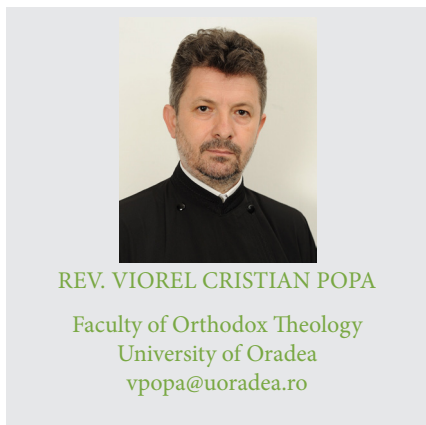


THE SECULARISATION OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY. SAUL AND SAMUEL – KING AND PROPHET

Abstract

In this study, we would try to tackle an old rabbinic dilemma, always presented in disagreement, regarding the theological legitimacy of the monarchy, if the covenant made with God remains operative and whether full sovereignty belongs only to Yahweh. Can the chosen people “ask” for a king and remain faithful to the Lord and their destiny? How far can the voice of the community go in legitimising a regime when it seems to undermine God’s rule over the chosen people? We will provide a few answers to these questions by focusing on King Saul and prophet Samuel, who were the protagonists of the advent of the monarchy within the chosen people.



Keywords

Saul, Samuel, king, theocracy, covenant

Introduction

When the Jews wanted to make the transition from theocratic governing to monarchic rule, they believed the solution to their problem was strictly political. God, on the other hand, gave them the lesson of Saul, of his military and moral decay, sharing with them the fact that no historical crisis can be solved only immanently. Being God’s chosen people, Israel can be free and honourable only theo-politically. For Israel, no solution doesn’t include theology. This is because their final mission and destiny are not only political but notably eschatological. Secularisation is possible, but never feasible from a historical point of view.

Samuel’s voice pervades this episode, fulfilling an important anamnestic function: the last judge of Israel reminds the people of their covenant and the destiny

they freely took on. Israel swore before God that they would be His people and not a mere nation among nations. Consequently, Samuel constantly underscores that they are not allowed to follow in the footsteps of the other nations, as only by following the Covenant will Israel be fulfilled. Not only Samuel and Saul will be the protagonists we analyse, but also God's (mediated) voice and the collective voice of the people "laden" with their unique mission.

Transition Challenges – the Decay of King Saul

In the biblical text, Saul plays a double role, both historical and pedagogical. On the one hand, he represents a first attempt to get out of the state of anarchy, which was reigning over Israel towards the end of the time of judges. A powerful, yet impulsive and politically incoherent leader, showing the purely immanent solution the chosen people found, namely that of taking control of their destiny. Historically speaking, besides the complicated "transition from a tribal structure to a state" (Kreuzer 2006, 39), the episode of Saul's rule also marks a difficult transition for other people.

On the other hand, the failure of Saul's governing, which was not secured by a new divine covenant, has a deep symbolic-educational meaning. Indeed, if Saul had not existed, no one would have invented him (Dietrich 2007, 166), for he is a counterexample of a the-political leader. His improper kingship, although accepted by God, presents judge Samuel with a *fait accompli*. In the end, God gives people what they want, with all the consequences this entails, even if they are tragic (von Rad 1962, 325). Moreover, it also shows them that any decision made beyond the boundaries of the divine law will undermine even the freedom of the chosen people.

From a structural point of view, this part of the Book of 1 King, which tackles the advent of the monarchy in Israel, Samuel's trial, and failure, is much more complex than the previous one. Five structural elements can be identified:

- The first episode describes the request of the people to have a king just like the "nations", against the backdrop of a crisis regarding the legitimacy of Samuel's successors.
- Later, Saul is secretly anointed king by Samuel, at God's urge.
- Then, Saul leads the Jews into battle against the Ammonites and, being triumphant, he asks for a large public celebration, where he is anointed king once more, before the entire people.
- Without a solid foundation for his authority, Saul temporarily usurps Sam-

uel's function by presenting an offering on his own, which brings divine punishment upon himself.

- Although he manages to defeat the Philistines, through the bravery of his son Jonathan, and later the Amalekites, Saul himself is eventually rejected by God.

To outline this path that Saul took and his tense relationship with Samuel, we shall tackle the narration from a chronological point of view, by resorting to historical or conceptual digressions whenever a certain episode requires a more complex approach.

