Lecture 11: 1 Samuel  
History-telling in the Bible

Today we turn to 1 Samuel, the next book in this story of Israel’s life, as told in light of the demands and expectations of Deuteronomy. The books of 1 & 2 Samuel were originally a single work. In fact, the earliest Hebrew copies of Samuel we possess record the books on a single scroll, without making a division between them. It was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible, that divided Samuel in two, just as it did Chronicles. Indeed, it divided not only Samuel, but also the book of Kings. Copies of the Hebrew Bible adopted both of those divisions only in the mid-15th century C.E.

At the same time, the division between 1 & 2 Samuel is natural enough, since 1 Samuel ends with the death of Israel’s first king, Saul, leaving 2 Samuel to focus on the reign of David, although David already becomes the prominent character by the end of 1 Samuel.

More specifically, 1 Samuel 1-7 tells the story of Samuel’s birth and rise to prominence. Chapters 8-15 have to do with the origins of the monarchy and Saul's failure as king, due to his disregard of Samuel’s words. The remaining chapters of 1 Samuel tell the story of the rise of David and his struggle to survive the deranged Saul's attempts to eliminate him as a rival to his own son’s claim to the throne. 2 Samuel is devoted entirely to David’s reign. Beginning with Samuel and his role can help us unravel what’s going on in this book.

1 Samuel takes up where Judges left off, with the tribes living more or less independently of each other, their only times of cooperation coming when some of them closed ranks to face a common foe, with whatever coalition arose based on a fairly local level. Samuel fits well into that situation. In fact, he provides a link with the era of the judges in that he is said to have “judged” Israel: “Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. He went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would come back to Ramah, for his home was there; he administered justice there to Israel, and built there an altar to the LORD.”

Samuel’s description as a “judge” both aligns him with and distinguishes him from the characters in the book of Judges, most of whom do not play an explicitly judicial role – the exception being Deborah, about whom Judges 4:5 reports, “she used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.” And, in fact, there is one other way Deborah bears similarities to Samuel, inasmuch as she is introduced, in the preceding verse, as a prophetess, even as Samuel is a prophet.

In any case, Samuel stands noticeably closer to the majority of the judges when he serves as a catalyst for the people in battling their chief rival, the Philistines. In
the verses just prior to the description of Samuel as a judge we read a moment ago, he calls the people to return to the LORD and summons them to a convocation:

“5 Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.” Mizpah is up in the central hill country, about 14 miles west of Jericho, as the crow flies, although that is somewhat deceiving, since it is also over 3300 feet higher in elevation than Jericho, a city situated around 760 feet below sea level, while Mizpah is around 2700 feet above sea level.

In any case, the narrator reports what happens next: “6 So they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD. They fasted that day, and said, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. 7 When the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it they were afraid of the Philistines. 8 The people of Israel said to Samuel, ‘Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines.’ 9 So Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD; Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. 10 As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the LORD thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel. 11 And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car. 12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Thus far the LORD has helped us.’ 13 So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel; the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. 14 The towns that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.”

At the conclusion of this episode stand the verses we read a moment ago: “15 Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. 16 He went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all these places. 17 Then he would come back to Ramah, for his home was there; he administered justice there to Israel, and built there an altar to the LORD.” To give you a sense of the geography again, the territory Samuel is said to have frequented took him in a yearly circuit that began with Bethel, from which he moved on to Gilgal (which seems to have been near Jericho, although its precise location has yet to be uncovered), then to Mizpah, and finally to his home in Ramah. If we look at this circuit in the context of the larger territory of Israel, it seems to cover a peculiarly narrow tract of land for a person said to have judged Israel. However, we have encountered the same issue in the book of Judges, whose heroes often worked in a
restricted area, and yet they were said to judge all Israel. Indeed, this summary of Samuel’s career is of the same type used by the historian in the book of Judges.

