

A LOOK AT A BOOK: 1 Samuel, Pt. 2

August 4, 2013

I SAMUEL 16-17

The Rise of David – David as Shepherd, Musician and Warrior

“The Rise of David.” The narrative begins with David as an unknown, unvalued shepherd boy and ends with David fully established as the “shepherd of Israel.”

David is a “classic” personality who draws around him a variety of interpretive narratives. Israel’s storytellers introduce David in three distinct ways: as a shepherd boy (16:1-13), as a young musician (16:14-23), and as a young unknown warrior (chapter 17). This threefold introduction of David has important parallels to the threefold introduction of Saul, which presents Saul by way of secret anointing (9:1-10:16), public acclamation (10:17-27), and military victory (11:1-15).

16:1-3. The rejection of Saul is reiterated (v. 1), but the narrative no longer has any interest in Saul. It is time for a new act and a new king. Samuel recognizes the ominous nature of the venture (v. 2a). It is hazardous to anoint a king when there already is a king! There is no vacancy in the office. Samuel by now is surely identified as a traitorous enemy of Saul, and he knows any overture toward a new king is high risk.

16:4-5. The elders of Bethlehem are terrified at Samuel’s coming. Surely this is not trembling before the prophetic office but because of political risk. They know that Samuel is a kingmaker and a king breaker. Whenever the high officials of the court come to the village, there can be only trouble and risk.

16:6-11. The drama intensifies. Jesse’s sons are paraded before Samuel. Only Samuel knows the reason for the parade of sons. Jesse and the elders do not know that they are witnesses of a decisive event in Israel’s life. The first son of Jesse, Eliab, is attractive and Samuel is drawn to him. Yahweh speaks directly to Samuel, however, and warns him not to be attracted to physical appearance.

16:12-13. Finally David comes. This is the one for whom Israel, Samuel, Yahweh, and the books of Samuel have been waiting. The anointing takes place (v. 13). The act is private and is not publicized; Israel and Yahweh now have a

new king. David receives the anointing passively and silently. Nothing is said by David or to David.

16:19-23. Saul invites David into his court. Saul unwittingly summons the very one who now possesses the spirit and will in the end displace him. David is not an intruder. He does not force his way in but comes by royal invitation. "Saul loved him greatly" (v. 21). David is irresistible. Saul might have feared or resented David if he had known the end of the story. He knows only what he sees in David, however. "Saul was refreshed." Saul's desperate concern was how to have the spirit of life available, rather than the evil spirit. The narrative makes clear that David makes the spirit of life available to Saul. Saul has life only because David mediates it to him. David is a life-giver, even to Saul.

I SAMUEL 16:14-17:58

David as Warrior

I Samuel 16:14-23

Saul is indeed a disturbed man, and the disturbance has to do with alienation rooted in a theological disorder. The disorder must be seen, however, as both theological and psychological in order to understand the powerful ministration of David, who is Yahweh's antidote for every ailment in Israel.

16:14-18. Saul's problem is the visitation of an evil spirit (v. 15); the solution is healing music (v. 16). The problem is with Saul; the solution will be carried by David. It may trouble our positivistic minds that the disorder of Saul is attributed to an evil spirit, and it may trouble us more that the evil spirit is credited to God. This narrative simply assumes that the world is ordered by the direct sovereign rule of God. All the spirits that beset human persons are dispatched from this single source (cf. I Kings 22:19-23).

Yet, lingering not too far below the story line of Saul's illness, the David story line already begins to assert itself.

Moreover, Saul invites David into his court. Saul unwittingly summons the very one who now possesses the spirit and will in the end displace him. David is not an intruder. He does not force his way in but comes by royal invitation.

I Samuel 17:1-58

We are now at David's third point of entry into Israel's narrative. Already he has been secretly anointed (16:1-13), and privately received by Saul (16:19-23). This story of David in chapter 17 is the best known of the David stories.

17:1-3. The Philistines still remain a threat to Israel. Saul's mandate is precisely to cope with the Philistines, and it is the one thing he is unable to do. These verses simply set the stage for the contrast to come, a contrast between the helpless Saul and the triumphant David.

17:4-11. Goliath is indeed a very large man whose physical appearance sends shock waves through Israel. Israel should have learned by observing Saul not to be excessively impressed or intimidated by height, for Saul's height in fact meant very little (cf. 10:23). Indeed, Yahweh had learned, as Israel had not, that appearance does not really count (16:7). In the moment of danger, Israel is inordinately and inappropriately intimidated by "the giant."

