Saul’s Meal at Endor (1 Sam 28:20–25) and its Contribution to Understanding the Story

Abstract

This article deals with the final scene in the story of Saul and the medium at Endor. This episode, which describes Saul’s response to the appeals of the woman and his servants that he eat, is a sort of anti-climax after the dramatic events that preceded it. Nonetheless, I believe that this scene makes a significant contribution to both the trajectory of the story and the depiction of Saul’s character, by symbolically showing that once Saul hears the prophet Samuel declare “tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me” (1 Sam 28:19, NSRV), he no longer functions as king. The biblical narrator uses three literary devices to convey the message of Saul’s approaching demise: the secondary characters who cast light on Saul’s character; the leading phrase שמע בקול ‘hear the voice,’ and bread as a repeating motif.

Opening

The chapters in the book of Samuel that deal with the kingship of Saul describe the king’s progressive deterioration. Saul’s journey began with his being selected by God (1 Sam 9-10) and by the people (1 Sam 11).[[1]](#footnote-1) However, a chain of sins led God to become fed up with him and with his kingship (1 Sam 13-15). In the chapters that follow, the rise of David is depicted alongside Saul’s deterioration. Nevertheless, at no point does Saul abandon his purpose, and he continues to function as the king of Israel. The point at which Saul internalizes the fact that he and his seed will not continue the kingship is, in my view, the story of Saul and the medium.

This story (1 Sam 28:3–25) is one of the most dramatic stories in the Book of Samuel and has been the subject of extensive commentary and research. Following the opening exposition depicting Saul’s quandary, and his failed attempt to turn to God (vv. 3–7), the tale of Saul’s inquiry of the medium is told (vv. 8–14). It is followed by the dialogue between Samuel and Saul (vv. 15–19), and the story concludes with the events subsequent to Samuel’s appearance (vv. 20–25).

As noted, the first stages of this extraordinary story culminate with Samuel’s declaration, “Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me” (v. 19). It is against the background of these dramatic events that the purpose of the last section, accounting for more than a quarter of the story (six verses out of twenty-three) must be understood. In brief, the text states that Saul is weak because he has not eaten all day and all night, the medium offers him food, Saul refuses her offer, but after her repeated entreaties, together with the pleas of his servants, he complies with their request and eats. This section is anti-climactic after the major events that precede it, and its description of seemingly ancillary details is inconsistent with the usual style of biblical stories. Why is it important to consider whether or not Saul wants to eat bread? What does this discussion add to the story and its message? The purpose of this article is to focus on this scene, explaining its significance and contribution to the overall message of the story.

Scholars have suggested several explanations. Some have argued that its purpose is to shed light on Saul, whether positive[[2]](#footnote-2) or negative,[[3]](#footnote-3) while others have suggested that the purpose is to shed light on the medium, whether positive[[4]](#footnote-4) or negative.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In my opinion, this episode contributes greatly to both the trajectory of the story and the development of Saul as a character. Chapter 28 in its entirety describes the last actions of Saul, the first king of Israel, before his death. In the verses prior to the episode under consideration, it becomes irrefutably clear to Saul that his life and kingship are coming to an end. It is my contention that the purpose of the concluding episode is to show, symbolically, that once he heard the prophet Samuel speak the bitter news, “tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me” (1 Sam 28:19, NSRV throughout), Saul ceased to function as king.[[6]](#footnote-6) To convey this message, the biblical narrator uses three literary devices that symbolically depict Saul’s pending demise: the secondary characters who illuminate Saul’s character;[[7]](#footnote-7) the leading words שמע בקול ‘hear the voice,’[[8]](#footnote-8) and the motif bread.[[9]](#footnote-9) The secondary characters, the keywords, and the central motif all point to the psychological process that Saul went through, at the end of which he stopped seeing himself as a king and as a person with leadership in his future.

Saul and the Secondary Characters in the Story

Saul is the primary character - the hero of the story. He is on stage for its entire length, surrounded by several secondary characters. Examination of the hierarchy between the entire cast of characters populating the story shows that God is positioned at the pinnacle, followed by the prophet Samuel. Next is King Saul, and then the medium, who is subordinate to Saul.[[10]](#footnote-10) The king’s servants are at the bottom of the hierarchy.

