

Obedience

I want to begin by looking closely at the brief I was given for today's talk so that I can make sure what we are attempting. I will then try to outline how I think we might try to achieve this objective.

"Turning away from disobedience in the fourth of the Old Testament series we will look at what happens to those who obey God, focusing on the books of Kings and Chronicles and the figures of Samuel, Saul and David."

For me five quite separate questions emerge here.

1. What do we mean by the word "those"
2. In what context may we talk about obedience?
3. How does this work for Samuel?
4. How does this work for Saul?
5. What is David's interpretation of obedience?

1 "Those" For ladies and gentlemen here this morning who may have undertaken serious theological studies in the past, I intend to explore the vexed question of corporate personality. And for anyone who isn't familiar with this – let me explain. It has sometimes been suggested that among primitive people there was no idea of the importance of individualism. Life was all about what the group did. Right, wrong, holiness or sinfulness were states that applied to the group and not to the individual.

2. Context of obedience – The events we shall be considering were eventually written down by people who lived life according to the precepts and standards of the Book of Deuteronomy. So unless we understand exactly where Deuteronomy is coming from in matters of correct behaviour and obedience, we shall just be waffling.

3 The personality of Samuel – despite two books which bear his name – factually we are told precious little about him. As an agent of God's will however and as someone who on earth oversaw the transition from tribal league to national entity, he is such an important character.

4. Saul – the first real king of Israel. Saul, I believe has been judged badly by those who wrote about him. He desperately attempted to grapple with the conflicting pressures of statesmanship and religion. I don't believe he had a firm hand on either and eventually succumbed to a mixture of betrayal and depression.

5 David – an astute ambitious politician, a schemer – not quite the statesman his son Solomon was but someone who was determined not to repeat the errors of Saul. On the other hand a man with considerable weaknesses of a personal nature which almost brought about his downfall when dealing, or failing to deal with members of his own family.

That is the scheme. I hope to deal with the first four headings before our coffee break and the topic of David, which is such a massive undertaking once you have fortified yourselves with sustenance.

Can we talk about individual obedience and disobedience at such an early period in Israel's history?

It is possible the terms could only be applied to groups

If one is obedient – it follows that one must be obedient to someone or something – and, it has been maintained, as there was no concept of personal salvation, it throws into question whether an individual can be described as obedient. It may be far better to see obedience as something that applies to the whole group.

The background to this idea called “corporate personality” seems to have come from the studies of Emile Durkheim and Lucien Levy-Bruhl who employed the notion of primitive psychology among early tribal ancestors. They claimed that individuals saw themselves as part of what they called a psychical unity and their values were indistinguishable from the values of the clan as a whole.

This means that when they did good things the tribe would flourish

When they did bad things there would be group retribution from God.

The idea of corporate personality was eagerly taken up by H Wheeler Robinson who felt that the idea smoothed out a lot of the problems in the post Exodus narratives about the obedience and disobedience of the people as they wandered through the wilderness. It also accounted for some of the puzzling features in the book of Psalms which seem to make reference to individual virtues and values but which have at the same time community implications.

Robinson cited 5 examples in support of his theory, which I am not going to enumerate this morning but we might just visit one to show you what he meant.

In Joshua 7 we have the story of Achan.

Achan, you may remember, was an Israelite who took part in the battle for the city of Jericho. The instruction to those taking part was that they should perform what we call the ban *herem*. This particularly unpleasant exercise meant that everyone and everything from the captured city should be devoted to God. Men, women, children and animals should be put to death and all goods including gold and silver belonged to God.

However it appears that Achan had kept back for himself several bits of booty, a mantle, two hundred shekels of silver and a gold bar.

The theft was only discovered after the Israelite army had moved on to the next town after Jericho, a city called Ai. There a small force of Israelites was defeated by the men of Ai and put to rout.

The question was therefore asked. “Why had the army been defeated?” and the answer was disclosed to Joshua by God that Israel had sinned and that some of the booty from Jericho destined to be devoted to God had been stolen.

There was of course a subsequent enquiry and by means of the sacred lot it was discovered that Achan had removed the aforementioned items and that they were residing in the ground underneath his tent. As punishment Achan and all his family and all his possessions including his oxen asses and sheep were stoned to death and their remains burnt and buried under a heap of stones.