17:12-30. The narrative advances the contest another step. In the face of this awesome bully, armed to the teeth, comes David. He comes unobtrusively, the eighth son of a remote family. The family of Jesse is loyal to Saul's cause, having already placed three sons "in the service" (v. 13). The ones already given do not include David. He is too young to fight in battle. At home he is still tending sheep. David's menial task at home is matched by his menial task with the troops. He has the responsibility of carrying food and supplies (vv. 17-18). This is a people's militia; the army depends on the participation of all supporters, even the young ones. David has more than passing interest in the Philistine boaster. He is tantalized by the notion that whoever kills the Philistine will be honored in Israel (vv. 24-27). The others are too frightened and can neither think nor speak. David, by contrast, is not frightened. He is able to ask an innocent, embarrassing question: How dare the Philistine defy the armies of the living God? (v. 26). Israel does not yet seem ready to receive what David has to say and to offer, however. David is rebuked by his older brother Eliab (vv. 28-30) and is generally ignored and disregarded. His treatment by his brothers and their resentment of him is parallel to that of Joseph by his brothers (Gen. 39).

17:41-47. Finally, after forty verses, the protagonists meet. The storyteller has made us wait as long as possible for the confrontation. The wait has permitted the dramatic suspense to build. The contrast between the two sides could not be more complete. The Philistine sees David and disdains him, for he is young and good-looking (cf. 16:12). David is too handsome to be a hardened warrior. David looks

like an innocent, inexperienced schoolboy. David is undaunted by the bombast of the Philistine. At the outset David states the contrast between the Philistine and himself as clearly and sharply as he can. The Philistine has sword, spear, and javelin -- conventional arms. David has none of these. He has the powerful name of Yahweh of the troops, however, the God of the ranks of Israel. The purpose of David's victory is not simply to save Israel or to defeat the Philistines. The purpose is the glorification of Yahweh in the eyes of the world. The intent of the encounter is to make clear yet again that Yahweh "saves" not with the conventions of human warfare but in Yahweh's own inscrutable ways.

I SAMUEL 18-19

David in Saul's Court

18:1-5. At this first meeting, Jonathan and David are immediately bound together, life to life.

18:6-16. The two have different roles – Saul as the commander, David as the warrior. The triumph belongs to both of them. There is no reason to imagine tension or competition between them. As happens on such a public occasion, a new celebrative song emerges saluting both Saul and David (v. 7). It is probable that the song, which was about “thousands” and “ten thousands,” simply used two words meaning “many.” It is likely that the song intends to celebrate Saul and David equally for an equal achievement. Saul, however, hears the song through his jealousy, because David is celebrated either as his equal or as his superior (v. 8).

18:17-19. The proposed marriage is only a pretext to send David more heroically and more dangerously into battle, perhaps to be killed by the Philistines (v. 17). David does not question Saul's motivation but humbly denies his qualification for such a high marriage (v. 18). The curious turn of the narrative, however, is that the marriage offered without explanation is also withdrawn without explanation. The offer and withdrawal perhaps reflect Saul's instability and his inability to think clearly or plan coherently in his rage. It is worth noting that the strategy of the marriage sounds strangely anticipatory of David's successful disposal of Uriah (II Samuel 11:4-17).

18:20-30. Saul's plan to destroy David by his Philistine stratagem has failed, and Saul has left himself even more vulnerable. David is now his son-in-law, with visible entitlement to power, ensconced in the royal establishment. David's

entitlement goes hand in hand with popular acclaim (v. 15) and with the commitment of Jonathan to David (vv. 1-3).

I Samuel 19:1-24

19:1-7. Jonathan becomes David's powerful advocate in the face of Saul (vv. 4-5). Jonathan makes a case to his father that David has not only been bold and courageous but has acted in loyalty to Saul.

19:8-10. The bearer of God's future is now a hunted man, sought by the king. David is thus far in the narrative completely passive. He takes no initiatives, nor are we told of his responses to Saul. The narrative simply gives room for the venom of Saul to have its full, self-destructive play.

19:11-17. The stories of verses 1-6 and 11-17 both begin with Saul's bold resolve to kill David. In verse 1, Saul's resolve is disrupted by the phrase "But Jonathan." In verse 11, it is disrupted by the phrase "But Michal." Saul's immediate problem is the powerful intervention of his own children, first his son and then his daughter, who thwart him. In verse 15, Saul is so desperate, so frightened, and so angry that he is prepared to kill a sick man while he has his chance.