The story is built around five inquiries that its characters make of each other, and the varied responses to these inquiries. Great attention is paid to whose inquiry is answered and whose does not merit a response. To my mind, these inquiries represent the relationships between the characters in the story, and following who inquires and who receives a response aids us in mapping the internal hierarchy between Saul and those around him, as well as clarifying Saul’s position shortly before his death.

The following table presents the people making inquiries and the responses they receive throughout the story:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Verse | Character making the inquiry | Character being addressed | Is there a response to the inquiry? |
| 6 | Saul | God | No |
| 7 | Saul | Saul’s servants | Yes |
| 8–14 | Saul | Medium | After hesitation |
| 15–20 | Saul | Samuel | No |
| 21–20 | Medium | Saul | After hesitation |

It is evident that the first four inquiries are made by Saul, who turns to the people around him for a response.

The first inquiry is Saul’s triple inquiry of God, “by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets” (v. 6).[[11]](#footnote-11) The Lord does not respond (v. 6).[[12]](#footnote-12) It is unsurprising that Saul’s question is ignored, given the disconnection between him and God. God here is at the pinnacle of the hierarchy and is not obliged to answer one whom he has rejected (1 Sam 15:23). God’s lack of responsiveness is particularly evident considering his responses to David’s inquiries in adjacent chapters. “When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him” (1 Sam 28:6) should be compared with “David inquired of the Lord… The Lord said to David” (23:2); “Then David inquired of the Lord again. The Lord answered him…” (23:4); “David inquired of the Lord… He answered him” (30:8); “After this David inquired of the Lord… The Lord said to him” (2 Sam 2:1) and other examples.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The second inquiry is Saul’s request that his servants find him a medium. They respond to his request positively and promptly (v. 7). This responsiveness is also unsurprising; the servants are subordinate to Saul, and it is their duty to comply with his orders.

The third inquiry is that of Saul when he asks the medium to “bring up for me the one whom I name to you” (v. 8).[[14]](#footnote-14) Unlike the servants of Saul, the medium is not directly subordinate to Saul, and initially, she does not comply with his request (v. 9). However, from the perspective of social class, there is no doubt that she is hierarchically lower than the king (even if she is unaware that she is speaking to the king at that moment).[[15]](#footnote-15) Saul asks again (v. 10) and his second request is answered affirmatively (vv. 11–14). The woman’s response conveys the symbolic message that, to his subordinates, Saul is still considered king and his requests are to be honored. [[16]](#footnote-16)

The fourth inquiry is that of Saul, who asks Samuel, “What I should do?” (v. 15). Samuel does speak to Saul, but he does not answer his question. Samuel’s status as a prophet is higher than Saul’s status as king, so Samuel is not obliged to obey Saul.[[17]](#footnote-17) In his response, Samuel begins, “Why then do you ask me” (vv. 16), and neither answers Saul’s question nor tells him what to do (vv. 16–19).[[18]](#footnote-18) Moreover, Samuel delivers the bitter news that Saul’s leadership has run its course. In response to this news, “immediately Saul fell full length on the ground” (v. 20). The language of this description is unique in the Bible, and the fact that the king of Israel prostrated himself fully is indicative of his condition and status.[[19]](#footnote-19)

From the fact that the first four inquiries are attributed to Saul, we can learn two things: On one hand, Saul is still the king, and as ruler he can address questions to, and make demands of, those around him. On the other hand, the repeated inquiries and requests convey a lack self-confidence and an inability to solve problems and difficulties.

