

THE BOOK OF SAMUEL: A LITERARY MASTERPIECE

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The Book of Samuel is universally acclaimed as an historical and literary work by a genius considered to be the "father of history." Neither the Babylonians nor the Egyptians produced anything that can be remotely compared to it in power of expression, objectivity and beauty. It precedes by some 500 years the historical writings of Herodotus the Greek. Written in classical Hebrew, it is a delight for literary study.

This article will explore wherein resides the literary art of this great book. Untold generations of Jews have recited the Song of Songs every Sabbath eve to remind them of the intimate relationship between God and Israel. Each week they have sung Psalm 23 at the mandatory third meal of the Sabbath, to remind them of the Lord's sustaining power in time of distress. Once a month they have added Psalm 104 to their prayers, to glorify God as Creator. At least once a year they have read the Book of Ruth on the Festival of Weeks, to pay homage to the noble ancestress of King David.

Yet it was left to the gentiles to discover the beauty in these messages. The Song of Songs and the Book of Ruth were greatly admired by Goethe, the greatest German literary figure. Herder maintained that it is worth spending 10 years studying Hebrew in order to appreciate fully the literary quality of Psalm 104 in the original. In the King James translation, Psalm 23 became one of the most exquisite and moving religious poems.

To these literary gems we add the Book of Samuel. Who was the author? The Talmud states: "Samuel wrote the book that bears his nameIt was completed (after his death) by Gad the Seer and Nathan the Prophet" (Bava Batra 15a). There can be little doubt that he was "one of the men who had known David well and who possessed first-hand knowledge of the affairs of his time."¹

With unerring skill, the author used various forms of art to enhance the quality of his narration. I shall limit myself here to a few of them: conveying meaning through sounds, *leitmotifs*, drama, and tragedy. Yet, it must not be forgotten that the Book of Samuel is first and foremost a great book of history.

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CONVEYING MEANING THROUGH SOUNDS

In one example of the author's art we have Elkanah, a man with two wives, Hannah the beloved one, but childless, and Peninah, who is blessed with progeny. Now Peninah *vexed* (Hannah) *sore* (I Sam. 1:6). The reader need not understand what she utters and the turmoil it created in Hannah, but merely to follow the sounds in Hebrew transliteration. *Ve kas-ta tsa-rata gam kaas . . . ki sagar haShem et raha-mah. Ve-ken ya-aseh . . . ken takhi-sena...*

The sensitive reader must feel Hannah's seething anger in the abundance of sharp sibilants. Her husband Elkanah tries to calm her with lullabies of love abounding in soft "l" and "v" sounds, as follows: *Hannah la-mah tiv-ki, ve la-mah lo tokh-li, ve la-mah yera levavech, ha-lo a-nokhi tov lakh...*

In a second example the weapons with which Goliath and David were equipped to face each other in mortal battle are a reflection of the famous words that David hurled at his opponent: *You comest to me with a sword and with a spear, and with a javelin, but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts* (I Sam. 17:45).

It seems no coincidence that the sounds which describe their weaponry emphasize that difference. Goliath had a *kova nehoshet al rosho ve shiryon kaskasim hu lavush v-mishkal ha-shiryon ha-meshet alaphim shekalim ne-hoshet* (I Sam. 17:5). David on the other hand: *va-yikah maklo be-yado va-yivhar lo hamishah haluke a-vanim min ha-nahal* (I Sam. 17:40).

The harsh "sh" sounds describing Goliath's weaponry evoke the clashing sounds of swords upon shields, while the ethereal "h" sounds describe the staff and stones with which David, trusting in the Lord, dared the giant Philistine champion. Thus, sounds, apart from words, are a meaningful device in the hands of a skilled writer.

LEITMOTIFS

Long before Wagner used *leitmotifs* in the form of melodic phrases in his musical works to emphasize recurrent ideas and themes, the Book of Samuel used such devices with consummate skill. It contains many plots and sub-plots, that subtly lead from one to the other, or are the consequence of a preceding one. I shall limit myself to three such themes: (1) the Holy Ark, (2) the roof, and (3) hair.

1. The *leitmotif* of the Holy Ark marks the ending of one era and the start of a new one. It had rested at Shiloh during the ministration of Eli, until it was brought to a battle with the Philistines at Aphek where it was captured. After many years and many peregrinations, it was brought by David to Jerusalem, its final destination. Thus within this subplot, the Holy Ark turned into a powerful motif for the emergence of Jerusalem as the national and religious center of the United Monarchy.

2. *And it came to pass at eventide, that David . . . walked upon the **roof** of the king's house, and from the **roof** he saw the woman bathing* (II Sam. 11:2). We of course know the sequel; that he slept with this woman, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, while her husband was engaged in a major war against Ammon. Uriah, summoned by the King to Jerusalem, refused to cohabit with his wife who by now was carrying David's child, and was subsequently killed in battle in a plot hatched by the King and executed by Joab. The finale is the prophet Nathan's courageous condemnation of the King: *'I will raise up evil against thee out of thine house, and I will take thine wives . . . and give them unto thine neighbor'* (12:11).