Israel Demands a King

The starting point of the new theo-political transformation takes on a profound community form. On their initiative, the men of Israel gather to express the will of the chosen people. Their request is not a mere fancy of the people; it marks a paradigm shift. They argue for their decision in front of the judge, but only from a socio-political point of view, referring to the integrity of the civil function. That is why the men of Israel invoke both Samuel's old age and the argument of the end of ruling legitimacy (1 Sm 8:5).

The reproach is not addressed directly to Samuel, but it highlights a much more complex phenomenon: the preoccupation of the people with the very reform put forward by their judge. It is not Samuel that they question, but the governing paradigm he brought in. The main issue is that the entire community overlooks the theological dimension of Israel's existence, which is made even more evident by the fact that it is not included in the argumentation. At no moment in time do the people point to a moral deviation from the Mosaic Law, but they invoke purely utilitarian arguments: age and the fact that the sons of Samuel do not follow in their father's footsteps. Thus, the people emphasise the inconsistency between Samuel, a genuine, saving judge, and his successors and not between their undignified behaviour and the imperatives of the Torah. They seem to be rejected by Israel because they do not measure up to their father and not because they do not comply with the divine Law.

Along this logical line, the people come up again with a purely political solution, by asking Samuel: "And said to him, 'Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations'" (1 Sm 8:5). Israel does not need to be like other nations, but its people want to be like them. Through its wish to have a strictly immanent ordering, the chosen people seem to ignore the burden and blessing of its having been chosen by God. It is precisely

this part of the people's demand that borders on blasphemy. For, if its history had an immutable foundation, then that was precisely the idea that Israel was like no other nation, that Israel was the only chosen people, and that Israel was unique.

Therefore, Samuel resumes his legitimate role, the only permanent one, that of representative of the Keter Torah (the Crown of Torah) and intercedes between God and the people. He instantly notices the negative consequence of Israel's decision and seeks God's advice. The Living God does not punish, nor does He take back His Covenant, but tells Samuel: "Obey 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" (1 Sm 8:7). God rids the demand of the people of all political arguments and reveals its ultimate theological meaning: the desire to be a mere nation among nations equals the rejection of divine sovereignty.

It is not Samuel and his reformatory project that Israel rejects, but God Himself (Provan, Philips Long and Longman III 2003, 208). That is why God tells Samuel that he must listen to their request and not consider it a personal offence. Saint John Chrysostom demonstrates that "their demand disheartened Samuel to such an extent, that he needed a lot of consolation" (St. John Chrysostom 2005, 109), which the Lord did not hesitate to offer [our translation].

Thus, Samuel is immediately told: "Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them" (1 Sm 8:9). The rights of the king represent the core of the advent of the monarchy. This new governing mode brings on a radical change of perspective in achieving the people's freedom, which, from now on, will be structurally redefined and limited. The concentration of civil and military power in the hands of a single man will inevitably lead to the decreasing autonomy of tribes, families, and individuals in Israel.

Samuel shows them a whole series of rights that the new king will have over the people, warning them in the end that: "you shall be his slaves. And in that day, you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day" (1 Sm 8:17-18). As Clement of Alexandria mentioned, "the Word [...] when the people asked for a king, promised not a loving lord, but threatened to give them a self-willed and voluptuous tyrant, [...] ruling by the law of war, not desiring a peaceful administration" (Clement of Alexandria 1982). The rights of the kings, listed by the prophet, are those which the Eastern autocrats who were contemporary with the Israelites (in Canaan, Mesopotamia, and Egypt) enjoyed,

subjugating their peoples (Gordon 1993, 42-3). If Israel wants to be like the other nations, this is the situation they are facing.

Nonetheless, the group of Israeli men is not convinced: “But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, ‘No! But there shall be a king over us, 20 that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles’ (1 Sm 8:19-20). While the prophet acts defensively, by presenting a negative image, the people set forth what they expect from the monarchy and implicitly accept its weaknesses. Thus, bearing in mind the characteristics described by the gathering, they wish their monarch to have a triple role: that of a civil judge, and that of diplomatic representation and military rule. They are all secular roles, with no sacred connotation whatsoever. Israel secularises its royal crown (Keter Malchut).

God allows them to freely go with their choice, telling Samuel: “Obey their voice and make them a king” (1 Sm 8:22).