But there is more to Samuel’s role as a judge then this judicial circuit. In the passage we just read, when the people appeal to him for relief from the advancing Philistines, he offers a sacrifice, in response to which the LORD routs the Philistines in such a way that all that’s left for Israel’s army is to slaughter those already in flight. This is the concept of “the LORD’s war” we encountered in Joshua, and it is the only type of warfare authorized by Deuteronomy, whose twentieth chapter is devoted entirely to standards for waging war, including a demand that prior to engaging in battle, a priest is to stand before the troops and proclaim, “’Hear, O Israel! Today you are drawing near to do battle against your enemies. Do not lose heart, or be afraid, or panic, or be in dread of them; for it is the LORD your God who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to give you victory.”

The theme that victory is ultimately delivered by Israel’s God is accented not only in Joshua, but also in Judges. Even the brute Samson accomplishes his victories only because the LORD’s power is with him, as embodied in his unshaven head.

And yet, the designation of “judge” does not account for the whole of Samuel’s role. This is what Campbell has in mind when he contends that "it is a serious distortion to view Samuel as the last of the Judges [inasmuch as] his role is much more innovative." While I think it is overstating the case to deny that Samuel functions as the last judge, it is merely part of his portfolio. There is also a strong emphasis on his role as a prophet. Indeed, it is this facet of Samuel that is front and center when we first meet him.

Samuel appears as a lad in the service of Eli, the priest at the northern holy shrine of Shiloh, which served as an important worship site during the early period of Israel’s life in the land, according to a variety of biblical passages.

As you know, the foundational event of Samuel’s career is narrated in chapter 3. One night, while sleeping in the holy place in the shrine, the young Samuel has his first experience hearing the divine word. The story begins with the auspicious comment, “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” Thus the narrator alerts us that the events to follow were out of the ordinary, a comment that spotlights Samuel and his role.

The young Samuel twice hears a voice calling his name. Supposing the voice to be Eli’s, he runs to the side of the elderly priest, who tells him he hasn’t summoned him. Then the narrator tells us (in an aside), “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.” When Samuel shows up at Eli’s bed the third time, it dawns on the priest that the LORD must be speaking, and so he instructs Samuel to voice his willingness to listen the next time. The message Samuel receives is not the important issue for us at the moment. The event’s larger significance is that this is Samuel’s inaugural
experience of hearing the LORD speak. In fact, the narrator underscores the ramifications of this as an inaugural event at the close of the chapter: “19 As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. 20 And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD. 21 The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD. 4.1 And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.”

Two ideas are stressed here. One is the spread of Samuel’s reputation, as emphasized by the phrase “all Israel” and further underscored by the phrase, “from Dan to Beer-sheba.” Dan was the northernmost city, while Beer-sheba was the southernmost. Thus the phrase “all Israel” is made more specific by specifying the length of the land via landmarks.

The other important accent here is on the content of Samuel’s reputation: “all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD,” which is based, as we’ve seen before, in the report that the LORD “let none of his words fall to the ground.” That in turn, as we’ve noted previously, reflects Deuteronomy’s insistence that every genuine prophet speaks only words that come true.

It is not accidental that Moses is held up as the ideal prophet in Deuteronomy and that prophets – both Samuel and others – play a pivotal role in the Deuteronomic History. And the fact that the author of 1 Samuel takes pains to establish Samuel as a trustworthy prophet on precisely the grounds spoken to Moses and the fact that he underscores Samuel’s prophetic status through an aside that this was a time when “the word of the LORD was rare” – all of this suggests that Samuel’s character has been deliberately shaped to make him a prophet of the Mosaic type, à la Deuteronomy 18.

Moreover, recall that the author stresses that it was through Samuel that the LORD’s word came to “all Israel” – in spite of the fact that chapter 7 depicts him operating in a restricted area – even as that chapter also implies Samuel served all Israel as a judge. This artificial creation of an “all-Israel” scope for Samuel’s work as a prophet, parallel to his role as Israel’s judge, is another indication that Samuel has been fashioned into a larger-than-life ideal who can serve as a vehicle for interpretations of Israel’s life.