Robinson's conclusion on Achan's wrongdoing was that in ancient Israel the misdemeanours of an individual had implications for the group as a whole. The people became displeasing to God and lost his favour – ie they lost the next battle because one individual sinned. With this

and other examples the view came to be held that terms (such as sin and disobedience; favour and obedience) were not simply aspects of individual personality but had implications for the tribe or indeed the nation as a whole.

Johannes Pedersen, and Aubrey Johnson in his great work on sacral kingship took up the idea and certainly when I first read theology it was rather taken as read that individuality and ideas such as personal holiness were not part of Israelite thinking until the time of second Isaiah who wrote after the Exile.

I think that is an oversimplification which has not stood the test of time. The whole idea that primitive people progressed from a communal group mentality to recognition as individuals really will not do.

J R Porter cast serious doubt on Robinson's hypothesis pointing out that there might have been other legal reasons why Achan was dealt with in the way in which he was. J W Rogerson also insisted that we distinguish between corporate personality and corporate responsibility.

This I believe has implications for books like the book of Psalms, where the 1st person pronoun is used implying that an individual is speaking and yet the context is clearly one of national importance as may be seen in Psalm 89. Here the first person pronoun "I" refers to the king who indeed has a corporate responsibility for the nation. The "I" does not refer to the nation as a whole.

People such as a king or a judge are representatives of the group to which they belong and individual actions may indeed have consequences for the group.

However in the realm of personality, morality, talents and abilities I feel we are very much on our own. Try for a moment considering this the other way round. Even in some of the earliest parts of the Old Testament we read that God chose certain individuals because of their personal qualities not because they embodied or even represented a particular group.

Moses was chosen by God Exodus chapter 3 as an individual who possessed certain gifts.

I think also of some of the stories about Abraham, not all of them, but some, which clearly have their origin in an individual who displays personal qualities – such as obedience.

Genesis 22?

I think the second area of interest for us this morning should be the book of Deuteronomy.

I focus on this for two reasons.

1st because one of the dominant themes of the book is “obedience to God”

2nd is because the author or authors of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel where the lives of our characters Samuel, Saul and David are found is someone who is described as the Deuteronomic historian. By that we may infer that the historical works of 1&2 Samuel and 1 &2 Kings were put together by people whose mind-set was in sympathy with the principles of Deuteronomy.

Book of Deuteronomy

In its present form the book of Deuteronomy is presented as if it were a sermon given by Moses to Israel in Moab shortly before the people crossed over the river Jordan to take possession of the Promised Land. As they stood on the threshold of a new way of life with all its opportunities and dangers, Moses exhorted the people to remember God’s gracious acts of their departure from Egypt, the Exodus and the time spent in the wilderness. They were to hold firm to the covenant pledge which they made when confronted with the temptations, both social and religious, which they would experience in the land of Canaan.

A closer inspection of the book shows that it is not all of one piece. Around a nucleus of laws collected in chapters 12-26 are clustered no less than three addresses

A The First Address – chapters 1 – 4

1. Introduction (1:1-5)
2. Moses’ summary of events since the departure from Mount Horeb (1:6-3:29)
3. Moses’ exhortation to Israel (4:1-40)
4. Appendix (4:41-43)

B The Second Address – chapters 5-26 & 28

1. Introduction (4:44-49)
2. Moses exhortation to Israel (5 – 11)
3. Detailed laws to be obeyed (12-26)
4. Conclusion (28)

C The Third Address - chapters 29 – 30

D Supplements

1. The Shechem covenant ceremony (27)
2. Moses’ last instructions (31)
3. Poems : Song of Moses (32) Blessing of Moses (33)
4. Narrative of Moses death (34)

Obedience as a central message of the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 28:1 “And if you obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. ² And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.”

That sentence comes as part of the conclusion to the second address of Moses in the book. The entire work is a beautifully crafted piece of literature. Its range of expression both in Hebrew and in English show that the final form of the work used a whole range of literary devices to bring home the urgency of the need to obey God.

If you look up in a Bible concordance the Hebrew verb shamea “obey” you will find that it is only used 10 times.

BUT there are other phrases as well

In chapter 4 the people are reminded “Give heed to the statutes and ordinances which I teach you and do them.”

Of the Ten Commandments, recited in Deuteronomy 5 Moses says “Hear O Israel the statutes and ordinances, which I speak in your hearing this day. You shall learn them and be careful to do them.”

