter 5, we discover that the ark, which was supposedly captured, is actually the captor. The Philistines have much trouble because of this captive. After a victory march throughout the Philistine territory, the ark returns to Israel.

The keyword from earlier in the book, *kabed* or *kabod* in the Hebrew, which means "weight" or "heaviness" and was translated as "honor" in chapter 2, continues to be important in 1 Samuel 4 through the account of the ark. When Eli heard that the ark was captured, he fell over and died under his own weight, because he was heavy. When Eli's daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, heard that the ark was captured, she was pregnant at the time and she gave premature birth to a child, whom she named Ichabod. That name has the Hebrew root *kabod* in it, and it means "where is the glory," "where is the honor," "where is the weighty One," or "there is no glory," "there is not honor." We read in 1 Samuel 4:21 that "she named the boy Ichabod, saying, 'The glory has departed from Israel.'" The glorious One has left. The ark has left. That which represented God's presence among the people had left. We are told that she said this "because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband." She said, "'The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.'"

So the ark finds itself in Philistine territory. It is first taken into the temple of Dagon in Ashdod. The story that follows is a familiar one. The Philistines set this vanquished god of an enemy people beside their supreme god, Dagon. In a polytheistic society, they would bring in these other gods for whatever benefit they might bring, and they would array them around their primary deity. The problem was that their primary deity was found facedown in the dirt the next morning. They thought it was a coincidence, so they propped the deity back up. The next day, however, the deity was down again, but this time it was without its head and hands. This was typical treatment of vanquished foes by the Assyrians.

The god of the Philistines was decapitated with his hands removed. Then it says in 1 Samuel 5:5, "That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold." It was customary in the ancient Near East for people to consider thresholds to be sacred. Even today, sometimes it is a custom for the husband of a newly married couple to carry his

bride across the threshold of their first home. In the ancient Near East there was often something considered special about the threshold leading from the secular realm into the holy precinct. Apparently it was customary for the Philistines to carefully avoid stepping on the threshold. Just as God held up for mockery the gods of Egypt, through this event the practices of the Philistines were held up for mockery. The writer could say that the reason the Philistines avoid stepping on the threshold is because one time their most important god was found decapitated on the threshold. It lost its hands and was vanquished. That was probably not the real reason they originally began the custom, but it is a brilliant way to hold up to ridicule that god that was no god.

As we continue to read in 1 Samuel 5:6, we find out that “the Lord’s hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity.” The weighty One had left Israel, and His weight was being felt already. It says, “He brought devastation upon them and afflicted them with tumors.” There have been long tomes and treatises written about what kinds of tumors they were. Whatever it was, it was not pleasant and the Philistines did not like it. We read in 1 Samuel 5:7, “When the men of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, ‘The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy upon us and upon Dagon our god.’” The captive had become the captor, and the Philistines were trying to escape. The next verse says, “So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and asked them, ‘What shall we do with the ark of the god of Israel?’ They answered, ‘Have the ark of the god of Israel moved to Gath.’”

The Philistines lived in a pentapolis, a group of five primary cities. The Greek translation of the Old Testament says that those from Gath answered, “Have the ark of God moved to Gath.” Why would they want to move the ark from Ashdod to Gath. It may be that they were still testing the coincidence theory. Ashdod was a port city, on the coast. It was common, of course, for rats to travel on ships and pass diseases to people. So some people speculate that the affliction the Philistines suffered was some sort of bubonic plague. The Philistines’ idea was to move the ark to an inland city in order to test whether something supernatural was really happening or whether there was a natural explanation. The Greek translation does mention the rodents that were present on the ships, even though we do not find that in the Hebrew. But later in the Hebrew text when the Philistines prepare to send the ark back to Israel, they make golden replicas of the tumors and of rats. So apparently rats were involved in some way.