That becomes especially apparent in chapter 9’s story of Saul roaming the countryside with a servant, looking for his father's lost donkeys. One of the peculiarities of this story is that in spite of chapter 3’s claim that “All Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD” and that “the word of Samuel came to all Israel,” Saul’s servant refers to him as a man with rumored abilities that might help resolve their dilemma. And the servant’s words suggest he doesn’t expect that Saul is familiar with this man, since he takes
it upon himself to inform Saul of what he knows: “There is a man of God in this town; he is a man held in honor. Whatever he says always comes true.”

Saul does not register recognition that this is Samuel, but refers to him simply as “the man” or “the man of God.” In fact, when they enter the city, Saul asks a passerby, “Tell me, please, where is the house of the seer?” Ironically, the person to whom Saul puts that question is Samuel himself, who simply says, “I am the seer.” Never do Saul or his servant hint that they know the Seer’s name. The only voice that refers to Samuel by name is the narrator, as in 9:14, where he reports that Saul and his servant “saw Samuel coming out toward them.”

Curiously, once we get beyond the story about the Seer and his anointing of Saul, we find a very different reference to this figure: “Saul’s uncle said to him and to the boy, “Where did you go?” And he replied, “To seek the donkeys; and when we saw they were not to be found, we went to Samuel.” Saul’s uncle said, “Tell me what Samuel said to you.” Suddenly everyone is speaking of Samuel as a well-known character, instead of the vague “Seer” or “Man of God.”

The oblique way Samuel is referred to in the dialogue between Saul and his servant, in contrast to chapter 3’s report of Samuel’s reputation throughout Israel and the following discussion between Saul and his uncle, compels the conclusion that chapter 9 is a traditional story about how Saul was anointed to be king by an unnamed seer that the author has appropriated and applied to Samuel by penciling-in his name.

This surmise is given additional force from observations we have already made about this story: such as the author’s need to define for his audience what a "Seer" was by equating it with a "prophet" of his own day, as well as the fact that this Seer’s function runs against the grain of Deuteronomy 18: he is more of a clairvoyant – a class of intermediary declared illegitimate in Deut 17 – than a prophet in the Deuteronomistic mold. As we've seen, the author covers this up by repeating chapter 3's claim that "his word always comes true."

Taken together, these observations compose a strong argument that the author adapted the old story of chapter 9 to his narrative purposes by, in part, weaving Samuel's name into this narrative as part of making him a "larger-than-life" character.

In fact, you'll recall that in looking at the remaining stories used to account for how Saul became king, we again saw evidence that he wove Samuel's name into the narrative at several points, in ways obvious because of their awkwardness within their contexts. Most conspicuously, in chapter 11, when Saul came in from plowing in the fields and heard of the threat to Jabesh-Gilead, he hacked his oxen into twelve pieces, sending those to the other tribes with the warning, “Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!” And yet, the one who musters the troops is Saul alone, which wouldn't be so surprising
if it weren't for the fact that Samuel suddenly appears out of nowhere after the battle, rallying the people to "go to Gilgal, and there renew the kingship." And yet, what follows seems to be anything but a "renewing of the kingship." Rather, the narrative reports the people making Saul king in Gilgal. What's more, Samuel is strangely absent from the report of the accompanying sacrifices, at which "Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly." Given that Saul's downfall will be his failure to wait for Samuel to officiate at sacrifice, it is most peculiar that nothing is said of his presence on this occasion. Accordingly, it seems highly probable that Samuel is present in this passage only due to the author penciling him in at various spots.

In this way, also, the narrator has forged a central role for Samuel, the prophet, alongside his role as judge. But even granting that Samuel's role is "innovative," as Campbell puts it, how do we account for this figure that wears many hats? On the one hand, it is clear that the author's insertion of Samuel, the prophet, in the narratives of chapters 8 and following establishes early on the priority of the prophet over kings; kings must subject themselves to prophets as those who deliver the divine word. And it is in this role that Samuel becomes "king-maker" for Israel, especially as the one who effects the transition from the period of the Judges to that of the Monarchy, which (of course) is featured in chapters 8-12.

