Orthodox Theology, Ulterior Motives in Samuel’s Farewell Speech?  
The Characterization of the Prophet in 1 Samuel 12

J. Richard Middleton  
Northeastern Seminary at Roberts Wesleyan College

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DRAFT

Until the rise of critical biblical scholarship, pious readings of the figure of David dominated Judaism and Christianity, aided and abetted, no doubt, by his image in Chronicles and in Psalms superscriptions. In more recent times, however, it has become common for contemporary interpreters to question David’s motives and strategies in his rise to power in 1 Samuel in such a way as to anticipate the character defects that led to David’s crashing fall in 2 Samuel.2

With few exceptions, however, the prophet Samuel has been read as a faithful (though strident), representative of YHWH’s will—especially in contrast to Saul, who is typically viewed negatively.

For some years now I have been developing to a reading of the character of Samuel that is suspicious of the prophet, both his motives and his narrated abuse of power vis-à-vis Saul; and

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1 The draft character of this paper will be evident in the lack of footnotes interacting with contemporary scholarship on 1 Samuel 12. That will come in a later edition of the paper.

I have been teaching 1 Samuel 1–15 from this point of view. When I tested out this approach during a sabbatical course that I taught at the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology (in Kingston, Jamaica), the students immediately embraced my reading of the prophet Samuel as true to their experience of the abuse of power in their churches or denominations. Although I have found that many of my theological students in the United States are initially resistant to this approach, the students in Jamaica overwhelmingly affirmed that this critical stance spoke powerfully to their lived reality.

This led me to reflect on why I had come to view Samuel suspiciously and why the Jamaican students embraced this reading so readily. Undoubtedly, part of this arose from a close reading of the text, which contains various prompts and suggestions toward this interpretation. But since every text is hermeneutically underdetermined, I have considered what in my own experience contributed to this approach.

**The Cultural Roots of My Suspicion of the Figure of Samuel**

I have come to believe that my approach to the text was informed by my experience of growing up in neocolonial Jamaica, a nation just beginning to break out of British cultural influence, with the increasing reach of American economic hegemony and cultural globalisation. Coming to adolescence in a “conscious” Jamaican culture in the sixties and seventies (influenced by the rise of black power and the growing popularity of Rastafarianism), it was impossible not to be exposed to suspicions of the cultural and economic imperialism of the West.

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4 Jamaica gained independence from Britain on August 6, 1962; I still remember the celebrations, despite being only a young child at the time.
These suspicions were heightened by my theological studies at Jamaica Theological Seminary, where I learned the imperative of contextualization in tandem with my own growing understanding of the power of creation theology to address what I perceived as the otherworldliness (and correlative subservience) of many Jamaican Christians.⁵

The relationship of this otherworldliness and subservience to the tendency to the suspicion of power needs clarification. My experience of the Jamaican church (I started attending church regularly at age fourteen), along with the nature of theological reflection in the Jamaican context (to which I was exposed during my B.Th. degree), suggests two contradictory tendencies that have impacted the church.

The first is a spirituality of passivity and subservience, evident both towards God and religious authority. This spirituality could be understood as the religious correlate to the slave mentality absorbed by so many Jamaicans of African heritage. Others have documented the impact of slavery on the low self-esteem and identity problems that continue to plague Jamaican society today.⁶

This identity problem was aided and abetted by an otherworldly theology of escape that permeated the Jamaican church in my adolescent years. This spirituality downplayed the

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importance of earthly life vis-à-vis heaven and “spiritual” realities and excluded in principle the so-called “secular” realm from impact by the Gospel.

I myself, as a white Jamaican in a largely black nation and church, struggled both with my own cultural and religious identity and with this inherited otherworldliness throughout my adolescence and young adulthood.\(^7\)

Yet there was a contrary, “secular” tendency in Jamaican society, rooted in the slave experience of resistance. Jamaicans are typically aware of the heritage of the Maroons, escaped slaves who (beginning in the mid-seventeenth century) lived in free communities in the mountainous “Cockpit Country” in the center of the island. Besides these specific communities of resistance, there was a tendency of resistance among many enslaved Africans, sometimes coming to the fore in slave rebellions, though often of a covert variety.

One of the wellsprings of this resistance was the folk tradition of Anansi (often spelled Anancy, along with other variants), which the slaves brought from Africa. Anansi the spider is the infamous trickster figure (inherited from West African folklore), who has to negotiate his relationship with the larger (and more dangerous) animals of the jungle. Whereas the African American stories of Brer Rabbit are an amalgam of Native American and Central African (Bantu) folktales, the Jamaican stories of Brer Anansi derive from the Ahanti peoples of West Africa, which were transported to the Caribbean through the middle passage of the slave trade (and there are various overlaps between these stories).

\(^7\) My attempts to address these twin problems generated most of my writing over the years, beginning with the book I wrote with Brian Walsh, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984), and culminating in more recent projects. On identity, see Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005); on the affirmation of earthly life vis-à-vis otherworldliness, see Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).
Most Jamaicans, especially in earlier generations, and particularly in the rural areas, grew up with a treasure trove of Anansi stories, concerning how Anansi outsmarted tiger, snake, John Crow, and many other animals—even including one story of how Anansi got his name associated with *all* folktales (indeed, all West African—and Jamaican—folktales, whether or not they figure the infamous spider/spider man, are known today as “Aanasi stories.”