In later years, Absalom, in his rebellion against his father, temporarily occupied Jerusalem. In accordance with the advice of Ahitophel, he set up a tent *upon the **roof** of the house and went in into his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel* (16:22). Here the *leitwort* "roof" serves as the symbol of measure for measure. On the roof David committed his greatest sin, and it is on the roof that he is humiliated by his own son.

3. There may be an ironic twist to Absalom's death, for we are told that defeated and fleeing on his mule from David's men, his hair was caught and held in the boughs of a terebinth (18:9). Scripture devotes two verses to describing Absalom's beauty and especially his hair (14:25-26). Thus Mishnah Sotah 1:8 insists: "Absalom gloried in his hair, hence he was suspended by it."

THE ROBE

The robe is a motif that weaves its way like a red thread throughout the entire Book of Samuel, assuming profound mystical symbolism. It makes its first appearance when Hannah, having dedicated the child Samuel at the sanctuary of Shiloh *made him a little **robe***, and brought one to him from year to year (I Sam.

2:19). Is the author only telling us of a mother's love for a child, or should the reader expect that it may have a significance as yet unclear to him?

As the story unfolds, we find the robe motif in the dramatic confrontation between King Saul and the prophet Samuel, which led to a total break between the two. *As Samuel turned to go away, he laid hold upon the skirt of his robe and it rent* (15:27). Thereupon, Samuel proclaimed that the Lord had rent the kingdom of Israel and *given it to a neighbor of thine that is better than thou* (15:28).

There is, I believe, intended ambiguity in who rent whose robe. It matters not whose robe was rent, for the narrator wished the reader to focus on the "robe" itself. It is an omen. The kingship will be turned over to someone, not yet identified. In the next incident, again involving a "robe," comes the beginning of a hint as to who that person is. Jonathan, striking a lasting friendship with David, *stripped himself of the robe that was upon him and gave it to David* (18:4). We are alerted to a symbolic act. Jonathan not only conferred a princely gift on the simple shepherd but, as it were, abdicated his role as heir to Saul. In this act the narrator most skillfully indicated who the neighbor is *that is better than thou*.

We note a progression in the growing significance of the robe. In the following episode it turned into a veritable nemesis for Saul. The King, not entirely unjustified, relentlessly pursued David, who, with his men, sought shelter in one of the caves in En-gedi. By chance, King Saul entered that particular cave, thus falling into the hands of David who, instead of laying a hand on the King, *cut off the skirt of Saul's robe privily* (24:5). David was fully aware of the implications of his deed: *David's heart smote him because he had cut off Saul's skirt* (24:6). It is in the open now; David is the one who will inherit the kingship.

The "robe" makes its appearance for the last time in the sad necromantic performance of the diviner of En-dor, who brought up the image of an old man *covered with the robe* (28:14). Thus the circle is closed. Samuel's career, that began with a robe, ended here. All along, the robe became the symbol of Saul's downfall and the coming to power of the young David. What wealth of meaning has the great author of the Book of Samuel hidden in this *leitwort* alone. Again, it is up to the reader to unravel this hidden treasure.

DRAMA

Samuel, Saul, and David are the three *dramatis personae* in the Book of Samuel. However, clustered around these central figures is a host of other personalities: Eli the priest and Nathan the prophet; Joab and Abner, the opposing military leaders; Jonathan and Michal, the children of Saul; Amnon, Absalom, Tamar, Adonijah, and Solomon, David's children; Ahitophel and Hushai, Absalom's two advisers; the knave Nabal and his clever wife Abigail. One dramatic event follows another throughout the entire book without a respite, and the whole gamut of emotions, love and hate, ambitions and frustrations, achievements and failures, victories and defeats, run through it all.

Even love is not stable, for Michal's love for David turns into contempt and that of Amnon for Tamar into outright hatred. There is even a shifting in the friendship between Jonathan and David. At first, their inequality in status is duly noted. Later on, with the growing popularity of David, and the fact that he was now Saul's son-in-law, they are equal in status (I Sam. 20:14-15). At the end, Jonathan admits ' , , and thou shalt be king over Israel and I shall be next unto thee' (I Sam. 23:17).

Consider fathers and sons. The sons of Eli and of Samuel are corrupt. Saul's relationship to his son Jonathan is fraught with tension. David, a great king and too doting a father, is indirectly responsible for the deaths of two of his sons, Amnon and Absalom, and perhaps even that of Adonijah.

TWO DRAMATIC EPISODES

1. Joab and Abner:

We are told that Abner, the commander of Saul's army, had a confrontation with Joab, the commander of David's forces, and in the fierce battle that ensued, Abner's men were routed. Asahel, Joab's youngest brother, pursued Abner, who when he recognized his opponent as Joab's brother, implored him not to engage in a fight. Asahel insisted on combat and was slain. A short time thereafter, Abner, who had made Saul's son Ish-bosheth ruler over the Northern tribes, was disappointed in him and initiated negotiations with David to unify the Northern and Southern Kingdoms under his rule. When Joab, who had not been involved in these negotiations, found out about them he intercepted Abner and killed him, much to David's chagrin. David was furious that his chances to become king of

a united monarchy nearly collapsed because of this politically stupid act on the part of Joab.