That puts us in a position to revisit the question of how these chapters, bearing an overriding negative evaluation of kingship, relate to the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17 and the positive assessment of kingship evident in the closing chapters of the book of Judges. I want to begin addressing that issue by putting a sharper point on the relationship between Deuteronomy and Joshua through Kings on the matter of the role of the king.

First we'll examine the warp and woof of Deuteronomy's law of the king. It is cast, of course, as addressing a situation anticipated once the people are in their land: the people will request a king. In agreement with the narrative of 1 Sam 8, the monarchy is not the LORD's idea, but the people's: "appoint for us, then, a king to govern us." Moreover, as in 1 Sam 8, this request means to supply Israel with something all other nations have, so that they can be "like the other nations."

The subsequent dialogue between the Lord and Samuel in 1 Sam 8 makes clear that this request is wrongheaded. Samuel finds it repugnant, and the Lord concurs: "the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.’” For this narrative, what made Israel distinctive was that they were a strict theocracy: the LORD alone was their king. By demanding a king like all the other nations, they were rejecting that arrangement. And yet, the LORD tells Samuel to permit the people to take this step.

Notice, however, that this characterization of the people's request differs from
the scenario assumed in Deuteronomy, where Israel's desire to have a king so as to be "like all the nations that are around me," lacks any hint that the request is illicit. And permission is granted without any hint of reproof: "You may indeed set over you a king." The fact that the king is to be chosen by the LORD would not differentiate Israel from the nations, whose kings were always considered chosen by their deities.

Elsewhere in Deuteronomy the threat of becoming like the nations motivates the demands that the people obliterate everything pertaining to the nations they are displacing, even the peoples themselves. That fear of contamination from outsiders shows up again in Deut 17's prescriptions, insofar as no foreigner is to serve as king; only Israelites need apply.

The way this king law further effects a distinction between Israel's kings and those of other nations is by denying Israel's monarchy the accoutrements customary to kingship in the ancient Near East: no amassing of horses, which means that he cannot develop a chariot brigade; no building of a harem, out of fear that so many wives will "turn his heart away," even though it doesn't specify why many wives would cause that, although the assumption is that he would otherwise make alliances with other nations through marriage (something for which Solomon is faulted by 1 Kings); neither may he amass a fortune for himself, the absence of which would be most out of character for a Near Eastern potentate. These injunctions shape the monarchy in such a way that, even if Israel has a king like all the nations around them, he will be unlike those kings.

Nevertheless, this listing of Deuteronomy's prohibitions reveals a profound difference with Samuel's words in 1 Sam 8. Samuel is directed to warn the people about the hardships a monarchy will impose and get them to sign off on them. He enumerates those hardships as follows: 11“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; 12and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. 13He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. 15He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. 16He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. 17He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.”

Note that Samuel does not say, "these are pitfalls that can occur with a monarch, so be on the lookout for them." Rather, he asks the people simply to sign off on these as the costs of having a king, which they do. Strikingly, Samuel operates as if the requirements of Deut 17 don't exist, a point that becomes even clearer when
we bring alongside the companion passage in 1 Sam 12. After reminding the people that asking for a king was a grave sin, Samuel utters this reassurance:

"13 See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the LORD has set a king over you. 14 If you will fear the LORD and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well; 15 but if you will not heed the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king."

This exhortation is remarkable when read against the “heads up” Samuel issued about monarchs’ *modus operandi* in chapter 8. Samuel has already certified that kings will break virtually every demand Deut 17 makes of them, and yet he doesn't raise his voice to warn against this infraction, he acts as if it is possible, with a king of this sort, to still obey the LORD. Why this lack of concern for Deut 17?

Let's turn our attention to the outer framework that's responsible for the overall negative verdict on the monarchy. As we noted in exploring chapters 8-12 a few sessions ago, there's something fishy going on here. Chapter 8 follows on the heels of the report we looked at a few minutes ago: “15 Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. 16 He went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all these places. 17 Then he would come back to Ramah, for his home was there; he administered justice there to Israel, and built there an altar to the LORD.”