I myself grew up with Anansi stories, many told by my father, others narrated on the radio (before TV came to the island) by Ranny Williams and Louise Bennett (on RJR). While Anansi was not always morally upright, and often was downright lazy, he was the hero of many tales because (as I would put it today) he refused to accept the power structures of the jungle (note that “dungle” is a term for an area in the slums of Kingston); instead, he always found an angle to work, from which he could dissent from the status quo or even (in limited or temporary ways) overturn it.

As the introduction to the 1974 reprint of *Jamaican Anansi Stories* puts it:

Anansi is the spirit of rebellion; he is able to overturn the social order; he can marry the Kings’ [sic] daughter, create wealth out of thin air; baffle the Devil and cheat Death. Even if Anansi loses in one story, you know that he will overcome in the next. For an oppressed people Anansi conveyed a simple message from one generation to the next:—that freedom and dignity are worth fighting for, at any odds.

The figure of Anansi is so central to the cultural traditions of Jamaica that even when many young people today are unacquainted with the range of Anansi stories, they have been

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8 For an excellent analysis of the figure of Anansi/Anancy in Jamaican culture, see chap. 3: “Speak of the Advent of New Light: Jamaican Proverbs and Anancy Stories,” in Hugh Hodges, *Soon Come: Jamaican Spirituality, Jamaican Poetics* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

9 Hughes develops an ethical version of the power reversals typically associated with Anansi/Anancy in order to explicate the spiritual vision of Bob Marley in *Soon Come*, chap. 7: “Walk Good: Bob Marley and the Oratorical Tradition” (Hughes makes it clear that this is a selective reading of the trickster motif; Marley himself dissented from anything underhanded).

influenced by the Anansi mindset. This is the mindset of resistance that contributed to the founding of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) by Marcus Garvey in 1914, and also to the Rastafari movement\(^\text{11}\) and the rise of trade unions, with their push for universal adult suffrage, in the nineteen-thirties.\(^\text{12}\) What these various movements have in common is a suspicion of claims to legitimacy on the part of those with power, and the desire to take the side of the “sufferer” (to use a common Jamaican term for the disenfranchised). It was precisely this suspicion that I could tap into in my reading of 1 Samuel 1–15 with my Jamaican Students.

**My Approach to 1 Samuel 12**

This paper engages in a close reading of Samuel’s so-called farewell speech at Gilgal in 1 Samuel 12, though its character as a farewell speech is disputed, because Samuel doesn’t retire afterwards. Indeed, he continues to have a determinative influence on Saul, the newly installed king (though he has not a whit of influence on David). And while some scholars dispute the intended location of the speech at Gilgal, since the link between chapters 11 and 12 is unclear, it makes perfect sense to view the speech as a continuation of the narrative of Saul’s installation as king at the end of chapter 11.

In my reading of 1 Samuel 12, I will juxtapose the “orthodox,” so-called Deuteronomistic, theology to which Samuel appeals in his speech with the complex rhetorical strategy of his words, examining his possible motivations and the effect of Samuel’s rhetoric on

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\(^\text{11}\) Legend has it that in 1927 or 1928 Marcus Garvey said: “Look to Africa, when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is at hand.” When Ras Tafari Makonen was crowned Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, many in the various black millenarian movements that had been growing in Jamaica hailed Selassie (the new ruler of the only African nation that had never been colonized by Europe) as the second coming of the Messiah. Thus was born the religion of Rastafari.

\(^\text{12}\) In 1944 the Jamaican Constitution granted the right to vote to all Jamaican citizens 21 years and older (without regard to race or gender). The first election was held on December 14, 1944, with a voter turnout of nearly sixty percent.
his audience. I don’t intend to try to get behind the text to putative sources, with their varying ideological points of view. My focus will be on the “Samuel” presented in the world of the text.

Samuel’s speech in 1 Samuel 12 has a relatively clear structure. Samuel first looks back to his impeccable career as judge (verses 1–5), then forward to the monarchy (verses 6–25), with a focus on the people’s sin in asking for a king and on his own indispensable role as prophet. All of these foci—Samuel’s impeccable career, the people’s sin, and the prophet’s indispensable role—are the clear emphases of Samuel’s rhetoric. The question is: What is Samuel trying to accomplish by this rhetoric?