The Philistines test whether the same thing will happen if the ark is in an inland city. And of course, the same thing does happen. We read in 1 Samuel 5:9, “But after they had moved it, the Lord’s hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors. So they sent the ark of God to Ekron.” But the people of Ekron do not want to be part of another experiment. Then it says in 1 Samuel 5:11, “So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, ‘Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people.’ For death had filled the city with panic; God’s hand was very heavy upon it.”

The glorious One, the weighty One, who had departed from Israel and come into Philistine territory, was making His weight felt. The Philistines began to realize that, so in the next chapter they began to return the ark. They use the complicated procedure of putting it on a new cart and hitching it up with cows that had recently had calves. Then they point them in a direction to see if the cows would go off in the direction of their calves. They are still wondering if something supernatural is happening. So they test it by setting up a very unnatural situation. It would have been very unnatural for cows to leave their calves to strike off in another direction, but that is what they did. They did not seem to be happy about it because it talks about them “lowing” along the way.

As the Philistines prepare the cart to send the ark back to Israel, notice what their leaders say in 1 Samuel 6:3: “‘If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it away empty, but by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you.’ The Philistines asked, ‘What guilt offering should we send to him?’ They replied, ‘Five gold tumors and five gold rats, according to the number of the Philistine rulers, because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers. Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country, and pay honor to Israel’s god.’”

The Philistines were learning the lesson that the house of Eli needed to learn, and even Israel needed to learn. God needed to be considered weighty. The Philistines continue to say in 1 Samuel 6:5, “Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land. Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did?” Again in this verse, the Hebrew word that we translate “harden” is the same root that we translate “to honor” or “to give weight to,” which has been the key word through this part of 1 Samuel, which underscores the key theme. The theme that the writer is establishing is that God is to be honored. God should be given the greatest weight in anyone’s life. It is impossible to serve two masters. Either you will love the one and hate the other, or you will hate the one and love the other.

So the Philistines send the ark back. The people of Israel receive it back gladly. But we find out at the end of 1 Samuel 6 that the people of Israel have not learned the lesson as well as the Philistines have learned it. The people looked inside the ark, which turned out a great catastrophe for them. The ark was not even supposed to be touched, and they looked inside it. Why would they do such a thing? Remember that the ark was returned to them with a small box of gold items that the Philistines had sent as a guilt offering. It is likely that the people wanted to know if there was more gold inside the ark. The ark was not large. It was a little more than a meter long and a little less than a meter wide. But it was big enough to hold significant quantities of gold. That may have motivated them to look inside the ark.

In this account of the ark narrative, the stress is placed upon God’s power. God is powerful and He is fully capable of taking care of Himself. God was not in the ark, of course, but it represented the presence of God. The ark is portrayed as going on a victory march from city to city to city and eventually back home. God demonstrates through that that He is not dependent upon human agency. He is fully capable of taking care of Himself. He is powerful.

To summarize the book so far, the first three chapters describe the establishment of God’s new man. Then we have the demonstration of God’s power. Then the two are brought together in 1 Samuel 7 as we see God’s power working through God’s prophet to deliver His people. In 1 Samuel 7 the Philistines gather to fight against Israel, but God miraculously delivers them from the hands of the Philistines. I will not go through the details of chapter 7, in which God demonstrates that He is fully capable and willing to deliver His repentant people. I will mention that in 1 Samuel 7:12 Samuel set up a stone between Mizpah and Shen and named it Ebenezer. That name means “stone of help,” and Samuel said, “Thus far the Lord helped us.” Samuel did not mean that geographically. He meant that to that point in their history God had helped them. Even though there had been long stretches of time when they did not honor God, He had proven His sufficiency.

It is immediately on the heels of that scene that we read in 1 Samuel 8 that the elders come to Samuel and say, “Give us a king.” They say specifically in 1 Samuel 8:5, “You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” The Hebrew word that is translated “to lead” is the same word sometimes translated “to judge.” And the narrator tells us, “When they said, ‘Give us a king to lead us [or judge us],’ this displeased Samuel.” Then the Lord

responded to Samuel, saying, “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.”

