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The Servants of Saul: 'Minor' Characters and Royal Commentary in 1 Samuel 9–31*

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Abstract

Since studies of the Saul narratives in 1 Samuel 9–31 tend to focus on the three main protagonists—Samuel, Saul, and David—characters who play only a minor role have not received much attention. To provide one of these 'minority perspectives', this article offers a re-reading of the narrative with a focus on Saul's servants. Although these figures are the only ones who are involved in all of the major scenes of the king's career, their role in the narrative has not been examined. Drawing from six servant passages (1 Sam. 9.1–10.16; 16.14-23; 17–18; 21–22; 28; 31), an attempt is made to show that Saul's servants bear heavily on the development of the plot and that they function as an important, indirect means of the characterization of Saul. The narrative role of these allegedly minor figures therefore has important ramifications for recent efforts to rehabilitate the image of Israel's first king.

Keywords: Servant, Saul, minor characters, characterization, kingship, 1 Samuel.

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1. Introduction

As the Saul narratives in 1 Samuel 9–31 revolve around the three main characters Samuel, Saul, and David, the events recorded in these chapters centre naturally on the triangular relationship between YHWH's spokesman and Israel's first and second king. Not far behind this cast operates a number of supporting actors. Whereas some of these relate to only one of the three (e.g. Abigail), others give rise to yet another relational triad. Prime examples are Saul's daughter Michal and his son Jonathan, both of whom shift their allegiance to the rising star David. While these protagonists have attracted a considerable share of scholarly attention,[1] a third tier of characters has gone virtually unnoticed. Apart from a 1993 study on anonymity and character by Adele Reinhartz, the role of such figures as the Israelite people, family members and elders, or the Philistine armies has not received much discussion.[2]

To provide one of these minority perspectives, I will examine the narrative role of the individuals and groups which are identified as Saul's servants. While the theme of servanthood has been of great interest in other sections of the Hebrew Bible, until recently no attempt has been made to probe 1 Samuel 9–31 in this regard.[3] Yet, considering the

1. See, e.g., Orly Keren, 'David and Jonathan: A Case of Unconditional Love?', *JSOT* 37 (2012), pp. 3-23; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, rev. edn, 2011), pp. 143-62; Hayyim Angel, 'When Love and Politics Mix: David and his Relationships with Saul, Jonathan, and Michal', *JBQ* 40 (2012), pp. 41-51; Jonathan Y. Rowe, *Michal's Moral Dilemma: A Literary, Anthropological, and Ethical Interpretation* (LHBOTS, 533; New York: T&T Clark International, 2011); Francois Langlament, '"David–Jonathan–Saül" ou le "Livre de Jonathan" 1 Sam. 16.14–2 Sam. 1.27', *RB* 101 (1994), pp. 326-54; Robert B. Lawton, 'Saul, Jonathan, and the "Son of Jesse"', *JSOT* 58 (1993), pp. 35-46; Otto Kaiser, 'David und Jonathan: Tradition, Redaktion und Geschichte in 1 Sam. 16-20: Ein Versuch', *ETL* 66 (1990), pp. 281-96.

2. Adele Reinhartz, 'Anonymity and Character in the Books of Samuel', *Semeia* 63 (1993), pp. 117-41. Reinhartz devotes most of her attention to three nameless women—the medium of En-Dor (1 Sam. 28) and the wise women of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14) and Abel (2 Sam. 20)—and discusses the narrative impact of the presence and absence of proper names.

3. While the most prominent location of the theme is, of course, Isa. 40–55, studies on servants and servanthood have appeared also for Genesis, the book of Kings, Jeremiah, and the Psalms. See, e.g., Edward J. Bridge, 'The "Slave" is the "Master": Jacob's Servile Language to Esau in Genesis 33.1-17', *JSOT* 38 (2014), pp. 263-87; Lieve M. Teugels, 'The Anonymous Matchmaker: An Enquiry into the Characterization of the Servant of Abraham in Genesis 24', *JSOT* 65 (1995), pp. 13-23; Esther Menn, 'A Little Child Shall Lead Them: The Role of the Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kings 5.1-19)', *CurTM* 35.5 (2008), pp. 340-48; John Goldingay, *God's Prophet, God's Servant: A Study in Jeremiah*

frequency and the situations in which the servants appear, their contribution to the narrative demands more attention. Whereas some of the main figures in 1 Samuel 9–31 occupy only a few chapters, the servants feature prominently in all major scenes of Saul's career—they are to be found in his first encounters with Samuel and David, the pivotal battle against Goliath, the massacre of the priests at Nob, and even at his death. From the introduction of the narrative to its conclusion, the actions and speeches of the servants are inseparably integrated into the king's private and public life. Within the world of the text, they stand in the longest and most consistent relationship to Saul, exceeding even his children and David.[4]

In a position of such significance, the allegedly minor character of the servants demands to be integrated into the analysis of 1 Samuel 9–31 and even more so into the study and evaluation of Saul. In the last decades, several efforts have been made to rehabilitate the king and to make a case against the academic and popular stereotype of Saul as a 'villain, tragic figure, and flawed ruler'.[5] Obviously, this discussion of Israel's first king entails many factors and facets and my study of Saul's servants is but one of them. Yet, given how closely and consistently these figures relate to the king—they are, indeed, the Israelites nearest to him—the servants carry much weight in the characterization and evaluation of Saul. In what follows, I will therefore embark on a re-reading of the narrative with special attention to their speeches, actions, and attitudes. On the basis of

and Isaiah 40–55 (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1984); Katharine J. Dell, 'The Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah: Jeremiah Revisited', in Katharine J. Dell, Graham Davies, and Yee von Koh (eds.), *Genesis, Isaiah, and Psalms* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 119-34; Edward J. Bridge, 'Loyalty, Dependency and Status with YHWH: The Use of *ʿbd* in the Psalms', *VT* 59 (2009), pp. 360-78. In 1 Samuel, the servant-theme has recently been brought into the discussion by Dawn M. Sellars with regard to Saul. As he emerges from her analysis of 1 Sam. 13–15 as a king who is anxious to serve his people rather than to make them his servants—*contra* to Samuel's warning in 8.11-16—she argues for a 'more positive assessment of his reign'. See 'An Obedient Servant? The Reign of King Saul (1 Samuel 13–15) Reassessed', *JSOT* 35 (2011), pp. 317-38 (319).

4. Servants appear at the beginning (ch. 9) and end of Saul's career (ch. 31) and in all major scenes between these poles. In comparison, Samuel relates to Saul directly only in chs. 9–13, 15, 28, and both Jonathan and Michal appear only in chs. 14, 18–19.