The Prophet Doth Protest Too Much, Methinks (1 Samuel 12:1–5)

From the start, Samuel’s rhetoric is highly confrontational. He frames his speech as a series of quasi-legal disputations, first concerning his own innocence (in the first five verses), then concerning the people’s guilt (in the rest of the chapter). Throughout, we find an abundance of attention-getting language—\textit{wē’attā} (“and now”) with one \textit{gam-’attā} (“even now”), and lots of \textit{hinnē} (“behold”), with \textit{hinnām} (“behold them”) and \textit{hinĕni} (“behold me”).\textsuperscript{13}

In his opening salvo, in verses 1–5, out of the blue and in the absence of explicit accusation by anyone, Samuel jumps to defend his past career as judge. Here we find an accumulation of “behold” (four times), with the first “and now” (\textit{wē’attā}) at the start of verse 2. After this \textit{wē’attā}, Samuel contrasts the king’s present leadership (verse 2a) with his own past leadership (verse 3a), using the metaphor of “walking before” in each case. This contrast leads the reader to think he is handing over the reins of power; he must diminish, the king is taking over (hence the idea that this is Samuel’s farewell speech). Yet sandwiched between this contrast between Samuel and the king is the distinction between his old age and his sons’ current

\textsuperscript{13} My translation of 1 Samuel 12 (with notes on the Hebrew and alternative readings) can be found in the Appendix to this paper.
presence among the people (verse 2). This muddies the waters somewhat; is it the king who is replacing Samuel or is it his sons?

The waters are further muddied when Samuel goes on to call the people to testify against him “before YHWH and his anointed” concerning his tenure as judge, with a series of questions about his honesty and lack of profit from his position. These questions implicitly contrast Samuel’s impeccable leadership with that of his sons (“from whose hand have I taken a bribe?” distinguishes Samuel behavior from the bribery of his sons, mentioned in chapter 8). But his use of the verb “take” both in the question about the bribe and in two other questions (“Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken?”) suggests a contrast with the way Samuel had previously portrayed the typical behavior of kings (who, according to chapter 8, would take [lāqaḥ] the people’s sons, daughters, fields, vineyards, slaves, cattle, donkeys, and sheep, until finally they became slaves to the reigning monarch).

It is clear that Samuel’s expects the answer, “No-one,” to all of his questions, and that is essentially what he gets in verse 4: “You have not defrauded us or abused us and you have not taken anything from the hand of anyone.” Although it is a minor point, I would interject that the narrative of 1 Samuel 9–15 suggests that Samuel has indeed defrauded and abused Saul so that his leadership ability becomes compromised (and he becomes mentally unstable); and while Samuel may not have taken anything from the hand of anyone, the narrator tells us in 9:22 that “Samuel took Saul and his servant and brought them into the hall” (where the addition of the verb lāqaḥ is technically unnecessary; “brought” works just fine by itself).

But my main point here is that instead of Samuel’s questions functioning to clear his name from any evildoing as he prepares to pass the torch of leadership, they seem intended to portray his past leadership as superior to either that of his sons or of the newly installed king,
with the implication that there was no need for his replacement. Especially in the absence of any accusation of wrongdoing by anyone, the prophet doth protest too much, methinks.\textsuperscript{14}

And if one might be inclined to a charitable reading of the protesting prophet, I would simply point to two corroborating items in the text. The first is Samuel’s rhetorical shift from defense to accusation by the end of this first speech. Whereas he had challenged the people (in the absence of any accusation) to “testify against” him “before YHWH and before his anointed” (verse 3), when the people admit that he is guiltless (verse 4) Samuel turns the tables from defending himself to accusing them, by stating: “YHWH is witness against you, and his anointed is witness” that you have found me guiltless (verse 5).

How does an accusation against the people follow from Samuel’s proven innocence? Are guilt and innocence a zero sum game such that Samuel’s impeccable leadership implies the people are guilty? Of what? Certainly not of accusing him directly of impropriety. They do no such thing.

As we shall shortly see, the missing part of Samuel’s argument is that the people are guilty for seeking to replace Samuel’s impeccable leadership as judge with a king. That is, their asking for a king implied—from Samuel’s point of view—that he had been lacking as Israel’s leader. Methinks the prophet definitely doth protest too much.

The second corroborating item that something strange is going on here is Samuel’s opening sentence in verse 1, which begins with hinnê and continues with two falsehoods (or at least two cases where he has massaged the truth). First, Samuel’s states that he has listened to the people’s voice in all that they said to him—whereas he clearly resisted the people’s voice, beginning in chapter 8, when they asked for a king (God had to twice tell him to listen to the

\textsuperscript{14} Here I allude to the words of Queen Gertrude in Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}, Act 3, scene 2: “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”
people’s voice, and he still ignored their request for a king at the end of chapter 8). And if anyone would defend the prophet by noting that in the end he did give them a king, I would point out that it was only reluctantly, with many obfuscating moves and feints to delay the process as long as possible (a secret anointing, followed by convoluted instructions, and then the casting of lots in chapter 10).

The second case of massaging the truth, if not outright falsehood, is Samuel’s statement in 12:1 that he has installed a king over them (the Hiphil of mālak followed by melek; he has kinged a king). This identical verb was used only one verse earlier (in the last verse of chapter 11) to describe the people installing Saul as king (11:15). And while technically Samuel might be able to take credit for what turned out to be inevitable, despite his objections, the fact that two adjacent sentences (separated by an artificial chapter division) make contradictory *prima facie* claims about who it was that installed Saul as king should arouse our suspicions about Samuel’s motives here.