The Lord clarified this for Samuel because he was the prophet and leader in Israel. He was the judge. When he heard the people ask for a king to judge them, he probably thought they were after his job. He thought they were trying to remove him from his position, and he felt offended by it. But God had to remind Samuel that the people were not just rejecting him. It was far more serious than that. They were rejecting the Lord as king. The significant word in their request was “king” not “judge.” So the Lord tells Samuel to warn the people that they will not be pleased with what this king does. He tells Samuel that their request will be granted but not until they are warned first. That is what Samuel does in the central section of chapter 8.

The response comes in 1 Samuel 8:19, which says, “But the people refused to listen to Samuel. ‘No!’ they said. ‘We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.’” That statement by the people is quite ironic when you consider the narrative flow of the book so far. Samuel had just said in chapter 7, “Thus far the Lord has delivered us.” And the Lord had delivered them very dramatically. We do not know how much time lapse there was in real time between chapter 7 and chapter 8. But in narrative time, the author is making an explicit point. God is sufficient and He had demonstrated His sufficiency. Yet still the people say they want something different. They want a king like all the other nations. Remember what Gideon had said in the book of Judges. “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.” There was an understanding that God was the rightful king in Israel.

After Samuel gave the people the Lord’s warning, they did not repent of their wrong desire. It says in 1 Samuel 8:19-22, “But the people refused to listen to Samuel. ‘No!’ they said. ‘We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.’ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the Lord. The Lord answered, ‘Listen to them and give them a king.’” And Samuel dismissed the people in preparation for doing so.

What do we learn from that response of the Lord to the people’s sinful request? He will sometimes grant our requests if we are insistent and persistent and it is the only way we are going to learn a lesson. We need to be very careful when we pray that we do not insist upon our will. Even Jesus Himself said, “Not my will but Your will be done.” If we persist in a wrongful request, He may grant us that request in order to teach us a lesson. That is the background for the beginning of the rise of Saul, which is the next section of 1 Samuel.

One reason that Israel may have made the request for a king is that living in dependence upon a God who is invisible requires walking by faith. There is a human temptation to want to walk by sight. In our Christian walk we can encounter the same kind of weariness of walking by faith. As we grow older, we like to be more established and secure. When we are young, it can seem adventurous to step out in faith not knowing how God will provide, but going forward anyway. When we get older and more tired, however, we begin to want to see how things will work out. Sometimes God grants that. But many times He requires us to continue walking by faith. We are not tempted to say, “Give me a king like all the other nations.” But we may be tempted to say, “Give me a salary like all my neighbors.” We can begin to look for visible security.

We need to take care to remember that the notion of a king was not wrong. It was rather the elders’ insistence on a king according to their timing and their description that was wrong. They wanted a king

like all the nations. We will see that the Lord did plan to give His people a king, but it was not going to be a king like all the nations.

The next section of the book, including 1 Samuel 8-12, describes the beginning of monarchy in Israel. This section is the *locus classicus* of source criticism. I mention that technical concept because it is important to understand the problem that people have had reading these texts about Saul. In doing so we hope to develop a better understanding of what they are about. And we hope to develop a clearer understanding of what happened in the life of Saul. The idea of a *locus classicus* of source criticism means it is the place to look if you want to see examples of sources that have been combined with less than total success. Many critical commentaries talk about several different sources being combined in this material that describes the rise of Saul.