5. Ronald F. Youngblood, '1, 2 Samuel', in F.E. Gaebelein (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), III, pp. 617-18. Most prominent among these efforts is the seminal work by David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (JSOTSup, 14; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980). See also the recent publications by Sellars, 'Servant?', and Ralph K. Hawkins, 'The First Glimpse of Saul and his Subsequent Transformation', *BBR* 22 (2012), pp. 353-62.

my analysis of six passages (1 Sam. 9.1–10.16; 16.14-23; 17–18; 21–22; 28; 31), I will argue that the servants fulfil a deliberate narrative function both for the development of the plot and the figure of Saul. By means of the indirections of correspondence and contrast, they provide a 'royal commentary' and contribute thereby heavily to the theological viewpoint of the narrative.[6]

2. The Servant Passages in 1 Samuel 9–31

Biblical Hebrew has a number of terms which can be used to refer to servants. Most frequent is the noun עבד which occurs over 800 times in the Hebrew Bible and appears also as the most common referent in the Saul narrative. Less frequently, the word נער is employed for a number of individuals who take on roles equivalent to those included in the עבד-group.[7] For the servant passages in 1 Samuel 9–31, the usage of these terms overlaps considerably, even to the extent that they are being used interchangeably within the same text (cf. 16.14-18). The referents עבדים and אנשים can likewise be used for the same characters (cf. 28.7-8). Saul's weapon-bearer, an individual who is certainly to be included in this discussion, adds yet another designator (נשא־כלים, 31.4).[8] In light of this diversity, the passages which are relevant to this study have not been identified solely and exclusively on the basis of terminology, but also with regard to the presence, function, and relationship which any given individual may show towards Saul. As I hope to demonstrate, there is a surprising diversity among those who bear the label 'servant' in 1 Samuel 9–31. The reasons for the selection and inclusion of each passage will be discussed within the respective sections below.

6. These functional aspects of minor characters have been well-attended and are readily available in the theoretical literature on Hebrew narrative art. See, e.g., Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), pp. 23-42; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989; repr.: London: T&T Clark International, 2004), pp. 86-92; David M. Gunn and Danna N. Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 75-81. I also found particularly helpful the concise overview and the numerous examples in Uriel Simon, 'Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative', *JSOT* 46 (1990), pp. 11-19.

7. The lexeme נער exhibits a wide range of referents, including infants (Exod. 2.6), young men of marriageable age (cf. Gen. 34.19; Josef: '17 years of age', Gen. 37.2), as well as servants. For references, see David J.A. Clines (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), V, pp. 708-11.

8. See below the discussion of 1 Sam. 16.14-23 and the use of נער and נשא־כלים as referents for Jonathan's weapon-bearer (1 Sam. 14.1, 6).

2.1. Servant, Saul, and Samuel (1 Sam. 9.1–10.16)

From all of the servant passages in the Saul narrative, the first has received the most attention and it is not difficult to see why. Corresponding to 1 Sam. 1.1, the phrase ויהי־איש in 9.1 marks the beginning of a new discourse unit and introduces Saul. Following immediately after YHWH's consent to kingship (8.22), this coalescence of new discourse and new character is laden with expectation. While these factors explain the significance and interest in the passage, the servant himself has also attracted scholarly attention, mostly because he appears alone and in dialogue with the future king.[9] Nonetheless, questions concerning the division and interplay of literary sources, the use of the prophetic titles איש האלהים, ראה, and נביא, and, of course, Saul himself have been at the centre of analysis, committing the nameless servant to the chapter's periphery.[10]

Whereas vv. 1-2 introduce Saul as someone perfectly suited for the open office of kingship, vv. 3-4 introduce the first problem that the potential candidate needs to overcome, namely, finding his father's lost donkeys. For this quest, Saul follows Kish's advice to take along 'one of the servants' (אחד־מנערים).[11] While this indiscriminate description already reflects the insignificance of this figure, the absence of a name and character sketch further highlights this, especially when compared to Saul's detailed introduction. The servant's disappearance midway through the passage (9.15-26) and his explicit dismissal before its climax—Saul's anointing in 9.27—just add to his role as a secondary prop.

Yet, there are a number of clues which prompt a reconsideration of this initial assessment. First, there is the deliberate alternation between plural and singular verbs in 9.4-5.[12] While this grammatical pattern serves to

9. See, e.g., V. Philips Long, *The Reign and Rejection of King Saul: A Case for Literary and Theological Coherence* (SBLDS, 118; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 201-203; Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis* (BLS, 10; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985), pp. 289-97. With the exception of the servant in ch. 9 and the weapon-bearer in ch. 31, all servants appear in group formation.

10. See e.g., Rachelle Gilmour, 'Suspense and Anticipation in 1 Samuel 9.1-14', *JHS* 9 (2009), pp. 2-16; Gunn, *Fate*, p. 61; P. Kyle McCarter Jr, *1 Samuel* (AB, 8; New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 185; David T. Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 168-69.

11. All translations in this study are my own.

12. ויעבר…ולא מצאו ויעברו…ויעבר…ולא מצאו…המה באו. Following LXX and the Vulgate, the traditional response to this apparent inconsistency has been emendation (see, for instance, the commentaries by Wellhausen, Budde, or McCarter). More recently, however, the change of number has been shown to be intentional, serving both to identify

underline Saul's role as the leader, it also functions to maintain the servant's presence in the narrative, as does the redundant reference in v. 5a (אשר־עמו). The servant's significance is further confirmed by the seating arrangements at the feast in the city—he sits next to the future king at the head table (9.22)—as well as by his reappearance at the conclusion of the episode (10.14-16).