The opening verses of chapter 8 report what happens when Samuel decides to retire and hand over his job to his sons: “1 When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. 2 The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. 3 Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice. 4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, 5 and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” 6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Notice that the request for a king is triggered by dissatisfaction with Solomon’s sons as judges, especially their openness to bribes. This seems a legitimate complaint.

Notice also their assumption that, just as Samuel has the authority to appoint his sons judges, so he has the authority to appoint a king. There seems to be a glaring gap in logic in this assumption, until we note that the Hebrew underlying the NRSV’s phrase “to govern us” is the construction שפט, “to judge us.” What they're asking for is a different sort of official to oversee justice: a king.

Throughout the ANE kings were responsible for maintaining justice and hearing legal cases. The book of Kings on occasion depicts a ruler deciding such cases – not the least of which is the decision by a king (identified in context as Solomon) in a dispute between two prostitutes with one living baby and one dead. So the
request for a king to take over the role of administering justice does not represent as great a gap in the people's assumptions as first seems the case. And yet, these elders are clearly seeking something new. So why does Samuel find this request objectionable?

Let’s continue reading the passage: “Samuel prayed to the LORD, 7 and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.” Samuel’s reason for displeasure, according to the LORD's perception, is that Samuel viewed it as a rejection of him. However, according to the LORD, their action has nothing to do with Samuel; it's a rejection of the LORD himself as king.

And yet, the words that follow are odd, because they suggest that Samuel should feel rejected, after all: “Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.” The LORD has just told Samuel not to take this as a personal rejection, but now he says that’s precisely what it is – parallel to what he’s had to put up with for years. And yet, this is not that severe of a conflict. I.e., it is reasonable to imagine an author who (through a character) urges a person not to take an offense personally, but also speaks empathetically of having been the brunt of similar rejection.

More telling is the awkward mesh between vv. 7 & 8 and the preceding narrative. Recall that this story began with “all the elders of Israel” assembling to appeal for a change in leadership. In vv. 7 & 8, however, it is not simply the elders making the demand, but “the people,” the group the LORD characterizes as having rebelled against him since day one. And this larger group speaks throughout this narrative. Thus, after Samuel warns of the hardships a king will impose, v. 19 reports: “19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us.”

It is significant, by the way, that when Samuel delivers his farewell address in chapter 12, it is this larger group he recalls as having demanded a king: “Samuel said to all Israel, “I have listened to you in all that you have said to me, and have set a king over you.” And so while at the beginning of chapter 8 the “elders of Israel” approach Samuel demanding a king, the speakers evolve into “the people” as a whole; and that’s how the event is recalled by Samuel in chapter 12.

And yet, recall also that in chapter 12 Samuel links their request for a king with the attack by Nahash on Jabesh Gilead in chapter 11, even though no such demand is associated with that attack. Moreover, notice that the motivation for their request, according to Samuel, is that they might have a king who can lead them in battle, which Samuel tells them amounts to a rejection of the LORD as their king, a motif we encounter already in chapter 8.

Before putting these observations together into an explanation of what’s going
on, let’s notice another feature in chapter 8. After the people have reaffirmed their
resolve to have a king, v. 22 reports, "22The \text{LORD} said to Samuel, ‘Listen to their
voice and set a king over them.’" Samuel then said to the people of Israel, ‘Each of
you return home.’” At first glance, this continues the theme of the people being
identified as the group that demands a king. However, this is one of those
occasions when the NRSV’s use of gender-inclusive language leads us astray.
Since vv. 7-8 the passage has identified Samuel’s audience as “the people,” מִמְרֹא. In v. 22, however, the subject is הָאָדָם, better translated (despite the NRSV’s
gender-inclusive scruples), as “the men of Israel,” a phrase used only minimally
throughout the Deuteronomistic History (only 9x, all in Samuel, and typically to
designate the army). This, in fact, aligns well with the report at the beginning of
the chapter that “the elders of Israel” (בַּעֲרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) gathered to propose
appointment of a king to administer justice.

Now I’ll pull all these threads together into a conclusion about how we wind up
with this negatively cast narrative of the rise of the monarchy and how we explain
its relationship to Deut 17 and the final chapters of Judges.