After Saul makes four inquiries – only some of which receive affirmative responses, while others receive hesitant or negative ones – comes the fifth inquiry which turns the tables: for the first time Saul is not initiating the exchange, but rather being addressed by another.[[20]](#footnote-20) The medium politely but firmly asks Saul to listen to her voice: “Your servant has listened to you… Now therefore, you also listen to your servant; let me set a morsel of bread before you. Eat...” (vv. 21–22)[[21]](#footnote-21) Saul refuses her request and refrains from eating (v. 23a). This refusal is expected. Saul is the king, the ruler, and is not obliged to listen to voices beneath him in the hierarchy.[[22]](#footnote-22) However, at this point Saul’s servants suddenly return to the stage, align themselves with the woman and ask Saul to respond positively. (v. 23b). Surprisingly, Saul acquiesces to their request (vv. 23c–25). At this point in the story, the secondary characters who are subordinate to Saul actually impose their will on the king! Breaking the conventions presented throughout the story clearly signifies the collapse of the hierarchical order in the kingdom of Saul. It is likely that on the visible, natural level, the women and servants want to help Saul, but on the symbolic level, the message is that Saul has lost his leadership: people of lower status control him and compel him to do as they wish.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The changing hierarchy between the king and the medium is especially conspicuous when we compare the two scenes in which they meet:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Opening Encounter (vv. 8–14) | Closing Encounter (21–25) |
| Encounter  (ויבוא ‘he came’ / ותבא ‘she came’) | (8) So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes and went there, he and two men with him. They came to the woman by night. | (21) The woman came to Saul, and when she saw that he was terrified |
| Request to violate a prior oath (to raise a spirit or to eat despite the fast) | And he said, “Consult a spirit for me, and bring up for me the one whom I name to you.” | She said to him, “Your servant has listened to you; I have taken my life in my hand, and have listened to what you have said to me.  (22) Now therefore, you also listen to your servant; let me set a morsel of bread before you. Eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way.” |
| Refusal | (9) The woman said to him, “Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the wizards from the land. Why then are you laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?” | (23) He refused, and said, “I will not eat.” |
| Additional plea | (10) But Saul swore to her by the Lord, “As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.” | But his servants, together with the woman, urged him; |
| Agreement and violation of the law | (11) Then the woman said, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” He answered, “Bring up Samuel for me” …. The woman said to Saul, “I see a divine being coming up out of the ground.” | and he listened to their words. So he got up from the ground and sat on the bed….  (25) She put them before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night. |

Laying out the two scenes in parallel reveals the process at which they hint. The following argument lays out the claim that Saul’s refusal to eat bread stemmed from a binding custom of not eating prior to an important battle. On this basis, it must be noted that Saul initially asks the medium to violate the ban. She refuses, but he is able to persuades her to do so. Later, it is the medium who implores Saul, who eventually accedes to her demand and breaks the oath to fast.

Comparing the various requests throughout the story, and noting the stance of the secondary characters vis-à-vis the character of Saul, transmits the message that after receiving the bitter news from Samuel, Saul loses his leadership ability and moves toward concluding his tenure as king of Israel.

שמע בקול ‘Listen to the voice’

In order to reinforce this message, the biblical narrator uses the phrase שמע בקול ‘listen to the voice’ or ‘obey the voice’ repeatedly. In this chapter, the phrase appears four times: first, in the words of Samuel to Saul, “you did not שמעת בקול ‘obey the voice’ of the Lord” (1 Sam 28:18); Second, in the words of the medium to Saul, “Your servant שמעה֭... בקול ‘has listened to you’” (28:21); Third, in her continued speech to Saul, you also שמע֭... בקול ‘listen’ to your servant” (28:22); And finally, when describing the king’s response to the appeals of his servants and the medium, “וישמע֭... בקולם ‘he listened to their words’” (28:23). By the end of the story, the king who began by not obeying the voice of God, is forced to obey the voice of his subordinates. [[24]](#footnote-24)

Indeed, this phrase functions as a leading word throughout the cycle of Saul stories. In most cases, שמע בקול‎ ‘listen to the voice’ is used to express the desired hierarchy, and the correct attitude toward God and God’s words. For example, in chapter 8, which deals with the request of the people to be given a king, it is reported, “But the people refused לשמע בקול ‘to listen to the voice’ of Samuel” (8:7). Despite this, God commands Samuel to “שמע בקול ‘Listen to the voice’ of the people” (8:7), and “שמע בקולם ‘listen to their voice’” (8: 9, 22). The people who should be subordinate to the prophet do not hear his voice. Nonetheless, God commands the prophet, who is hierarchically above the people, to listen to the voice of the people. It seems that the choice of words is intended to highlight the role reversal between the prophet and the people, reflecting discomfort with the people’s choice and the request for a king.

