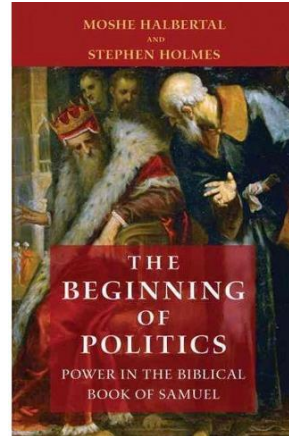


**Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes. *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. xiii + 211. ISBN 978-0691191683. Paperback \$27.95.**

Two lawyers from New York provide an unusually brilliant and persuasive reading of the book of Samuel in their new monograph *The Beginning of Politics*. In contrast to run-of-the-mill Old Testament scholars who emphasize the political nature of ancient literature (e.g., royal propaganda), Halbertal and Holmes contend that the author (singular) was perhaps the first person in history to write a book focusing on politics and power itself. In their words, "...the book of Samuel does not display a one-sided allegiance to any of the political factions that competed for power at the time. Its author didn't write a political book, therefore, but rather a book *about* politics" (p. 2).



This thesis is provocative and persuasive in countless ways. Consider, for example, what this suggests about the literature compared with its surrounding culture:

The biblical political theology that preceded the dramatic events recounted in the Book of Samuel upended this ancient Near Eastern formula. Rather than declaring that 'the king is a God,' the new theology postulated instead that 'God is the king.' The sole or exclusive kingship of God was fundamentally irreconcilable with a consolidated political monarchy....In the Samuel narrative, both the shift away from the political theology of the Book of Judges and the initial appearance of monarchy in Israel are presented as events occurring in human history. They do not belong to the mythic past. The biblical king, enthroned before our eyes, is a thoroughly human being, not a God. He is not a pillar of cosmic order. He plays a negligible and wholly dispensable role in

religious ritual, does not convey divine commands to his people, does not maintain the order of nature, and is not the prime lawgiver. (pp. 5, 8)

Kingship was always a problem in the Old Testament, and (the book of) Samuel specifically addresses the notorious hazards of political authority in general—such as its aggressive and coercive nature.

Samuel's catalog of the king's onerous privileges, proclaimed at the very moment when the unified Israelite polity came into being, introduces the reader to the fundamentally problematic nature of mankind's political project. For one thing, if the sovereign amasses enough power to provide security for the people against their enemies, he will also be strong enough to threaten and oppress the people he is supposed to protect. Indeed, the very act of organizing the people for self-defense inescapably involves a painful degree of tyrannical subordination, resource-extraction, and unfreedom. (p. 11)

Halbertal and Holmes do not attempt to legitimize violence as so many authors do today in their popular discourse about government. "The privilege to tax...means to confiscate their subject's property, and to draft, which means the right to enlist able-bodied young men whether they wish to serve or not" (p. 12). This is what it means to possess political authority: to initiate violence against people and their property. This, presumably, is one of the reasons why Yahweh has a problem with monarchy and the political structure of power it represents in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, "the Book of Samuel provides us with our earliest account of the arduous, contested, and historically contingent emergence of this-worldly sovereignty. The centralization of political-military authority is

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<sup>1</sup> The authors see Yahweh as having the following attitude toward kingship: "*I did not recommend that decision. It wasn't the initial plan I had for you. Human kingship was your choice, which you insisted upon even after being warned. You wanted it and I couldn't refuse you. So let us see how it unfolds, and what it means. And what will be my place in it*" (p. 15, emphasis original).

admittedly accompanied by priestly anointment and bestowed by the grace of God” (p. 14). With Saul, David, and Solomon, one witnesses all the great hopes and energy of a modern-day political rally—as well as the most primitive problems of a “state-church” combination. The state and its political apparatus are fundamentally opposed to the progressive, peace-making vision of God. So no matter what the rhetoric at the time, it’s just not going to last.

In going through the whole narrative of Samuel to Saul to David, the authors marvelously uncover the insightful details of the narrator—and how they are just as relevant today as they were over three millennia ago. The book’s “anatomy of sovereignty applies not only to dynastic kingship in a tribal society but, with suitable modifications, illuminates important features of every political order, including the welfare state, the liberal state, and so forth” (p. 167). Here are the key highlights of this discussion (in no particular order).

