

The Politics of Samuel and the Politics of Ellul

Last year in our small Anglican parish in the centre of London we began a preaching series on the rise of David. It was around this time that David Gill was encouraging me to offer a paper for this conference. Fascinated as I was by the political theology and ethics I was discovering in these chapters which I did not know well and by the connections with so many aspects of Ellul's work I offered to explore this further. A year on, we've just returned to the stories in our new preaching series and I'm realising what a massive topic I proposed and what a rich part of Scripture this is to bring into conversation with Ellul. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes in their recent fascinating study "The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel" capture the significance of the book of Samuel – our two books of 1 and 2 Samuel – well:

a profound work of political thought...in which the beautifully crafted narratives cut to the core of human politics, bringing into relief deep structural themes that transcend the particular events and fates of the book's main protagonists and that remain resonant wherever and whenever political power is at stake.¹

I am still struggling with the narrative's length and depth of political insight and producing a short paper has not been easy. I will open with comment on the surprising lack of interest in, and limited reading of, Samuel's narrative within Ellul's published works (despite the number of themes common to both). I then want to illustrate Samuel's value and connections with Ellul's own thought by focusing, albeit selectively, on the text and six themes relating to the nature of political power as seen in Saul and David which touch on concerns in Ellul's work.

A. Ellul and the Politics of Samuel

As is well-known, the biblical study Ellul undertook in dialogue with his sociological study, *The Political Illusion* (1965 French, 1967 ET), was on 2 Kings. *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (1966 French, 1972 ET) and its careful reading of seven key figures and texts² has a special place for me as it was how I first encountered Ellul.³ I will refer to that book briefly but my interest here is more with Ellul's biblical theology of political power and ethic of Christian anarchism and non-power more widely in relation to the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel. What is interesting is Ellul's lack of interest in his writings to these foundational narratives and in particular, given his critique of political power, how positive a reading he offers of King David.

Ellul's main focus is on the significance of the narrative in Israel's political history as Israel demands a king and we witness the transition from the period of the judges – a form of rule which is much more in line with Ellul's "anarchist" vision – to an established, monarchical political system.

From his earliest book, *The Theological Foundation of Law* (1946 French, 1960 ET), Ellul often refers to 1 Sam 8 but very little else in Samuel's account gains his attention. He sees 1 Sam 8 as of great importance in understanding not only politics but more broadly how God relates to human works.

¹ Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 1. Also "arguably the first and greatest work of Western political thought" (cover flap).

² Ellul examines Naaman (5.1-19), Joram (6.24-7.17), Hazael (8.7-15,13.14-25), Jehu (9-10), Ahaz (16.1-20), Rabshakeh (18.17-37), and Hezekiah (19). There is a concluding meditation on inutility.

³ As an undergraduate studying politics and interested in how to think biblically about it my college chaplain mentioned this book as the best he knew but commented it was very hard to find. This was long before the internet! Shortly after this I came across it in a second-hand section of a Christian bookshop, bought it, and within a few years Ellul was dominating my life as the subject of my doctorate.

In particular he highlights God's appropriation of human works. In discussing how this relates to law he notes that

On the one hand, human law is bound up with human sin.... On the other hand this law, bound to the covenant from which it originated, is preserved by God in the heavenly Jerusalem, like other works of man, among the glory and honor of nations.⁴

He then notes that these two aspects – also central to his theology of the city of course - “are already present in God's attitude toward the Israelites' demand for a king (I Samuel 8)” and spells this out:

By their insistence they reject God himself as their king, and thus are wholly unfaithful and disobedient. Nonetheless, God accedes to their wish and sets down the law of the king. Thereby he takes upon himself this disobedience, but he also makes it the criterion for the condemnation of the people. This condemnation is strikingly apparent in Saul.⁵

After this sweeping negative assessment of Saul there is then a positive account of David, though with no justification offered from the biblical narrative other than David being a type of Christ:

With David's reign, however, the prefiguration of Christ's kingship, God reversed the situation. This time the Israelites, having rejected God in favor of a king, find themselves subject to the kingship of God, as God appropriates the kingship of David. He exalts it as the sign of the kingship eternally to be established in Jesus Christ. While Israel's act remains on the level of sin, it becomes an act of benediction and salvation.⁶

These themes reappear in Ellul's first detailed discussion of anarchism – his 1974 article which forms the basis for the chapter in *Jesus and Marx* (1979 French, 1988 ET). Here again 1 Sam 8 is “the main text”.⁷ Three central observations are made about political power based on its account of kingship:

1. It “rests on distrust and rejection of God”
2. It “is always dictatorial, excessive, and unjust (1 Sam 8.10-18)”
3. It “is established in Israel through conformity, in imitation of what is done everywhere else”.⁸

Ellul then sums up the witness of the narrative of 1 and 2 Samuel in just three short sentences:

Israel's first king, Saul, is a raving madman. Then, by grace, and as an exception, God chooses David making him His representative. But David is just a ray of light, showing that God can bring miraculous good from human evil.⁹

Finally, and more fully but still very selectively and narrowly, there is Ellul's discussion in *Anarchy and Christianity* (1988 French, 1991 ET). In his chapter on “The Bible as the Source of Anarchy” he has 10 pages (46-55) on The Hebrew Bible and notes that “the real history of royal power (ie central

⁴ TFL, 96-7.

⁵ TFL, 97.

⁶ TFL, 97. As we will note there is a similarly rosy, but textually dubious, picture of David offered in relation to Jerusalem in *The Meaning of the City* (French 1975, ET 1970, but originally written in late 1940s and 1950s).

⁷ J&M, 165

⁸ J&M, 165.

⁹ J&M, 165. Prior to this Ellul's fullest discussion on Old Testament kingship is his 1967 article.

and unified power) would begin only with the familiar story in 1 Samuel (ch 8)".¹⁰ Ellul again emphasizes the three points noted above and God's acceptance of Israel's rebellious choice. The narratives relating to Saul are summed up as "Saul...became mad, committed all kinds of abuses of power, and was finally killed in battle against the Philistines".¹¹ David is then treated at more length than before though still only in a single paragraph where Ellul engages with Vernard Eller's critique of his earlier summary in his *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers*, published the previous year.¹² There Eller wrote

Ellul next calls David's reign 'an exception' and proceeds to recount the sad history of the remainder of the monarchy. But I want to insist that David is not the exception but actually the heart of the pattern. (I do not like to hear it said that I automatically accept whatever Ellul says as being gospel truth; that is not [quite] true)....Far from being the exception, David is our one best argument for anarchy.¹³

Ellul still writes that David "enjoyed great renown...was Israel's greatest monarch...was constantly held up as a model" and that "I have written elsewhere that he was the exception among Israel's kings". However, he then notes that "Vernard Eller is harsher than I am. He thinks that David is a good example in favour of anarchy" and summarises Eller's key points: David's glory was due to God acting through him (2 Sam 12.7-9), David "did all the things that in later centuries would bring successive disasters on Israel's kings", and "the Bible curiously insists upon all David's faults".¹⁴ With no further comment on these or any discussion of Samuel's wider narrative, Ellul then proceeds to examine Solomon and later kings.

In summary – in contrast to his careful, detailed reading of the text of 2 Kings, yielding amazing theological insights, Ellul really shows no interest at all in Samuel's much lengthier account of the first two kings of Israel apart from the origins of kingship in 1 Sam 8 and rather simplistic sweeping statements contrasting Saul and David, possibly modifying his positive account of the latter. What if, instead, we attempted something more like his work in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* to try to understand *The Politics of Samuel*? Clearly it is impossible to do justice to the 24 chapters of 1 Samuel from 1 Sam 8 which cover Saul's reign and the further 24 chapters of 2 Samuel. What I want to do therefore is signal some interesting insights in six key areas relating to political power focussing on Saul and David up to 2 Sam 12 (the Bathsheba, Uriah and Nathan narrative).

B. The Politics of Samuel

1. Becoming King

We have already seen the significance and central themes of 1 Sam 8 for Ellul which forms the backdrop of the anointing of Saul as the first king. I believe Ellul's reading is correct but it is important also to remember the context of Samuel seeking to establish his own line of succession (8.1) and the failings of his sons (8.2-3) as the trigger for the request for a king (8.4-5). Samuel's displeasure – and perhaps some of his subsequent treatment of Saul – likely arises from this failure to secure his own plan for the transfer of political power within his family. The central warning which was so important to Ellul (8.9-18) highlights that kingly power will result in acquisition ("he will take...") and self-aggrandisement and alongside the desire to be like other nations, which Ellul

¹⁰ A&C, 48.

¹¹ A&C, 48-9.

¹² Eller, *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers* (Eerdmans, 1987).

