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Divine Approval and Support of the King Going into War: The Case of King Saul, Biblical and Hittite Descriptions¹

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Abstract

One of the most pitiful incidents in the Hebrew Bible is the request of King Saul for divine support in his last battle against the Philistines in 1 Samuel 28. The life of King Saul started with the inquiry of YHWH in chapter nine, where he was told he would become the king of Israel, and ended after his inquiry of YHWH by the woman of Ein-Dor. In both cases the mediator was Samuel the prophet. In both cases the deity sought was YHWH. The story of Saul will be read in light of the Hittite ritual texts mainly text CTH 423 which details the specific actions of the Hittite king during his pursuit of the support of his god for success in winning the war. The main issue to be discussed is the question of what indeed was the sin of Saul, for his punishment which was that he should die on the battlefield, was the most severe regarding Ancient Near Eastern rulers.

Keywords: King Saul's rituals, Biblical war rituals, Hittite and Biblical war rituals, Biblical rituals in literary usage.

Preface

It is fascinating to see how the book of Samuel has been the topic of many commentaries explaining the stories that created the

¹ A first draft of this paper was read at the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Amsterdam, July 2024. All biblical citations in English follow the ESV translation, and the Hebrew texts are according to Biblia Hebraica MT. Translations of Hittite texts are mine unless indicated differently.

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historiography of the reign of King Saul.³ The tales of Saul have presented a character who touched the heights of power and left the world in the lowest state possible. He is seen as a tragic figure, but a close reading of the texts in the first book of Samuel that portray his character reveals that the main issue in the ideological description of his life and reign is his relationship with YHWH. His fatal sin, which brought about his fall, should be viewed in regard to the cult.

In a recent article in a volume on the Book of Samuel, Paul S. Evans suggests an additional interesting view on the figure of Saul as a “multi-layered character.”⁴ He sees in the way Saul’s character is described two main flaws: the first is low self-esteem, which makes him constantly in need of empathy and support for his actions; the second is what he defines as being “superstitious.” I agree with the first flaw but think the second is invalid, in light of the cultural background and time of the composition of the Book of Samuel.⁵ Evans usefully treats, however, the gradation in the descent of Saul that brought about his downfall.

³ For clarity of the use of the term historiography for the book of Samuel see Rachelle Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel* SVT 143 (Brill, 2011), esp. 27–33. She relates to the issue of the ideological redactor, such as the Deuteronomist, by clarifying that the text “uses the past for its purposes” (a quote from R. Alter, see p. 29). I agree with her that this does not stand in contrast to the fact that the text was written by “a gifted writer.” I will suggest here that the gift is all ours, while the combination of different approaches, and maybe not just one perception of the “ideology” of the writer can be seen in the way the combined sources were intertwined. Other commentaries will be mentioned throughout the article.

⁴ Paul E. Evans, “From the Head above the Rest to No Head at All: Transformations in the Life of Saul,” in *Characters and Characterization in the Book of Samuel*, eds. Keith Bonder and Benjamin J.M. Johnson LHB/OTS 669 (T&T Clark Bloomsbury, 2020), 101–120.

⁵ Using a term such as “superstitious” seems to me a negative judgment on the entire culture of the ANE, and cannot be justified. As I will show, the idea of inquiring of the god(s) was a constant practice among leaders in the ANE, and Saul is acting accordingly. However, I will show that his inquiry actually lacked consistency, which was an integral custom in ANE divination in general, see *Mediating Between Heaven and Earth: Communication with the Divine in the Ancient Near East*, eds. C.L. Crouch, Jonathan Stökel, and Anna Elise Zernecke LHB/OTS 566 (T&T Clark, 2012). See also on divination Daniel Schwemer, “Magic Rituals: Conceptualization and performance,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, eds. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford University Press, 2011), 418–442.



In this article, I propose an additional perspective on Saul's downfall: that it may reflect two distinct literary layers. One layer narrates Saul's failure to fully carry out the *Herem* against the Amalekites, while a second layer portrays him as violating cultic law.

Introduction

The fact that kings in the ancient Near East did not embark on war campaigns without consulting their gods is common knowledge, supported by the large number of texts from Mesopotamia, Hatti, and the Hebrew Bible.⁶ A war is a divine judgement: by choosing the victor, it reveals the just party. Therefore, all wars in the ancient Near East can be considered "holy wars."⁷ There were several ways to request acknowledgement from the divine world and to receive an indication of whether it was the right time to go to war and succeed. In each case, a professional was employed to communicate with the divine world, either a diviner, a prophet, or a priest. The request had to come directly from the one pursuing or initiating the battle. Two basic forms for making an inquiry of the divine can be identified: one was submitting to the divine the questions for which professional diviners' answers were given through methods of inquiry such as oracles, dreams, or the manipulation of various tools, such as haruspicy, augury etc.; the second was by the royal-leader himself conducting a special ritual, personally appealing to the god or gods, asking whether to go into that

⁶ For detailed descriptions, see the large volume of Charlie Trimm, *Fighting for the King and the Gods: A Survey of Warfare in the Ancient Near East*, Resources for Biblical Study 88 (SBL Press, 2017). See also Ada Taggar-Cohen, "War at the Command of the Gods," *The Torah*, 2022, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/war-at-the-command-of-the-gods>.

