

Preface

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PORTRAIT OF A DISGRUNTLED PROPHET: SAMUEL'S RESISTANCE TO GOD AND THE UNDOING OF SAUL

This book isn't a commentary.

Yes, it is.

Well, it wasn't meant to be. I planned it as a thematic study of the prophet Samuel; I wanted to explore his resistance to God and how this destroyed Saul's leadership potential.

Then why is it so much like a commentary—a commentary in all but name?

Because I realized that to make the case for my particular interpretation of Samuel, I needed to take the reader through the details of the text; I needed to show how this interpretation arises from the actual story and is not an imposition from the outside.

Well, okay. But did you need to have quite so much detail—more, in fact, than many formal commentaries?

I found that there were many parts of the story that commentaries simply skipped over and didn't explain. I wanted to work through the details for myself to see how much my interpretation could account for.

And what did you find?

I'm more convinced now, having completed the work, that my overall interpretation makes the best sense of the Samuel-Saul story.

Are there any places where your interpretation doesn't fit—or where you aren't sure you're right?

There are lots of places where I might be wrong in my specific proposals; it's simple honesty to admit that. I might even be wrong overall, but I don't think so.

Then isn't it arrogant to write this book, given that you contradict so many traditional and scholarly readings of the narrative?

It's not arrogant to propose a new reading of any text, so long as you justify your reading and respect alternative points of view. I also try to interact with interpretations I disagree with, while explaining what I don't find convincing about them. Not all commentaries do that.

So, you admit this book is a commentary!

Okay, you can call it a commentary; but it's different in two ways.

First, it's more conversational than most commentaries. I'm bucking the scholarly convention (should I say, pretension?) of objectivity. That's why you will hear my own voice throughout the analysis; no "effacing of the subject" for me.¹

Second, from time to time, I'll interrupt my movement through the text of Samuel (the commentary per se) to reflect on a particular issue in some depth. I know this slows down the exposition, but I judge that these interpretive and theological asides are important to understanding what's going on in the narrative.

Well, okay. I guess you can get on with the Preface.

Thanks for your permission!

¹ On the novel ideal of objectivity that arose in the nineteenth century, which attempted to efface the subjectivity of the knower as an obstacle to knowledge, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), esp. 14–15.