

Rise & Fall of King Saul, III

We are dealing with the rise of Saul and some of the questions it raises. We are considering some of the concerns that have led scholars to believe that this narrative does not make sense as a story. In the previous lesson we looked at the perception of differing attitudes toward the monarchy in the narrative. We also considered another objection to the integrity of the narrative, which was that Saul seems to become king in too many different ways. My answer to that objection was that there was a standard three-part process when someone rose to power in Israel, and understanding that process might help us understand what is going on in the account of Saul.

There is another problem people have with the narrative of Saul, though it is not mentioned as often as the first two. In 1 Samuel 10:8 there is a reference by Samuel of Saul going to Gilgal and waiting seven days for Samuel to arrive. But then later in 1 Samuel 13:8 we read, “He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul’s men began to scatter.” There is a clear link between those two verses, which are separated by many events over three chapters of text. The question is how did those intervening episodes get in there? Does 1 Samuel 13:8 really take place just seven days after 1 Samuel 10:8? That is a question we need to wrestle with. And we will discover that answering that question will give us a key to understanding what is going on in the rise of Saul.

My overall strategy will be to consider the same texts from several vantage points. I may skip over some texts initially and then come back to them later. We need to begin by considering the actual account of Saul being anointed by Samuel. That account follows the events in 1 Samuel 9 in which Saul is out looking for his father’s lost livestock. He encountered Samuel, who had been told by God that He had special things in store for Saul. God had said to Samuel in 1 Samuel 9:16, “About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him leader over my people Israel; he will deliver my people from the hand of the Philistines.” The Philistines were the arch enemies of Israel.

Just as God had predicted, Samuel and Saul encounter one another. Samuel takes Saul to a banquet where it is apparent that Saul has been anticipated. Saul spends the night and the next morning Samuel wakes him up and tells him it is time to go. As they are traveling, Samuel tells Saul to send the servant ahead. Then in private, Samuel anoints Saul. It says in 1 Samuel 10:1, “Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on Saul’s head and kissed him, saying, ‘Has not the Lord anointed you leader over his inheritance?’” Then Samuel predicts three signs that will take place to confirm Saul’s anointing. After that prediction, we read in 1 Samuel 10:7 that Samuel says, “Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.” Some translations have the phrase as I read it, “do whatever your hand finds to do.” But I must correct that. The Hebrew actually says, “Do what your hand finds to do.” That is a significant point for understanding this text. So 1 Samuel 10:7 should say, “Once these signs are fulfilled, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you.”

In the next verse, 1 Samuel 10:8, Samuel continues instructing Saul, saying, “Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do.” Some commentators have found a problem between verses seven and eight. Their problem is that first Samuel tells Saul to do what his hand finds to do. Then Samuel says that Saul should wait seven days for Samuel to tell him what to do. It appears that Samuel is giving conflicting instructions. On the one hand he says Saul is authorized to do what he wants to do. Then on the other hand he says Saul should wait to be told what to do. Which is it?

Many theories have been proposed to account for this apparent discrepancy. One theory that I am not convinced by suggests that a later prophetic circle inserted verse 8 to correct verse 7. It is suggested that the prophets at a later point in history were uncomfortable that their fountainhead prophet, Samuel, had given that kind of unqualified authority to the king. If that was the case, then they created a tension between the two verses. If they felt that kind of freedom, why did they not just delete or modify the verse they objected to, rather than just inserting a contradictory verse?

In order to understand what is going on, we need to ask what 1 Samuel 7 really implies. The text says, "Once these signs are fulfilled, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you." It mentions the signs, which had the purpose of confirming for Saul that his anointing really was from God, because only God could have made these signs come about. If you think back to the three-step process I mentioned before, I suggest that the fulfillment of the signs is Saul's designation as the leader, the first step of the process. Then when he is told to "do what your hand finds to do," that means he should demonstrate that he was really God's anointed leader, which is the second step of the process.

The next question is what was it that Saul should have done to demonstrate his anointing as leader? I contend that there is sufficient evidence in the text to suggest what Saul should have done. It says in 1 Samuel 10:5, "After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost." And then Samuel goes on to describe the third sign. Samuel seems to go out of his way to mention the Philistine outpost. It is interesting that many commentators have said that the reference to a Philistine outpost is meaningless, because Saul knew the terrain and he did not need to be told where there was a Philistine outpost. Some commentators simply wonder why Samuel would have mentioned it there. And others actually move that reference to another place in the text.