1. *The path to power is not actually glorious*: “sovereign authority is actually consolidated much less sacramentally, through a hard-fought struggle, by tactically ingenious applications of force and fraud deployed to overcome considerable human resistance” (p. 14).
2. *Power corrupts; means become ends*. “Whenever retaining hold on high office, rather than realizing an ideological vision or implementing a political program, becomes the dominant aim of politics, sovereign power becomes for its wielder an end in itself, even while being publicly justified as a means for providing collective security....As power becomes an end for a sovereign clinging desperately to it, other intrinsically worthy ends turn into disposable means. Rulers who wield their authority in the service of power as an end in itself regularly convert such ends as love, loyalty, the sacred, and moral obligation into mere means for

eliminating dangerous rivals and staving off the loss of power, a loss that they morbidly dread" (p. 18).

3. *Power corrupts even those who are determined to avoid it.* "Saul did not covet power. Power coveted him...why exactly does the author of Samuel make sure that we see Saul as wholly devoid of lofty ambition and craving for power? It is sometimes said that the only one who can be trusted with power is the one who doesn't seek it. Yet our author, in these passages, obviously wished to convey a diametrically contrary thought. The account of Saul's first two coronations prepares us to see how intoxicating appeal of supreme power will overtake even a character as naturally uncalculating, unassuming, and unenterprising as Saul" (pp. 20, 22).
4. *Committing violence naturally prepares one for political office.* [On 1 Sam 11] "This was the moment Saul began to act like a king. He established a permanent court with a small standing army; he would no longer be found plowing his fields. Military victory gave him a taste for power and the confidence to assume it" (p. 23).
5. *Political power always depends on the willingness of others to kill—and more.* "...no ruler, no matter how strong, can rely solely on coercion to dictate the behavior of those who wield the means of state coercion on his behalf. When ordering violence against his own subjects, therefore, a sovereign is necessarily constrained by the likely unwillingness of his security forces to obey any order to massacre kinsmen, their own flesh and blood, who, in this case, were also men of God" (p. 75).
6. *Unpredictability is a strategy of maintaining power over others.* "Opaqueness is intrinsic to the mystique of charisma. Screening David's subjective intentions and sentiments from the reader's view is one of the ways in which the genius of our author constructed David's aura. But the general illegibility of David's

motives did not prevent Saul from foreseeing that David, too, would have no qualms about using Michal's love as a stepping-stone to power" (p. 33-34).

7. *"Justice" is often used by those in power to legitimize purely political actions. "one of our author's central themes: the invocation of justice to palliate, excuse, or rationalize conduct undertaken for reasons of pure political expediency is a possibility that haunts all genuine political action" (p. 157).*
8. *Those with political power do not see their role as the same as those who elected them. "But the sovereign who has gained [power] and those around him who compete for it do not see supreme political power exclusively from the public's point of view, as a means for organizing collective defense. The seekers and wielders of sovereign authority inevitably see it from a more personal perspective. The privileges and status of the highest political office can be intoxicating, transforming sovereign authority all too easily into an end-in-itself, a stand-alone goal which becomes the very raison d'être of those seeking to gain or maintain it" (p. 167).*
9. *Hierarchies of power create distance between those in power and those "on the ground," which leads to self-deception. "An increase in political power often spells a decrease in understanding, because political power inevitably attracts disinformation or highly selective information from those who want to use it for their own ends. The powerful will always have trouble deciphering the sincerity and reliability of the indispensable information that backroom counselors whisper in their ears, disorienting their decision making and adding to their isolation" (p. 116).*
10. *Hierarchies of power forge internal competition destined to end badly. "Wielding sovereign authority is dangerous, above all, because supreme power is an irresistible magnet attracting ruthless competition from ambitious and talented rivals to its exercise... supreme authority can breed a distrust of subordinates so extreme*

as to verge on paranoia. It is undoubtedly true that even paranoids have enemies" (pp. 44, 69).