The Limits of Political Power. The Dynamics of the Ketarim (the Crowns)

Therefore, the appointment of a king is the responsibility of the prophet. The God of Israel tolerates the advent of a centralised, secularised regime, but He will choose the king, through Samuel’s hand. A new dynamic is introduced between the Keter Torah and Keter Malchut, one which will mark three thousand years of Jewish and Christian history. Sometimes, the tension between the two areas of the people’s leadership becomes destructive (the episode between Saul and Samuel) or competitive. However, most of the time, an organic balance settles in, which is only occasionally troubled by the personality of a king who wants to usurp the other “crown”.

As to the appointment of Saul as the first candidate for Jewish monarchy, the Lord points out to him, by telling Samuel that “Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince[a] over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines...”. (1 Sm 9:16). The right to anoint kings is conferred upon the prophet, who is the keeper of divine law and the sacred mediator. Thus, as far as the legitimacy mechanism is concerned, the king becomes dependent on the Keter Torah.

Samuel proceeds to the anointment of Saul away from the eyes of the people, granting him the mandate by divine law: “Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on his head and kissed him and said, ‘Has not the Lord anointed you to be prince[a] over his people Israel? And you shall reign over the people of the Lord, and you will save

them from the hand of their surrounding enemies” (1 Sm 10:1).

Just like Moses, after Samuel explains to Israel the fundamentals of the new regime, he writes them down (McConville 2006, 139). “Then Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship, and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord...” (1 Sm 10:25). The new constitutional document is presented to God for consecration. From now on, Israel has a new institutional arrangement.

On the other hand, throughout this episode, one can feel an ideological tension between the political structure envisioned by the people and the one accepted by Samuel in the name of God. The terms used are very suggestive in this respect. The gathering of Israel keeps asking for a king (*melekh*), while the prophet promises to anoint a prince, a ruler (*nagid* – 1 Sm 9:16). The Hellenic version follows the same differentiation, by using the dialectal terms *basileus* and *archon*. Therefore, while the people take on the full reality of a personalistic autocracy, just like the other nations in Canaan, Mesopotamia and Egypt, the God of Israel makes a concession only to the point of offering them a unique, powerful leader, but whose military (Elazar 1989, 176) and administrative mandate is specific.

Namely, the hermeneutic difference between the two terms can be highlighted “in the ideological view each project of the relation between Yahweh, Israel, and Israel’s governor. In our texts, the Melek sees his power from Yahweh as susceptible to his arbitrary manipulation, who obtrudes himself inappropriately and disproportionately between Yahweh and Israel, and who treats Israel as little more than the subjects of his monarchic power. The *nagid*, on the other hand, is positively portrayed as one who sees his power as a sovereign and inviolable devolvement from Yahweh, who acts strictly under the orders of Yahweh for the benefit of Yahweh’s people and holds himself as no more than the willing subject of the divine monarch” (Murray 1998, 299).

Although Samuel and God keep talking about the monarch as *nagid* (*archon*), the voice of the people is trenchant in describing how they understand the new constitutional function – “Long live the king!” (1 Sm 10:24). The entire chapter ends in the general acclamation of Israel, who greet their monarch (as *melekh* and not as *nagid*), but for a handful of people, who are not pleased with the choice which has been made (1 Sm 10:27). However, they do not question the full royal function, but the person who was chosen. From now on, the people of Israel live under a full monarchic regime.

Saul – Keter Malkhut. Samuel – Keter Torah

The beginning of Saul's rule is a confirmation of his military virtues. Being a governing based on the personal qualities of the monarch, early Jewish royalty needs constant proof of these qualities. The initial legitimacy given through anointment is maintained only if the ruler persists in morality and devotion towards the people. The insurance of external security prevails over all the other tasks. That is why the first significant episode following Saul's anointment is the confrontation between Israel and the Ammonites. With excellent tactics, Saul manages to crush the Ammonite army.

Very important is how he understands, at this point, the functioning of the monarchy concerning the other institutions. Namely, Saul seems to have reached a model of "Byzantine symphony", in which royalty and prophetism compete with each other in governing the people, with one power in charge of actual administration and the other playing the role of a legitimation-acknowledgement mechanism. Thus, Saul points to three implicit conditions for efficient political functioning in Israel and for defeating external enemies:

- the unity of the people;
- the following of Saul-the king;
- the following of Samuel-the prophet.

These conditions are meaningful only if they are taken together. Saul himself cannot imagine that the people could resist without showing the same degree of respect to Samuel. Only together do the two make the governing legitimate. Keter Malchut and Keter Torah substitute each other and, from a complementary point of view, the latter acts as a theological warrant for the political monarchy.