Samuel tries to rectify the situation in his farewell speech to the people of Israel in chapter 12. Although he begins by declaring, “שמעתי בקלכם ‘I have listened to you’” (12:1), he later he warns the people with clear words: “If you will fear the Lord… and ושמעתם בקולו ‘heed his voice’… if you will notתשמעו בקול ‘heed the voice’ of the Lord… then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king” (12:14–15). Thus Samuel restores matters to their proper order. Although the prophet yielded to the people’s request, they must remember that they are subject to God. This phrase is repeated again in the description of Saul’s sin in chapter 15. The chapter opens with Samuel demanding of Saul “now therefore שמע לקול ‘listen to the words’ of the Lord” (15: 1). After Saul’s sin, Samuel asks, “Why then did you not שמעת בקול ‘obey the voice’ of the Lord?” (15:19). Saul argues, claiming “שמעתי בקול ‘I have obeyed the voice’ of the Lord” (15:20). Samuel responds unequivocally, “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as כשמע בקול ‘in obedience to the voice’ of the Lord?... Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king” (15:22–23). It is only after this statement that Saul confesses, and admits “I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and ואשמע בקולם ‘obeyed their voice’” (15:24). Saul understands that the role reversal in which the king obeyed the voice of his subordinates, caused him to sin.[[25]](#footnote-25)

פת לחם ‘Bread’ or ‘food’

Above, we explained that the importance of the concluding episode in story of Saul at Endor is that subordinate characters – the medium and the servants – persuade Saul to listen to and obey their voices, which signifies Saul’s descent from his position of leadership. It is possible that this message is further reinforced by examining a particular detail in the plot – namely, the fact that the discussion revolves specifically around eating bread. The medium makes an offers to Saul, “let me set a morsel of bread before you” (28:22), and the mention of bread may cause readers to recall the previous references to bread in the cycle of Saul stories.[[26]](#footnote-26) In the cycle of Saul stories, several references to bread demonstrate a symbolic connection between the bread and the kingdom. Early in his reign, immediately after being anointed by Samuel, the prophet tells Saul that he will soon meet three people, and “They will greet you and give you two loaves of bread, which you shall accept from them” (10:4). Bestowing a gift on the king is a symbolic act that signifies the people’s consent that Saul be anointed to rule over them.[[27]](#footnote-27) The first meeting between Saul and David is also accompanied by bringing of bread as a gift to the king: “Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread… and sent them by his son David to Saul” (16:20). Later, the bread is the counter-factor between Saul and David, when David does not dine at the king’s table: “The king sat at the הלחם ‘feast’ to eat... but David’s place was empty.” (20:24–25). As a result of Saul’s anger, his son Jonathan also prefers not to eat with him “and ate no food on the second day of the month, for he was grieved for David, and because his father had disgraced him” (20:34). This is the final phase of separation between Saul and David, and immediately thereafter David receives holy bread from the priest, Ahimelech (21:4–7). Later, during his wanderings, David (who, it will be remembered, was born in Bethlehem, בית לחם ‘the house of bread,’ [16:1]) will receive bread from Abigail (25:18), very shortly after his appointment as, in her words, “prince over Israel” (25:30). Does Saul’s initial refusal to eat bread point symbolically to his relinquishment of the kingship?

In any event, in my opinion, there is symbolic hint of the destabilization of Saul’s status at this stage: his eventual compliance with the request to eat the bread.

In order to understand this, it is necessary to ascertain the possible reasons why Saul “had eaten nothing all day and all night” (28:20).[[28]](#footnote-28) A common explanation is that Saul is fasting to prepare for his meeting with the medium,[[29]](#footnote-29) but there is no hint of this in the text. Others suggest that he refrained from eating because of personal distress and stress.[[30]](#footnote-30) However, it is more likely that Saul did not eat in accordance with the custom of fasting on the eve of an important battle,[[31]](#footnote-31) as the Israelites had done before the crucial battle with Benjaminites (Judges 26:2), and before the decisive battle with the Philistines (1 Sam 6:6). Similarly, Jehoshaphat imposes a fast on Judah before the battle with Moab and Ammon (2 Chron 20:3).