Turning from the introduction to the conversation in 9.5-10, it can be seen that Saul speaks first, suggesting to abort the unsuccessful search and to return home, lest his father be worried. As Alter has demonstrated, both the moment of first dialogue and the first words by a new protagonist constitute an 'important moment in the exposition of character'.[13] Equally important in this scene, however, is the reaction of the servant: far from the compliance and unqualified obedience which one might expect from a random, nameless inferior, he counters Saul's decision and directs his attention to a 'man of God' who lives close by (הנה־נא איש אלהים בעיר הזאת, 9.6).[14] As that man's word always comes true (כל אשר־ידבר בוא יבוא), he will surely be of help in their situation. Yet, Saul pushes back: 'What can we bring the man?' (9.7). Not the least affected by his master's reluctance, the servant persists in his proposal (ויסף הנער לענות, 9.8). His presentation of a piece of silver ultimately convinces Saul and they set out to their pivotal encounter with Samuel.[15]

Saul as the leader (see Hertzberg), and to remind the reader of the servant's presence (see Fokkelman). The deliberate nature of this shift is confirmed by its reappearance in 10.2 (והנה נטש אביך את־דברי האתנות ודאג לכם; see also 10.14). Cf. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (trans. J.S. Bowden; OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 81; J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. IV. *Vow and Desire (1 Sam 1–12)* (SSN, 31; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), p. 376. For shifts between singular and plural referents, see the seminal study by Jaakov Levi, *Die Inkongruenz Im Biblischen Hebräisch* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1987), p. 25. For a comprehensive discussion of the participant shifts in this passage and in 1 Sam. 9–31, see Charles Grebe, 'Participant Reference in the Saul Narratives' (MA dissertation, Briercrest Seminary, 2007), pp. 78-82.

13. Alter, *Art*, p. 74: 'The point at which dialogue first emerges will be worthy of special attention, and in most instances, the initial words spoken by a personage will be revelatory, perhaps more in manner than in matter'.

14. Just as the particle הנה functions to express different levels of perception between narrator and characters, it is possible that it expresses here something that the servant knows, but not Saul, namely, the whereabouts of the divine spokesman. See Berlin, *Poetics*, pp. 62-63.

15. The sudden appearance of the money, expressed by the rare Niphal form of מצא, has been taken by many interpreters as an indication of divine sustenance and guidance. See, e.g., Eslinger, *Kingship*, p. 294. McCarter, *1 Samuel*, p. 185; Tsumura, *Samuel*, p. 268.

Aside from this crucial impact on the plot, there is more that needs to be observed with regard to the servant. First, I note that he exhibits all the criteria one would expect to find in a good king, such as courage, good speech, success, knowledge of his land, and the awareness of how and where to acquire divine counsel. As the direct sequel to the royal expectation in 1 Samuel 8 and Saul's promising portrayal in 9.1-2, it is striking to encounter here a servant who overrules his master precisely in these aspects. This imbalance is reflected also in the speech proportions (the servant speaks much more), and speech style (there is much redundancy in Saul's talk). Taking these aspects together, this first servant passage depicts the future king of Israel as someone who requires direction, advice, and even financial support from one of those he ought to lead. Rather than seeing Saul's behaviour here as a virtue—Weiser, for instance, commends him for his willingness to give in—the exchange with the servant urges me to question his royal abilities from the very moment he appears on the scene.[16] The crucial contribution of the servant-figure is affirmed immediately by a nondescript group of female servants (נערות) who similarly provide Saul with further directions for Samuel's whereabouts (9.11-14). Much, then, is achieved through seemingly irrelevant protagonists at the beginning of the Saul narrative. They make possible the divine appointment between Samuel and Saul (cf. 9.15-16),[17] they solve problems which are too difficult for the future king (finding donkeys, finding prophets), and they convey much about Saul's potential as Israel's leader.

16. Artur Weiser, *Samuel: Seine Geschichtliche Aufgabe und Religiöse Bedeutung. Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu 1 Samuel 7–12* (FRLANT, 81; Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), p. 55: 'Ein treuer Sohn, der seinem Vater in Gehorsam und Liebe zugetan ist (9.3, 5), mit dem Sklaven seines Vaterhauses auf freundschaftlichem Fuße verkehrt (9.5-8) und, wo es gilt, auch schweigen kann (10.16)'. On a related note, one could speculate whether Saul's concern for his father (9.5) and for the servant's provision (כי הלחם אזל מכלינו, 9.7) may not lead to a more positive picture. Yet, as the return to Kish would have jeopardized the divine appointment with Samuel (9.15) and as the lack of bread is providentially resolved by the opulent meal in the city (9.22-24), the wider narrative context seems to work against a re-evaluation of this kind.

17. Whereas Miloš Bič's reading of 1 Sam. 9 as a reworked version of an old Semitic enthronement festival in which Saul takes the role of Baal has found little resonance among interpreters, his awareness of the servant's instrumentality deserves attention: 'So wird der Diener zum Werkzeug Gottes um Saul aus dem Götzendienst zum Gottesdienst emporzuheben' ('Saul sucht die Eselinnen [1 Sam. 9]', *VT* 7 [1957], pp. 92-97 [96]).

2.2. Servants, Saul, and David (1 Samuel 16.14-23)

When Saul's servants appear the next time in the narrative, their master is already well-established as king. After Samuel's anointing (10.1) and the public declaration of his kingship (11.17-26), Saul enacts his role as the deliverer of Israel (11.11). As the result of the events in chs. 13–15, however, this situation does not last long and only a few chapters after his regal appointment, Saul is rejected (16.1).[18] As a consequence, the spirit of YHWH departs from him and he receives instead a רוח רעה from YHWH (16.14). Since the nature of this mysterious, evil spirit understandably has attracted most of the scholarly attention, the role and contribution of the king's servants has gone largely unnoted.[19]

To begin, it is important to realize that the narrator tells *his audience* that Saul has an evil spirit. There is no indication in the text that Saul himself knows about the reason or nature of his malady.[20] Taking this into account, the servants' quick and correct diagnosis, reminiscent of the perceptive servant in ch. 9, is remarkable: 'Behold (הנה־נא), an evil spirit from God has struck you with terror!' (16.15; cf. 9.6). In contrast to their master, the servants demonstrate a keen awareness of the spiritual realities behind Saul's situation. Moreover, they instruct the king on what to do and even provide the remedy—music therapy—to his affliction

18. This is not the place to discuss the complex issue of why and how Saul lost the kingdom. For a full engagement with this topic, see the helpful monographs by Gunn (*Fate*) and Long (*Reign and Rejection*), and also the recent contribution by Yisca Zimran, '"The Lord has rejected you as King over Israel": Saul's Deposal from the Throne', *JHS* 14 (2014), pp. 1-18.

19. For a bibliography for the interpretation of the רוח רעה, see David M. Howard Jr, 'The Transfer of Power from Saul to David in 1 Sam. 16:13-14', *JETS* 32 (1989), pp. 473-83. Just as in Howard's article, the focus on the evil spirit has left little room to explore the significance of the servants also in other works; see, e.g., Tsumura, *Samuel*, pp. 426-33; McCarter, *1 Samuel*, pp. 279-83; A. Graeme Auld, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 185-91. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. II. *Crossing Fates (1 Sam. 13–31 & 2 Sam. 1)* (SSN, 23; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), pp. 133-40; Diana V. Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah* (JSOTSup, 121; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp. 117-23. Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 155-61.