⁷ For studies on holy war conceptions in the Hebrew Bible and the ANE see Ada Taggar-Cohen, "Rituals on the Battlefield and Historiographical Accounts: Hittite and Biblical texts," in "Now It Happened in Those Days": *Studies in Biblical, Assyrian, and Other Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Mordechai Cogan on His 75th Birthday*, eds. Amitai Baruchi-Unna et al. (Eisenbrauns, 2017), 553–584.

specific battle, or even the opposite, how to protect oneself from an enemy attack.⁸ Professionals were required for these inquiries too. These professionals assumedly had the ability to contact divine forces that enabled them to approve or disapprove the proposed war campaign actions, suggesting the predictable outcome of the battle. Polytheistic societies would appeal to different gods but in the Hebrew Bible, YHWH was the only god to whom inquiries were made by the Israelites.⁹

The life of Saul as it is narrated in the Book of Samuel up to his coronation and as a king, involves constant consulting with YHWH, and he is either given or denied an answer. His last battle, for which he was constantly requesting divine answers, is, in the end answered by the spirit of the dead; its prediction comes true and ends the life of king Saul and, in a sense, his dynasty. Why is Saul judged negatively by the divine and why must he receive the most humiliating punishment for a warrior king, that of death on the battlefield?¹⁰ This stands somehow in contrast with his devotion to YHWH as described in 1 Sam. 9 and 10, and in his building of an altar to YHWH in 1 Sam. 14:35. In the following, I will discuss the rituals conducted by Saul, in the period between his installation to kingship until his death on Mount Gilboa, to understand where his capital sin is to be found. The text in 1 Sam. declares that Saul's grave sin was his incomplete execution of the *Herem* on the Amalekites as stipulated (15, 28:18). In 1 Chronicles 10:13-

⁸ Note the case of Hezekiah, king of Judah, 2 Kings 18 on, as well as the desperate act of the king of Moab in 2 Kings 3:26-27.

⁹ This is crucial in the case of the story of Saul, as the issue of YHWH as the source of divine power is essential.

¹⁰ Note the treatment of his body by the Philistines first and then by the Yabesh-Gil'ad people, who cremated the body (1 Sam. 31: 8-13), and the final burial that took place after the intervention of King David (2 Sam. 21:14).



14, we find a different reasoning.¹¹ The Amalekites are not mentioned and there are two terms used: one that appears only twice in 1 Samuel דָרְשָׁ (seek a divine guidance) and the other מַעַל, a harsh term that is correlated with *Herem*, which means “a rebellion, transgression against the Lord, being unfaithful.”¹² The Chronicler emphasizes the term דָרְשָׁ twice in consecutive verses, which seems to be a much more serious sin in his view.

This article will focus on the literary descriptions of Saul, with the aim of showing that the understanding of the Chronicler for Saul’s sin, identified as דָרְשָׁ (did not seek a divine guidance), has to do with the ritual activities practiced or mis-practiced by Saul. It will attempt to show how the literary format in 1 Samuel builds up Saul’s failures, creating his rejection as the first king of Israel as well as his dynasty. The following discussion will read the texts on Saul, literally, linguistically, ideologically, and culturally with focus on Saul’s relations with YHWH in light of other biblical texts as well as some Hittite texts, while offering a possible two layers of a narrative regarding the sin of Saul.

The Priest on the Battlefield

Deuteronomy indicates that on the battlefield there should be a priest. Deuteronomy 20:1-4 indicates that this is in order to strengthen the support of God to the people:

¹¹ “Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore, the LORD put him to death.”

וַיָּמָת שָׁאֵל בְּמַעַל אֲשֶׁר לְאַדְבָּר יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא שִׁמְרָה וְגַם לִשְׁאָל בָּאָוֶב לְדָרְשָׁ: לֹא־דָרְשָׁ בִּיהוּה וְמִמְּרוֹת.

¹² For the meaning of the Hebrew term מַעַל see Jacob Milgrom, “The Concept of MA’AL in the Bible and the Ancient Near East,” JAOS 96 (1976): 236-247.

And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people and shall say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies: let not your heart faint. Do not fear or panic or be in dread of them, for the LORD your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.’