**Samuel’s Confusing Retelling of Israel’s Story (1 Samuel 12:6–13)**

Our suspicions are put on high alert when we turn to Samuel’s creative (and initially confusing) retelling of Israel’s story in verses 6–13. Near the start (in verse 7), Samuel utilizes the language of legal challenge: “take your stand and I will enter into judgment with you before YHWH” (verse 7). Whereas in verses 1–5 YHWH and his anointed have been witnesses, the single witness to the proceedings from here on is YHWH (this is because the king will be taken to be part of the problem). In other words, the function of the retelling of Israel’s story is to provide the basis for an accusation against the people (which leads some scholars to view the chapter as a covenant lawsuit; however, it is much more a lawsuit between Samuel and the people than between God and the people).
Samuel tells Israel’s story in three stages. Beginning with the exodus (verses 6–8), he then moves to the time of the judges (verses 9–11), and ends with a reference to contemporaneous events (verses 12–13). In all three stages of the story we find contradictions between his retelling and what we know from elsewhere in the Bible.

**The Exodus (6–8)**

In his summary of the exodus, Samuel focuses on the role of Moses and Aaron. His focus on these two leaders is usually thought to emphasize that they were personally chosen by YHWH, in contrast to the king whom the people asked for. If this is the point, like all of Samuel’s points it is tendentious, since we might note that in response to the people’s asking for a king, God specifically selects Saul (see 1 Samuel 9:15–17).

Samuel makes two narrative claims about Moses and Aaron, namely that they brought the ancestors up from Egypt (verses 6 and 8) and that they settled the ancestors in the land (verse 8); this latter claim does not fit any known account of Israel’s founding narrative. Not only was it Joshua who settled them in the land, but Moses died on the other side of the Jordan. So Samuel seems a tad confused here. Or maybe he is at pains to deny the passing of the torch from Moses to Joshua, since this might justify the transition from judge to king, thus granting legitimacy to Saul.

**The Judges (9–11)**

Samuel’s retelling of the story of the Judges is even more confusing. Admittedly, Samuel follows the basic pattern of the cycles (or spirals) of sin, oppression, cry of distress, and deliverance or salvation found in the book of Judges. Samuel even utilizes stereotypical language found in Judges, such as Israel forgetting or abandoning YHWH their God (Judges 3:7; cf. Deut
6:12; 8:11, 14, 19; 32:18), YHWH selling them into the hand of various enemies (Judges 2:4; 3:8; 4:2; 10:7), their crying out to YHWH (Judges 3:9; 10:10).

What is strange, however, is that whereas the narrative of Judges 3–16 lists five cycles of oppression and deliverance, Samuel lists only three sets of oppression in verse 9 and four deliverers or judges in verse 11. Further, the three examples of oppression he lists are out of chronological order. To top it off, the second judge in Samuel’s list (Bedan) is unknown from the book of Judges; hence the replacement of Bedan with Barak in the LXX and with Deborah and Barak in the Peshitta (since Deborah is technically the judge and Barak is her lieutenant); the Peshitta also puts Gideon (a.k.a. Jerubbaal) after Deborah and Barak, presumably to correct Samuel’s confused narrative order. A further confusion is that Samuel gives his own name as the fourth judge, which seems so self-serving that this is replaced with Samson in the Lucianic text of the LXX and in the Peshitta.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>MT (Hebrew)</th>
<th>LXX (Greek)</th>
<th>LXX (Greek)</th>
<th>Targum (Aramaic)</th>
<th>Peshitta (Syriac)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jerubbaal</td>
<td>Jerubbaal</td>
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<td>Gideon</td>
<td>Deborah, Barak</td>
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<td>Bedan</td>
<td>Barak</td>
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<td>Samson</td>
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*Figure 1: Textual Traditions for 1 Samuel 12:11*

If we were to correlate the examples of oppression and deliverance in Samuel’s retelling (from the MT), we have oppression by Sisera of Hazor, with rescue by Jerubbaal (Gideon); then oppression by the Philistines, with rescue by Bedan; then oppression by the king of Moab, with rescue by Jephthah; and finally rescue by Samuel himself, with no oppression listed.
Judges 3–16  
(5 sets of oppression and deliverance by judges)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oppressor (or Group)</th>
<th>Deliverer(s)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eglon, King of Moab</td>
<td>Ehud (chap. 3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sisera of Hazor</td>
<td>Deborah (and Barak) (chaps. 4–5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midianites</td>
<td>Gideon (= Jerubbaal) (chaps. 6–9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ammonites</td>
<td>Jephthah (chaps. 10–11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philistines</td>
<td>Samson (chaps. 13–16)</td>
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1 Samuel 12:9–11  
(3 oppressors, 4 judges)  

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<td>Jephthah</td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>Samuel</td>
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**Figure 2: Samuel's Implicit Narrative of Oppression and Deliverance**

Instead of trying to get behind the text to putative alternative traditions of Israel’s history, as some scholars are wont to do, I am interested in the rhetorical effect of portraying the prophet as either confused about Israel’s past or as outright rewriting history for his own purposes (or some combination of the two).