¹³ Eller, 8, 9.

¹⁴ A&C, 49. Summarising Eller, 8-9.

noted, the main reason given for wanting to have a king is “to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles” (8.20). This signals the importance of a desire for security against one’s enemies in the establishing of concentrated political power, the significance in the politics of Israel at this time of military success and power, the close tie between political power and organised use of violence, and also Israel’s lack of trust in God fighting Israel’s battles and raising up himself those through whom he would do this.

Given Saul’s reputation, it is important to note that when we are introduced to him he does not appear anything like the power-hungry monarch Samuel warned about in 1 Sam 8. He’s on a quest for lost donkeys (ch 9), aware of his own insignificance (9.21) and hiding away (10.22). Given this and what Saul then becomes we have here perhaps a narrative of how, in Lord Acton’s words, “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

God’s choice of David as king is also presented by the narrator as surprising. It comes straight after the rejection of Saul and leads Samuel to fear for his own life (16.2), leading to a divinely inspired deception (16.2-5) to cover his real highly political intention (an early sign of the complexities and ambiguities surrounding political power, even when bestowed by God). The Lord’s choice is based not on outward appearances valued by humans but on the heart (16.6-7) and leads to the identification and anointing of the youngest son of Jesse, who needs to be brought into the feast from tending the sheep in the field. Despite this similarity the account quickly presents David (unlike Saul at his first appearance) as a confident (even arrogant) young man looking to make a name for himself (17.26ff).

In contrast to Saul there is a long period between David’s anointing and accession to the throne during which he learns the ways of power and the nature of confident, determined leadership in the military and then the way of relative powerlessness as he is on the run from Saul.

2. *Establishing Kingship*

There is no sense of a major transition to a new power structure once Saul is made king. He is, for example, content to let Samuel disperse the people and he then returns to his own home after his coronation (9.26).¹⁵ Although he is transformed by the Spirit of God (10.5-13), when he and the people are reminded of the “the right and duties of kingship” (10.25) there are sceptics who consider Saul incapable of fulfilling their wishes for a powerful king (10.27). Even so, the new king takes no action against these potential troublemakers in order to secure his rule. In short, on becoming king, Saul does not simply follow the pattern of kings in the other nations. Nor does he seek to establish and secure his own power base in a new structure of political authority. Whatever his later flaws they are not evident at the start of his reign and there is no evidence of a major shift in Israel’s political structures.

Saul’s first exercise of kingly power arises because of the external threats of the Ammonites and the outpouring of the Spirit (11.1-6) leading to his military victory. Here there is considerable continuity with how God functioned through the judges – the initiative lies with God both in empowering Saul and in bringing together his army (there is no standing army as warned of in 1 Sam 8) and Saul does not appeal to his kingship, even placing Samuel alongside him in leadership (11.7). Even after his victory, despite popular demands, the newly empowered king refuses to use his new status and power to establish his supremacy and enact vengeance on his opponents (11.12-13). It is Samuel

¹⁵ According to 1 Sam 13.1 he was just 30 years old and ruled for 42 years.

not Saul who initiates renewal of his kingship (11.14-15) and the fragility of the new institution is evident in Samuel's farewell speech.¹⁶

David's actions on becoming king are quite different. He becomes king over Judah (2 Sam 2.1-7) after his years on the run from Saul and then has the power struggle with Saul's son Ish-Bosheth and his followers (2 Sam 2-4) before becoming king over Israel as well (2 Sam 5.1-5). The account in 2 Samuel 5 then contains four elements which (in contrast to Saul on his accession) should ring alarm bells, particularly for a reader who has also read Ellul even though Ellul does not hear them.

First, David immediately launches a military attack on the Jebusites. Although the narrator is clear that David "became more and more powerful, because the Lord God Almighty was with him" (5.10) there is no suggestion (unlike Saul's initial military action) that this campaign is inspired by or guided by God: David takes the initiative himself and uses his knowledge of the area to secure his victory (5.9-10). The contrast is stark in relation to the two victories over the Philistines in 5.17-25 where on both occasions "David enquired of the Lord" (5.19, 23). God's commands are different in each case – "Go" (v19), "Do not go straight up" (v23) – but "David did as the Lord commanded" (5.25).