So how do we make sense of this? Put yourself in Saul's place. When all the signs take place, he will be at the site of the third sign. Samuel has told him to do what his hand finds to do. In other words, he should do what lies at hand. The logical conclusion would be that he should attack the Philistine outpost. Samuel went out of his way to mention that the location is Gibeah of God, which means the "Hill of God." But the Hill of God now has a Philistine outpost. Remember Saul has been anointed to deliver his people from the Philistines. Samuel is telling Saul that when he is confirmed as the leader of God's people he should attack the Philistine outpost. If he had done that, it would have provoked the Philistines. Such an attack would not have defeated the Philistines, but it would have made them angry.

Taking all of this into account, we can surmise the sense of 1 Samuel 10:7-8. Samuel tells Saul that once he has been confirmed, he should do what lies at hand. What lies at hand is to attack the Philistine outpost. That would make the Philistines mad and they would come out for retaliation. It is then that Saul should go down to Gilgal and wait for Samuel. Then Samuel would come down to Gilgal and offer sacrifices, which was typical procedure prior to a battle. After offering sacrifices, Samuel would tell Saul what he is supposed to do.

One point from 1 Samuel 10:8 is that Saul should wait seven days for Samuel to come. The emphasis is on Samuel coming, not on the seven days. It is not as though Saul was supposed to use a stopwatch and if Samuel was slightly tardy Saul could do whatever he wanted. It is likely that the seven days was simply an estimate of how much time it would take Samuel to get there.

I consider this account of 1 Samuel 10:7-8 to be Saul's first charge. He has been anointed and now he receives a two-part first charge. I contend that the second part of the charge in verse 8, the trip to Gilgal, is contingent upon Saul's fulfillment of the first part of the charge in verse 7. So now I am going to look

back at the rise of Saul in light of the three-part structure for a leader's rise to power and in light of this understanding of these verses that I have offered.

The elders ask for a king in chapter 9. Then 1 Samuel 9:1-10:16 recounts the anointing of Saul. In terms of the three-part structure, that would be the designation of Saul as leader. As we proceed to read in chapter 10, we find that the third sign is recounted. It is presumed that the first two were fulfilled, but the third sign is there in the text. As it is recounted, some bystanders are astonished to find Saul among religious folk. That will be significant when we later consider the overall portrayal of Saul. We do not read anything about Saul attacking the Philistine garrison. What we read in 1 Samuel 10:13 is "After Saul stopped prophesying, he went to the high place." It is possible that instead of "he went to the high place," the text should say, "He went home." The Hebrew of those two phrases is very close, and the latter phrase would make much more sense. It is expected that Saul will do something grand after this important event in his life. But instead he finds himself in a conversation with his uncle in 1 Samuel 10:14. What we read is "Now Saul's uncle asked him and his servant, 'Where have you been?' 'Looking for the donkeys,' he said. 'But when we saw they were not to be found, we went to Samuel.' Saul's uncle said, 'Tell me what Samuel said to you.' Saul replied, 'He assured us that the donkeys had been found.' But he did not tell his uncle what Samuel had said about the kingship."

The point is Saul did not do what his hand found to do. He was told to do what was at hand. Something lay at hand, and he did not do it. So the designation was not followed by the demonstration that was anticipated. I will refer to this anticipated demonstration as "demonstration A." Demonstration A should have been Saul attacking the Philistine outpost. That should have been the first demonstration. And that begins to explain the next episode.

We read in 1 Samuel 10:17 that "Samuel summoned the people of Israel to the Lord at Mizpah and said to them, 'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "I brought Israel up out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and all the kingdoms that oppressed you." But you have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your calamities and distresses. And you have said, "No, set a king over us."'" Do you observe how that begins like a judgment speech? You expect that after recounting the problem a pronouncement of the judgment will come next. But what comes next, in 1 Samuel 10:19, is "So now present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and clans." That is what they do, and eventually Saul.

The lot-casting procedure is described in much the same way as the one that discovered Achan in the book of Joshua. Some commentators have suggested that it is almost as if Saul is guilty of something, but we do not know what it is. I am suggesting that we do know what it is. Saul is guilty of faltering from the starting gate. He is guilty of that first hesitation that becomes so typical of him later. It is a faithless hesitation to move when God says to move.