First, at the core of the narrative are two stories about Saul’s selection that
portray it as positive: in each case he arises in answer to the people’s distress,
much like the military champions in the book of Judges. Prefixed to that is a story
about the elders of Israel justly protesting Samuel’s sons being entrusted with
administering justice and requesting that Samuel replace them with a king. The
fact that this narrative suddenly identifies all the people as lodging this request and
has them doing so in terms that Samuel, in chapter 12, identifies as arising from the
attack on Jabesh Gilead, suggests that those particular verses have been injected
into a narrative that once read somewhat as follows:  

1When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel.  
2The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba.  
3Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.  
4Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah,  
5and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.”  
6But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.”…22The \text{LORD} said to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “Each of you return home.”

I.e. this stage of the narrative takes a neutral stand towards the monarchy. The
elders request it and the \text{LORD} grants the request. We no longer have the peculiar
situation of the \text{LORD} readily granting something he characterizes as an outright
rejection. Moreover, the request remains that of the elders, rather than all Israel,
and maintains its focus on providing consistent administration of justice.
Needless to say, this heavily reduces the conflict with Deut 17. No longer is the monarchy set up in direct violation of the curbs on monarchical practices stipulated there. Moreover, it reduces another tension with the concluding section of Judges, bracketed with the observation, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes,” where it's obvious that the people "doing what was right in their own eyes" is not a good thing. Not only is this a positive view of the monarchy, but the author appears to live in the era of the monarchy, looking back on the time before it as rife with social chaos; for him, the monarchy brought justice and order to life.

This is precisely the point of the elders in 1 Sam 8 with their request for a king. Their assumption is that having a king will give them a better chance at justice than relying on transient judges. Judges 17-21 simply states the flip side of this: to be without a king is to find oneself in the situation of the era of the judges, which includes the situation faced by the elders under Samuel's sons.

Before turning to how Judges 17-21 relates to Samuel-Kings as a whole, let's notice how this earlier form of the narrative of the request for a king came in for revision.

Into this earlier form of the narrative have been injected the concerns about kingship that arise most pointedly in chapter 12, where they are grounded in the immediately preceding story about the threat posed to Jabesh Gilead. Of course, by virtue of giving chapter 11 as the spur to the request, chapter 12 does not accord with the depiction of chapter 8. Most likely, the negative portrait of kingship has been injected secondarily into chapter 8 from chapter 12. The difference between them is that they were injected into an already existing narrative in chapter 8, whereas chapter 12 was created as a speech in order to deliver a negative verdict on kingship. And thus, we can think of an infusion of themes from chapter 12 back into chapter 8. And we can add to this the concluding verses of chapter 10, where as part of the preparations for casting lots to choose a king, Samuel reminds the people that they chose to reject the LORD who had delivered them from so many foes, in favor of a king to lead them. These verses are alien to the narrative to that point, but consonant with Samuel’s chastening speech in chapter 12, which marks the transition from the era of judges into the age of the monarchy.

The core objection Samuel voices – one woven also into both chapters 8 and 10 – has to do with substituting a king for the LORD in a specific way: “8When Jacob went into Egypt and Egypt oppressed them, then your ancestors cried to the LORD and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your ancestors out of Egypt, and settled them in this place. 9But they forgot the LORD their God; and he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of King Jabin of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab; and they fought against them. 10Then they cried to the LORD, and said, ‘We have sinned,
because we have forsaken the LORD, and have served the Baals and the Astartes; but now rescue us out of the hand of our enemies, and we will serve you.' 11 And the LORD sent Jerubbaal and Barak, and Jephthah, and Samson, and rescued you out of the hand of your enemies on every side; and you lived in safety. 12 But when you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ though the LORD your God was your king.”

What Samuel focuses on is the way the LORD has provided deliverers when Israel has been under an oppressor. However, their reliance on the LORD to provide a deliverer broke in the incident of Jabesh Gilead: no longer were they willing to count on the LORD, but demanded a king to be their deliverer. This is also a need cited in chapter 8, in a speech attributed to the people: “19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, ‘No! but we are determined to have a king over us, 20 so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.” It is the king who will fight for them, not the LORD. And yet, according to chapter 12, this does not happen until the threat by the Ammonite, Nahash, in chapter 11.