Second, the attack on the Jebusites leads to the capture of the fortress, the renaming of it as "the City of David", and David "building up the area around it" (5.9). There is, here, not only another contrast with Saul but a new centralisation of power and David as a successor to Cain. Here again Ellul has a remarkably rosy picture of David. In *Meaning of the City* he writes of David's action in relation to Jerusalem:

We could go on at length about its strategic worth and how easy it was to fortify, about the political necessity of choosing a completely new capital, and of the value of making the political capital what was already the religious capital. But after all is said, these considerations are secondary. What transforms this military city is David's act: in the name of the Lord he made with her a pact of love.¹⁷

Despite his emphasis on Cain naming his city in Gen 4.17 (after his son, Enoch),¹⁸ Ellul fails to see the significance of "and called it the City of David" (5.9) or the fact that this name effectively replaces that of Zion (5.7 – "the fortress of Zion – which is the City of David").

Third, David not only becomes a builder (5.9) but allows foreign nations to build a palace for him – "Now Hiram king of Tyre sent envoys to David, along with cedar logs and carpenters and stonemasons, and they built a palace for David" (5.11). Again it is astonishing given Ellul's emphasis on 1 Sam 8 warning about Israel's kingship being "in imitation of what is done everywhere else" and

¹⁶ Samuel (perhaps revealing some sense of his own disappointment and frustrated ambitions) reminds Israel of their pre-monarchical experience of God's rule (12.1-11), the rejection of God as king but God's giving them a king (12.12-13, though Saul is never named), and crucially the subordination of both people *and king* to the rule of God (12.14-15). Samuel then demonstrates his own continued power by calling on the Lord to send thunder and rain to reinforce the evil character of the new politics of Israel (12.16-25). The next three chapters focus on Saul's military exploits and the complex power play between Samuel and Saul and the limits placed around being a king under God. In 1 Sam 13 we see the first initiative of the new king. He selects men to mount an attack on the Philistines, a military adventure in which the narrator makes no reference to God and Israel appears on the verge of losing. Faced with his troops dispersing after Samuel fails to appear when promised, Saul seeks the Lord's favour himself by making the offering Samuel would have offered if present (13.7-10).

¹⁷ MC, 95. Later (96) – "A city, a heathen city, a city scorned in the conquest of the twelve tribes, a city covered with blood, is chosen by God to become the center of his people, the city of the king whom he loved, the place where his glory will reside".

¹⁸ MC, 5-6.

his references to Tyre in *Meaning of the City*¹⁹ that he does not hear loud alarm bells ringing about David's kingship.

Fourth, David as king is rapidly accumulating wives and concubines (5.13) as warned against in Deut 17.17. This is a developing problem as shown by earlier references in 2.2 and 3.2-5 and again contrasts unfavourably with Saul. Though never as serious as with Solomon this aspect of David's reign is also highlighted in Absalom's coup (2 Sam 15.16, 16.21-22, 19.5, 20.3).²⁰

There are, then, despite all the positive features of David's character and the presence of the Lord with him, clear warning signs in Samuel's introduction to David's reign as king over Israel and Judah.

3. *God and the King – Personal Piety, Religious Power and Other Divine Mediators*

Saul's rule falls into two phases - prior to his rejection by God and the anointing of David (1 Sam 11-15) and then after that decisive development. Here I will look only at the former.²¹

In 1 Sam 13 we see the first initiative of Saul in which the narrator makes no reference to God's involvement: an attack on the Philistines where, when Israel appears on the verge of losing and Samuel fails to appear when promised, Saul seeks the Lord's favour himself by making the offering Samuel would have offered if present (13.7-10). Here we witness the complex interaction of political power with God's spokesman: Is Saul's action a deliberate extension of kingly power and assault on the proper role of Samuel in violation of God's pattern of rule? Or is it, as Saul protests, an action driven by military necessity (13.11) and good intentions of seeking the Lord's favour (13.12)? Samuel clearly sees it as the former and condemns Saul and declares God's judgment on him. But Samuel too could here be playing political games as part of a power struggle given his late arrival, the lack of a reported word from the Lord, and his claim that the Lord has already appointed a new ruler (13.13-14)?

This question of the relationship of the king to the authority and power of God and to other mediators of God's will comes to a head in the next two chapters. In 1 Sam 14, Saul brings an end to his soldiers disregard for God's law (14.31-34) and for the first time builds an altar (14.35). He heeds the priest's challenge to enquire of God but then acts rashly when God is silent - the first instance of kingly power being wielded intemperately and irrationally and with a willingness to sacrifice even family (14.39, 44).