In the first battle of Saul against Naḥaš the Ammonite, there is no mention of a priest on the battlefield at the start, but Samuel is mentioned at the end of the battle, reacting to the demand of Saul’s supporters to kill those who were against him as a king (1 Sam. 11:12-13). This might indicate that Samuel joined the battlefield, as he was involved previously in the battle of Even Haezer (1 Sam. 7:12).¹³

As the encounters with the Philistines increase after he becomes a king, Saul wishes to prepare for war with a large number of warriors, and is waiting for the prophet Samuel, who also functions as a priest, to approach YHWH, before leaving for the battlefield. Saul, using the verb חִלֵּחַ, “plead, entreat”, explains why he started sacrificing before the arrival of Samuel, preparing for his coming, as he was late and the warriors were dispersing and leaving the king (1 Sam. 13:8-12). According to the few other occasions of the verb in other biblical texts (fifteen in total), a king could plead to YHWH in distressing times. The first to do this was Moses as a leader (Ex. 32:11), and later, Jehoahaz in 2 Kings 13:4. A prophet or a priest could also be the one to plead for divine mercy (1 Kings 13:6; Jer. 26:19). The specific term used here points to a mindset that he himself or the people had sinned, and for that reason, the Philistines were attacking. Saul made a plea to God by

¹³ The call of Saul for the battle against the Ammonites does not include a priest or an inquiry because the text indicates that “the spirit of YHWH rushed upon Saul (11:6)” and he wins that war, resulting in his second inauguration for kingship.

using the method of a sacrifice, although this could also have been done by prayer alone (1 Kings 13:6; Psa. 35:13).

Saul's excuses are rejected by Samuel, who answers that YHWH no longer wanted him as a king of Israel, an answer that seems to come from nowhere in this specific context (1 Sam. 13:13-14). Saul does not transgress YHWH's words at this time, only Samuel's authoritative priestly power, but this is already counted negatively for him. As has been commented by J.P. Fokkelman, from a literary point of view, these verses "occupy a key position in the understanding of Saul's decline."¹⁴ The text does not indicate whether Samuel completes the act of sacrifice, but this sacrifice does not appear to have been fulfilled. 1 Sam. 13:13-14 is a difficult combination of two verses that do not exactly fit the context. Maybe Samuel could have been upset, but the harsh decree on Saul and his dynasty is not reasonable at this stage.¹⁵ This text is an edited passage in a Deuteronomist style that can be compared with other texts.¹⁶ Samuel arrives at the battlefield, then leaves, allowing Saul to prepare for the war. Even more surprising, in 14:3, a continuation of the previous story informs us that a priest, of a priestly family, is on the battlefield with Saul.

In 1 Sam. 14:3, we see Saul and the priest Achija of the house of Eli on the battlefield, and also a mention of the Ark of YHWH on the field at 14:18. The fact that not Samuel, but rather, a descendant of the cursed house of Eli (1 Sam. 2:31-36) is serving Saul, does not present a positive

¹⁴ See J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* vol. 2: *The Crossing Fates: 1 Samuel 13-31 & 2 Sam. 1* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 33.

¹⁵ Antony F. Campbell, S.J., *1 Samuel*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature VII (Eerdmans, 2003), 139-40, who sees in it part of the prophetic story starting in 9:1-10:16, showing the prophetic authority of Samuel. He suggests that it has a "secondary status" here.

¹⁶ 1 Sam. 13:4 has a clear resemblance to such prophetic speeches about David (1 Sam. 24:21; 2 Sam. 3:10, 7:12) and the phrase **אֲשֶׁר כֹּלֹבָנוּ** repeats the prophecy to Eli in 1 Sam. 2:35. No doubt, the usage of **לִבְבָּךְ** is a coin of Deuteronomic language for which see Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Clarendon Press, 1972), *passim*.

opening to the battle. The last time that the Ark was on the battlefield with the priests of the house of Eli, Samuel did not participate, and the battle was lost. However, as Jonathan is leading the battle, Saul has no time to consult God via the priest. Thus, Saul goes into battle without either God's consent or disapproval. Jonathan, who in fact received a sign that God was with him (14:6, 10), is the one who brings about victory over the Philistines. Jonathan meanwhile transgresses the oath made by Saul forbidding eating on the battlefield—which was not clever to start with—resulting in YHWH not answering Saul's inquiry as to whether to continue the battle against the Philistines or not (1 Sam. 14:37). Note again that the misdeed is divine disobedience, as the oath/curse taken by Saul is not observed by the people.

In chapter 15, Samuel sends Saul on a “divine command” to wage a holy war against the Amalekites. The command is for the total annihilation of the Amalekites under the category of *Herem*. Saul obeys the command, but not word-for-word as sought by Samuel, and as a result, Samuel predicts a stark future for the house of Saul for the second time. Saul is found not to have respected YHWH's command, again, an issue of obedience. The harsh words of Samuel on the rejection of Saul by YHWH relate first and foremost to the sacrifice (v. 22): “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obedience to the LORD's command? Surely, obedience is better than sacrifice, Compliance than the fat of rams.” These words, placed in the mouth of one who functions as a priest, whose contact with the divine is through sacrifices, seem not in line with Samuel's professional life.¹⁷

Herem is a ritual that Saul fails to follow to the letter, although he offers an excuse: his intention to sacrifice the best of the looted animals to

¹⁷ It is indeed more of a prophetic speech, see Antony Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 152.