Much the same is said of the Shema in chapter 6 “Hear O Israel the Lord our God is one...and you shall love the Lord...” It is to be taught to the children, to be bound upon your hand and as a frontlet before the eyes and written on the door posts.

In chapter 8 they are to keep the commandments so as to live and multiply and this is backed up by a warning against disobedience of following strange gods.

Chapter 10 speaks of obedience in terms of “fearing God and walking in his ways” 10:12 Or “fearing God and cleaving to him.”

In chapter 11 obedience is not only about keeping the commandments but it is linked to blessings. “Behold I set before you this day a blessing and a curse. The blessing if you obey the commandments and a curse if you do not obey.”

There are many other terms which serve as an injunction to obey God, such as “hearkening to the voice of the Lord and acting upon it.”

Perhaps one of the more unusual demands for obedience is one laid upon the king. 17:14 “I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me”; ¹⁵ you may indeed set as king over you, him whom the LORD your God will choose..”

But then we get

17:18 “And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself, in a book a copy of this law... and he shall read it all the days of his life that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by keeping all the words of this law and doing them...so that he may not turn aside from the commandments and may continue long in his kingdom.

I hope this small snap-shot from Deuteronomy will encourage you to explore the enormous range of sayings used to instil the idea of obedience among the Israelites.

Progressing with Deuteronomy

Perhaps we can turn for a moment away from simply what the text says to consider what the thinking behind the book was and what implications it has for our study.

Who wrote the book?

Sadly I don't think it was Moses and that is not simply because it contains an account of his death in chapter 34.

I have already indicated that I think the language used in Deuteronomy is very colourful and varied. Phrases such as “to hearken to the voice of the Lord;” “To go after or serve other

gods” “that you may prolong your days in the land” “that it may be well with you” “to do that which is evil (or good) in the eyes of the Lord.”

The prose sections here are very similar to prose sections found in the writings of the prophet Jeremiah. Given that it is therefore possible that it may have been a characteristic way of writing in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE. It is also interesting to note research that was done by Moshe Weinfeld on the Lachish Letters – these were a series of inscribed potsherds discovered in 1935

The Lachish letters sometimes called *Hoshaiah Letters*, are a series of letters written in carbon ink in Ancient Hebrew on clay ostraca. The letters were discovered at the excavations at Lachish (which by road is about 45 miles south west of Jerusalem) The individual ostraca probably come from the same broken clay pot and were most likely written over a short period of time. They were written to Yaush (or Ya'osh), possibly the commanding officer at Lachish, from Hoshaiah (Hoshayahu), a military officer stationed in a city close to Lachish. Among other things the letters also contain informational reports and requests from Hoshaiah to his superior. The letters were probably written shortly before Lachish fell to the Babylonian army of King Nebuchadnezzar in 588/6 BC during the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah (ref. Jeremiah 34:7).

Compare for example these passages. Each begins with the phrase **ועתה**

Deut 4:1 And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes
Deut 10:12 And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you
Deut 10:22 ...and now the LORD your God has made you as the stars of heaven

Jeremiah 2:18	And now what do you gain by going to Egypt
Jeremiah 7:13	And now, because you have done all these things
Jeremiah 44:7	And now thus says the LORD God of hosts

Lachish letter 3 And now open the ear of your servant concerning the letter
Lachish letter 4 And now according to everything which my Lord has sent
Lachish letter 9 And now give ten loaves of bread and two measures of wine

What does this tell us about the book of Deuteronomy?

This is one small piece of evidence among many others that has led scholars to consider that at least part of the written form of the book of Deuteronomy was published during the late 7th century BCE.

Those of you with a very precise knowledge of the second book of Kings may remember that in Chapter 22 of 2 Kings there was a king of Judah, reigning in Jerusalem called Josiah.

There we are told that in the eighteenth year of King Josiah the High Priest in the Temple told the king's secretary "I have found a book of law in the house of the Lord." The book was shown to the secretary – a man called Shaphan, and he subsequently read the book to the king.

On the basis of the words of this book, it seems, that King Josiah carried out a thoroughgoing reform of worship in Judah and Jerusalem. Cultic objects, vessels, statues and pillars dedicated to Baal or his female consort Asherah were forbidden. All were taken out of the temple and burnt outside Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron, Cult prostitutes lost their jobs, so too did mediums and wizards and Josiah commanded all the people to keep the Passover of the Lord – for no such Passover had been kept since the days of the Judges.

What conclusions may we draw from this?