Curiously, another text prior to this in the DH voices opposition to kingship on these grounds. In Judges 8, the people approach Gideon, who has just spearheaded deliverance from Midian, with a proposal: “22 Then the Israelites said to Gideon, “Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian.” It is Gideon’s success as a military leader that spurs the request that he and his descendants become kings over Israel. But Gideon declines: “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.” Here again we find rejection of the idea that the king, rather than the LORD, is Israel's deliverer. Consequently, part of Samuel's objection to the monarchy, in the reworked form of his speech in chapter 8, finds a precedent in the story about Gideon.

At the end of the day, however, Gideon's objection is not that far from Deut 17's conception of the role of the king. We've noted the curbs Deuteronomy imposes on kings, but we have yet to notice the one positive function it demands: “18 When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. 19 It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, 20 neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.”

Deuteronomy does not object to kings on the grounds that they will take the place of Israel's true monarch, the LORD, but it does require that kings become, in essence, simply refractions of the LORD's rule over Israel by immersing themselves
in his demands and following them to the nth degree. And that would include its prescriptions for conducting war, which (as you'll recall) stress the LORD's role in bringing deliverance, as in Deut 20:1: "When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots, an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." A king whose rule is curbed so that he does not "gather horses for himself" and conducts warfare with the knowledge that the LORD is Israel's true deliverer, is not the same sort of king demanded by the people in the additions to 1 Sam 8.

So whence arose the revision of the elders' request for justice into the people's demand for a king in place of the LORD? To begin answering that question, let's notice another divergence from Deuteronomy 17 in Samuel's words of chapter 12: “If you will fear the LORD and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king.” The chief demand of both the king and the people is obedience to the LORD’s voice.

However, whereas Deuteronomy stresses the king’s attentiveness to a copy of the law so as to follow it scrupulously, Samuel stresses obedience to the “commandment of the LORD,” also described as “the voice of the LORD.” And the vehicle for this is made clear by Samuel's subsequent statement about his role: “Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way.” Curiously enough, while in this speech Samuel claims to be stepping down, he lays out a role for himself as Israel's guide, one in which he executes two activities attributed to prophets elsewhere: praying on behalf of the people and instructing them in the path they should take. What's more, it is this prominent, prophetic role he fulfills in the chapters that follow.

This brings us back to the observation I made earlier about the enhanced role of Samuel in these books: Samuel’s role is shaped so as to establish the priority of prophets over the institution of the king. Preference for the office of the prophet seems to lie, in large part, behind the negative evaluation of kings woven through this narrative of the rise of the monarchy.

What I want to suggest is that, when we speak of Deuteronomy through Kings as "the Deuteronomistic History," it is not well to think of it as the product of just one author/editor who fashioned it as a continuous narrative. There are, as we shall see, reasons to consider the narrative as the product of successive editings. And one layer of editing seems to have reworked the story from the standpoint of its ending – the fall of Jerusalem – and gave a prime role to prophets as having
warned of what lay ahead if Israel continued on its course.

The reworking of a narrative originally favorable to kingship (à la Judges 17-21) into one that takes a dim view of it and casts the future of Israel as dependent on obedience to the prophets as teachers of what is required quite likely was part of that later editing, for which we'll see further evidence later on.

This raises, of course, the question of historiography: what kind of historical work is composed in this fashion, with additions by subsequent editors whose revisions give an entirely new direction to the story? Clearly this is not the same sort of historiographic project as a history text written by a committee of editors today. This work is the product of a series of "historians" who felt at liberty to reshape the story in ways that were well beyond the intentions of whoever first formed it.

That said, the continuing story of Israel's life from this point on takes on this strong cast of conflict between prophet and king. And nowhere is that conflict clearer than in the story of Saul’s ill-fated reign. It is with that story that we will take up again how this role of prophets relates to the larger concerns of the Deuteronomistic History.