This theory arose because critics have argued that different sections in the text express different attitudes toward the monarchy. In 1 Samuel 8 the elders demand a king, and because Samuel warns them many have said that the chapter is anti-monarchical. It expresses an unfavorable attitude toward kingship. Then in 1 Samuel 9:1-10:16 is the account of the anointing of Saul. Saul goes out looking for some lost livestock, but instead of finding the livestock he encounters Samuel. Samuel then anoints Saul to be king. In this section there is nothing negative said about Saul. The idea of kingship seems to be assumed, which has led scholars to assert that this section is pro-monarchical. It expresses a favorable attitude toward kingship. The next section is 1 Samuel 10:17-27, which describes the lot-casting that brings Saul to public attention. This section begins as a judgment speech. Just at the point where you would expect Samuel to pronounce a judgment, he tells Israel to gather themselves by their clans and then begins the lot-casting process that eventually identifies Saul. Due to the negative tone that Samuel adopts in this section, people have decided that this section expresses a negative attitude toward the monarchy. Then 1 Samuel 11 deals with Saul's defeat of the Ammonites and the rescue of Jabesh Gilead. In that chapter Saul performs rather well and nothing negative is said about kingship, so it is regarded as a pro-monarchical section. The following chapter, 1 Samuel 12, presents Samuel's final warning on the eve of kingship. In that warning Samuel has some rather hard words to speak to the people. He warns them that kingship may succeed or it may fail, which leads scholars to view this section as anti-monarchical. Thus scholars believe that those chapters developed from different sources because of the perception of different attitudes toward the monarchy, sometimes negative and sometimes positive.

There is another reason that scholars have thought those chapters are based on different sources and therefore we cannot read them as a unified story that makes sense. They say there is too much happening in them. One scholar said that there are too many accounts of how Saul became king to believe that they are all true. One or the other of them could have been believed, but it seems unnecessary to have so many. The elders ask for a king and Saul is anointed. Saul is chosen by lots. Saul defeated the Ammonites. Any one of those would have been enough. But some scholars wonder how we can make sense of all of them being present.

Those are the two reasons people have used to support the idea that there are multiple sources for this material. First, the material expresses different attitudes toward kingship. And second, the material contains different accounts of how Saul became king. There are responses we can make to those ideas.

All of the sections that have negative attitudes toward the monarchy have one thing in common. In those sections Samuel speaks to all the people in the context of an assembly. First he speaks to the elders of Israel who have assembled before him. Then he speaks to all Israel that has gathered for the lot-casting process. Finally he speaks to Israel on the eve of the monarchy. Those are contexts in which we would

expect Samuel to voice his opinion. He would naturally speak out about the wisdom, or lack of wisdom, of what the people were doing in demanding a king.

On the other hand, the accounts that are viewed as pro-monarchical are simply reports of what happened. Samuel is not addressing the people in the context of an assembly. He is simply following through with what God has told him to do. Kingship is presupposed in those sections because God had told Samuel to give the people a king, as they had asked. So that is what Samuel does. Samuel discovers Saul by God's leading and anoints him to be king. Then later when Saul defeats the Ammonites, it is simply a report of what happened and there is no opportunity to make a statement about whether or not it was wise for the people to ask for a king.

The variation between pro-monarchical and anti-monarchical attitudes in this section that people have recognized is easy to explain by considering who is speaking, who is being spoken to, and what the context of the speaking is. When we take those factors into account, it makes sense that concerns about the sinfulness of the people in asking for a king would be expressed when Samuel is addressing the people. It would not be natural to express those concerns in the reporting of events and actions that were taken.

The issue of the multiple accounts of Saul's rise to kingship is a little more difficult to deal with. Recent studies have shown that in the period of the judges, and likewise into the period of the kings, an individual would rise to power through a multi-stage process. There was a three-part process that was typically involved in God bringing someone to power. The first step was designation. Saul's anointing was his designation as God's choice to be king. The second step was demonstration. The one who had been designated was expected to demonstrate in some way that God had chosen him. For instance, when Gideon destroyed the altar of Baal, that was not the primary deliverance, but it was the demonstration that God had chosen him to lead. The third step was confirmation of the individual by the people and by God. This three-part process is very important in dealing with the question of why there are so many accounts of how Saul became king. When you understand that process, you realize that the story as we have it makes good sense.