**The Origin of Israel’s Monarchy (12–13)**

Samuel seems further confused in his account of the recent events that led to the people’s request for a king. According to Samuel, it was in response to the Ammonite threat that the people demanded a king (verse 13). However, Samuel here juxtaposes language from 1 Samuel 8:19 (where the people say, *No! but a king shall reign over us*) with the narrative of Nahash and the Ammonite threat recounted at the start of chapter 11 (verses 1–5), which comes after Saul’s anointing (and certainly after the people’s request for a king). Now, some commentators try to harmonize Samuel’s statement with a passage from Qumran (4QSam) that suggests Nahash had been terrorizing Israel for at least a month before the incident at Jabesh-Gilead; so they postulate that this threat could have been part of the motivation for the people’s request for a king (depending on how much time is supposed to have passed between 1 Samuel 8 and 11).
Some justification for this postulate could be found in the fact that when God brings Saul to Samuel’s attention in chapter 9 as the one to be anointed *nagid* over Israel, the reason given is that YHWH has heard the cries of his people under Philistine oppression and will deliver them by the hand of Saul (1 Samuel 9:16–17). Yet note that YHWH lists *Philistine* oppression and not the (later) Ammonite threat. Plus, when the people reaffirm their request for a king in 1 Samuel 8:19 (the line quoted by Samuel) they make no mention of Nahash or the Ammonites, though they do say they want the king to go before them and fight their battles.

Perhaps more importantly, Samuel seems to ignore the original reason for the people’s request for a king at the start of chapter 8, namely Samuel’s old age and his sons’ corruption (1 Samuel 8:4); new leadership is therefore necessary. Samuel’s reframing of the reason for the people’s request for a king to omit mention of the need for new leadership further supports my claim that the prophet protests too much at the start of chapter 12; his defense of his previous leadership seems like an anxious act of self-justification.

We should also note here the significant disjunction between the way that Samuel and YHWH frame the need for a king qua deliverer. Whereas YHWH (in 9:16) portrays Saul’s deliverance of Israel as part of the pattern of the Judges, as a *legitimate* response to the people’s cry of distress, Samuel (in 12:12) portrays it as an *illegitimate* request to replace YHWH’s kingship. God and prophet are not on the same page here.

**The Self-Serving Result of Reframing Israel’s Story: Samuel as Israel’s Deliverer**

It is now time to turn to the lacuna in Samuel’s reframing of the cycle of oppression and deliverance in verse 11. Having mentioned the lack of reference to the oppression to which he is the answer, it is time to figure out why Samuel leaves the oppression unsaid at this point.
We could fill in the lacuna by looking to the past, specifically to chapter 7, where Samuel is clearly portrayed as a judging Israel, though primarily through the exercise of a juridical function (7:6, 15–17). Yet Samuel is also instrumental (in that chapter) in delivering Israel from the Philistine threat, though not by military action (as is typical of the judges), but by prayer and sacrifice (7:7–12), in response to the people’s putting away their idols (7:3–6). However, in chapter 12 Samuel does not mention the Philistines as the oppression from which he delivers Israel, which he easily could have done.

Instead, I believe we need to look not to the past but to the future, to Samuel’s expected rescue of Israel from oppression, at least as he envisions it. In my opinion, Samuel’s rhetorical framing of Israel’s past and current history leads the reader to expect that it is the monarchy that will fill the lacuna, since this is the new form of oppression that Israel will need deliverance from. In other words, Samuel’s rhetorical lacuna is intentional, to be filled in by what the prophet says in the remainder of chapter 12. This will reveal Samuel as Israel’s true deliverer.

Now, someone might object that back in chapter 8, Samuel ended his warning about the monarchy by stating that the people would cry out for deliverance from the king, but that YHWH would not answer them (8:18). So that constitutes a clear contradiction with Samuel portraying himself as the deliverer from the monarchy in chapter 12. But what’s a little contradiction among friends? Or, more precisely, enemies? And it is clear from verses 14 following that Samuel places himself (along with YHWH) in an adversarial stance vis-à-vis the people (and also the king). It also turns out that Samuel seems quite comfortable with contradictions in the remainder of chapter 12.

Let’s start with the adversarial stance that Samuel takes in the rest of chapter 12, by which he communicates both subliminally and openly his opposition to the monarchy.
First, the subliminal communication.

**Samuel’s Lopsided Statement of Covenant Sanctions (1 Samuel 12:14–15)**

Having recounted Israel’s history in verses 6–13, Samuel moves on to challenge the people, using traditional covenantal categories, with the alternatives of obedience and disobedience, which are articulated as 1) fearing YHWH and listening to his voice versus 2) not listening to YHWH’s voice, but rebelling against his mouth (verses 14–15). In one sense these alternatives constitute “orthodox” Deuteronomistic theology. The trouble is that Samuel’s statement of the traditional covenant sanctions is lopsided. Whereas the consequence of rebellion (verse 15) is that YHWH’s hand will be against the people (and their ancestors, MT; or and their king, LXX), there is no positive consequence stated for obedience (verse 14). Many translations therefore supply something like: “it will be well with you.”