11. *Permitting the state's monopoly on violence will always result in more violence than intended—and come back to bite. "In our view, the subtly constructed details of the story of the massacre of the priests of Nob reveal how the anonymous author of the Book of Samuel excavates the deepest underpinnings of political violence, uncovering structural themes that emerge when a sovereign turns his capacity for violence, originally bestowed to fend off foreign threats, against his own subjects and subordinates. The Israelite people had knowingly accepted the burdens of taxation and conscription as the price of collective self-defense. But they had not agreed to the massacre of innocent members of their own community, for no legitimate national purpose, by a mentally unhinged and paranoid king" (p. 77).*
12. *The state's monopoly on violence is inherently contradictory; politicians represent the will of the people and do this by forcing their will over the will of the people: "A loose-knit confederation of disputatious tribes was especially vulnerable at its frontiers, where territorial disputes with neighboring peoples were most acute. Such vulnerability explains the legitimate aspiration to overcome strife inside a tribal confederacy and to enforce unity. Yet this rationale for pooling collective resources by centralizing the power to command is fraught with a deep contradiction that lies at the core of political life and that our author brings us into focus with exceptional artistry and theoretical force" (p. 166).*
13. *Systematic, collective violence is far more difficult to stop than individual acts of violence because no one needs to claim ultimate responsibility. "In distributing the various components of his conduct along a chain of agents, not only the sovereign but each link in the chain can find some way to disassociate itself from the*

crime. State action, especially when it is oppressive and inhumane, becomes anonymous. It has no face" (p. 88, cf. 97).<sup>2</sup>

14. *The true heroes are not those in office or those wielding power, but those without power willing to treat even the most corrupt individuals as human beings.* "Saul's last supper was served to him by a socially marginalized woman who was as disconnected from political power as can possibly be imagined. Moved by the shattered king lying inert on her floor, a persecuted sinner proved capable of a pure act of compassion seemingly beyond the moral capacities of the powerful heroes populating the Book of Samuel. The resentful prophet Samuel had only harsh, unforgiving words for Saul on the last night of his life. David and his band were securely hiding in Achish's territory. The only person willing and able to provide Saul with some measure of warmth and care, feeding him from what little she had in her own home, was the woman of En-dor. Her uncalculating compassion is luminous in a narrative replete with moments of questionable piety and political duplicity. The unambiguously noninstrumental nature of her charitable act is the measure of her distance from the equivocal ways of power-seekers and power-wielders. She is a rare moral hero in a world where morality can rarely escape from the cloud of ambiguity that pervades political life" (pp. 65-66).

I can't recommend *The Beginning of Politics* enough. It is a tremendous volume that blends sound biblical study with honest and penetrating thoughts about the nature of political authority and the government's

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<sup>2</sup> God, in the narrative, is apparently aware of this given the prophecy of Nathan: "Cold blooded murder, it turns out, even when committed at arm's length, remains cold-blooded murder. Despite all of his attempts at distributing the violence through the causal chain, David was the one who killed Uriah with the sword of the Ammonites. This is what Nathan says" (p. 96).

power. It would be an excellent “bridge” to Christian libertarianism for those ensaturated in modern, democratic readings that are uncritical of statism, nationalism, and politics in general.<sup>3</sup>

The book, however, left me with a gnawing question in the back of my mind: Can the authors’ purpose in the book of Samuel be restricted to the book of Samuel, or could it be extended to 1-2 Kings—and perhaps even to the Enneateuch as a whole? A good case could be made that Genesis-2 Kings maintains the same critical perspective of political authority (e.g., the Tower of Babel, Joseph’s refusal to assume power over his boss’s wife, the civil disobedience of the Egyptian midwives, Pharaoh and the Exodus, Moses’ inability to judge so many cases in the primitive Israelite community, etc.). If Genesis-2 Kings was largely composed/compiled by the same group of scribes in the 500s BCE, then a unified perspective would be somewhat expected. Perhaps this is a proposal needing further exploration.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever the case, there is room to doubt Thomas Hobbes’ assertion that the Bible could never be used to criticize political authority.

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<sup>3</sup> The book’s thesis also strongly resonates with that of Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jamin Hübner, “Israel’s History as a Post-Exile Critique of Political Power,” 2018 Canadian-American Theological Society annual meeting, Wycliff College, Toronto. For a recent scholarly treatment of this topic, see Jan Gertz, Bernard Levinson, Dalit Rom-Shiloni, and Konrad Schmid, eds., *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America (Forschungen Zum Alten Testament)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) and Thomas Dozeman, Thomas Römer, and Konrad Schmid, *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneateuch?: Identifying Literary Works in Genesis Through Kings* (Society of Biblical Literature. Ancient Israel and Its Liter) (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).

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