When, at the Lord's command through Samuel, Saul later mounts a war of retribution against the Amalekites, he and his army (15.9 makes both the agents) fail to obey the instruction to destroy them totally and God "regrets" making him king (15.10 cf 15.29, 35). As Samuel comes to confront Saul there are further signs of his increasing self-aggrandisement with reports of "a monument in his own honour" (15.12). As before, when Saul is challenged by Samuel he initially and repeatedly protests his innocence and we see again the difficulty of discerning the truth of political decisions and also power's determination and ability to use this to evade responsibility and defend its actions when called to account for its failings.²² Samuel now declares the Lord's judgment even more emphatically than previously stressing the necessity of the king's subordination to God: "Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king" (15.23, 26). Although Saul then confesses his disobedience – of both God and Samuel – he still embodies political power

¹⁹ See *MC*, 45-46, 51, 58, 89, 111, 114, 193, 205-6.

²⁰ Cf Saul in 1 Sam 14.50.

²¹ The latter would include eg Witch of Endor.

²² He distances himself from the soldiers but also seeks to present their apparent disobedience as in fact a sign of devotion to God (15.15, 20-21).

denying responsibility through blaming the power of others, blaming his failing on the people and his political weakness (15.24). The portrayal of Saul in relation to God is thus almost wholly negative. Indeed, Stephen Chapman's recent theological commentary on 1 Samuel makes this – and the contrast with David here – a central feature of the narrative: Saul's "deficiency as king" is "his lack of spiritual conviction" as shown by the fact that "Saul never addresses God directly by name (ie in the second person) at all".²³

But what of David? He is famously said by God to be "a man after my own heart" (1 Sam 13:14 cf Acts 13:22) and confronts Goliath zealous for the name of the Lord and confident in the Lord's power to rescue (17.36-37, 45-47). From 1 Sam 21 onwards when David is on the run from Saul and having to navigate the power politics of Israel, and her neighbours, from a position of relative powerlessness the central message conveyed is that he is a model of restraint in relation to Saul, unwilling to use the opportunities he is provided with to end his life and take the throne. Just as earlier he sought out Samuel (19.18), so in this period he is portrayed as dependent on God: he seeks assistance from Ahimelek the priest (21.1-9), declares himself eager to "learn what God will do for me" (22.3), heeds the word of the prophet Gad (22.5), enquires of the Lord about attacking Philistines (23.1-6) and, through Abiathar the priest, seeks guidance as to how to respond to Saul's plots (23.9-12). In his relative powerlessness he is presented, in stark contrast to Saul, as one who "finds strength in God" (23.16). Here, it seems, we have a different politics taking shape, one reliant on God, as David is on the margins, sought out by the powerful Saul. Despite his flaws as king this characteristic remains – he consults Nathan about building the House of God and accepts it when the prophet reverses his original permission and instead promises that God will build his house. When later Nathan confronts him about Bathsheba and Uriah he – unlike Saul – repents.

The picture is, though, not without its complications and ambiguities. As Robert Alter pointed out, David's inner life is kept opaque.²⁴ As an example, prior to his plan to build the Temple, there is the moving of the Ark to Jerusalem. Is this a sign of his piety and devotion to the Lord? Perhaps, but it is noteworthy this follows rather than precedes establishing his own palace (7.2), appears to be aimed at receiving blessing (6.12), and leads to David being angry and fearful (6.8,9) when God shows he is not to be messed with in relation to the Ark. At least as plausible a reading is that which sees here David's attempt to consolidate his power in his new city by taking ownership of the Ark. So Brueggemann argues that here David "appeals to the central symbol of the old order to legitimate a new order...the elaborate ritual of chapter 6 is to bind together in a visible world the old ritual claims and the new ideological venture of monarchy".²⁵ If there is any truth in this then David is here perilously close to being guilty of what Ellul frequently critiques in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* as the "sin of Jeroboam": "using God to enhance the state".²⁶ In his study of Ahaz (*PGPM*, chpt 5) Ellul focuses on this

the sin of Jeroboam was precisely that he made theological and religious decisions regarding the true God for political reasons, thus subordinating the spiritual life of the people to political necessity, orienting its worship, not to another lord, but according to the demands

²³ Stephen Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 65, 66.

²⁴ Quoted in Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 33.

²⁵ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 248.