YHWH (v. 15). In spite of his error, this act might show Saul's zeal for YHWH.¹⁸ In triumph, Saul erects a memorial (מִצְבֵּחַ לְוִיִּדָּה) for his victory, like many other ANE kings.¹⁹ This seems to aggravate Samuel's displeasure, as the first pronouncement he reports from God is that YHWH regrets choosing Saul as king (15:10-11). This sequence of events is crucial to understanding the negative position the storyteller places Saul. Saul wins the war, he proceeds back to Benjamin through a town named Carmel—a place that would offer David the most important righteous act before becoming king (1 Sam 25)—and there he places his stele! Why does he not set it up in Gilgal, the holy place? Why not in his own hometown and capital, Geva Benjamin? He then goes to Gilgal to worship God at the holy place. Gilgal, the sacred place where he was acknowledged as king by Samuel and the people (11); it is here that the relationship between the old ruler and the new ruler would break up. The break must be very painful for Saul, as he probably does not understand how he has wronged YHWH, even though he admits to Samuel that he has sinned (15:24-25). His first answer shows a misunderstanding of wrongdoing, and only after Samuel blames him for bringing back booty does he try to explain. Saul, though, understands that his wrongdoing concerned Samuel as he says, “I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words,” and he requests forgiveness, asking to make sacrifices in Samuel's presence. There is no doubt that Saul sees Samuel as authoritative for his royal

¹⁸ Note 1 Sam. 14:35, where Saul builds an altar to YHWH, probably in his capital, which stands in contrast to the altar that was built by Samuel in his hometown, Ramah 1 Sam. 7:17. Building an altar was a sign of leadership, as for example in the Gideon story in Jud. 6, as well as the first act of David in his new capital Jerusalem (2 Sam. 24:18-25), or Jeroboam I at Bet-El (1 Kings 12:33).

¹⁹ The most famous among the ones found in Israel and cis-Jordan are the Tel-Dan inscription of an Aramaic king commemorating his victory over the kings of Israel and Judah, and the Mesha' stele from Moab commemorating his successful war against the kingdom of Israel. See Shmuel Ahituve, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period* (Carta, 2008), for the Mesha' stele, 391ff.; for Tel Dan inscription, see 433-73.

activities. The way he speaks to Samuel shows his acknowledgement of Samuel's authority: "Saul said, 'They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the *people* spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we *have devoted to destruction*" (15:15). They did obey the commandment of *Herem*, as he understood it.²⁰

The final act of the war is, indeed, made by Samuel in executing the king of the Amalekites on the sacred grounds of Gilgal as indicated, "before YHWH." Like the last to act at the end of Saul's first victory over the Ammonites, Samuel is the last to act in the ritual before God at the end of the victory over the Amalekites, not the victorious Saul.

From here on in the narrative, YHWH no longer answers Saul, demonstrating that the last word of Samuel the prophet in this case was final, and YHWH has left him. Saul would now be haunted by a bad spirit. At this point, David takes the stage. David would be answered by YHWH, while Saul would be left without any divine communication, showing that the next chosen king is David, though Saul and his dynasty are still alive and ruling, while David is still a fugitive in Judea-Moab and finally in Philistia. As a result of anger with and fear of David, Saul's gravest action was the punishment of the priesthood of Nov. In chapter 22, Saul discovers that his priest Achimelech, of the house of Eli, had helped David in his flight from him. He accuses the priest of treason and pronounces the death sentence on the priest and all his household.²¹

²⁰ David also fights the Amalekites, but about him it is said: 1 Sam. 30:20 "David also captured all the flocks and herds, and the people drove the livestock before him, and said, 'This is David's spoil.' No *Herem* command for David. It somehow looks like the command to Saul to go to war against the Amalekites was a kind of a trial.

²¹ Interesting to note here is that Achimelech was accused mainly of having "inquired of God for David" (1 Sam. 21:13).



An important point here to note is the fact that when Saul decrees the death penalty on Achimelech the priest, and the city of Nov, he does not consult God. Instead, he annihilates an entire city—like the punishment given to a city that is unfaithful to YHWH according to Deut. 13:13–17 (“banished city”) הַעַיר הַנְּذָחַת; the description of the punishment of Nov is the same language as that used for such a rebellious city. Before discussing Saul’s decree on Nov, I would like to present first a few Hittite texts which can shed light on Saul’s inquiries requesting YHWH’s approval of engaging in battle.

Comparative Material on “Divine Inquiries” Pertaining to Battlefields from Hittite Texts

A:

The Hittite kings used to celebrate the spring festival as a major festival of the year. The festival is named after the plant used in it, written in Sumerian logograms AN.TAH.ŠUM-festival.²² It was a festival that lasted about a month, and each day was dedicated to rituals in honor of a specific deity or deities. The 16th day of the festival, indicated in our recorded Hittite texts as text CTH 612, was a festival for the war god ZABABA. The king celebrated this day on his throne, holding a golden spear, specifically worshiping the war god.²³ This celebration was an important one for the coming year, as King Muršili II says in his annals on the festival of the spring, celebrating the Sun-goddess of

²² On this spring festival see Piotr Taracha, *Religions of Second Millennium Anatolia*, Dresden Beiträge zur Hethitologie 27 (Harrassowitz, 2009), 138–141.