Saul himself commanded his warriors before entering the battle with the Philistines, “Cursed be anyone who eats food before it is evening and I have been avenged on my enemies” (1 Sam 14:24). The people kept the command – “so none of the troops tasted food” (ibid.) – except for Saul’s son, Jonathan, who did eat of the honeycomb. Saul sentenced Jonathan to death (14:44), and now Saul himself violates the custom. After some hesitation, he breaks the oath and eats before an important battle. By eating, Saul conveys his absolute despair over his position and status as the leader prior to the battle; seemingly he imposes on himself the same death penalty to which he previously sentenced his son.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Third Dismissal

It seems that the appeal to the sorceress and the harsh words of the prophet Samuel in response to this appeal, brought Saul to the very lowest point in the annals of his reign as king of Israel. This point was preceded by incidents of dismissal that signaled a gradual decline in Saul’s status.[[33]](#footnote-33) The first was in Gilgal, before the war against the Philistines, when Samuel informed him: "But now your kingdom will not endure, for you have not kept the commandment of the Lord" (1Sam 13:14). The second incident also occurred in Gilgal, after the war against Amalek, when Samuel informed him, "Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king" (1Sam15:22).[[34]](#footnote-34) However, it seems that Saul did not agree to accept the words of the prophet. Throughout the chapters that describe the complex relationship between Saul and the alternative candidate chosen by God—David—it is clearly evident that Saul did not concede his position and continued to cling to his role as king.

Saul’s insistence upon holding on to his status cannot obscure the gradual decline in his royal authority. For example, it was suggested above that Saul’s consent to act in accordance with advice coming from his subordinates reflects weakness in his leadership. It should be noted that this was not the first time in the Saul narrative cycle that he followed the advice of his subordinates. In previous chapters, Saul acted according to the advice of the people (1 Sam 14:45, 15:24); his servants (16:15-17); and his son Jonathan (19:6). Moreover, we must not forget the episode in which the servants of the king refused to obey a direct royal order (1Sam 22:17). In my view, this fact does not detract from the message of the present story. It is true that Saul’s royal authority has been challenged for some time. However, after every crisis of this kind, Saul recovers and continues to function as king.

The turning-point in Saul’s consciousness and psyche occurs only in the present chapter. After Saul hears the decisive words of Samuel, he understands finally that his role has come to an end and that there is nothing left for him to do other than depart honorably for his death. It must be emphasized that the king of Israel cannot leave his job; he can’t “retire.” Only death can release him from office. Saul undoubtedly continued to function technically in his role, and in his capacity as king of Israel, he went out to battle at the head of the army, in a final war against the Philistines. However, he did so with deep personal awareness and knowledge that his job was done, and he went forth towards his anticipated death.[[35]](#footnote-37)

In conclusion, the episode that concludes the story of Saul and the medium at Endor shows the character Saul after he receives the news of his impending death and the end of his reign. Observing the secondary figures who surround Saul makes it clear that the natural hierarchy has been compromised when subordinates are able to impose their will on Saul. Tracking the phrase שמע בקול ‘listen to the voice’ - ‘obey the voice’ shows that Saul not only neglected to obey the voice of God but was constrained to heed his own servants. Saul’s eventual consent to eat on the eve of a critical battle hints that he has despaired of being king, and confirms the death verdict against him.

By means of these literary devices, the biblical narrator presented the mental process that Saul experienced and that led him to realize that his role had come to an end.