When scholars first noticed the similarities and possible associations between the book of Deuteronomy and the reform instigated by King Josiah. It was widely believed that Deuteronomy might have been a pious fraud. Certainly the book was found in the temple – but was the ink dry when it was found?

In other words was Deuteronomy written so that Josiah could bring about his reforms?

Very quickly I think people came to realize that was not the case.

If one just reads chapters 12-26 of Deuteronomy it is clear that there are considerable parallels between what is said there and what Josiah instigated by way of reform, but the book of Deuteronomy is far more complex than that.

I think we would be on firmer ground if we recognised that Deuteronomy contains very ancient legal stipulations, which may indeed come from the time of Moses himself, but that this material has been recast and reinterpreted for the 7th century BCE.

I think it is much more likely that the Deuteronomic Torah had its home somewhere in the northern kingdom.

I think that for a number of reasons.

1. The Mosaic covenant was popular there in the early period of the monarchy
2. Shechem – in the North was where Joshua held the first covenant renewal ceremony
3. The central sanctuary or "special place" mentioned in Deuteronomy is never named. If it had been Jerusalem, one would have expected it to have said so.
4. Therefore it is possible that when Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 721BCE, fleeing exiles brought the book with them and for safe keeping deposited it in the temple at Jerusalem

Why is all of this so important?

You came here hoping to hear about obedience in relation to Samuel, Saul and David and all I seem to have done is to talk about the word "those" and the composition of the book of Deuteronomy.

However the publication of this book led to a reformation which defined the meaning of the word "obedience"

It is from this time onwards that we begin to speak about a scholarly group who we call by the singular term – the Deuteronomic Historian.

This group of scholars had as their touchstone a very definite understanding of the terms good and bad, obedience and disobedience. It was in fact the definition given in the book of Deuteronomy from the mouth of Moses.

These scholars began writing the history of Israel from the time of the entry into the land until their own day – Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings

In fairness there were several editions of the Deuteronomic history, the last of which may well have been in the late 5th century BCE just before Israel came out of Exile in Babylon. They collected and wrote the stories of Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon – and all the kings of the Northern and Southern kingdoms and they judged those reigns by the standards of Deuteronomy.

Because we have no other descriptive histories of the time apart from the books of Chronicles we only see these personalities through the eyes of the Deuteronomic writers. Missing are of course the often referred to “Books of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah” mentioned at the end of the life of each king (Example 2 Kings 15:6)

So if one picks a certain king – be it Saul, David or anyone else – the only historical account we have is the one provided by the Deuteronomic Historian. If we are lucky there may be a writing prophet who lived at the same time and from whom we might glean another insight, or we may be able to discover an archaeological artefact which gives more information. Beyond that we firmly lodged in the realm of supposition.

The Books of Chronicles

The Chronicler’s work is actually a late revision or reinterpretation of Israel’s history from a priestly point of view. It was written after the Exile and included a detailed account of the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah. Sometimes these historians copied word for word accounts from the Deuteronomic history. At other times they ignored or changed the tradition according to their interests. They emphasized aspects of their tradition which were relevant to their own day. Samuel is only mentioned 6 times in the whole work – and usually in conjunction with someone else. Saul does a little better but the Chronicler only refers to him in one chapter and there he describes Saul and his sons in the battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. That is it for Saul and he lost the battle because he was unfaithful to the Lord.

The authors of the books of Chronicles gloried in David’s military accomplishments and the splendour of his kingdom. They emphasized his covenant with God that guaranteed the continuation of the Davidic house. There is almost something Messianic in their depiction of him. He is seen as a very religious man, who organised the worshipping community, who made Jerusalem a holy city, a religious capital. It was David who conceived the building of the temple, who organised the music and assigned the Levites their duties. The books of Chronicles leave out anything which might detract from David’s messianic nature, such as his early life as an outlaw, his adultery with Bathsheba, Absalom’s rebellion and his death-bed instructions to liquidate Joab and Shimei

I am left not being terribly sure that the Chronicler’s accounts of Samuel, Saul and David are going to further our studies.

Samuel

Samuel is a curious character about whom, I suspect, we know very little. Any independent sources of his life have been consumed by first one tradition and then another.

He is seen as a judge.

He is described as a priest.

Samuel is clearly regarded by the sources as a prophet.

Some sources feel he was in touch with the people and sensitive to their needs.