Then when the lot falls on Saul, they cannot find him. So they ask the Lord if he is there, and the Lord informs them, "Yes, he has hidden himself among the baggage." They find him and bring him out. Then Samuel says in 1 Samuel 10:24, "Do you see the man the Lord has chosen?" Remember that this is the man the Lord has chosen in response to the people's sinful request. Samuel made it clear that the people made a sinful request. So it is the Lord's choice, but it is in response to the people's demand. Samuel goes on to say, "There is no one like him among all the people." That is a rather ambiguous statement, not quite positive or negative. It says Saul was a head taller than everyone else, but it may be that Samuel is being a bit ironic.

The traditional interpretation of Saul hiding behind the baggage is that he was humble. He was self-effacing and did not aspire to greatness. He had been appointed king to lead the people but he did not want to put himself forward. We should ask, however, whether it is humility or timidity. It seems to be a faithlessness that made him unable to step out and do what God had called him to do. Humility is quite right when God calls upon us to do something, to recognize our inadequacy. We may even protest that we are not fit for the duty. But if God assures you that you are His choice and that whether you feel ready for the task or not He will give you the strength, then we must do it. It is okay to protest when God calls us to do something, but if God assures us that we are to do it, then it is faithlessness to hold back. Saul had received those assuring signs. So we can say that Saul was guilty of something.

I call this lot-casting process “designation B.” The reason designation B is necessary is that Saul has faltered. He did not do what his hand found to do. Thus he did not demonstrate that God had chosen him to lead. He did not come to public attention or distinguish himself in any way. So he could have been lost in obscurity if Samuel had not taken the initiative, convened the people at Mizpah, and gone through the lot-casting process. It was all done to show the people what he and Saul already knew, namely that God had chosen Saul. So the lot-casting is the second designation.

Notice how the people respond. It says in 1 Samuel 10:25, “Samuel explained to the people the regulations of the kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the Lord. Then Samuel dismissed the people, each to his own home. Saul also went to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched.” So God was not dealing Saul an unfair hand. But then it says, “But some troublemakers said, ‘How can this fellow save us?’”

I have to be careful not to side with the troublemakers. The word “troublemakers” is the same that is used to describe the sons of Eli as “worthless men.” They were worthless men because they questioned God’s choice. But their question has a point. They are wondering how Saul can save them and how he came to be chosen. It is a very unusual situation. Usually the first they hear of someone is when he does some great deed. He destroys the altar of Baal, like Gideon, or like David does later on by killing a giant. By such a great deed the people can see that God is working through the person. Saul looks big and impressive, but he was hiding behind the baggage. He had not given any demonstration that he was a leader. So some of the people wonder how this man could save them.

Then in 1 Samuel 11 is demonstration B. Remember that Saul had failed to follow through on demonstration A, which should have been the attack on the Philistine outpost. Demonstration B is the defeat of the Ammonites. The account begins in 1 Samuel 11:1, “Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to him, ‘Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you.’ But Nahash the Ammonite replied, ‘I will make a treaty with you only on the condition that I gouge out the right eye of every one of you and so bring disgrace on all Israel.’ The elders of Jabesh said to him, ‘Give us seven days so we can send messengers throughout Israel; if no one comes to rescue us, we will surrender to you.’” The Hebrew word translated “surrender” could also be translated as “we will come out to you.” That would probably draw some laughter from a Hebrew audience because the same word is used later when it says that they come out to meet them, but then it is for battle and not for surrender.

So the elders of Jabesh Gilead ask for permission to seek a savior. Then the text says in 1 Samuel 11:4, “When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul...” I think we should assume that the messengers went directly to seek Saul. They knew he was the one who had been appointed the leader of the people. But when the messengers arrive at Saul’s city and the people there hear what had happened, they begin to weep. Saul had gone back to farming. He notices the people weeping as he returns with his oxen and he

asks what had happened. Then 1 Samuel 11:6 says, “When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he burned with anger.”

We will see a number of times that the Spirit of God comes upon Saul. Back at the time of his anointing it even talked about him being changed into a different person, being given a different heart, a new heart. We need to be very careful because that reminds us of New Testament heart regeneration. We wonder if that was his conversion experience. If we look at all the instances of the Spirit of God coming upon Saul, they seem to be external workings of the Spirit of God, changing Saul from what he normally is to what God needs him to be at that time.