19:18-24.

There is surprisingly little about David in this chapter, except to note that he has powerful friends (Jonathan, Michal, Samuel), that he is very "lucky," and that he is prospering. David still remains in the background, responsive but not yet proactive. Most attention in this chapter is focused on Saul. Indeed, before our very eyes, the narrator diminishes, depreciates, and finally destroys Saul, episode by episode. All that is left, when the narrator completes the dismantling, is an empty shell of hate, no longer a king. Saul is portrayed as finished with power, legitimacy, and authority long before his death.

I SAMUEL 20-21

David in Saul's Court

We have already seen that Jonathan "loved" David, that he had already dramatically ceded his claim to power over to David (18:4), and that he sided with David against his father. David's posture is consistently and necessarily one of flight. The two themes of Jonathan's love for David and David's fear of Saul both witness to the hidden resolve of Yahweh that Saul should decrease and David should increase.

20:1-11. In verse 1 David places his case before Jonathan, asking what his guilt is that Saul should seek to kill him. In verse 8 David asserts that if he is guilty, he would rather die at the hand of Jonathan. Both times Jonathan answers “Far from it” or, better, “God forbid” (vv. 2, 9). In both cases David poses the hypothetical possibility of his being guilty, and each time Jonathan rejects those categories of analysis. Jonathan will not entertain the notion that David might be guilty. Through the mouth of Jonathan, the narrative takes care to assert the complete innocence of David. David proposes a plan to find out Saul’s intention for him (vv. 5-8). He proposes intentionally to miss a royal dinner, one at which he should be present. Saul will surely note his absence. Either Saul will gladly accept David’s excuse of going to Bethlehem for a sacrifice or Saul will be angry and allow no excuse. David fears that Jonathan might be persuaded or intimidated by Saul to abandon his covenant oath to David. Jonathan reassures David that the ties of friendship and covenant in this case supersede family ties (v. 9).

20:30-34. Saul’s rage is not first against David but against the closer target, Jonathan. To have his own son and heir join the charade against him is a profound humiliation. The rage is rage only a father can feel for a son, a son who could have received the whole future from the father but would have none of it. A father has a right to expect loyalty from his son, even if he can no longer have it from God. Jonathan, like Yahweh, has rejected Saul and chosen David. The terrible choosing and rejecting of Yahweh has now come very close to home in this beloved, beautiful son. The hurt is closer than the reality of God. It is as real as Saul’s own son, who betrayed for the sake of this other loyalty. The narrative has us watch while all the power for life seeps away from Saul and rushes toward David.

20:35-42. Jonathan and David know yet again what they had known already: David is in deep danger and Saul is beyond reason. It is high narrative art to interest us so passionately in something we had already known. The arrow episode is extraneous, because as soon as it is over, Jonathan and David converse face to face (vv. 41-42). The tenseness of the narrative is for a moment resolved, because Saul is not present. The tenseness in the narrative is regularly generated by the presence of Saul. It is not only “me and you” but “my descendants and your descendants, forever” (v. 42). There is something final and awesome about these words. It is as though Jonathan now fully recognizes that the tide has turned.

I SAMUEL 21-22

David Flees the Court of Saul

21:1-9. In his flight from Saul, David comes alone to the shrine of Nob, where he confronts the priest Ahimelech. David insists that he is on an urgent and secret

mission for Saul. Running for his life, David and his entourage (which is not visible in this narrative) are hungry and desperately in need of food. The bread is “holy,” and those who eat it must not be “profane”: that is, ritually impure. Present, and overhearing the conversation, was an agent of Saul, Doeg the Edomite. Nothing is said about him. He is simply there. As we shall see, Doeg comes to play a crucial, ominous, ignoble role in the narrative. David needs not only bread but a spear (vv. 8-9). David’s lack of a spear is sharply contrasted with Saul, who seems to have a spear at every turn and will not be caught without one. He takes it and departs. The entire confrontation reflects great haste, urgency, and danger. David may be headed for a throne, but here he is still an empty-handed fugitive.

22:1-5. What interests us here is the report that David became a powerful magnet, attracting all kinds of marginal people. There came to him all who were in distress, all who were in debt, all who were discontented with their life (v. 2). (This populace is not unlike that said to be attracted to Jesus, [Mark 1:32-34]). The Saul-David struggle thus may not be merely a dispute between themselves, but may also reflect tension between the haves and the have-nots.