²³ Compare with the scene of Ashurbanipal king of Assyria seated on his throne with a spear in his hand on the reliefs depicting the conquering of Lachish (now in the British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1856-0909-14_7?selectedImageId=354015001).

Arinna, who was the goddess of kingship. He implored the goddess to support him saying: “The enemy foreign lands [...] have begun seeking to take away the borders of the Sun-goddess of Arinna my lady. Stand by me, O Sun-goddess of Arinna, My Lady. Destroy those enemy foreign lands before me.”²⁴ Thus, the Hittite kings used the festival as an opportunity to ask the god(s) to support them in their wars.

B:

Even on the battlefield, the Hittite kings continually consulted the deities as to whether or not to continue conducting certain battles and moves. The diviners consulted the gods as in KUB 5.1+KUB 52.65 (CTH 561, campaign in the land of the Kaška):²⁵

Concerning the fact that Temeti supported a plan for attacking Tapena and Ḫuršama. Is the outcome approved by you gods? Will no harm whatsoever come to the fortresses? Let (the oracle) be favorable. The ‘dais’ arose and took the ‘year’ and ‘well-being’. They are given to ‘the enemy’. Second: ‘The assembly’ took for itself ‘sinisterness’ and the ‘weapon’. They are placed to the left of “the king”. Unfavorable (i, 7-10).

In another text the king replies to a commander who asked him about continuing his battle as follows:

When I had thought this over, I took oracles by augury and extispicy in advance for Nuwanza, the Chief of the Wine. (Success) was ascertained for him by augury and by extispicy.

²⁴ Following the translation of Richard H. Beal, “The Ten Years Annals of Great King Muršili II of Hatti,” in *Context of Scriptures II* (Brill, 1997), 84.

²⁵ The translation of this text is by Beal and appears in: R. H. Beal, “Seeking Divine Approval for Campaign Strategy KUB 5.1+KUB 52.65,” *Ktema* 24 (1999): 41-42.



I sent Nanaziti, the Royal Prince, after Nuwanza with a letter saying: 'Just now I have taken oracles by augury and extispicy in advance for you and (success) was ascertained for you by augury and extispicy. Go now! The Storm-god, My Lord, has already given that *Hayašan* enemy to you. You will kill him.'²⁶

These kinds of procedures are clearly similar to those attested to in the Book of Samuel regarding both Saul and David, as indicated above. However, for comparison with the story of the annihilation of the city of Nov, the following Hittite text is interesting.

C:

The Hittite text CTH 423 describes a ritual conducted on a battlefield, in which a Hittite king requests his Storm-god's permission to conquer a rebellious city.²⁷ Permission was needed because the city and its livelihood were all to be destroyed and killed, an act identified as *Herem* in the Hebrew Bible. The text includes several stages of a ritual conducted by two professionals. The first professional is a female ^{MUNUS} ŠU.GI ("Old woman/Wise woman"). She conducts a ritual that evokes the gods of the city and aims at convincing the gods of the city to leave their town and support the Hittite king. She says: "Turn in favor towards the (Hittite) king, and indeed step away from your land!" thus leaving their borders to be included in the Hittite borders. In the next part of the ritual, after she finishes, the Hittite king changes his clothes

²⁶ Compare this inquiry with David's inquiries in 1 Sam. 23. Translation follows R. H. Beal, "The Ten Year Annals," in *Context of Scriptures II* (Brill, 1997), 89. For more examples, see Ada Taggar-Cohen, "Rituals on the Battlefield," 553-584.

²⁷ For a detailed discussion of this text see Ada Taggar-Cohen, "Rituals on the Battlefield" *ibid.* including translations of the texts. The next translations are mine.

and “dresses in a kingly way.” He pours a wine libation to the gods of the city and speaks to his own god. The following is his request:

This town has been rebellious to me. I have invoked the Storm-god, my lord. May the Storm-god, my lord, fulfill my will,²⁸ may he bring about my desire (ZI-aš *arnuddu*), so that he handed it over to me and I had laid it waste, and have consecrated (šuppiyahhun) it. As long as heaven and earth and mankind will be, in the future no son of man will inhabit it! This enemy city with its fields, cultivated land, granary, vineyards (belong) to the Storm-god, my lord, and may it be the pasture of your bulls, Šerri and Ḫurri, my lord, the Storm-god.