After the battle against the Ammonites, Samuel has the initiative to guide the people towards Gilgal, to "renew the kingdom", by anointing Saul as king before the Lord for the second time: "Then Samuel said to the people, 'Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingdom.' So, all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal" (1 Sm 11:14-15). Right after this episode, Samuel fully gives up the last symbols of his function as a judge, leaving the entire Keter Malchut in the hands of the king alone. In the speech he delivers when he gives up his civil dignity, Samuel briefly shows them the mistake they made by asking for a king when "the Lord your God was your king" (1 Sm 12:12).

Nonetheless, even if the people themselves realise the fundamental theological error they have made – "for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves

a king” (1 Sm 12:19) –, Samuel shows them that the error is not without a solution in front of the Lord if the monarchy does not become idolatry. Therefore, he warns them against the dangers of paganism, slightly referring to the idea that a kingship like the one professed in Mesopotamia and Egypt must be avoided at all costs. The new regime is accepted and blessed by the Lord if the people of Israel remain loyal to the Lord and firm in their faith.

Towards the end, Samuel shows that he holds all the attributes of prophecy and remains the keeper of the law and a sacred mediator, the only depository of the authority of the Keter Torah: “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” (1 Sm 12:23).

He keeps on giving directions to the people as to the path they should follow (Gunn 1998, 65) while keeping the same control over the moral hermeneutic role. Being also a king, in a different area of authority, Samuel is the first in the history of Israel “to hold the office of the prophetic observer, which the biblical account places as an accompaniment and corrective at the side of the ruling king” (Dietrich 2007, 35). This is the premise of a monarchy blessed by the Lord.

The Decay of King Saul. The Campaign Against the Philistines

Soon afterwards, Saul begins his military campaign against the Philistines, which should have been the crowning of his rule. This has been the very motivation for his anointment as king, his early mandate ordained and blessed by God. What begins as an insurrection of Jewish vassals against those who had a monopoly on the manufacture of weapons gradually grows into an actual war. The episode of the battle against the Philistines does not have only a strong historical basis, but also a theo-political one. Now come to light the limits of human governing and Saul’s weaknesses.

Being in a very difficult military situation, Saul refrains from starting the main attack and waits for Samuel, who has ordered him: “Then go down before me to Gilgal. And behold, I am coming down to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do” (1 Sm 10:8). Samuel’s instructions have been clear, showing that, even in purely military situations, the prophet must tell the king what path to take, presenting an offering to the Lord together. Saul’s royal mandate has been circumscribed ab initio by this institutional balance between Keter Torah and Keter Malchut.

Thus, the king seems to depend on the prophet when exercising his function and Saul must “satisfy the test of obedience” (Gordon 1993, 55). The king fails this test. Being impatient and fearing that the military situation might worsen, the king gathers his people and tells them, “Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the peace offerings. And he offered the burnt offering. As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came. And Saul went out to meet him and greet him” (1 Sm 13:9-10).

The confrontation is theo-political. Saul usurps Samuel’s function and presents the offering alone. It is not only a conflict between institutions but also evidence of mistrust in the Lord’s promise. As always in the history of Israel, the tragedy is theological. Saul allows military reason to prevail over sacred reason (Dietrich 2007, 43), because he fears for the fate of his campaign, although God has announced their liberation. Thus, the fall of Saul has a dual nature: institutional, by usurping another Keter, and soteriological, by believing that he could attain liberation all by himself. As Saint John Chrysostom mentions, “Saul presented an offering against God’s will” [our translation] (St. John Chrysostom 2005, 109). God, and not Samuel, is defied by the king breaking the laws of the Torah

Samuel shows the long-term consequences of such a sin, “And Samuel said to Saul, ‘You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the Lord your God, with which he commanded you. For then the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you’” (1 Sm 13:13-14). Saul’s falling from faith leads to an administrative delegitimation. His theological mistake has radical political consequences: kingly dignity can no longer be conferred upon a man who has broken God’s commandment. Monarchy shall endure, but Saul must be removed from power. On the other hand, from Saul’s perspective, although he understands the cause of the divine sentence, the situation is urgent. He continues to lead the armies of Israel, and, with the help of his son Jonathan, he is victorious against the Philistines. However, the interpretation of Samuel’s words can be multifold: either Saul will not be the founder of a dynasty, or he will soon cease to be a king himself (Gunn 1998, 67).