22:6-10. We now resume the main story line we left at 21:9. Saul is taking counsel with his men. Unlike David (21:8), Saul as usual has a spear in his hand (v. 6). Saul’s opening speech shows how disquieted and uneasy he is (vv. 7-8). Saul addresses the Benjaminites, his own people who have supported him longest and most faithfully. Saul comes from the tribe of Benjamin (9:1) and has his modest royal capital at Gibeah. The conventional picture of a united twelve tribes constituting Israel is inappropriate to the period of Saul. Saul’s region of rule consisted only in the area he could manage and control.

22:11-19. Doeg’s report feeds Saul’s own suspicion. Saul summons Ahimelech, the priest of Nob (v. 11), who is properly deferential and no doubt terribly frightened (v. 12). Saul’s rhetoric here is revealing. First, in characteristic fashion, Saul will not name the name of David. Second, “conspire” is the word Saul has just used with the Benjaminites. Saul has a fascination with the word, and it is found on his lips frequently. Third, Saul’s words reiterate in detail Doeg’s report (v. 13). Saul trusts Doeg’s report in full, no doubt because its content is what he wants to hear. Saul accuses the priest on all three counts: giving food, giving sword, and inquiring of God. Ahimelech’s self-defense is in fact a defense of David (vv. 14-15). For the priest to establish his own innocence before Saul, he must establish that of David, with whom he dealt. His own innocence depends on that of David. Ahimelech’s defense of David is fourfold. David is known to be

reliable. He is the king's son-in-law. He holds high military rank. He is honored at court. Are these the marks of a conspirator?

I SAMUEL 23-24

Saul Pursues David

It does not surprise us any longer that David must flee for his life. Nor does it surprise us that Saul will desperately pursue David in order to kill him. Saul will pursue David to the edge of his realm, to the end of I Samuel, to the end of his own life. Indeed, Saul now has no other purpose than the elimination of David.

23:1-5. In the midst of his flight, David hears that the Philistines are plundering a Judean village, Keilah (v. 1). While David fears Saul greatly, he interrupts his flight in order to fight the Philistines, who are Israel's perennial threat. Pious man that he is, David will not do battle until he is led and assured by Yahweh (v. 2). He inquires and receives divine sanction. His men are still frightened, however. He is as effective against the Philistines as he has been from the beginning, and as Saul was in his best times. Success against the Philistines is surely a measure of divine legitimacy.

23:6-14. The battle with the Philistines must have been a welcome respite for David. Now he must return to the endless, seemingly unresolvable conflict with Saul. David is accompanied by Abiathar, the priest he saved (22:20-23). In this particular episode, however, neither the function of Abiathar nor the danger of Saul is of primary interest. The narrator stresses the ready access David has to Yahweh. David and Yahweh talk as two good friends, in easy trust (vv. 10-12). In the midst of extreme danger, David is not portrayed as a man of action. Rather, in his extreme danger he prays (v. 10). The narrator tells us the meaning of this cat-and-mouse game. The escape does not mean that David is faster or more clever than Saul. No, the escape is possible because Yahweh has intervened: "God did not give him into the hand of Saul" (v. 14). David's future is to be understood theologically. David's life can be portrayed only with reference to Yahweh. Yahweh has chosen and Yahweh has rejected. The various episodes in the conflict between David and Saul simply play out this overriding reality of Yahweh, which neither Saul nor David can change.

24:1-7. "Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave" (v. 3). Quickly both lead characters are located: Saul in vulnerability, David in the safety of hiding. When we last considered them together (23:26), Saul was the strong, aggressive one and David was the vulnerable fugitive. The initial action of David and his remorse in response to his action serve

three purposes. The men are “persuaded” by David’s reasoning. David is positively pictured. Saul leaves the cave, indicating that he is safe and that the dramatic episode is now ended. We are prepared for the two speeches for which the scene in the cave is preparation.

24:8-15. David speaks first. David addresses Saul as king (v. 8). He is properly respectful and bows deeply, casting himself as the still obedient and dutiful servant of the king. The speech of David is masterfully constructed. David is technically correct in his plea and technically innocent. As each point in his case is taken separately, no piece of evidence can indict him. Taken in large perspective, however, Saul is not wrong in knowing there is a dark conspiracy against him and for David.