So the Spirit of God came upon Saul with power. By the way, that is the same phrase that is used about Samson. Then it says in 1 Samuel 11:7, “He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent the pieces by messengers throughout Israel.” That is reminiscent of something that was done in the book of Judges, during a time when there was no king in Israel. Saul has been anointed king, but he has been faltering along the way. He did not follow through with demonstration A. That made necessary designation B. Now he is facing demonstration B and the Spirit of God is not going to let him falter any longer, so he is propelled into battle.

Saul succeeds. God delivers the people that day. It is a great victory. Then Saul says something that is probably the best thing he ever says. Some people want to put to death those that had questioned Saul’s leadership now that they have seen him in action. But Saul responds in 1 Samuel 11:13, “No one shall be put to death today, for this day the Lord has rescued Israel.” Saul acknowledges that it was the Lord’s victory.

After this we read in 1 Samuel 11:14, “Then Samuel said to the people, ‘Come, let us go to Gilgal and there reaffirm the kingship.’ So all the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the Lord.” Instead of “reaffirming” the kingship, it may be more accurate to translate it “renew” the kingship. What is Samuel talking about? Why would Samuel talk about renewing the kingship at the end of demonstration B? The scholar Robert Vannoy wrote about this verse saying that the word “renew” is used regarding something that is in a poor state of affairs and is in need of being renewed. By virtue of Saul’s inaction and his failure to do what his hand found to do, the three-part kingship process of designation, demonstration, and confirmation had been derailed. It required designation B and demonstration B. Now it is time for the confirmation. So Samuel says it is time to renew the kingship. It was derailed and now it can be put back on track. Saul can be put on the throne.

We read next in 1 Samuel 11:15, “So all the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the Lord. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the Lord, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.” It is interesting that Samuel is not mentioned as part of the celebration. Saul is happy. The people are happy. Samuel is at least not in the mood to celebrate. Samuel still has some concerns, which are expressed in the next chapter.

In chapter 12 Samuel again rebukes the people for their demand of a king according to their timing. God had conceded to that and allowed Samuel to appoint a king for them. Later in chapter 16 we will find out that God had in mind a king for Himself. In 1 Samuel 12, Samuel still has tentativeness about the success of this kingship experiment. He is very clear that if Israel and their king will continue to follow the Lord, then things can go well. But if they stray, if they turn back from following the Lord, the whole thing can still fail. There is still a test to be stood before the kingship is fully confirmed. At the end of chapter 12 Samuel says in 1 Samuel 12:24-25, “Be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all

your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away.” There is still tentativeness in that warning.

What follows in 1 Samuel 13 is the account of a time of testing. It is very clear in chapter 13 that the first charge given at the time of Saul’s anointing begins to come into play again. We will see someone do what Saul’s hand should have found to do. Saul took a force with him to Micmash, and he sent another force with Jonathan. We read in 1 Samuel 13:3, “Jonathan attacked the Philistine outpost at Geba.” Many scholars contend that Geba and Gibeah of God were the same place, which is very possible.

We see Jonathan attacking the Philistine outpost. You will find in some commentaries the statement that here Jonathan did what Saul’s hand should have found to do. I have not found anyone who has noticed the pattern that I argue for that Saul’s initial charge had two parts, with the second being contingent upon the first. The first action, attacking the Philistine outpost, would have simply provoked the Philistines. That is exactly what happened when Jonathan attacked.

The response is recounted in 1 Samuel 13:3-4. “Jonathan attacked the Philistine outpost at Geba, and the Philistines heard about it. Then Saul had the trumpet blown throughout the land and said, ‘Let the Hebrews hear!’ So all Israel heard the news: ‘Saul has attacked the Philistine outpost.’” Sometimes the leader of a nation is given credit for a victory even when he does not participate in the battle. We know that it was actually Jonathan, not Saul, who attacked the Philistine outpost. But Saul should have done it.

Next we read that “the people were summoned to join Saul at Gilgal.” Commentators who do not notice all the interconnections say this makes no sense militarily. Saul had a position of strength in the hill country. He was in Micmash. Jonathan was in Gebah, another position of strength. They wonder why Saul would give up these positions to go down into the valley and allow the Philistines to go up and take over that territory. The first response is that Saul probably left his troops in place to try to hold that area. We learn later that they were unsuccessful. The Philistines came out in such numbers that the people just hid wherever they could find a place. But Saul went down to Gilgal because he had been told that was the next thing to do. The words of Samuel back in 1 Samuel 10:8 are the background for what happens here. Once Saul did what his hand found to do, he was supposed to go down to Gilgal and wait for Samuel.