20. Similar scenarios are recorded in the narratives of Exod. 3.2-3 (Moses does not know that the Angel of YHWH is in the bush), Gen. 22 (Abraham does not know that YHWH tests him), or the prologue of Job (the undeserved sufferer knows nothing of the arrangements between YHWH and השטן). In all these texts, the readers are given an insider perspective which the main character does not share.

(16.16). Thus the same dynamics as in ch. 9 can be seen at work: the king has a problem which he is not able to solve, let alone understand, and it is only through the insight, action, and confidence of his servants that the situation is resolved.[21] The major contribution of these supposedly insignificant characters is indicated again by their narrative presence which is reflected in the initiative and length of their speech.[22] As with the servant in ch. 9, the expected hierarchies are inverted: it is the king who obeys his subjects.

But there is more: upon Saul's compliance to acquire a musician, a random individual from the group of servants (אחד מהנערים; cf. 9.3) launches a long speech about the 'son of Jesse' which goes far beyond his musical abilities. Apparently, this man is a strong warrior (גבור חיל), prudent in speech (נבון דבר), and closely allied with YHWH (יהוה עמו). Against the contrast between servants and master in vv. 14-17, this unprompted laudatio invites yet another level of comparison, this time between the new king and the old king. With Saul being weakened, outspoken by his inferiors, and God-forsaken, the servant's description of David presents an attractive alternative to the current royal programme.[23]

In summary, the servants in 16.14-23 function as an indirect evaluation of the character of Saul. This is achieved again via the contrast in speech,

21. Robert Alter (*The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* [New York: W.W. Norton, 1999], p. 98) is among the few who observes this connection: 'Just as at the beginning of his story, in his quest for the lost asses, Saul did not know what to do and was dependent on the counsel of his "lad"'. See also Hertzberg, *Samuel*, p. 141.

22. In the dialogue in 16.15-18, Saul speaks seven words, his servants speak forty. Alfons Schulz ('Narrative Art in the Books of Samuel', in David M. Gunn [ed.], *Narrative and Novella in Samuel: Studies by Hugo Gressmann and Other Scholars 1906–1923* [trans. David E. Orton; JSOTSup, 116; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991], pp. 119-70 [137]) misses the point here entirely: 'The speech of the servants to Saul is rather long, but is addressed to a sick man, whom they want to induce to do something'. Seidl's meticulous analysis of the *Redeebenen* in this pericope, however, is right on target: 'Bei den Reden des 1. Teils sind sehr häufig die Diener Sauls Redesubjekt…Saul redet nur nach, was die Diener sagen (v. 17)… Der Diener gibt den Impuls, Saul führt nur aus. Saul bleibt im Redeteil immer an zweiter Stelle, ohne Eigeninitiative, ohne Impuls; er ist nur Vollzugsperson der Vorschläge anderer.' Theodor Seidl, 'David statt Saul: Göttliche Legitimation und Menschliche Kompetenz des Königs als Motive der Redaktion von 1 Sam 16–18', *ZAW* 98 (1986), pp. 39-56 (48-49).

23. Fokkelman (*Crossing Fates*, p. 137) calls the servant's speech a 'hymn of praise to the celebrated king'. Gunn (*Fate*, p. 79) goes a step further: David becomes not only Saul's new servant, but also 'God's new servant'.

discernment, and action. They demonstrate the royal characteristics of control, oratory skill, spiritual insight, and problem-solving which their master, by comparison, lacks. They also fulfill a crucial role in the development of the plot. Continuing the trajectory from the previous servant passage, it is only through their diagnosis and directive that two main characters come into contact. Since the rest of the narrative depends on the establishment of the Samuel–Saul–David triad, the significance of this structural function cannot be overstated. The minor character of the servants plays a major role in the transition from no king to first king to true king.

2.3. David, Saul's Servant *Par Excellence* (1 Samuel 17–18)

As a result of the events in ch. 16, David enters into Saul's service (עמד לפניו),[24] not only as a musician, but also as his weapon-bearer (16.21b). Whereas the previous two servant passages have pictured Saul within family relations (ch. 9) and in a court scenario (ch. 16), chs. 17–18 depict him on the national and public stage, namely, in the midst of the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Philistines.

What makes this episode of the conflict special, however, is the involvement of the warrior Goliath. Given the impressive portrayal in 17.4-7, the dismay of Saul and his men is certainly understandable (ויחתו ויראו מאד, 17.11). David, however, upon hearing Goliath's blasphemous taunt again Israel and YHWH, reacts not with fear but with fervour (17.26b) and is quick to offer the solution to Saul's military predicament: 'Let your servant (עבדך) go and let him fight with this Philistine' (17.32). While Saul has good reasons not to accept this proposal—'you are but a lad (נער)'—David's subsequent speech proves persuasive:[25]

24. Mark E. Biddle, *Polyphony and Symphony in Prophetic Literature: Rereading Jeremiah 7–20* (SOTI, 2; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), pp. 59-60: 'With the exception of a few unique usages, all other occurrences [of the phrase עמד לפני] describe circumstances involving the appearance of an individual or a group before a superior—most often the king, a royal official, or the deity—in order to render service'. Cf. also the parallel of Jer. 52.12 (עמד לפני) and 2 Kgs 25.8 (עבד).

25. Similar to his response to the servant in 9.7, there remains here also the possibility of evaluating Saul's resistance more positively: as far as he knows, he is saving the inexperienced David from walking into certain death. While the contrast that ch. 17 articulates between Saul's fear and David's fearlessness will need to be considered at this point, the king's appropriate concern cannot be dismissed all that easily.

> Your servant (עבדך) used to shepherd the flock for his father and whenever a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went out after him and struck him down… Your servant (עבדך) has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has treated the ranks of the living God with contempt. (17.34-36)

The rest of the story is well-known: Saul gives in, David goes out with sling and stone, Goliath is killed, the battle is won.