I SAMUEL 25

After the brief reference to Samuel’s death, this text relates the conflict between Nabal and David, in which Nabal’s noble wife intercedes to prevent a violent conclusion. The unit is unique in that two of the main protagonists of 1 Samuel so far are not present. The narrator chooses this point in the story to announce Samuel’s death, which removes permanently this spiritual giant for Israel. Saul is also absent. With literary subtlety, this narrative substitutes Nabal for Saul. His stance and demeanor toward David are the same as Saul’s (25:10-11), and his sudden death prefigures Saul’s death, after which David receives the spoils of both his adversaries.

Nabal Rejects David’s Request (25:2-13).

David now turns to the Desert of Maon, which was the scene of Saul’s previous pursuit of David. Here we encounter for the first time Nabal, who is wealthy but boorish. His name in Hebrew means “foolish,” which becomes an ironic part of the narrative (25:25). However, as rude and unsavory as Nabal is, his wife Abigail is “intelligent and beautiful” (25:3).

David’s request for food and assistance takes on the appearance of a Mafia-style racket” promising protection (euphemistic for a promise not to harm Nabal) in return for payment. But David’s delegation asks for no more than payment for protection they have voluntarily rendered earlier. Indeed, ancient Near Eastern customs of hospitality and Old Testament laws suggest that Nabal, who is more than able to provide such modest provisions, is under obligation to aid David.

Nabal’s response brings a swift reaction. David’s command “Put on your swords!” leaves no doubt about his intentions. Verse 13 contains the word “sword” three

times in the Hebrew, revealing a dependence on armed force we have not seen in David before.

Abigail Intercedes (25:14-35).

Nabal's servants feel it useless to try to reason with him directly ("He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him"). Instead, one of them goes immediately to his remarkable wife, Abigail.

Nabal Dies and Abigail Becomes David's Wife (25:36-44).

Not only does Nabal's death suddenly confirm David's actions, but it makes the way clear for this remarkable woman, Abigail, to become David's wife. Her wisdom and strong character make her a suitable partner for David, and she is in many respects his equal.

The political significance of his marriage should not be missed. David's exile from Saul's court means he has lost his power base in Gilbeah, where he was hailed as a military hero (18:6-7). Similarly, the loss of Saul's daughter Michael to another man gives David one less claim to royal lineage (25:44). His marriages to Abigail and Ahinoam give him ties to the Hebron and Jezreel areas, perhaps giving him a new power base among the inhabitants of Judah. Nabal has apparently been a prominent member of the leading clan of Hebron, and it is interesting that David first becomes king at Hebron (2 Samuel 2:1-4).

I Samuel 26:1-15

Since chapter 16, the narrative has been shaped so that Saul and David are on a collision course. Saul is the entrenched king under threat. David is not a threat to Saul because of his own aggressive initiatives against Saul but because of the inscrutable workings of Yahweh, wrought through the odd turns of the narrative. For a long stretch of the narrative, Saul is the stalker seeking out David; David is the one stalked, who must always seek escape. Even at the threshold of this climactic episode, Saul and David are in their assigned roles. As this narrative begins, however, their roles are reversed. Abruptly and unexpectedly, Saul is the hunted one and David is the hunter. David, we know, is sure to succeed; however, we learn that he is unwilling to seize violently his unclaimed, unavoidable success.

The narrative tale recorded in chapter 24 is retold in chapter 26. At a surface reading, the two versions are parallel and in some sense the second is redundant. The story line is the same in the two tellings. David, by stealth, has sleeping Saul in his power. David can kill Saul but he refuses. David will not strike the life of "the Lord's anointed." In both cases, the narrative ends with an exchange of

speeches between the two. Saul is grateful and yields to David. David is noble, reticent, and confident. Both accounts show how the flow of the narrative, and of the historical process, is toward David's success and Saul's demise.

Chapter 26 is the last meeting and last exchange between the two heroes who have become deathly rivals. Saul will appear again only in the secret, disastrous meeting of 28:3-25 and in his own death scene (31:1-13).

I Samuel 27:1- 28:2

This narrative shifts the scene abruptly. David is operating out of Philistine territory. David gambles for high stakes in his Philistine venture. He risks his political future in Israel by standing in solidarity with the feared and hated Philistines. David must be an endlessly inventive man to make such a gamble work. The narrative indicates that David is not only inventive but blessed with remarkable good fortune.

27:1-4. We are told it was in order to escape Saul that David moved his entire company into Philistine territory. David, like Saul, has made a career of fighting Philistines.

Achish imagines David has burned his bridges to Israel, has made himself an enemy of his people Israel, and thus has no alternative but to remain in Achish's service. This conclusion follows from data Achish has received. The data, however, is false, carefully selected for him by David. David's careful, dangerous game is working.