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   On the different stages in the coronation of Saul, see: J. Jacobs, “‘And There Renew the Kingship’: The Double Coronation of Saul (1 Samuel 10-11),” *SJOT* 32 (2018), 189–200. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. D.M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of Biblical Story* (Sheffield: A&C Black, 1980), 109; A.F. Campbell*, I Samuel* (FOTL; Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 283–284. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michael compared Saul’s meal with the prophet Samuel, which opens the Saul stories (1Sam 10:22–27) to his meal with the sorceress, which concludes the Saul stories, and concluded that the point of the meal is to demonstrate Saul’s decline. See

   M. Michael, “Saul's Prophetic Representations and Its Parody in 1 Samuel,” *OTE* 26 (2013), 131–132. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J. Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel* (NCBC; London: Oliphants, 1971), 183; P.R. Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel, The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 216; J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, vol. II, The Crossing Fates (I Sam. 13–31 & II Sam. 1)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 619–620; U. Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1997), 99–101. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. W. Beuken, “I Samuel 28: The Prophet as ‘Hammer of Witches,’” *JSOT* 6 (1978), 11–13; P.T. Reis, “Eating the Blood: Saul and the Witch of Endor”, *JSOT* 73 (1997), 3–23; M. Garsiel, “King Saul in Distress: Between the Prophet Samuel and the Sorceress (1 Sam. 28:3–25),” *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* 6 (2002), 42–45. Concerning the differences of opinion in prior interpretation regarding the character of the medium, see Garsiel, 40–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. While Saul had previously received messages from Samuel according to which God was fed up with him (1 Sam 13:14, 15:23), he nevertheless continued to hold on to the kingship. Below I will argue that Saul ceased functioning as king only after he heard the prophecy of Samuel in the present chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On secondary characters and their role in biblical stories, see for example: S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 86–92; Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, 317–324. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On Leading Words and their role in biblical stories see for example: M. Buber, “Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative”, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 114–128; Y. Amit, “The Multy-Purpose ‘Leading Word’ Usage”, *Prooftexts* 9 (1989), 99-114; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 211–216. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A “recurring motif” is a phenomenon, object, or phrase that is repeated numerous times in a single work and generates structural meaning of some sort. See