Although this episode diverts strikingly from the previous passages—David is as far from being a minor character as anyone can be—there is good reason to include it in this study. Since ch. 16 has established David in Saul's service at court, his triple self-reference as עבדך in 17.32-36 reflects not only 'the essential minimum of court style' but also a much more essential self-identification of David *as* Saul's servant.[26] The decision to include the Goliath episode in this study is affirmed by the events which follow in ch. 18. Waging war for the king, David continues in Saul's service, and we learn that he 'had more success than all of Saul's servants' (שכל דוד מכל עבדי שאול, 18.30b). If David were in an entirely different category than this group, such a comparison could hardly serve the effect intended by the narrator.[27] The fight against Goliath, therefore, continues the trajectory which has been seen thus far: the king has a problem that he cannot handle and one of his servants takes the initiative and brings about the solution. As with the servants in chs. 9 and 16, here it is the servant David who exhibits all the royal characteristics which Saul, by implicit comparison, is found wanting. This observation is supported once more by the disproportion and effectiveness of speech, but also by the symbolic clothing of David with his master's armour (17.38).[28]

26. Fokkelman (*Crossing Fates*, pp. 166-69) notices the repetition of עבדך in 17.34 and 17.36, but finds no significance in it. That an address like David's here must not be restricted to the category of self-abasement is supported, for instance, by Nehemiah who is described both as Artaxerxes's cup-bearer (Neh. 1.11) *and* as his humble subject (ואם־ייטב עבדך לפניך, Neh. 2.5a).

27. One further needs to consider at this point that David is referred to as 'Saul's servant' also at later moments in the narrative, and not only by himself (20.7; 26.18), but by Saul (22.8) and others (22.14; 29.3).

28. Edelman, *Saul*, p. 131: 'In a reversal of roles, Saul now arms David, his appointed weapons-bearer, for battle (vv. 38-39). David assumes the place of the king in taking on responsibility for battle'. A similar exchange occurs between Jonathan and David later in the narrative (18.4).

If we take into account our insider information about the divinely ordained power shift (cf. 16.1-13), and the servants' structural function in connecting Saul and David (cf. 16.14-23), the involvement of David in the Goliath episode presents itself as yet another advancement of YHWH's will through a servant figure. Since YHWH's plans will ultimately benefit David as the new king, it is particularly fitting that David himself takes on the role of Saul's servant and that he does so precisely as Saul's popularity declines and his own rises (18.7). Moreover, it is not only Saul's own son Jonathan who binds himself to David (18.1-4), but also Saul's servants (18.5b)![29] Since these figures have impressed thus far with great insight and discernment, this seemingly irrelevant note at the conclusion of the Goliath episode functions as a particularly strong affirmation of David. While the king's servants have superseded their master in character, spiritual awareness, and action, the most important role in YHWH's design of the Israelite monarchy is reserved for David, Saul's servant *par excellence*.

2.4. Servants and Masters in the Nob Episode (1 Samuel 21–22)

The next passage presents a complex scenario of three interrelated master–servant relationships (21.2-10, 11-16; 22.6-19), which I will discuss in the sequence in which they appear.[30] I begin with David and his servants (הנערים, 21.3), who find themselves running from Saul's wrath. Seeking refuge at the sanctuary at Nob, David 'persuades' the priest Ahimelech to supply some provision for him and his crew.[31] Since the sanctuary only holds holy bread, the priest inquires into the purity of David's servants. David vouches for them, yet not without highlighting their exceptional devotion to him: since his servants keep themselves in order even on a normal journey, how much more when they escape with their master (21.6)? Since this is the first time that David's lads appear in the narrative, this scene begs a comparison with previous master–servant

29. וייטב בעיני כל־העם וגם בעיני עבדי שאול (18.5b). Walter Brueggemann, 'Narrative Coherence and Theological Intentionality in 1 Samuel 18', *CBQ* 55 (1993), pp. 225-43 (235): 'Even Saul's inner circle has an odd, subversive sympathy for David'.

30. The verse references in this section follow that of the MT.

31. It is not clear whether David's dubious claim to act on a charge from the king (המלך צוני) should be attributed positively as a clever improvization on behalf of his followers (cf. 21.14) or negatively as an outright lie to deceive the priest and save his own life. Note here Gunn's observant remark: 'Saul the pragmatist is condemned by Yahweh (chapter 13); David the pragmatist finds only favour' (*Fate*, p. 86).

episodes and it does not take much to note the striking contrast to Saul and his men: David appears entirely in control of the situation, he leads in speech and action, he finds the solution himself, and he provides for his followers.[32] Regarding the conduct and devotion of his servants, his leadership appears to have an inspiring quality.

Departing from Nob, David's flight leads him to Achish, the Philistine king of Gath. Entering his territory, Achish's servants (עבדי אכיש) immediately recognize him as the successful Israelite war-hero who has slain so many of their own people. In fear of Achish, David improvises: he scratches on the door posts, drools in his beard, and pretends to be insane (21.14). Achish, obviously lacking the discernment of his servants, rebukes them for bringing madman David to him (21.16). Just as with Saul's servants, then, Achish's men deserve much more credit than one may naturally attribute to an anonymous group of background figures. By means of the indirect characterization which they provide, Achish's short-sightedness and self-assurance are exposed and it is precisely these two traits which will cost him many more of his men in a later episode.[33]

Chapter 21 thus presents a juxtaposition between David who initiates, leads, and provides, and Achish who disregards the important insights from his servants and thus brings disaster on his people. Against the backdrop of these two models of master–servant relationship, I now turn to Saul and his attendants in 22.6-19. The passage opens with the king's complaint to his servants (לעבדיו).[34] Unable to find out David's whereabouts, Saul accuses them of conspiracy (קשרתם כלכם עלי, 22.8), of having been bought off by David to sabotage his search.[35] While it is possible to speculate whether there is some truth to these accusations, the situation seems to be resolved, once more, by one of Saul's servants. This time, however, it is not an anonymous individual or group but a named

32. The same dynamics of implicit comparison could also apply to Jonathan's valiant leadership of his servant in 1 Sam. 14.1-15.

33. In 27.8–28.2, we learn that David, then in Achish's favour and service, will deceive him again as he decimates the Philistine population behind his back.

34. There is a striking contrast between Saul's behaviour and his explicitly royal presentation (Tsumura helpfully points out that the portrayal of Saul sitting under the tree with his spear is a royal type scene in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East; *Samuel*, p. 542).

35. Auld, *Samuel*, p. 266: 'Saul has earlier insulted Jonathan grossly about his parentage (20.30); and now he insults both his staff and his son'.

character: Doeg the Edomite.[36] This figure was introduced *en passant* already in 21.8 where he is identified as 'a certain man from the servants of Saul' who happened to witness David's exchange with Ahimelech at Nob (ושם איש מעבדי שאול). For whatever reason, Doeg is eager to share this information with the king. Being now in possession of a trace of David, Saul immediately summons Ahimelech and accuses him of conspiracy, as he did before with his servants (למה קשרתם עלי, 22.13). Yet, not only does the priest show as little cooperation as Saul's men, he makes matters worse by his unprompted praise of David (cf. 16.18). King Saul, now entirely at the end of his nerves, gives immediate orders to have the holy man executed. Yet none of his servants is willing to strike down a priest of YHWH.[37] Faced with this denial of his direct charge, Saul turns to the foreigner Doeg, his last obedient supporter, who at once follows his command. As a cruel overcompensation for the servants' refusal, he murders not only Ahimelech but 85 other priests, as well as all their families and animals (22.19).