In this ritual, the king’s request aligns with how the ritual parts were conducted. The ^{MUNUS} ŠU.GI is appealing to the gods of the city itself. In the second part of the ritual, the king himself is the speaker, supported by the SANGA-priest. They then submit the matter to hepatoscopy in the following wording:

If you gods will have approved this matter done in this way, my Majesty on that matter will not fear at all regarding myself, my house and my country; regarding the enemy city which I will sacrifice (šippantahhi), if ever someone will inhabit it, he will cause the anger of the Storm-god my lord, you will go to war with him, and you will annihilate him – you will not make his dwelling legally right! (ešuwar-ši UL āra iyaši). (If) you gods

²⁸ In Hittite ZI-aš *iyadu*; The meaning of the Sumerogram ZI in Hittite *ištanza-* is “soul,” but basically means “will,” “desire,” and thus also “wish.” See Annelies Kammhuber, “Die hethitischen Vorstellungen von Seele und Leib, Herz und Leibe sinnerem, Kopf und Person,” ZA 56 (1964), 150-212; ZA 57 (1965), 177-222.



will have approved this, done in this way, let the liver-oracle be favorable.²⁹

I emphasize this part of the Hittite king's speech because conducting a *Herem* on a city must be fully approved by the gods, or be commanded by the god(s), as happened with Samuel regarding the Amalekites. I quote the biblical law in Deuteronomy regarding the rebellious city 13:15: "you shall *investigate* and *inquire* and *interrogate thoroughly*. If it is true, the fact is established—that abhorrent thing was perpetrated in your midst." The matter should be clear beyond any doubt.

ידרשוּ וַיְקַרְבּוּ וְשָׁאַלְתּוּ הַיּוֹטֵב וְהַגָּוֹן נִכְזָבְתָה הַתּוֹעֲבָה הַזֹּאת בְּקָרְבָּךְ³⁰:

The use of the Hebrew verb "דָרְשׁ" means to inquire of the god by special means. This is the word used to inquire of God whether or not to go to war. The result of careful divine consultation, as also seen in the Hittite text, will give the entity inquiring permission to smite the inhabitants of the city an answer in one way or another. The law in Deuteronomy finalizes the decision in the following words (13:16): "you shall surely put the inhabitants of that city to the sword, devoting it to destruction, all who are in it and its cattle, with the edge of the sword."

הַבָּה תָּפֵה אֶת-יְשָׁבֵי הַעִיר הַהוּא [הַהִיא] לְפִי-חַרְבָּה הַתְּלִם אֶתְתָּה וְאֶת-כָּלְ-אָשָׁר-בָּהּ וְאֶת-בָּהָמָתָה לְפִי-חַרְבָּה:

In the scene describing the court judgment of the priesthood of Nov, at the start, Saul is pictured as follows: "Saul was sitting at Gibeath

²⁹ See Giuseppe F. Del Monte, "The Hittite Herem," in *Memoriae Igor M. Diakonoff: Babel und Bibel 2, Annual of Ancient Near Eastern, Old Testament, and Semitic Studies* (Eisenbrauns, 2005), 42; and Francesco Fuscagni, "Una nuova interpretazione del rituale CTH 423," *KASKAL* 4 (2007): 198.

³⁰ On the *Herem* of a city in the ANE context see Ada Taggar-Cohen, "The Subverted City (Ir Hannidahat) in the Context of ANE Vassal Treaties," *The Torah*, 2020, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-subverted-city-ir-hannidahat-in-the-context-of-ane-vassal-treaties>.

under the tamarisk tree on the height with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him" (1 Sam. 22:6). This is a picture of a warrior like the Hittite king, as well as a judge like Deborah (Jud. 5:4-5). And in the following, we hear of a court judgement and a war.

I would like to draw attention to the language of the Deuteronomic law in comparison with the act of Saul when giving the order to punish the city of the priests of Nov in 1 Sam. 22.³¹ Saul accuses Achimelech the priest of treason, although the priest said he was sure David was a loyal servant of the king, being his son-in-law. He even vowed to YHWH that he had not conducted any divine inquiries on behalf of David. Saul does not listen, does not continue to inquire, and does not put the issue to divine inquiry. He immediately judges (1 Sam. 21:16-17):

But the king said, 'You shall die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house.' And the king commanded the guards standing by, 'Turn-about and kill the priests of the LORD, for they are in league with David; they knew he was running away and they did not inform me.' But the king's servants would not raise a hand to strike down the priests of the LORD.

The king then orders a foreign servant to kill the priests, and the result is horrific (21:19):

He put Nob, the town of the priests, to the sword: men and women, children and infants, oxen, asses, and sheep—[all] to the sword.

³¹ For the complicity of the story and the state of the priest Achimelech in it, see Anton Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 225-227. See also Ada Taggar-Cohen, "Political Loyalty in the Biblical Account of 1 Samuel xx-xxii In Light of Hittite texts," *Vetus Testamentum* 55, no. 2 (2005): 251-268.

ואת נב עיר-הכְּנִים הַכָּה לְפִי-חֶרֶב מַאיִשׁ וְעַד-אֲשָׁה מַעֲזָל וְעַד-יָונָק
וְשָׂוֹר וְחַמּוֹר וְשָׂה לְפִי-חֶרֶב:

The phrase “הַכָּה לְפִי חֶרֶב” (“smite to the sword”) is the biblical Hebrew term for annihilation, *Herem*, that must be carried out only after careful divine inquiry, not vehemently as Saul did. The Hittite text emphasizes that the king would do it only if the gods allowed it because otherwise, he endangers all: “*my Majesty on that matter will not fear at all regarding myself, my house and my country.*” And indeed, Saul endangered himself, his house, and his country—all would be lost. This grave sin of his, not receiving permission for the annihilation of the city of Nov, the city of the priests of YHWH, immediately causes YHWH to leave him, and no longer answer him before the crucial war with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa.