   *The Hebrew Bible in Literary Criticism*, A. Preminger and E. L. Greenstein (eds.) (New York: Ungar, 1986), 243–251; F. Polak, *Biblical Narrative: Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 124–126. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hamori has argued that the medium ranks higher in the hierarchy than Samuel, because it is she who causes his spirit to appear. See: E.J. Hamori, *Women's Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2015), 125. This claim is difficult to accept. While the medium does serve as a ‘technical’ instrument in raising Samuel’s spirit, the words of the prophet stem from his authority as one who bears the word of God, and this authority is, of course, greater than any act carried out by the medium. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This triple inquiry is also recognized from elsewhere in the Ancient Near East, see D.V Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 242. Y. Zakovitch noted the existence of the three-four structure here, see Y. Zakovitch, *“For Three… and for Four,”* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1979), 109–112 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Conspicuous here is the play on the name שאול ‘Saul’ who שואל ‘asks’ but is not answered. On this derivation of Saul’s name, see M. Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (Jerusalem: Revivim, 1990), 72–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. On the opposing analogies between Saul and David on this subject, see Garsiel, “King Saul in Distress,” 27; Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 116–117. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Fokkelman determined that the removal of the royal garments symbolizes the end of Saul’s kingship. See: Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, 600. In my view, it is indeed possible that there is a symbolic act here which hints at the end of the story, but the fact that Saul goes to ask Samuel for assistance demonstrates that, at this stage, he has still not given up on the kingship. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The prevalent, accepted approach is that the medium did not recognize Saul until she saw Samuel rising up. The medieval Jewish Commentator Rabbi David Kimhi cites an opinion that the medium did recognize Saul immediately (on 28:24). For discussion regarding in what manner and at what point the medium recognizes that the man she is speaking with is king Saul, see for example Edelman, *King Saul*, 244; Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 120–122. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Throughout the chapter Saul is referred to by his given name, and the only reference to Saul as “king” is in the dialogue between Saul and the medium (v. 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The differences in status are evident in Saul’s response to seeing Samuel: “He bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance” (v.14). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See P.D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 169–170. For another discussion of this issue, see Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, 617–618. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Fokkelman noted that The root *n-f-l* appears when Saul fell before Samuel at Naioth in Ramah (19:24), see Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, 618–619. see also Edelman, *King Saul*, 248. The root *n-f-l* appears again in the description of Saul's death: “So Saul took his own sword and **ויפל** ‘fell’ upon it” (31:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. According to this suggestion, the story of Saul and the medium is a classic example of a series of similar events in which the last occurrence to transpire involves a reversal. Alongside the common three-four pattern, Zakovitch points out several less-common patterns, including four-five, see Zakovitch, *“For Three… and for Four,”* 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. On the phrasing of the medium’s request, see J. Jacobs, *Measure for measure in the biblical storytelling* (Tevunot: Alon Shvut, 2006), 114. According to Reis, the medium makes her offer because she wishes to live, and the food she offers is intended for the spirits of the dead. See Reis, “Eating the blood”, 3–23. Hamori claims that the medium ranks highly in the hierarchy of the story. Her claim draws, *inter alia*, on noting the authorities of the medium in her address to Saul here. See Hamori, *Women’s Divination*, 127. In my opinion, one can only learn from this phase in the story about the reversal of authority that takes place at the story’s end, and not about the status or authority of the medium throughout the plot. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Klein believes that Saul initially refuses to eat because hearing that his death has been decreed makes him feel that there is no reason to in eat, because eating is an expression of life and vitality. See, R. W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1983), 273. However, Miscall thinks that Saul refuses because he is in shock after hearing Samuel's message, see Miscall, *1 Samuel*, 170. The question of why Saul had not eaten that day is considered below. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. On other cases in the cycle of Saul stories that Saul acts according to advice from those subservient to him See below. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Several scholars have noted that שמע בקול‎ ‘listen to the voice’ are leading words in this chapter but did not fully clarify their significance. See: ‎Klein, *1 Samuel*, 273; S. Bar-Efrat, *I Samuel: Mikra Leyisra’el* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), 345; Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 74–75. Garsiel described the importance of these words well but attributed different significance to them. In his opinion, they represent another sin of Saul. See: M. Garsiel, *The Book of Samuel Part One: The Story and History of David and his Kingdom* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2018), 228–229. Hamori has also noted well the importance of these words, which she sees as a means to rank the hierarchy within the story. See: Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 125–127. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For additional points of contact between 1 Sam 15 and 1 Sam 28, see Below. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On bread as a motif in the cycle of Saul stories, see Shula Abramsky, “On the casting of lots for the apprehension of a sinner”, *Beth Mikra* 26 (1981), 239–244. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See, for example, H.P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Samuel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 136; D.T. Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 285 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. On fasting in the Biblical Narrative see: D. Sharon, "When Fathers Refuse to Eat: The Trope of Rejecting Food and Drink in Biblical Narrative," *Semeia* 86 (1999), 135–148. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See P.K. McCarter, 1 Samuel, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1980), 421; Klein, *1 Samuel*, 272; Tsumura, The First Book of Samuel, 629. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. S. Bakon, “Saul and the Witch of Endor”, *Dor LeDor* 5 (1976), 20–21; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, 621; Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 109; Garsiel, “King Saul in Distress”, 42; R. Alter, *The David Story, A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Gunn also compared Saul’s eating here with that of Jonathan in chapter 14, see Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 109. It should mention that Saul's kingship was initiated by a meal (1 Sam 9:22-25). See T. Angert-Quilter and L. Wall, “The ‘Spirit Wife’ at Endor,” *JSOT* 92 (2001), 60–63, they also point out some other parallels between the events at the beginning and end of Saul's reign. See also M. Michael, "The Prophet, the Witch and the Ghost: Understanding the Parody of Saul as a ‘Prophet’ and the Purpose of Endor in the Deuteronomistic History," *JSOT* 38 (2014), 321-331.In contrast, according to Edelman, Saul's consent to eat shows that “He has decided to embrace life for the moment, return to his kingly duties, and accept his fate”, see Edelman, *King Saul*, 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Saul’s decline is described well, but from different angles, in Michael, “Saul's Prophetic”, 111–136. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Samuel himself recalls the previous incidents when he says, “The Lord has done to you just as he spoke by me; for the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand,” (1Sam 28:17). See, e.g., [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. It should be noted that David also referred to Saul as the lawful king throughout the period, even though he had already been informed in chapter 16 that he was Saul’s heir. Only after Saul’s death did David begin to establish his status as Saul’s rightful heir. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)