Evidently, the trajectory of Saul's dependence on his servants continues. As a telling development from the previous scenes, however, he now begins to blame them for his incompetence. While Saul's problem is remedied again only through the initiative of one of his servants, it is noteworthy that this individual does not belong to the ranks of the Israelite people: now it is an unclean foreigner who has to do the king's work! The control and exercise of 'royal matters' has been removed even further from Saul's hand. As a parallel to the contrast between his self-absorbed address in 22.7-8 and their silence, Saul's men provide a commentary on his attitude towards YHWH. While his lack of reverence for the divine is already evident in his address to Ahimelech and his fatal command, it is all the more striking when compared to his servants' unwillingness to touch the priests. Although the spiritual discernment of his servants has thus far always benefited their master, Saul does not follow their lead in this pivotal situation. The consequences of this move are to the detriment of his evaluation as YHWH's king and, tragically, at the cost of the priests' lives.

36. For a full discussion of this character, see Joseph Lozovyy, *Saul, Doeg, Nabal, and the 'Son of Jesse': Readings in 1 Samuel 16–25* (LHBOTS, 497; London: T&T Clark International, 2009).

37. In stark contrast to Saul, 'they respect the sacredness and inviolability of the priests and know the inappropriateness of trying to overcome the power of the divine' (Edelman, *Saul*, p. 179).

Considering the complex master–servant scenarios of chs. 21–22 as a whole, there is a notable parallel between the arrogance of Saul and Achish and the discernment of their respective servants. As both scenarios end in the death of those who should enjoy royal protection, the indirect juxtaposition of master and servants serves as a critique of kingly presumption. In correspondence to Saul's cooperation with Doeg the Edomite, this narrative linkage affirms that he has fallen to the level of the foreign rulers around him, unfit to serve as the king of YHWH's chosen people (see 1 Sam. 8.5!). This characterization of Israel's king gains additional momentum when compared to David and his men in 21.2-7. Whereas Saul impels his followers to transgress against YHWH's holy institution, David's servants are depicted as blameless precisely because of their master's leadership.[38] As Saul's servants demonstrate their devotion to YHWH, they stand closer to David than to their own master. As an affirmation of what was seen at the conclusion of the Goliath episode (cf. 18.5b), this implicit shift of allegiance emphasizes both YHWH's and Israel's preference for David.

2.5. Serving Saul at En-Dor (1 Samuel 28)

In light of the fateful events at Nob, it is evident that Saul's royal career is spiraling increasingly out of control and closer to its end. The penultimate servant passage continues and affirms this development. The introduction of ch. 28 provides two pieces of information, namely, that Samuel has passed away (28.3a; cf. 25.1), and that the Philistines gather once more for attack. As a parallel to the Goliath episode, the size of the Philistine army causes Saul great anxiety (וירא ויחרד לבו מאד, 28.5b; cf. 17.11). Since Samuel has died and since Saul, in laudable days past, had expelled all the mediums from the land (28.3b), he now faces the military challenge without any direct connection to the divine. In light of his dismal activities at Nob, it is not surprising that his own inquiry of YHWH is disappointed (28.6).[39] As a last resort, Saul undoes his previous good works and commands his servants (לעבדיו) to find a medium for him (28.7).

38. The contrast between Saul and David's treatment of their servants is analogous to their treatment of their families. Whereas Saul initially attempts to kill Jonathan (20.32-33) and later leads him into death (31.2), David, due to the potential threat posed by the royal apparatus, arranges a safe refuge for his family (22.1-4).

39. See Kenneth M. Craig Jr, 'Rhetorical Aspects of Questions Answered with Silence in 1 Samuel 14.37 and 28.6', *CBQ* 56 (1994), pp. 221-39.

There are two things to notice about this request. First, by its very nature, it leads to a re-evaluation of the efficacy of his cleansing—after all, it implies that there are still mediums in the country and that people know where they are to be found. Second, the request prompts the servants to act against the policies of their own master. Aside from this ironic and self-defeating dimension of Saul's order, it expresses once more Saul's dependence on his servants. As the narrative adds yet another item to the list of entities which Saul cannot find himself—donkeys, a prophet, a musician, David, a medium—the emphasis on the king's lack of insight, ability, and leadership grows in proportion.

As with the previous searches, the servants are quick to provide the solution, pointing the king to a medium located at En-Dor. Saul disguises himself, takes two of his men along, and sets out for consultation (דרש, cf. 9.9).[40] Adding to the irony of his request, the medium herself reminds the disguised king of his previous good deeds (28.9). With Saul's reassurance, she calls upon the dead Samuel whose oracle is far from hopeful for the king: YHWH has left you, David will be king, tomorrow you will die (28.16-19). Upon hearing this fatal message, Saul collapses and refuses to eat and move on.[41] Eager to remove the king from her vicinity, the medium takes the initiative:

> Behold, your servant (שפחתך) has obeyed your voice… Now, you also obey the voice of your servant (שפחתך). Let me set a bit of bread before you and then eat. It will strengthen you so that you can go back on your way. (28.21-22)

While technically not one of Saul's servants and while self-abasement more than anything else prompts her choice of words,[42] the trajectory which has been witnessed thus far opens up the possibility of integrating the medium into this study. The initiative, style, and content of her speech and the abrupt shift in hierarchy,[43] all of which were common phenomena in the previous passages, count as prime reasons for this consideration. Adding to these observations the woman's cooperation with Saul's

40. The verb דרש occurs only these two times in 1 Samuel. Whereas Saul was finding every reason *not* to inquire of YHWH's prophet in ch. 9, now he seems more than ready to consult the medium.

41. Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, p. 621: 'Once again Saul is responsible for erecting an obstacle'.

42. For a recent and helpful study on self-abasement, see Edward J. Bridge, 'Self-abasement as an Expression of Thanks in the Hebrew Bible', *Bib* 92 (2011), pp. 255-73.

43. Reinhartz ('Anonymity', p. 135) detects here a 'bold tone and presumption of mutuality'.

servants (ויפרצו־בו עבדיו וגם־האשה, 28.23), the scenario in ch. 28 is a feasible candidate for this study of servant figures. As with David and Doeg, this inclusion of the medium comprises another surprising extension of the character category 'servant'.