This lopsidedness leads some commentators take Samuel’s words in verse 14 to include both the protasis and apodosis (the latter being, “then both you and the king who reigns over you will follow YHWH your God”); but this makes for a tautology, not a consequence. Whereas in the case of many imprecations in the Hebrew Bible, the actual curse is missing, perhaps because it is too terrible to be said, here the blessing is missing. Could Samuel omit the positive apodosis because he can’t force himself to countenance a positive outcome of the monarchy?

Support for this possibility is found in the fact that Samuel continues to harp on the evil of the monarchy even after YHWH has given Israel permission for a king in chapter 8 and specifically chosen Saul in chapter 9; indeed, Samuel’s affirmation of the evil of the monarchy comes even after he anointed Saul in chapter 10 and after Saul is installed as king in chapter 11.

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15 An example of a missing apodosis in an imprecation is found in Uriah’s oath to David in 2 Samuel 11:11, which the NRSV renders as “As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing.” Instead of “I will not do this thing,” the Hebrew simply says, “if I do this thing . . . .”
Clearly, Samuel cannot accept the fact that the monarchy (with Saul as the first king) could ever be legitimate.

The depth of Samuel’s antipathy to the monarch in chapter 12 is seen by his association of the monarchy with nothing less than idolatry; he makes this association in a series of subtle and not so subtle rhetorical moves.

**Samuel Intimates That Monarchy Equals Idolatry (1 Samuel 12:10, 12)**

First, the cry of distress that Samuel quotes from the book of Judges (in his retelling of the cycles of oppression and rescue) has the people identifying their forsaking of YHWH with serving the Baals and Astartes (12:10). This is not controversial for covenantal theology, though I might point out that this quote comes from Judges 10:10 (in the Jephthah story) and is the only time in the entire book that Israel admits to sin in their cries of distress (and in this case YHWH doesn’t believe them and refuses to rescue them).

But then Samuel goes on in verse 12 to identify asking for a human king with rejecting YHWH as king. If we put these two statements together, from verses 10 and 12, we have a clear identification of forsaking or rejecting YHWH with following idols and with asking for a king. So the monarchy is thus tantamount to idolatry in Samuel’s eyes; both constitute rejection of YHWH.

**Samuel Gets the People to Admit that the Monarchy is Evil (1 Samuel 12:16–19)**

Perhaps this is too subtle.

So, having laid out the two ways, of obedience followed by . . . . (whatever) and disobedience followed by YHWH’s adamant opposition, Samuel goes on (in verses 16 and following) to predict and then perform a miraculous sign; this sign is meant as a show of power to convince the people of their great evil in asking for a king (verse 17), and this right after the
king has been installed. This sign is introduced with *gam-ʿattâ* (“even now”), followed by a call for them to take their stand and see the “great thing” that YHWH will do.

The fact that the storm for which Samuel prays would in all likelihood have damaged (if not destroyed) the wheat that Samuel himself acknowledges is ready for harvest (verse 17), simply demonstrates that the miracle is not for the people’s benefit, but to exalt Samuel’s prestige and authority in their eyes. And the miracle has the desired effect. The people “greatly feared” YHWH and *Samuel* (verse 18); and they ask him to pray for them that they do not die. Then they acknowledge that asking for a king was *an evil* that they have added to all their other sins (verse 19). To their idolatry, in other words—of which they repented in chapter 7—they have now added monarchy.

*Samuel Identifies Monarchy with Idolatry (1 Samuel 12:20–21)*

The parity or equivalence between monarchy and idolatry is confirmed in Samuel’s response to the people’s confession of the evil of monarchy.

In his response, in verses 20–21, Samuel contrasts, on the one hand, serving YHWH with all your heart and, on the other, turning aside after *tohû*, which (he adds) cannot profit and cannot deliver. Now, *tohû* has a variety of contextual uses in the Hebrew Bible, but in Isaiah 44:9 it is a description of those who make idols. Likewise *loʾ yôʾilû* (“they do not profit”) can be used in different contexts, but in the covenant lawsuit of Jeremiah 2:8 it stands in parallel with Baal, a clear reference to idolatry.

Samuel’s use of these terms in verse 21, in his response to the people’s admission that they sinned in asking for a king, clarifies the alternatives, at least in Samuel’s mind: *either* serve YHWH wholeheartedly *or* turn aside to the monarchy, which (like idolatry) is described as *tohû* and that which cannot profit. Interestingly, according to Samuel the monarchy cannot profit *and*
it cannot deliver, even though YHWH intended the king to deliver Israel from the Philistines (1 Samuel 9:16–17), and the new king has in fact already delivered them from the Ammonites.

**Samuel’s Prima Facie Theological Contradictions**

At this point I want to explore what look suspiciously like theological contradictions in Samuel’s words to the people, beginning in verse 14 and continuing through the end of the chapter.