Alternative sources clearly regard him as a stalwart of the religious *status quo*.

The whole corpus of material is completed by a birth and vocation stories which some commentators believe are legendary.

Partly because of the literature that has gone before in the book of Judges it is natural to assume that one of Samuel's roles was to act as a judge in Israel. This is reinforced by the summary in 1 Sam 7:15-17 "Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpah and he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would come back to Ramah for his home was there and he administered justice to Israel."

I feel with Samuel that the political situation in Israel had already begun to develop. What is described in this passage is a long way from the charismatic judges mentioned in the book of the same name. Samuel is an administrative judge dispensing justice almost in the way that a local governor would do, From this we must deduce that Samuel was seen as one of the guardians of God's law.

There are times in the narrative that Samuel seems to fulfil the role of a priest. In the reference I have just mentioned he is described as building an altar.

In Chapter 9:13 the people tell Saul that Samuel has gone to bless the sacrifice. In chapter 13:8 Saul waits 7 days for Samuel to come and make a burnt offering and a peace offering. His role as a priest was also stressed by the later tradition in 1 Chronicles 6. If in fact David did succeed Eli at the shrine at Shiloh it is conceivable that he was regarded, like Eli, as a priest.

Was Samuel a prophet? Despite the reservations of some scholars, the text of the early part of 1 Samuel seems to indicate that he was a prophet.

The statement that "the word of Lord was rare" in those days changes fairly rapidly once the boy Samuel reaches maturity. Through this medium he transmits God's will to Eli.

At the beginning of chapter 9, although the location has changed, Samuel is described as a Seer.

I think last time we met I spoke at length about different sorts of prophecy in the early period of Israel's history. Do consult my impressions on that on the website if you need to trace ideas on details. Basically I believe that the term Seer **הַרְאָה** (ro-eh) was a person to whom one would go to find a missing object. A person as we would say these days who possesses second sight. This seems to have been the way in which Samuel was regarded, although it is a description which one of the editors of 1 Samuel feels needs to be explained because in 1 Sam 9:9 we find "for he who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer"

It is of course possible that this editor of the book does not wish Samuel to be written off as just some sort of local holy man with a gift of locating objects. He is aware that Samuel's life and the life of the nation as a whole are to be directed by God through the mouth of Samuel. Many of the unpopular statements, judgements and oracles that appear in the next few chapters express the will of God as transmitted faithfully by Samuel. What God commands for Saul and what subsequently leads to the anointing of a second figure David are really God's commands spoken through the mouth of Samuel the prophet.

So far what have we learnt about Samuel and obedience?

In a way this is a massive character and in common with Moses, someone whose life has gathered traditions about him. He is obedient to the will of God at times almost in a way which is sickening. I am afraid I am perhaps only person who finds himself squirming when the legend about the young boy Samuel is read. My heart really goes out to poor old Eli – he has a rotten family because his sons are up to no good, he has had to nurture and educate this precocious child prodigy and then he gets the news that the iniquity of his house is about to be punished and “shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever!” Nevertheless if it is obedience you are after the matter seems indisputable as far as Samuel is concerned

We can't really leave this personality Samuel without outlining the difficulty which is faced in these early chapters.

There seems to be a dual tradition in 1 Samuel 1-12. In both Samuel is described as playing an important role in Israel's fateful decision to establish a monarchy.

One, described by some, as the earlier tradition 1 Samuel 9:1 – 10:16 and 1 Samuel 11 contains the story of how Saul arrives in Samuel's presence searching for his father's asses which have been lost. In this source Samuel turns out to be more than a local seer, who Saul was hoping might be able to reveal the location of the missing beasts. He is the prophet, who in the name of the God of Israel could appoint a king. Seeing Saul as a man who could save the people from the power of the Philistines and other enemies, Samuel took the initiative and secretly anointed Saul as prince over the people.

According to this tradition, Saul was not publicly acclaimed as king until he had shown his victorious leadership in the battle described in 1 Samuel 11 in defence of the men of Jabesh Gilead.

The other tradition is found in 1 Samuel 7:3 – 8:22, 10:17-27 and chapter 12. Here the picture of Samuel is somewhat different. Samuel is not called a seer but a judge. This is a continuation of the source which saw Samuel himself triumph against the Philistines, although he is said not to have accomplished this by military leadership, but by prayer and sacrificial rite.

