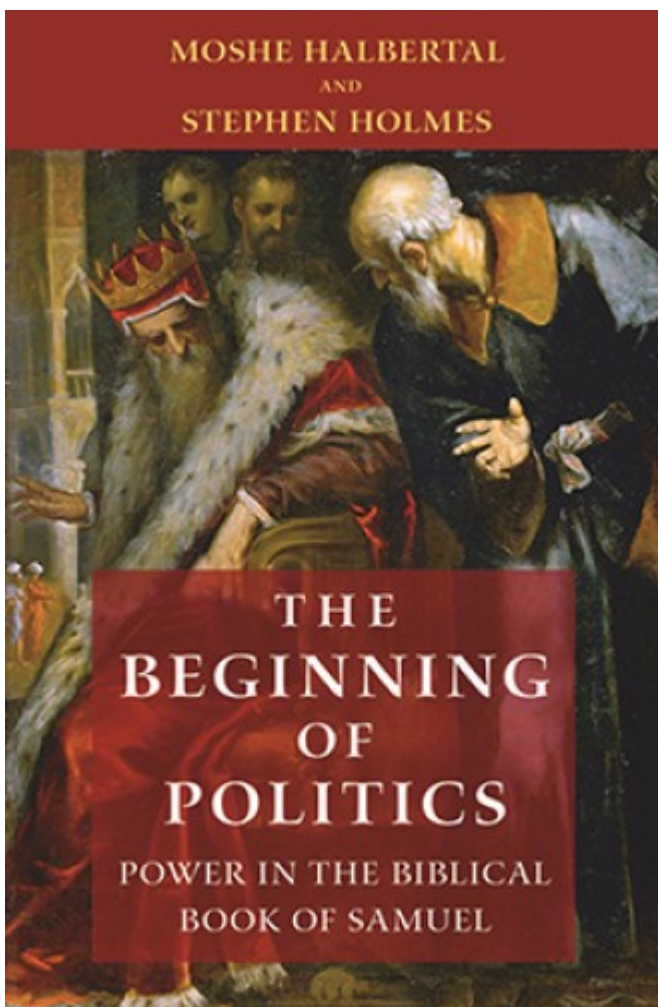


Saul, David, and the morality of power

How shrewdly the drama of mixed motives, mixed loyalties, and mixed feelings unfolds.

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [August 2, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Beginning of Politics

Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel

By Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes
Princeton University Press

A torrent of books have appeared recently commenting on the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel. This corpus of fresh, suggestive literature has reflected a drift from historical (and historical-critical) concerns to an appreciation of the narrative's artful constructiveness. Most of these books are preoccupied with the awareness that the biblical stories are richly and intentionally fraught with deep ambiguity that admits of no obvious decoding. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes contribute a thoughtful, wise, and judicious exposition that considerably advances our understanding.

Halbertal and Holmes, both of whom teach law at New York University, treat the Samuel narrative as an artistic construct that offers a shrewd insider view of the complexities of governance. They regard the author, who "must have resided at court or have once been part of the political world itself," as an eyewitness of the narrated events.

The book's title, *The Beginning of Politics*, recognizes Samuel as a new kind of literature within the Bible. Here human agents are primary, in contrast to the antecedent books in which the gods are decisive. In his classic essay on Samuel, Gerhard von Rad recognized God's retreat from active agency in the story. Halbertal and Holmes go further, insisting that power and history unfold "naturalistically" without reference to divine agency. God is at best "like a retired boss" who no longer has the capacity to influence events.

A recurring theme in the book's four chapters is the way the characters in Samuel instrumentalize their (sometimes genuine) moral concerns in self-serving ways. Both Saul and David demonstrate a readiness to convert the means—keeping power—into an end. It is impossible to "unmask" the dark side of this complex, multilayered narrative in simple moral ways because the characters are so deeply ambiguous in their motivations and performances.

The Samuel narrative pivots on the ambiguities of power, and the chapter "The Grip of Power" exposes how Saul and David seek and maintain power in profoundly contrasting ways as they are held in the grip of power that propels their actions. Saul is initially without royal ambition. He becomes infected by the reality of his power but remains unstable and is soon marked by paranoia. His persona, however,

is clearly and shrewdly exposed in his undoing.

By contrast, David is ambitious, cunning, aggressive, and very sure of himself. Yet he is presented opaquely, so readers do not penetrate beyond his performance. David's character is finally unmasked in the episode of Absalom's death, which exposes the king as a father.

Halbertal and Holmes show how both kings come to power in order to protect their people but soon display their willingness to abuse their people for the sake of maintaining power. Focusing on Saul's frenzied massacre at Nob (1 Sam. 22) and David's murder of Uriah (2 Sam. 11), the authors probe the violence that marks both kings—so much that I could almost hear the theme music from *The Godfather* sounding in the background. While Saul's violence is undisciplined and paranoid, David's violence is shrewd and calculating in the service of his bold self-indulgence.

The authors are shrewd readers of the biblical text. They reveal how delicately the drama of mixed motives, mixed loyalties, and mixed feelings unfolds, particularly with respect to the continuity of dynastic sovereignty. In David's lament in 2 Samuel 1, Saul's short-lived rule is terminated and celebrated. David, however, is implicated in the clean-up action concerning the residue of Saul's party. In David's case, the dynasty's maintenance is threatened not by disruption of the family from the outside but by the lethal tensions within the family that arise in the wake of Uriah's murder. The book concludes with the transfer of royal power from David to Solomon in a series of "hits" ordered by the father to serve the security of son Solomon and his throne.

In all the book shows the narrative to be an "anatomy of sovereignty" that applies not only to dynastic kingship in a tribal society but, with suitable modifications, illuminates important features of every political order, including the welfare state, the liberal state, and so forth. It is reasonable to suggest that the Samuel narrative, as Halbertal and Holmes read it, is an antecedent of a Niebuhrian analysis of power. A healthy awareness of cynicism allows for a trace of morality in the lives of the characters—even if it is a morality compromised and betrayed by violence.

As Halbertal and Holmes make clear, the Samuel narrative recruits readers to become participants in the contest between the hope of fidelity and reality of the ruthless, self-serving governance. We may recognize how "the sword devours now one and now another" (2 Sam. 11:25). We may know the prospect that "the sword

will never depart from your house" (2 Sam. 12:10). But we are also mindful of this assurance: "I will not take my steadfast love from David" (2 Sam. 7:15).

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