I Samuel 28

Disturbing the Dead

Higher stakes are introduced in these verses, and higher risks for David. The reader is forced to wait to see how the tension is resolved.

This is the story of a man who is dying from the inside out, with the outside still giving to the world an impression of vitality. The God whom Saul has sought to serve and trust is not available to him.

Even in death, Samuel dominates the narrative. Samuel painstakingly reviews the record. The record has not changed, and the verdict is not softened. In 28:16-19, the powerful name of Yahweh is spoken seven times in the speech. Saul falls to the ground prostrate, powerless, as good as dead.

I Samuel 29:1-11

The narrative continues the account of David's precarious sojourn with the Philistines (cf. 28:1-28:2).

29:1-5. It is critical for the narrator's telling of the David story that David be extricated from the upcoming battle of the Philistines with the Israelites, for the future king cannot fight against his own people. The narrator needs to resolve the situation for David; David must be allowed to retain his presumed loyalty to Achish, his Philistine patron, who has trusted him and who fully believes in him. The narrative strategy for David's extrication from the dilemma is provided by the other "lords of the Philistines" (v. 2). David receives a clean bill of health from his patron. Achish risks his own reputation by giving security clearance to David: "I find no fault in him" (v. 3). The reality of the situation is in tension with the reality assumed in the plea of Achish. Against the naiveté of Achish, the lords are aware of David's continuing loyalty to "his lord," who is Saul. It is ironic that only Achish, most loyal to David, is the one deceived. Neither the Philistine lords nor we are taken in by David's ruse. Saul and David are linked in the Philistine perception in common military exploits.

I Samuel 30:1-31

The conclusion of the story of David's sojourn in Ziklag takes a curious turn. David stays there while the Philistines fight Saul. When David comes back to Ziklag he has to cope neither with Saul nor with the Philistines, who are off fighting each other. Instead, David must deal yet again with the Amalekites.

30:1-6. Upon return to Ziklag, David finds a burned city. The Amalekites have taken the women and children and burned everything else. Oddly, and fortunately, they have killed no one, but they have worked great destruction. But David has even greater cause for alarm. In addition to his personal loss, his public role as leader is in jeopardy (v. 6). He is held accountable by his men for this loss, presumably because he left the city vulnerable by not taking precautions to secure it in his absence. The people murmur against David as they did against Moses. Indeed, they propose to kill David (v. 6).

30:7-10. These verses narrate the precise way in which David strengthened himself in Yahweh. David inquires of the Lord by means of Abiathar and the ephod. What is central is David's open and trusting communication with Yahweh. The answer from Yahweh consists in two infinitive absolutes: "You shall surely overtake them. You shall surely save" (v. 8). David will recover the lost people, including his own wives.

30:11-15. Yahweh has promised David, “You shall surely overtake” (v. 8). As it turns out, the means of keeping that promise of God is this straggler upon whom David’s people stumble. The man is alone, abandoned by his troops to die (v. 13). David’s company, which is accustomed to recruiting hopeless, isolated outsiders, welcomes him and cares for him.

30:16-20. The Amalekites are to be despised because their celebration is directly at the expense of these marginal people. The narrative asserts that the Amalekites thrive on what is rightly “ours”!

I Samuel 31

Samuel’s Prophecy Is Fulfilled

31:1-7. As Samuel promised, the Philistines fight Israel (cf. 28:19). This event is nothing new in the life of Israel. After the death of his sons, Saul comes into lonely focus. In this instant there are not even Philistines present. There is only Saul and his death. He prefers to die rather than be humiliated and tortured by the Philistines (v. 4). David is still king at Ziklag at the time of Saul’s death. The narrator creates a wonderful hiatus. David is safer to be far away, for the distance leaves him clearly unimplicated in Saul’s death. In terms of narrative strategy, we may also credit the narrator with enough grace and dignity to give Saul his own full scene, without being crowded by David.

31:8-13. In the end, Saul is humiliated and then honored. Both acts are necessary to understand Israel’s pathos-filled narrative about this tall king. The Philistine gods seemed to have defeated Yahweh in chapters 4-5. Now that defeat is real. The Philistines share the “gospel” (v. 9) with their people. They make a religious claim. The gods of the Philistines have won. Every people somehow links the military and the political to the religious. The body of Saul is simply spoil for the Philistine gods. Yahweh is as humiliated as is Saul.