**To Fear or Not to Fear (1 Samuel 12:14, 20, 24)**

The first contradiction has to do with the motif of fear. Having listed the fear of YHWH as one of the covenantal alternatives (in verse 14), Samuel gives a miraculous sign, which results in the people fearing YHWH and Samuel (verse 18). However, in verse 20 Samuel’s identification of monarchy with tohu is prefaced by the exhortation Fear not! This is, paradoxically, followed in verse 24 by the warning “Only fear YHWH.” Now I am fully aware that it is possible to argue for two meanings of “fear” here, one being the legitimate awe of God (verse 24), the other unnatural terror (verse 20). However, it is seems clear that the point of the miraculous sign was (to use a contemporary idiom) to put “the fear o’ God” into the people, to scare them into acknowledging their guilt (which worked). So Samuel is being a bit disingenuous in his exhortation not to fear (verse 20) after his (intentionally) fear-producing performance of the miraculous sign (verse 18).

**Guilt Tripping and Love Bombing (1 Samuel 12:22 and 25)**

But there is another contradiction in Samuel’s concluding words (in verses 20–25) that parallels the two uses of fear—the first use represented by Samuel’s exhortation to the people not to fear and the other by the narrator’s note about the people’s evident fear (of both God and Samuel).
On the one hand, Samuel affirms in verse 22 that “YHWH will not forsake his people, for the sake of his great name, for YHWH has resolved to make you a people for himself.” These are words of assurance and comfort; they fit with *fear not* and suggest that no matter what the sin, YHWH’s love is unconditional.

Yet in the last sentence of the chapter (just three verses later), we find the words, “But if you *dare to do evil* [ḥārē’ā tārē’û; the infinitive absolute followed by the finite form of the verb], both you and your king will be swept away” (verse 25).

So, which one is it? *Fear YHWH? Or Don’t be afraid?* Are we to believe *YHWH will not forsake you? Or You will be swept away?*

Having grown up in the era of new religious movements (also known as cults), I am struck by the parallel between Samuel emotional manipulation of the people with his rhetoric and what was known in cult circles as *love bombing* and *guilt tripping.* It was precisely the alteration between positive affirmation and negative condemnation that characterizes what has come to be known as the initial stages of cultic “brainwashing.” This immediate and irrational alteration between affirmation and condemnation served to keep new converts off balance and make them easily subject to manipulation by cult leaders. This is also practiced in terrorist interrogation (anyone who has seen the movie *Zero Dark Thirty* knows what I mean).

I submit that something analogous is going on throughout verses 20–25 (though more like cultic practice than what we find at Guantanamo). Witness the three opening affirmations of verse 20:

1) “Fear Not!” [comfort];

2) “As for you (emphatic), you have done all this evil.” [condemnation]

3) “Only, do not turn aside from following YHWH with all your heart.” [warning]
And so it goes throughout the following verses, alternating comfort, condemnation, and warning. And in the midst of this rhetoric, Samuel makes an oath not to “sin against YHWH by ceasing to pray for you”; indeed, he promises to “instruct them in the good and straight way” (verse 23).

We are not told the people’s response to Samuel’s concluding words in 20–25. But we can imagine with the help of an analogy.

An analogy for what Samuel is up to in the entire chapter would be to think of the installation of the king at Gilgal as a wedding, where the father of the bride (Samuel) is also the officiating minister and disapproves in no uncertain terms of the marriage of his daughter (the people). After the ceremony, which is meant to formalize and celebrate the relationship of bride and groom (read people and king), the disgruntled minister makes a speech at the wedding banquet in which he gets the bride to admit that he has always been an exemplary father to her, and he promises to be available at any time for marriage counseling, no matter what problems the ill-conceived marriage may bring. Having lectured the newly married bride on her sin in desiring this husband, he then gets her to admit publicly (on her wedding day) that the marriage was a bad idea from the beginning.

The question I have is: What possible chance would such a marriage have of succeeding? And what would be the effect of this speech on the groom?

**Ulterior Motives, Deficient Theology: Samuel as Anti-Prophet**

In the end, I need to answer the question of paper’s title: “Orthodox Theology, Ulterior Motives?” Clearly, Samuel’s motives are mixed here, though he seems to appeal to standard covenantal (Deuteronomistic) categories.

But that distinction is too simple; there is something else going on here. Samuel’s rhetoric serves to position himself on the side of YHWH in opposition to king and people. That
the people understand the force of this rhetoric is evident in their plea for Samuel to pray for
them “to YHWH your God.”

However, as Abraham Heschel (among others) has shown, prophets are meant not just to
identify with God, but also to identify with God’s people. This is because they participate not in
God’s transcendent sovereignty, but in God’s pathos. This pathos is the wellspring of the biblical
tradition of prophetic intercession, as numerous prophets not only bring YHWH’s word of
judgment to the people, but simultaneously stand “in the breach” (Psalm 106:23) in order to
stave off God’s judgment as long as possible. Thus Moses (the paradigmatic prophet) intercedes
on behalf of the people after the Golden Calf episode.16 But Samuel, having promised not to
cease praying for both people and king (1 Samuel 12:23) reneges on his oath when he outright
refuses to intercede for Saul in chapter 15.17

When I began working on this paper I expected to be able to affirm the terms of my title:
Orthodox Theology, Ulterior Motives. However, I am now of the opinion that Samuel’s speech
in chapter 12 not only reflects ulterior motives, but represents deficient theology as well.