²⁶ *PGPM*, 88.

of politics, seizing control of the revelation of God, playing the role of the prophet in order to distinguish the true God.²⁷

Here we see a fourth feature of the narrative's account of politics:

4. The hiddenness of political power's true motives and plans

The question of David's motives in relation to moving the Ark – political scheming or pious service? – were also raised in the earlier story of Saul's seeking the Lord's favour in the absence of Samuel in 1 Sam 13. In fact this is a recurring theme in Samuel's account of the exercise of kingly power: the difficulty of discerning the motives and intentions of political agents.

This reality of politics is perhaps most vividly displayed in relation to Saul as he seeks to neutralise David in 1 Sam 18. Having failed to bring about his death by his spear-throwing he now has to resort to political subterfuge. The narrator shows us power deliberately masking evil intent through public actions and statements which appear to signal political approval and praise. Saul offers one of his daughters (Merab) to David and encourages him in his military endeavours as a form of service to God²⁸ but his intent is to bring about his death – "Saul said to himself, 'I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!'" (18.17b). He then extends this further in relation to his other daughter Michal in a story we will explore shortly for another insight but which also makes clear that "Saul's plan was for David to fall by the hands of the Philistines" (18.25).

The most famous example of this of course is the story of Uriah the Hittite. Here we get to see what was hidden from public view: David manipulating events to secure his own ends. First he encourages Uriah to return home and sleep with his wife. What might appear an act of kindness to one of his officers is in fact driven by the hope that Uriah will then be seen as father of David's child that Bathsheba is carrying. When that fails he sets up an elaborate military manoeuvre in order to bring about his death on the battlefield seemingly as a casualty of war. His mindset is the same as Saul's earlier - 'I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!'. As a result we are left with questions about David's other earlier actions.

On two famous occasions David found himself with the power to end Saul's life and in both he steadfastly refused (1 Sam 24 and 26) even when his men interpret the circumstances as the fulfilment of a prophecy and a divinely given opportunity to strike. This appears, on the surface, to be a sign of David's piety and respect for the Lord's anointed who can only be removed by God himself. But in the second instance there is a sign that David may also be playing a clever political game – he draws attention to the neglect of Abner and his fellow guards in their duties and uses this failing to call for their execution (26.16). So might the restraint in relation to Saul – particularly given its very public proclamation – also be motivated by political guile? David by such actions (or inactions) shows himself to be acting rightly (as even Saul is presented as acknowledging) and refuses to give his opponents a basis on which they could subsequently question his legitimacy, or even justify, by appealing to David's own actions, their own temptations to regicide once he becomes king. As Halbertal and Holmes again observe

Morality itself becomes a matter of tactics. The tactical dimension of such seemingly moral behaviour is stressed by its patently contrived publicity...What is clear is that David wanted his personal horror at regicide to be publicly notorious, to be dramatized in a much talked

²⁷ PGPM, 125.

²⁸ Saul said to David, 'Here is my elder daughter Merab. I will give her to you in marriage; only serve me bravely and fight the battles of the LORD.' (1 Sam 18.17a)

about public spectacle...the public cannot look directly into the hearts and minds of their rulers. Private motivations may or may not diverge significantly from public justifications. Observers can never be totally sure....Even morally good actions can be performed for exclusively instrumental reasons. Arguably, no genuinely political act can avoid raising suspicions in this regard.²⁹

So we begin to wonder, was he really as innocent as it seems of the deaths that eliminated the House of Saul (2 Sam 2-4)? Is he really showing genuine kindness to Mephibosheth in 2 Sam 9 when he asks “Is there anyone who is still left from the house of Saul that I may keep faith with him for the sake of Jonathan?”? Or is he making sure he keeps the last descendant under his control? As Halbertal and Holmes comment

Neither his subjects nor his courtiers can ever be sure that David is motivated solely by political ambition. The moral norms that he so publicly espouses may, after all, provide genuinely independent reasons for action. This irrepressible ambiguity about the underlying motivations of rulers, in fact, helps explain why their moral excuses are politically effective....Actions that turn out to have been politically expedient may have been initially undertaken for sincerely moral reasons. And yet it is no easy matter to identify any political action that is both effective and unambiguously moral. We can never be certain, in analysing political life, that human compassion or a compelling sense of duty is a genuine motive rather than a calculated pretext.³⁰

This opens up a further area of interest in the narrator’s account of politics:

5. *Ends and means in politics*

Once Saul is rejected by God and made aware that God has a chosen successor he becomes obsessed with securing his precarious hold on power. Kingly rule, which was meant to be a means to the end of providing security and justice for the people being ruled, is no longer his vision. Now power has become an end in itself and other ends, other goods, simply become means to the end of maintaining power. We see this in his second attempt to get David killed by the Philistines in 1 Sam 18 where his corruption by power reaches an even higher level. Another daughter (Michal) falls in love with David (the only time in the Old Testament we are told of a woman loving a man). Saul now sees this experience of love as a means to secure the death-dealing political end he seeks. The narrator again reveals the hidden scheme in Saul’s mind (‘I will give her to him,’ he thought, ‘so that she may be a snare to him and so that the hand of the Philistines may be against him.’ (18.21)). He then uses his royal power to command in order to draw other – apparently innocent – parties into his plot in order to accomplish it through telling lies (18.22-3). The narrator lays bare the hidden plan behind the bizarre bride-price – “Saul’s plan was for David to fall by the hands of the Philistines” (18.25). Halbertal and Holmes highlight the significance of this in terms of means and ends in politics:

Whenever retaining hold on high office...becomes the dominant aim of politics, sovereign power becomes for its wielder an end in itself, even while being publicly justified as a means for providing collective security. Although power is always justified to subjects as a means of

²⁹ Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 47, 48.

³⁰ Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 58.

repelling foreign conquest and attaining other collective goods, for the one who exercises it, sovereign power may easily turn into something desired for its own sake.³¹

What is more, in order to secure that end of maintaining power (here by eliminating the perceived rival and enemy (18.29)), any means will become acceptable. For Saul, the bonds of family and of human love are not valued as goods, as ends in themselves, but rather as realities which can be manipulated as means to serve the ends of power:

As power becomes an end for a sovereign clinging desperately to it, other intrinsically worthy ends turn into disposable means. Rulers who wield their authority in the service of power as an end in itself regularly convert such ends as love, loyalty, the sacred, and moral obligation into mere means for eliminating rivals and staving off the loss of power...³²

In relation to David we perhaps see a similar instrumentalization in his approach to Ahimelek and the priests of Nob. In 1 Sam 21, David, although on the run from Saul, instead presents himself as actually acting on Saul's behalf. Despite the visible fear of Ahimelek the priest at his appearance (21.1) and a very direct question (21.2), David deceives him. He then uses his (recently abandoned) position of power in the royal court to demand absolute secrecy, effectively making his presence what we would class as a "matter of national security": "The king sent me on a mission and said to me, "No one is to know anything about the mission I am sending you on."" (21.2). Here the narrator shows how power enables those who wield it and are close to it (or even just believed to be close to it) both to deceive others in order to achieve their ends and also to prevent them, through appeals to "state secrets", from uncovering their deception. Although the narrative is not explicit it also suggests that David is a lone fugitive and thus that he is presenting himself as much more powerful than he really is in order to achieve his ends when he claims to be the commander of a whole band of men for whom he is requesting assistance (21.2-6).³³ As a result of these deceptions David successfully manipulates the priest both to provide him with the sacred bread (which Mark understands to be strictly a violation of the law, Mk 2.26, and Halbertal and Holmes describe as the instrumentalization of the sacred³⁴) and to arm him when he is a wanted man, on the run from the king. The pronouncements of those who are perceived as powerful are here seen to be able to create a distorted view of reality in order to shape the actions of others to serve their own ends.³⁵

The consequence of that story of the priests at Nob, finally, provides a stark illustration of

6. *The abuse of power*

In the chapter after David is "economical with the actualité"³⁶ before Ahimelek, Saul's murderous intent leads to the massacre of the priests of Nob, the most vivid account of abusive lethal power and its disregard even of that which is sacred. In 1 Sam 22 the scene opens with Saul haranguing his officials and demonstrating his paranoia (22.6-8) before being given a more precise target –

³¹ Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 17.

³² *Ibid*, 17-18.

³³ Though Mk 2.26 takes David at his word and assumes the bread was shared with companions.

³⁴ Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 38ff.

³⁵ Here one might explore some of Ellul's analysis of propaganda of his use of this in PGPM.

³⁶ This phrase has become famous in UK politics, having been used by the late Alan Clark, a former minister, in court in relation to answers he gave to Parliament concerning knowledge of arms sales to Iraq. It adapts an earlier statement by the former Cabinet Secretary in court about the need to sometimes be "economical with the truth".