If this line of thought is accepted, a number of links to previous material emerge. As with Samuel and David, Saul's servants function again as a structural link between central characters (Saul and the medium) and between important narrative junctures (Saul's return to the battlefield; 28.25b). As with the priests of Nob, Saul again provides a poor example in that he instigates his servants to act contrary to his commendable raid of mediums and thus contrary to YHWH's claim of sole power in the land. Since it takes both Saul's servants and their female counterpart to direct and sustain the king, a notable link exists also to ch. 9. But above all, we must not fail to notice that the divinely ordained termination of Saul's royal career comes about only through the action of his servants and the medium. Without their joint effort to persuade Saul to return to the battle against the Philistines, Samuel's prophecy of Saul's imminent death could scarcely be realized.[44]

2.6. The Death of Saul and His Servant (1 Samuel 31)

We end where we began: only here and in ch. 9 is Saul to be found alone with one individual servant, in this case, his weapon-bearer. As the outworking of Samuel's verdict at En-Dor, Saul and his faithful attendant find themselves wounded and surrounded by the Philistine army (31.3). Facing his imminent death and fearing the mutilation of his body by the Philistine army,[45] Saul turns in a final effort once more to his servant for

44. Nevertheless, the significant role of the servants barely features into the scholarly discussion of 1 Sam. 28. While Polzin picks up the continuation of narrative threads, there is no reference to the servants; see *Deuteronomist*, pp. 217-21. See also Edelman, *Saul*, pp. 238-51; Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, pp. 596-622; McCarter, *1 Samuel*, pp. 417-23; Auld, *Samuel*, pp. 325-30; Tsumura, *Samuel*, pp. 614-31; Hertzberg, *Samuel*, pp. 215-21.

45. Mutilation was a 'common wartime practice in the ancient Near East' and thus to be expected in Saul's situation. See T.M. Lemos, 'Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible', *JBL* 125 (2006), pp. 225-41 (225). Given the events *post mortem* in 1 Sam. 31, Saul's fear was entirely justified. For parallel scenarios in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East, see Judg. 9.50-57 and Jer. 38.19 and the discussion in Jan Dietrich, 'Der Tod von eigener Hand im Alten Testament und Alten Orient: Eskapistische Selbsttötung in Militärisch Aussichtsloser Lage', in Angelika Berlejung and Raik Heckl (eds.), *Mensch und König: Studien zur Anthropologie des Alten Testaments. Rüdiger Lux zum 60. Geburtstag* (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), pp. 63-83.

help, commanding him to take his life. As a noteworthy parallel to the scene at Nob, this call for murder is not followed. At the closure of Saul's life, then, we find his weapon-bearer, presumably his closest and most loyal servant,[46] unwilling to obey his master's final order. Whereas some might interpret this move as an expression of his devotion to Saul,[47] it appears far more likely that the servant's decision is grounded in his respect for divine election. This reason for his disobedience suits the passage much better and gains support also from the wider narrative context, in particular from the servants' allegiance to YHWH at Nob and from David's resistance to strike down YHWH's anointed.[48]

Well-suited for the closing scene of the narrative, the weapon-bearer thus models the reverence and obedience to YHWH which was lacking in Saul's behaviour throughout his career. Having for once not been provided with a solution by his inferiors, Saul is forced to act on his own initiative. It is both tragic and telling that this results in his immediate death.

3. Conclusion

In this study of the Saul narratives in 1 Samuel 9–31, I set out to analyze the role of the individuals and groups which constitute the king's servants. I began with the observation that these allegedly minor characters have not received much attention and that this is rooted in the apparent insignificance of their narrative contribution. With important qualifications, this judgment has been affirmed in this study: (1) the servants appear in most passages as an amorphous collective; (2) if they turn up as individuals, readers usually learn neither their names, nor their origin or appearance; (3) they enter and leave the story indiscriminately; (4) they are never portrayed for their own sake but always in relationship

46. Cf. David's election as Saul's weapon-bearer (ויבא דוד אל־שאול ויעמד לפניו ויאהבהו מאד, 16.21).

47. In Reinhartz's view ('Anonymity', p. 126), the servant's neglect of obedience was 'what he perceives to be his master's best interests'. One wonders, though, how shameful and painful torture at the hands of the Philistines would really be in Saul's 'best interest'.

48. In two scenes, David has the opportunity to end Saul's life but spares him: 'YHWH forbid that I should do such a thing to my master…for he is YHWH's anointed' (24.7[MT]); 'Who can lift his hand up against YHWH's anointed and be guiltless?' (26.9). Hertzberg (*Samuel*, pp. 231-32) also draws this conclusion: 'His faithful armour-bearer…no more dares to touch the Lord's anointed than David'. See also 2 Sam. 1.14-16.

to one of the major characters. At the same time, I demonstrated that there is much more complexity behind this façade of insignificance. I noted, for instance, that the Saul narratives contain quite a diversity of servant figures. While this is reflected in their numbers, involvement, and behaviour, most striking is the inclusion of the named characters Doeg and David amidst the ranks of the otherwise nameless attendants. Furthermore, there are two servants, Doeg the Edomite and the medium of En-Dor, who do not belong properly to Israel.[49] It is noteworthy that only these two servant figures engage in practices which are condemned in Israel—killing YHWH's priests and summoning the dead—whereas the Israelite servants refrain from them. Yet, it is even more significant that these two outsiders commit their atrocities at the order of Saul, the Israelite king.

Corresponding to this diversity, the servants in 1 Samuel 9–31 fulfill a wide variety of narrative functions. In more than one instance, the speech and actions of Saul's attendants take on an important structural function. They either connect the king with other key characters, like Samuel, David, or the medium, or they advance the plot as, for instance, through Doeg's announcement of David's whereabouts or the servants' efforts to return Saul from En-Dor to the battlefield. In the full spectrum of the six passages investigated, it is remarkable how central Saul's servants feature in 'his' story: it is they who bring him in contact with Samuel who then anoints him as king, it is their diagnosis and guidance which introduces David into Saul's circles, it is servant David who resolves the Goliath conflict for him, it is servant Doeg who continues his search for David, it is his servants' provision of a medium which brings him in contact again(!) with Samuel, and it is his weapon-bearer who forces his hand to end his life. We thus encounter a servant figure who takes care of the king's business at all major turning points of Saul's career. As a departure from this striking pattern, the only crucial episode in Saul's life which records no servant involvement is to be found, of all places, in 1 Samuel 13–15.[50] The only time when Saul decides and acts by himself is the time when he forfeits the kingdom. Without his servants, it appears, he is not fit to serve as Israel's king.