Saul is Asking, but God Does Not Answer

The silence of YHWH through regular tools of communication—dreams, *urim*, and prophets (“גָם בְּחִלּוּמֹת גָם בְּאוֹרִים גָם בְּנִבְיאִים” 1 Sam. 28:6)—forces Saul to approach the divine messengers that he opposed as a YHWH follower, which is the “Ob” system, “consulting the dead.” Interestingly, he requests a female professional (28:7): “*בְּקַשׁ לִי אֲשָׁת בָּעֵלֶת אָוֶב...וְאֲדֹרֶשָׁה בָהּ*” (“Find me a woman who consults dead ghosts, so that I can go to her and inquire through her”). Pay attention once again to the verb “*דָרַשׁ*,” “inquire.” While the Hittite text presents the approach to the gods of the rebellious city—the enemy—with a female professional, the ^{MUNUS} ŠU.GI, who deals with magical tools, and only in the second act, the SANGA-priest, who offers a sacrifice and then lets the king appeal to the Storm-god, in the case of Saul, only the female

professional acts. No doubt, the action of the ^{MUNUS} ŠU.GI is different from the 'Ob-professional, but both were appealing to a divine entity.³²

To emphasize even more the literary context of the use of the verb **דָּרַשׁ** in the story of Samuel, this verb appears only twice in the narrative of 1 Samuel: once when Saul consulted Samuel about the asses that were lost, and finds kingship (1 Sam. 9:9), and secondly when Saul consulted the woman-professional seeking the spirit of the dead. This time, he finds the dead Samuel, who would decree the death of Saul and his sons. It seems to me that there is an intentional opening and closing of the relationship between Saul and Samuel. Another important verb in the story of Saul is **עָנוֹת**, the answer and response of God. Samuel, in chapter 7, acting as a priestly leader similar to Moses, is described as follows: v. 9 “Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD. And Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him (**וַיַּעֲנוּ** **יְהוָה** **יְהוָה**.”)

The warning that Samuel gives the people in Chapter 8, where he—against his will—accepted the request of the Israelites for a king, is materialized with Saul through that very verb in 1 Sam. 8:18: “And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer (**וְלَا** **יַעֲנוּ**) you on that day.” In 14:37 and 28:6, God does not answer Saul. Saul’s last resort is to go back to Samuel, his first supporter. In this context, one should also resort to the word **שָׁאַל** in the context of asking God. Hannah asked for a son and received Samuel. In 12:13, Samuel says after declaring Saul as king: “And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked (**מִשְׁאַלְתֶּם**); behold, the LORD has set a king over you.” In 1 Sam. 28:16, Samuel says to Saul in a very painful way: “Why

³² Though the act of the 'Ob-woman is to call the dead, she indicated as she sees Samuel that “God is coming up **לִלְקֹדֶם רָאִיתִי עַלְמָם מִזְרָחָךְ**”.

then do you ask me (**וְלֹא שָׁנַׁה**), since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy?"

Saul's encounter with divine decisions was with the help of Samuel, a prophet-diviner-priest-messenger, as well as Achiya the priest. His appeals are under the guidance of Samuel, who, at a certain stage, leaves him, and Saul seems to lose his way chasing David. In his following actions at Nov, he commits a grave sin, for which there would be no forgiveness.

Although the story in the first part of Samuel places the sin of Saul as not fulfilling the *Herem* commandment concerning the Amalekites, I suggest a secondary layer of tradition for which YHWH cuts off his communication with Saul as a result of Saul's committing a *Herem* act upon his own priests of Nov without authorization. The ability of a king to communicate with the divine world depends on the proper professionals, according to the Hebrew Bible.³³ Saul had to communicate with YHWH through his own priesthood—Achimelech and his household at Nov—but he destroyed them and was left with communication with the spirit of the dead Samuel, which he did, disregarding his own decree. He receives an answer, but a devastating one predicting his defeat in battle, and even the loss of his sons. From the narrative perspective, the story of Samuel and Saul turns around communication with the divine YHWH. When Saul comes to the woman of Ein Dor, the “mistress of the 'Ob”, he swears an oath to her (28:10) in the name of YHWH, not in the name of any other god.

As for the issue of necromancy, of which Saul is accused as sinful and against YHWH by approaching the woman of Ein-Dor, the text of 1

³³ Especially according to Deut. 13 and 18. And specifically regarding the 'Ob-system, Lev. 19:31, 20:6, 27, Deut. 18:11.