Once Saul is at Gilgal, he feels pressure when Samuel does not arrive after seven days. We do not know for sure whether the seventh day had elapsed and Samuel arrived at the beginning of the eighth day. The events are described in 1 Samuel 13:8-12, which says, “He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul’s men began to scatter. So he said, ‘Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings.’ And Saul offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him. ‘What have you done?’ asked Samuel. [Now, Saul begins to make his excuses.] Saul replied, ‘When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, “Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord’s favor.”’” That last phrase is made to sound a little better in most translations than it does in Hebrew. A strict translation of the phrase would be, “I have not softened the deity’s face.” Commentators have noted that that phrase is a rather profane expression. It is not the usual pious language.

Saul continues by saying, “So I felt compelled.” Another way to translate that is “I pulled myself together.” It is as though Saul was saying, “Everyone else was falling apart. Everyone else was escaping or fleeing. But I pulled myself together to offer the burnt offering.”

Samuel replies in 1 Samuel 13:13, “You acted foolishly. You have not kept the charge 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 charged him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord’s charge.” Saul did not keep the Lord’s charge, so He has charged someone else.

What is Saul’s fault in these events? The dominant voice among commentators speaks of the petulant, peevish prophet who has it in for Saul. One commentator characterizes Saul’s actions when confronted by Samuel in 1 Samuel 13:10 as “properly and guilelessly deferential. Samuel, on the other hand, is harsh, unresponsive, and accusatory, and this despite the fact that Saul offers what appears to be compelling and valid reasons to offer sacrifices before the arrival of the tardy Samuel.” And when Samuel says that Saul has not kept the command of the Lord his God, the same commentator points out that “this is a remarkable statement, because Samuel cites no commandment, nor can we construe one.” I would argue that we can construe a commandment. Saul did not abide by the all-important first charge he was given when he was first anointed. He was to do what lay at his hand, and then he was to go to Gilgal and wait for seven days for Samuel, who would then offer sacrifices and tell Saul what to do.

We might ask why Samuel would give that charge at the time of Saul’s anointing. And then the question arises, what is the nature of Saul’s failure here at Gilgal? God had in mind all along that Israel would have a king, but he was not supposed to be a king like all the nations. After all, God is the king in Israel. In giving them a human king through His prophet Samuel, He established a structure by which God Himself could remain the great King. Israel was to be a theocracy. God was to continue to be the great King. So He establishes a test of Saul’s suitability to see whether Saul will allow the Lord to continue to reign or whether Saul, when things become difficult, will become expedient and pragmatic and take matters into his own hands. Saul’s excuses sound very good on the surface. Samuel was late. The people were scattering and it is difficult to fight without any soldiers. The Philistines were breathing down his neck. He was in great danger. And at that point he allows himself to be moved by his circumstances. It seems that Samuel’s arrival was so brilliantly timed that it was either providential or Samuel was waiting so he could test Saul. Perhaps he wanted to see if Saul would wait at all costs for Samuel, who was God’s spokesman, to arrive, consecrate the battle, and instruct Saul as to what he should do further.

So it is not that Samuel has overreacted against Saul on the basis of a technicality. This was a fundamentally important test that was established at the time of his anointing that was meant to test whether Saul was suitable to be king. Samuel alluded to that in chapter 12 when he warned the people that this experiment with the king they demanded could succeed or it could fail. It all depended upon how the people and Saul responded. If they would follow the Lord, it would succeed. If they would not follow the Lord, it would fail.

Many commentators suggest that Saul’s main fault is that he offered sacrifices, which was only supposed to be done by priests. The problem with that argument is that it appears that other kings such as David and Solomon were involved in sacrifices. Even though God did designate priests as the rightful ones to do it, that does seem to be the specific command that Samuel has in view. It may have been a subsidiary offense. I suggest that the far more significant problem was that Saul abused an authority structure that Samuel set up which was meant to safeguard God’s authority and right to rule. Saul was supposed to do what lay at his hand. Then he was to go to Gilgal and wait for Samuel. When the time

came, it was actually Jonathan who did what Saul was supposed to do by attacking the Philistine outpost. Then when Saul went to Gilgal and times got tough because Samuel was late, Saul failed the test by not waiting for Samuel to arrive.