49. The medium is among those who Saul had removed from the country (see 28.3b).

50. With the exception of the brief episodes of ch. 24 and ch. 31, the noun עבד appears in every single chapter from 1 Sam. 11 to the end of the book, but not in chs. 13–15.

In close connection to their contribution to the narrative's plot and structure, Saul's servants also bear heavily on the characterization of their master. Throughout the narrative, they provide a consistent backdrop against which their master is portrayed. In the sum of the servant passages, they reflect all the royal attributes which Saul, by indirect comparison and contrast, lacks: they are pro-active, dominant, and prudent in speech, they show courage and discernment in their actions, they achieve military success, they demonstrate great spiritual awareness and insight, and they have a high regard and reverence for YHWH's mediators, guidance, and counsel.[51] King Saul is overruled by his inferiors with regard to the very characteristics which ought to define and legitimize his kingship.[52]

In light of these conclusions, this study has important ramifications for the rehabilitation of Saul which I have mentioned at the beginning of my analysis. Whereas most studies that address this issue focus primarily on the decisive events in 1 Samuel 13–15, the scope of the servant texts has shown that Saul's rejection is rooted in the entire narrative. While it is, of course, YHWH and Samuel alone who have the authority to condemn Saul's kingship, the Israelites closest to him serve as a notable affirmation of the divine-prophetic verdict. As the servants—after all, themselves Israelite people—are affected by the quality of Saul's reign more than anyone else, their relationship to the king needs to be integrated into an assessment of Saul. As they out-serve and overrule him, there is, for instance, little room to think of Saul as a model-servant who acts on their behalf.[53] Likewise, the treatment which they receive from his hand makes it difficult to conceive of a harmonious relationship between the

51. These dynamics of Saul's characterization are further supported by the comparison with other masters in the narrative, such as the short-sighted, arrogant Achish (21.10-15) and the successful leader David (21.1-9).

52. Within the Hebrew Bible, the relationship between Zedekiah and Ebed-Melech provides a striking parallel to this role reversal between king and servant (see Jer. 38.7-13; 39.15-18). For passages which lay out the qualities listed here as proper, royal attributes, see, e.g., Ps. 45.2-5 and Deut. 17.14-20 or the wider domains of the deuteronomistic history and wisdom literature. See, e.g., Katharine J. Dell, 'The King in the Wisdom Literature', in John Day (ed.), *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (JSOTSup, 270; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 163-86; Gerald E. Gerbrandt, *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic History* (SBLDS, 87; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986).

53. In Sellars's view, Saul's behaviour in chs. 13–15 must be commended because it is motivated by his concern for the people: 'Saul might be deemed to have failed in his relationship with Yahweh, [but] he succeeded in his relationship with the people of Israel as a responsive leader' ('Servant?', p. 335).

king and his subjects.[54] While there is great value in reassessing stereotypical images of biblical characters,[55] and while there is, of course, much more to the Saul narrative than these six servant passages, they comprise an important voice which needs to be heard in conversations about Israel's first king.[56]

As I come to the end of this study, I would like to take a step back and ask *why* Saul's servants are portrayed in this particular way: in the larger framework of 1 Samuel, what is gained by this indirect, negative commentary on Saul's character and the denigration of his ability and suitability as Israel's king? The obvious answer to this question is that the servants of Saul function as a means to pave the way for David, YHWH's true servant and Israel's true king. Through the comparison provided by the servants and their representative function for the Israelite people, the audience is prompted to agree with YHWH's rejection of Saul's right to rule. The allegedly minor character of the servants contributes, therefore, in a major way to the divinely ordained power shift and the legitimization of David's rise to the royal office. That David himself participates in this shift as Saul's servant *par excellence* only emphasizes this larger function of the servant theme.

Ultimately, however, the development of this theme serves a theological purpose in that it demonstrates that the institution of Israelite kingship operates entirely under YHWH's supervision and orchestration. As the outworking of the Song of Hannah at the opening of the book (2.1-10),[57]

54. Overall, this study casts doubt on Saul's concern for his people. He insults his servants at Nob and instigates them here and in ch. 28 to transgress divine and royal law. At other times, the people have to fear for their lives because of Saul (14.24-26) and have to bear the blame for his own shortcomings (15.15, 21).

55. See, e.g., Paul J. Kissling, *Reliable Characters in the Primary History: Profiles of Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha* (JSOTSup, 224; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); John W. Olley, 'YHWH and His Zealous Prophet: The Presentation of Elijah in 1 and 2 Kings', *JSOT* 80 (1998), pp. 25-51.

56. Whether or not other 'minor' characters, such as the Israelite armies or the Philistines, or other servant–master relationships in 1–2 Samuel (cf. David and his servant Uriah [עבדך אוריה]; 2 Sam. 11.21), corroborate or challenge these observations is a stimulating avenue for future research.

57. 'YHWH brings poverty and gives riches, he makes low and he exalts / From the dust, he raises the poor, from the ash heap he lifts the needy, / to place them next to princes, to bestow upon them a seat of honour… / He will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed' (1 Sam. 2.7-10). The significance of 1 Sam. 1–7 as an introduction to the Saul narratives has been demonstrated in the excellent study by David G. Firth, '"Play it again, Sam": The Poetics of Narrative Repetition in 1 Samuel 1–7',

YHWH leads the emerging kingdom not through the major character Saul, exalted above all (9.2b), but instead through his lowly and faithful servants.[58] This principle of YHWH's rule becomes evident most strikingly as the battle that tips the scales is not won by King Saul, but instead by an insignificant shepherd-servant, the youngest of his family and someone too small to wear armour, yet he is YHWH's anointed and legitimate king. As in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, so also in the Saul narratives supposedly minor characters are to be found at the centre of YHWH's plans and actions.

TynBul 56 (2005), pp. 1-17. YHWH's agenda of reversing hierarchies finds expression also in Samuel's misguided criteria for kingship (16.6-7) and in Jonathan's courageous leadership (14.6).

58. There is, then, an intriguing parallel to Sellars's observation that 'it is Saul who is king and who has been given a divine task to fulfil, and yet it is the people who appear to have been the controlling element' ('Servant?', p. 335). Whether or not these roles of people and servants may be part of a larger argument against Israelite kingship per se and thus a call for the return to the 'original' YHWH–Israel relationship is a question which must be left open within the parameters of this study.