Samuel seems to actually accept the usefulness of this profession, as the spirit of Samuel arose from the dead and gave its prophecy, which came to pass. As I understand it, Saul's act is an act of the cult of the dead.³⁴ I find Saul looking at Samuel as his "royal father," as he was his mentor into kingship. It is quite clear that even though there was tension between them, Saul saw in Samuel the previous leader, who was involved in religious activities. Saul sees himself fit for ritual activities; note his actions regarding the festival of the month (1 Sam 20), which seems to be a fixed festive day for the king. Also, it is quite clear that Saul saw himself as responsible for the religious life of his kingdom, where his personal god was YHWH. He built an altar for him, he made sacrifices for him, and he even "had put the mediums (אֱבּוֹת) and the necromancers (יִדְעָנִים) out of the land." This sentence follows the announcement of Samuel's death, which means Saul sees himself as a responsible religious leader after Samuel. Of course, this sentence has been introduced here to be in contrast with Saul's resorting to the woman of Ein-Dor in the following narrative.

Insights and Conclusion

The book of Samuel, as has been shown in decades of research, was strongly influenced by Deuteronomic language and ideology.³⁵ According to Deut. 17:14-20, the king must adhere to the commandments of YHWH and obey the priesthood. In a sense, Saul could have been a good example of listening to the cultic figure of Samuel. But history showed otherwise.

³⁴ See Christopher B. Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in Iron Age II and its Rhetorical use in Proto-Isaiah* (Eerdmans, 2015), 140-142.

³⁵ For a summary of the research on the book of Samuel's text see David T. Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Eerdmans-Cambridge, 2007), 16-23.



As this article shows, the language of certain episodes was strongly influenced by Deuteronomy. Regarding the Deuteronomistic History composition of the Book of Samuel, as seen specifically in the fact that different stories about Saul and his relations with—on the one hand, YHWH, and on the other, Samuel—were told, one could say that these were completely different stories. However, together they send a strong ideological message concerning the evaluation of Saul as someone who did not follow the religious laws of YHWH. This is well interpreted by the Chronicler, as noted by Sara Japhet: “[1 Chr.] Chapter 10 is the first long section taken from the book of Samuel [...]. The chapter is an almost literal parallel to I Sam. 31.” Even more so, “the historiographical view expressed in these remarks [i.e., Ch. 10:13-14] is actually no different from that of I Sam. 28:16-18.”³⁶ The only difference is the Chronicler’s addition that Saul “did not seek guidance (שָׁרֶד) from the Lord,” which is certainly what the text of Samuel does not say: Saul did seek guidance (שָׁרֶד) from the Lord but was not answered.

Looking at the story of Saul’s flaws from a ritual perspective, we can see that he is judged for failing to perform the sacrifices to YHWH as demanded, and that, step by step, the ritual becomes a means of judging his kingship.

His first inauguration is performed during a monthly sacrifice with the seer-priest Samuel at Ramah temple. The leader of the Israelites at the time is Samuel; up to the coronation of Saul, Samuel is directly attached to YHWH as seen in his leadership in chapter 7 and the Even Haezer battle, or even in chapter 12, where he appeals to YHWH and causes a storm after which he promises to continue to pray for the

³⁶ Sara Japhet, *I&II Chronicles: A Commentary* (Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993), 222, 229.

people. In the ancient Near Eastern context, royal Hittite prayers depict kings praying constantly while making sacrifices to their gods. Samuel conducts the cult to YHWH and leads the people. Saul, on the other hand, depends on Samuel. He is supported by Samuel during the public pronouncement of his inauguration at the temple at Mizpah (1 Sam. 10) and at Gilgal (11). However, from then on, he has difficulties fulfilling the rituals, including before going to the most important war against the Amalekites. This war starts with his mistake of making sacrifices before the priest Samuel arrives, and ends with his bringing unnecessary animals for sacrifice.

As indicated, his attack on the city of the priests was an extremely fatal misdeed. Linguistically, it is described as a war against a rebellious city. But Saul did not request permission from YHWH at what should have been a judicial court, and killed YHWH's own servants.³⁷ His final ritual action was that of approaching the woman of Ein-Dor, who does not perform a sacrifice before starting the ritual of elevating Samuel. No food is offered to the ghost of the dead Samuel, but rather food is only prepared at the end of the ritual, using the term וְזִבְחָה “slaughter for sacrifice,” for Saul himself. The narrative regarding the use of ritual description in this story has an enormous impact on our understanding that Saul brought upon himself and his royal family total destruction, even though all along he worshiped YHWH; unfortunately, he did not do so properly.

³⁷ As noted above, Saul in chapter 22 is sitting at a judicial scene under the tree as a royal judge, and is calling up Achimelech the priest to court in accusation of treason. He judges upon one witness alone—against the very rule of Deut. 17:6 and Num. 35:30. Only by two witnesses. In the Achimelech case, it is only Doeg the Edomite 1 Sam. 22:9-10. To add here Hittite practice at court regarding judgment of royal members by the king; the king will conduct a religious ritual inquiring of the gods before determining judgement for example Ḫattušili III being at court before his brother King Muwatalli II see text translation by Theo P.J. van den Hout, “The Apology of Ḫattušili,” in *The Context of Scriptures* vol. 1, eds. W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Brill, 1997), 199-204. Esp. §4: 9-11.