Ahimelek and the other priests serving with him at Nob. Revealing something of the dynamics in the courts of power, this target is provided by the intelligence of the foreigner Doeg. He apparently sees this as an opportune moment to reveal, and apparently twist, what he has long known (22.9-10), in order to redirect the king's wrath away from his closest advisors, feed his paranoia, and gain his favour. Demonstrating how powerful he now is, Saul commands all the priests to attend which they duly do, wholly unaware of what they are about to face because they have not acted as Doeg alleges and Saul believes (22.11). Then, demonstrating how detached his kingship now is from the pursuit of justice, he accuses them of treason (22.13), ignores their defence (22.14-15), pronounces the death penalty (22.16) and orders their summary execution (22.17).

Here we see powerfully displayed the risk that comes with established political power: out of an initial desire to protect the people as a whole from external enemies, power has become concentrated in the hands of the king which he can then unleash internally against those he perceives as enemies, even those who are innocent, even those who are priests. Saul's command in 22.17 (which unashamedly identifies them as "priests of the Lord") is so extreme an abuse of power that his officials refuse to comply but Saul will not be deterred. Faced with his officials' refusal to obey he calls on the outsider, the one whose ties are simply to power, the Edomite Doeg (his being an Edomite is emphasised in 22.18 cf 21.7, 22.4). Doeg then carries out the slaughter, unhindered by those unwilling to act themselves (who thereby become complicit by omission and inaction rather than their own action), and the whole population of Nob is subsequently also eliminated (22.19). This wider genocide may be a political calculation in order to ensure there is no retaliation, no base of continuing internal opposition to Saul from those connected with his victims, and perhaps *pour encourager les autres*, or it may simply reveal the uncontrolled nature of Saul and of political violence more widely.³⁷ Once again, despite his apparent power, Saul does not totally succeed – Abiathar manages to escape and subsequently joins David's followers (22.20-23), giving him a priestly presence (23.6) within his camp. There, significantly, David admits his hands are not clean – not only did his deception enable Saul to attack the priests, he carried it out fully aware of the risks. He confesses to the sole reported survivor of Doeg's slaughter: "That day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, I knew he would be sure to tell Saul. I am responsible for the death of your whole family" (22.22).

David himself is never guilty of such mindless slaughter and gross abuse but he is presented as susceptible to it as we see a few chapters later in 1 Sam 25 when he is on the run and his activities look suspiciously like a protection racket. When this does not yield the desired result from Nabal, David sets out to slaughter every male in his family and is only restrained by the wise, winsome intervention of Abigail.

When he becomes king, David abuses his power most graphically in his elimination of Uriah, an act driven not by paranoia but by a sense of entitlement and the need to cover his sin. Here, as with Saul, his malicious, death-dealing will is put into effect by others. Royal power is now so great that he can actually issue lethal commands at a distance and secretly (even getting Uriah to deliver his own execution warrant). The bureaucratic and military command structures which he uses to secure his goal would have effectively kept his abuse hidden and enabled him to deny his involvement – as so often happens within the modern state - were it not for the intervention of the God who sees all things through his prophet Nathan.

³⁷ There is, here, perhaps a witness to Ellul's first law of violence: "once you start using violence you cannot get away from it" (Violence, 94).

C. Conclusion: The Politics of Samuel and the Politics of Ellul

Despite being quite wide-ranging this paper has only been able to scratch the surface of the “Politics of Samuel”. It has, however, shown – I hope - what a goldmine Ellul missed in restricting his comments almost exclusively to 1 Samuel 8 and the demand for a king. In addition, it has suggested that his description of the two kings – Saul and David – was much too simple. Both rulers are much more complex and ambiguous than he suggests and, in particular, (as Eller argued) his perception of David is much too uncritical and positive. If – as in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* – Ellul had undertaken a careful reading of the biblical text he would have found it rich with subjects and insights close to his heart in relation to the city, violence, propaganda, politics and religion, ends and means. Above all, he would have discovered the many illuminating ways in which this text unveils how military and political power work whoever – Saul, David or anyone else – is in power. This would have provided much to support his anarchist vision and ethic of non-power as a follower of the true king of Israel, God’s surprising choice, who established his reign through the cross and whose motivations were not hidden but were faithfulness to his Father and the Kingdom of God. A follower of the one who was not driven by political necessity and did not seek the end of his own power or make others simply means to his own end. A follower of the one who rather than being an abuser of power, suffered the abuse of power and overcame it through his cross and resurrection – the Son of David, Jesus, the Christ.