Seen from Joab's perspective, it is stated that he killed Abner to avenge the death of Asahel. The reader may also look for additional motives and will find that Joab was no fool but a man of pride and sensitivity. A highly successful captain of David's forces, he must have wondered why he was excluded from these momentous negotiations. Was the price of unification the appointment of Abner as commander of both armies? From what we know of Joab, he would never have tolerated that.

There is a sad sequel to this episode. Thirty-three years later, shortly before his death, David charged his son Solomon to execute Joab for what he had done to Abner.

2. Absalom's rebellion:

On the surface, the narrative seems to be mum as to what brought about Absalom's rebellion. Yet, there are sufficient hints to present a rather comprehensive picture of the problems that nearly toppled David's regime. We are told about Absalom's beauty and the exaggerated care and pride he took with the hair on his head. It would seem that the narrator wanted to draw attention to a narcissistic character, one who exuded charm -- not unlike his father David -- which led to a sense of self-importance and ambition.

Absalom felt deep resentment toward his father for not punishing or even rebuking his son Amnon for raping and then humiliating Absalom's sister Tamar by ordering his servant: *'Put now this woman out from me, and bolt the door after her'* (II Sam. 13:17). However, for a rebellion to materialize there must be some grounds for disaffection with the present regime. Again, on the surface there is no indication of discontent with the popular David, yet it must have existed. In the earlier years of his reign it is stated: *And David reigned over all Israel; and David executed justice and righteousness* (II Sam. 8:15). There is an enumeration of his inner circle of advisors at this time. Later in his reign there is a similar listing, but with a most significant addition: Adoram, who is over the levy (that is, forced labor gangs) (II Sam. 20:24). To the freedom-loving Israelites, this unpopular innovation must have been a cause for trouble and dissen-

sion. We note later that at the beginning of Rehoboam's reign this same Adoram was stoned to death by the people (I Kg. 12:18).

These factors, coupled with the demagoguery of Absalom, led to the painful rebellion.

TRAGEDY

All these events, tensions, and clashes, are masterfully related by the great author of the Book of Samuel. Yet the peak of his narrative power is reached in his portrayal of the tragedy of King Saul.

Saul reached the nadir of his career and the most tragic point in his life when he made inquiries about his future from the woman diviner of En-dor. What made him do it? Was it not he who had forbidden recourse to ghosts and familiar *spirits in the land* (I Sam. 28:3)? The Philistines had gathered a powerful force at Gilboa against Saul's men. The King made every effort to receive Divine guidance but when Saul inquired of the Lord, *the Lord answered him not, neither by the Urim nor by the prophets* (28:6). Through his own doing, he had brought about this state of total isolation. Having repeatedly disobeyed God's commands conveyed to him by the prophet Samuel, he had fallen from His favor. In his obsession with David, he had the priests of Nob, wardens of the *urim* and *tumim*, killed because they had aided David when he was fleeing from the King's wrath. One feels Saul's utter desperation and dire need for the inspired leadership of David and the tested military savvy of Joab when he is about to face the superior forces of the Philistines alone. Then, he heard the ghost of Samuel at En-dor tell him: *'Tomorrow your sons and you will be with me [i.e., dead] and the Lord will deliver the Israelite forces into the hands of the Philistines'* (28:19). That was the final blow and his ultimate tragedy.

There is a question regarding the encounter at En-dor. Was this gruesome scene real or mummery? The narration offers powerful hints that the entire apparition was an imposture. It is told that when Saul inquired of the necromancer, *'What seest thou?'* she described what she saw and only then *Saul perceived that it was Samuel!* (28:14). She saw and Saul heard Samuel addressing him. Classical Jewish commentators and thinkers were divided in their opinions on the possibility of necromancy. While all denounced the practice, the great rationalists such as Gaon Hofni ben-Samuel, Maimonides, Ralbag, and Ibn Ezra, among

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others, considered that the incident was a fraud and the address of Samuel was the act of a ventriloquist. Here again, the artistry of the narrator leaves the decision to the reader. What is important is that Saul, in his state of great anxiety, believed what he heard and *fell straightway his full length upon the earth* (28:20).

Nevertheless, Saul engaged the Philistines in battle, in which his forces were routed, three of his sons -- including Jonathan -- were killed, and he himself committed suicide rather than fall into the hands of his enemies.

A touching finale is added to this story. The Philistines, upon finding the body of the fallen King, fastened it to the wall of Beth-Shean, together with the bodies of his sons. The men of Jabesh-gilead heard of this desecration and dared to remove the bodies and give them an honorable burial. Another cycle was closed. Saul, in his bright beginnings as King, had rescued Jabesh-gilead from the Ammonites, and now upon his death its people honored their debt to him.

In his portrayal of Saul, the narrator has awakened in us great sympathy for the tragic King. We become increasingly aware of Saul's inner conflicts, personality flaws, and possible mental disorder which in the end cause his downfall. An almost Greek tragedy.

NOTES

1. Julius A. Brewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1951) p. 21.

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