Until a new sign from the Lord comes, the monarch continues to fulfil his military mandate and he is successful in doing so: “Saul [...] fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the

kings of Zobah, and the Philistines. Wherever he turned he routed them” (1 Sm 14:47). Consequently, his victories seem to soften his previous fall, as Saul fulfils his royal destiny to free the people of Israel and to ensure their external security. The episode of the illegitimate offering fades away in the collective memory and Samuel does not show any interest indirectly causing the abdication of the monarch.

The Delegitimization of the King. The Campaign Against the Amalekites

A new episode, marking a new beginning and a new opportunity for Saul to prove his obedience, begins with the campaign against the Amalekites, “the archetypal implacable enemy of Israel” (Alter 1999, 87). Through the voice of the prophet, the Lord asks Saul to fully purge the territory of Amalekites. Nothing alive must survive and no good must be kept under any circumstances.

From now on, instructions are very clear and leave no room for interpretations and hermeneutic doubts. Any deviation from Samuel’s words shall be an insurmountable sin. Maybe this is also his opportunity to redeem the mistake he made by presenting the offering, for nothing is said about the Lord’s previous verdict, namely that of removing his royal dignity (Gunn 1998, 70). The setting is ready for Saul to complete a new task, with the possibility of being confirmed as a monarch.

However, the king of Israel falls again. The Lord’s commandment is not fully followed, and Saul spares the Amalekite king and allows the people to keep a considerable part of the spoils. What had to be fully destroyed is appropriated by Israel as their own. This is not only an act of greed and love for richness but also an act of idolatry. Prophet Samuel himself gives this spiritual diagnosis when he finds out about the deeds of the king and his armies: “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry” (1 Sm 15:23). This breaking of the commandment leads to the irrevocable removal of the divine mandate. The Lord’s word in the Torah is blatantly broken and the verdict of the divine Sovereign of Israel is unambiguous: “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments” (1 Sm 15:11).

Nonetheless, Saul is given the possibility to defend himself, by being asked why he has not followed the imperative commandment, but he gives a completely unsatisfactory answer: “I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the

best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal” (1 Sm 15:20-21). His guilt is now threefold:

- he considers the voice of the people more important than that of God;
- he tries to defend himself by blaming the community which he was ordained to govern;
- he gives a false ritual excuse.

Thus, first, Saul seems credible from a political point of view, but unworthy for a king anointed by the Lord, as he fears the voice of the people and acts according to their will and not according to his principles, dictated by the divine imperative. Therefore, there is a (pathological) sovereignty mutation in Israel. After the Lord limited His own political governing and offered a full administrative-military mandate to the king, Saul renders heavenly sovereignty inoperative, by transferring the final authority to the will of the people (Zimran 2014: 12).

Moreover, blaming the people is a poor “verbal strategy”. Saul tries to show that he should not carry the whole burden of responsibility, although he has been blessed with governing the people. Thus, the king “is also testifying to his inability to restrain the people” (Green 2003, 255), namely, to the poor fulfilment of his monarchic duties.

Samuel carries on with his prophetic discourse of delegitimisation of the monarch, showing that royal dignity can begin and end only with a Keter Torah and offers the final verdict: “And Samuel said, ‘Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king’” (1 Sm 15:23).

Monarchy shall not be abolished, but the ruler shall be replaced. Thus, the new constitutional regime is visibly consolidated. As far as our theo-political analysis is concerned, the narrative thread ends, as we have a full cycle of legitimisation and delegitimisation of a monarch, having in mind the divine and human coordinates of royal dignity.

Conclusions

The prophet, judge and priest Samuel show as unequivocally as possible what the consequence is if the chosen people give up their unique theo-political model. Essentially, the demand of the people symbolises the drama of the entire humankind: the history of a predictable, yet avoidable fall. Even though they were shown the right path, just as we were shown Orthodoxy, and salvation under God’s sovereignty was promised to them, Israel, as an icon of humankind, choose the world; they choose

political (d)efficiency, thus neglecting their Providence Insurer. The people look for fulfilment here and now, turning their eyes from eternity to immanence. Like a political Adam, Israel takes again a bite from the only forbidden fruit: that of being like the other nations. How topical for the Christians of our times, the new people of God!

Through Samuel, God reveals to the people the limits of secularised politics. Tyranny is always the dead-end that purely human governing tends to reach. That is why the lesson given in the episode between Samuel and Saul (1 Sm 8-15) is not only theoretical but as pragmatic as possible from a historical point of view.

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