16 True, not all prophets intercede on behalf of the people; but I am focusing here on Moses as the
paradigmatic prophet. For a more in-depth exploration of the motif of prophetic intercession, see Middleton, “God’s
Loyal Opposition: Psalmic and Prophetic Protest as a Paradigm for Faithfulness in the Hebrew Bible”; paper
prepared for the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures program unit at the Society of Biblical Literature, San Antonio,
November 21, 2016.

17 For an exploration of the contrast between Moses in the Golden Calf episode and Samuel in the narrative
of 1 Samuel 15, see Middleton, “Samuel Agonistes,” 89-91.
1 Samuel 11:14—12:25
Translation with Analytical Outline
J. Richard Middleton

Context of the Speech—The Confirmation of Saul’s Kingship at Gilgal (11:14–15)

14Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.” 15So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they installed Saul as king [lit. they kinged Saul] before YHWH in Gilgal. There they sacrificed shalom offerings before YHWH, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.

Looking Back—Samuel’s Innocence as Judge Established (1–5)

1And Samuel said to all Israel, “Behold [hinnê], I have listened to your voice in all that you said to me, and I have installed [lit. kinged] a king over you. 2And now [wĕ’attâ], behold [hinnê] the king who is walking before you. As for me, I am old and gray. As for my sons, behold they [hinnâm] are with you. As for me, I have walked before you from my youth until this day. 3Here I am [hinĕni]; testify against me before YHWH and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I abused? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe that I might blind my eyes with it? [Witness against me; LXX] then I will return it to you.”

4And they said, “You have not defrauded us or abused us and you have not taken anything from the hand of anyone.”

5And he said to them, “YHWH is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.” And they [MT: he] said, “Witness.”

Looking Ahead—The People’s Guilt and Samuel’s Indispensable Role (6–25)

• Telling Israel’s Story with Some Unusual Twists (6–13)

○ Exodus (6–8)

6And Samuel said to the people, “YHWH is the one [or LXX: is witness] who appointed [or worked with; ‘āšā et-] Moses and Aaron and brought your ancestors up from the land of Egypt. 7And now [wĕ’attâ], take your stand, and I will enter into judgment with you before YHWH, and [I will declare to you; LXX] all the righteous acts [tsidqôt] of YHWH that he worked with you [āšā etkem] and with your ancestors. 8When Jacob came into Egypt [and the Egyptians oppressed them; LXX], then your ancestors cried out to YHWH and YHWH sent Moses and Aaron, and they brought forth your ancestors from Egypt, and they settled them in this place.

○ Judges (9–11)

9But they forgot YHWH their God; and he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army [of King Jabin; LXX] of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab; and they fought against them. 10Then they cried out to YHWH, and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have forsaken YHWH, and we have served the Baals and the Astartes. And now [wĕ’attâ] deliver us from the hand of our enemies, and we will serve you.’ 11And YHWH sent Jerubbaal and Bedan [LXX: Barak; Peshitta: Deborah and Barak], and Jephthah, and Samuel [LXX: and Peshitta: Samson], and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies all around; and you dwelt in safety.
12 But you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, so you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ though YHWH your God was your king. And now [wê‘attâ], behold [hinnê] the king whom you have chosen, for whom you asked; and behold [hinnê], YHWH has set a king over you.

- **The Choice Before the People—Lopsided Covenantal Alternatives (14–15)**
  - **Obedience and (Implicit) Promise (14)**
    14 If you fear YHWH and serve him, and listen to his voice, and do not rebel against the mouth of YHWH, and you—both you and the king who reigns over you—follow YHWH your God . . . [no positive apodosis].
  - **Disobedience and Explicit Threat (15)**
    15 But if you do not listen to the voice of YHWH, but rebel against the mouth of YHWH, then the hand of YHWH will be against you and [as it was?] against your ancestors [or LXX: your king].

- **The Miraculous Sign and Its Intended Effect (16–19)**
  16 Even now [gam-‘attâ], take your stand and see this great thing that YHWH is doing before your eyes. 17 Isn’t it the wheat harvest today? I will call to YHWH, and he will send thunder and rain. Know and see that your evil is great, which you have done in the eyes of YHWH, by asking for yourselves a king.”
  18 And Samuel called to YHWH, and YHWH sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared YHWH and Samuel. 19 And all the people said to Samuel, “Pray on behalf of your servants to YHWH your God, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of asking for ourselves a king.”

- **Samuel’s Concluding Words of Comfort and Warning (20–25)**
  - **Comfort with Warning Sandwiched Between (20–22)**
    20 And Samuel said to the people, “Fear not! As for you, you have done all this evil. Indeed, do not turn aside from following YHWH, but serve YHWH with all your heart. 21 And do not turn aside after empty things [tohû] that cannot profit and cannot deliver, for they are empty [tohû]. 22 And YHWH will not forsake his people, for the sake of his great name, for YHWH has resolved to make you a people for himself.
  - **Samuel’s Pledge of Support (23)**
    23 Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against YHWH by ceasing to pray on your behalf; and I will instruct you in the good and the straight way.
  - **Final Challenge and Warning (24–25)**
    24 Only fear YHWH, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for see what great things he has done for you. 25 But if you dare to do evil, both you and your king will be swept away.”