In this tradition we find nothing but divine disapproval of the anointing of the king. The idea of the monarch was displeasing to Samuel and by the same token, to God.

The Israelite people were trying to set up a stable political government imitating the nations around them. This attempt though was interpreted as a rejection of God himself.

It is in this source that we find Samuel trying desperately to dissuade the people from such action by warning them what would happen if they had a king. He would limit their freedom, subject them to tyranny

Despite Samuel's warnings the people insisted and Samuel grudgingly went along with them.

1 Samuel 10:17-27 report's Samuel's selection of Saul by lot and the latter was acclaimed king at the city of Mizpah. Then in chapter 12 Samuel we read Samuel's valedictory speech as the last judge of Israel.

Back to Obedience

Well, as one might say, it all depends on what you mean by "obedience"

In the first source Samuel is seen as aware and alert to the needs of the people in the face of the Philistines. He is obedient to the will and needs of the people.

In the second source he is obedient to the will of God as portrayed in those chapters.

Of the two I think it is the second which more faithfully transmits the view which eventually came to be held by Samuel.

This reluctant acquiescence may be behind his later unreasonable attitude towards Saul and his subsequent transfer of allegiance to David.

It is difficult because the view is of course in tune with the final conclusion of the Deuteronomistic Historian – that in the last resort the whole experiment of kingship had been a mistake.

Even so what we are seeing here I think is an authentic tradition probably accepted by Samuel himself that kingship was a disappointing direction in which the nation had to go.

I think I want to stop the evaluation of Samuel at this point although I realize his life and work continues for at least another 16 chapters, but Samuel's story from chapter 13 onwards is inexorably tied up with the story of Saul.

Saul

The rise to power, the life and death of Saul are recorded in chapters 8 to 31 of the first book of Samuel.

We need to refer again to those two sources which document Saul's rise to the position of king.

Just by way of reminder

1 Samuel 9:1 – 10:16 and 1 Samuel 11 contain a story in which Samuel willingly, and at

God's behest, anoints this popular young man as prince (nagid נָגִיד) over the people.

Saul is sent on his way and there is an account of how he becomes involved with a "band of the prophets" probably what we should describe as ecstatic prophets. It rather looks as if Saul returned home and life continued as normal until a crisis arose which would demand a response along the sort of charismatic principle we saw with other judges.

Sure enough in chapter 11 we read how Nahash the Ammonite besieged the city of Jabesh Gilead and devised a peace treaty only if the men of the town agreed to have their right eyes gouged out.

Like Gideon before him, Saul imbued with the Spirit of God called up the tribes of the nation to come and support him in the fight against Nahash. The skirmish seems to have been brief, the siege was raised and the Ammonites defeated.

With Samuel in tow the people went to Gilgal and there they made Saul king.

1 Samuel 7:3 – 8:22, 10:17-27 and chapter 12.

Saul doesn't actually appear in the early part of this source. It is a discussion between the elders of Israel and Samuel. The former request, that Samuel appoints a king to govern them "like all the nations." As I have already said this is displeasing to Samuel and God.

Then there is the protracted discourse about rejection between the Lord and Samuel.

So Saul doesn't really appear until verses 20-24 of chapter 10, where the author tells us that Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near and the tribe of Benjamin was chosen by the sacred lot. This is whittled down to Saul the son of Kish. However Saul cannot immediately be found and is said to be hiding among the luggage. He is fished out and acclaimed by the people who shout "Long live the king"

That is it – Saul actually says nothing during the remainder of this source. Chapter 12 contains more warnings and signs against the populace showing both Samuel's and God's displeasure.

One of the passages we shall have to consider when trying to evaluate Saul's character is 1 Samuel 13. Here Saul had been told that Samuel would appear in support of Saul's inevitable battle against the Philistines within 7 days. When this period of time had elapsed and Samuel had not re-appeared, Saul was aware that his troops were beginning to desert. So he offered the burnt offering himself. No sooner had he finished than who should appear but Samuel, who was furious that Saul has made the offering without authority.

"You have done foolishly" claims Samuel.

"The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel for ever. But now your kingdom shall not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart... and all this is because you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God."

This seems to me to be totally over the top and, given the circumstances it seems difficult to know what else Saul could have done.

Nevertheless on the score card so to speak – this one goes down as disobedience.

What is interesting is that in the following chapter where Saul and Jonathan do battle with the Philistines God still seems to be on the side of Saul.

In 1 Samuel 15 the break between Samuel and Saul – indeed the break between Saul and God becomes complete.

Samuel despatches Saul to fight against Amalek. This is as a punishment for opposing Israel as they came out of Egypt. Samuel says “Go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

This, what seems to us to be barbaric, was the typical fate of any defeated nation at the time of Saul, We know that the ban *herem* was performed with rigour after any major siege or battle.

Saul defeated Amalek but brought the king Agag back to the camp, along with the best of the sheep and oxen which they were about to offer as a sacrifice.

Once again Samuel is furious

Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices

As in obeying the voice of the Lord?

Behold to obey is better than sacrifice

And to hearken than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is as the sin of divination

And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.

Because you have rejected the word of the Lord

He has also rejected you from being king.

There follows a bit of play acting more reminiscent of Fawlty Towers or the Barchester Chronicles whereby Samuel’s robe is torn as Saul attempts to reason with him. It reinforces Samuel’s message that God has torn the kingdom from Saul’s grasp.

Once Samuel has hewed Agag, the king of the Amalekites, in pieces he returns to Ramah and Saul goes to his house at Gibeah and the narrator says Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death.

From there onwards in the 1st book of Samuel we are told about the anointing of David by Samuel and his life at court as a warrior in Saul’s army.

Saul’s jealousy of David increases and this forces David to become an outlaw until after the fateful battle on Mount Gilboa where Saul and his sons, including Jonathan are killed.

Conclusion

A king was demanded by the people. Saul was regarded as eminently suitable and was subsequently chosen.

Yet in the eyes of God and Samuel he is only king on sufferance. Clearly from the evidence of 1 Samuel 12 he was still on trial.

Saul failed subsequent tests in chapters 13 and 15.

The remainder of the story depicts Saul's vain struggle against David's rising fortunes. In addition to this there is a sub-plot – Saul as king was betrayed by his own family. His son Jonathan not only befriended David but declared that on the death of his father he would abdicate in favour of him.

Eventually totally rejected by Samuel and God Saul died in a futile attempt to halt the Philistine advance in a battle on Mount Gilboa 1 Samuel 31.

Saul is seen as no more than a foil to David and the latest victim in the anti-monarchic tendencies of the Deuteronomic Historian

Saul fails to measure up to the strict standards of obedience of God – as spoken through the mouth of the prophet Samuel. The spirit of the Lord departed from Saul and was given to David.

There is the text-book answer reinforced I must say by commentators ancient and modern.

Early Christian commentators saw David as one who pre-figured Christ himself

Augustine of Hippo in his commentary on Psalm 56 claimed that inasmuch as Saul persecuted David, he persecuted Christ himself

Nicholas of Lyra the 14th century Franciscan scholar depicted Saul as the figure of Satan!

D H Lawrence, in his play David, has Saul say "I am a man given over to trouble and tossed between two winds."

Even Hertzberg – author of the SCM Press commentary on the books of Samuel can only damn him with faint praise. "Saul loved by many is pious in the extreme, brave and modest, yet does not measure up to the demands of God. A life full of tragic greatness."

I am not totally convinced of the open and shut case against Saul.

From the point of view of the text and leaving aside the issue of Doeg the Edomite and the treatment of the priests at Nob in chapters 21 and 22 Saul's army remained loyal to him and there was no criticism of him by the people as a whole.

Secondly I am intrigued by the lament for Saul in 2 Samuel 1:17-27, which, it is claimed was written in the now lost Book of Jashar. It is put into the mouth of David but seems to show real affection for both Jonathan and Saul.

I believe Saul was a willing lad, brave, talented and anxious to do what was best. In that respect he intended to be obedient to God.

He was let down by thoughtless incompetent rulers who failed to realize the complexity of the task they were asking him to do and who, when it started to go wrong, sought a scapegoat for their own shortcomings.

The extent of Saul's fault – and faults he had.

I think he was impulsive – at times making decisions which if he had considered them more carefully would have been seen to be flawed.

I think his loyalty turned to stubbornness and a refusal to back down.

I wonder how often we have got ourselves into an argument and as the argument develops One's reason becomes so clouded with anger that there is danger that one might become irrational.

Others have suggested that Saul began to suffer from a mental illness.

That may be but I suspect he became so keyed up, so wound up that he began to make decisions that reflected his tortured stressful soul rather than his earlier vibrant spirit.

For me he's a tragic hero and one who dies with his boots on.