

Saul in Story and Tradition

Edited by
CARL S. EHRLICH
in Cooperation with
MARSHA C. WHITE

*Forschungen
zum Alten Testament
47*

Mohr Siebeck

Forschungen zum Alten Testament

Herausgegeben von

Bernd Janowski (Tübingen) · Mark S. Smith (New York)

Hermann Spieckermann (Göttingen)

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ISBN 3-16-148569-6

ISBN-13 978-3-16-148569-5

ISSN 0940-4155 (Forschungen zum Alten Testament)

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de>.

978-3-16-157784-0 Unveränderte eBook-Ausgabe 2019

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The book was printed by Gulde Druck in Tübingen on non-aging paper and bound by Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

Preface

The idea for this collection of essays was first formulated after Marsha White held a lecture on Saul, since published in the *Burke O. Long Festschrift*, at the Association for Jewish Studies Annual Conference in 1997. It was then that the editors discovered they had a common interest in Israel's first king and initially formulated the idea of publishing a collection of essays devoted to him. For various reasons, it has taken longer than expected to complete this project. We are grateful to the contributors to this volume, who have waited patiently for their work to appear.

The abbreviations in this volume generally follow the guidelines of the Society of Biblical Literature. In distinction to common SBL practice, however, titles are not italicized nor are the titles of articles placed in quotation marks. This deviation from common SBL norms is done in order to bring the volume into harmony with the formatting standards of *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*. Also in accordance with the standards of the series, the abbreviation "Art." precedes the names of dictionary and encyclopedia articles.

The attempt has been made to harmonize the formatting and linguistic guidelines of the various contributions to this volume. In one or two instances, however, we have allowed individual authors to deviate in their transcriptions of the divine name. While this engenders some inconsistency from chapter to chapter, it does honor the religious sensibilities of the individuals involved.

The editors of this volume would like to thank the members of the planning committee of the Deuteronomistic History Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, who devoted their meeting in 2000 to the subject of Saul in the Deuteronomistic History. The papers delivered at that session form the core of this volume. The publication of this volume was aided by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada administered by York University. In addition, we owe our gratitude to Professors Bernd Janowski, Mark S. Smith, and Hermann Spieckermann, the editors of *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*, who accepted this volume into their publication program, to Dr. Henning Ziebritzki of the Mohr Siebeck Verlag, who provided valuable guidance in the publication process, to Tanja Mix, also of Mohr Siebeck, who aided us greatly with the drudgery of formatting, to Ruth Lockshin of Words That Work for preparing the indices for this volume, to Prof. Leonard H. Ehrlich and Dr. Edith Ehrlich for their valuable input, to Sahar Rizvi of York University, who did some preliminary formatting, to

Professor Ralph Locke and Tanya Sermer of the Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, who checked over the translation of musical terms from German to English, and last, but not least, to Shimi Ehrlich without whose expert computer advice this volume would never have been published. Any mistakes or imperfections that remain are the responsibility of the editors.

CSE & MCW

November 2005

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Introduction

Carl S. Ehrlich

In an evaluation of the legacy of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on the tenth anniversary of his assassination, Amotz Asa-El wrote that:

Rabin was therefore neither the Davidic nation builder nor the Solomonic visionary some have made of him. Rather, he was a reincarnation of King Saul, the modest man who ruled in spite of himself after the people demanded a leader who would protect them from the Philistines; the warrior who initially excelled on the battlefield, before prematurely concluding that Israel's wars could be halted, and ultimately losing his life in that stubbornly persisting war. The sages said Saul's rule could not last because he was too modest, and German historian Leopold [von] Ranke said he was history's first tragic figure. Since then, history in general, and ours in particular, has had many more tragic figures. Rabin will always be counted prominently among them.¹

Whatever the merits of this comparison of Rabin to Saul, it is intriguing that some three thousand years after the traditional date of his demise, the figure of Saul continues to exert a hold on the human imagination. Indeed, Asa-El deftly and succinctly articulates much that explains this enduring fascination. Saul is an ambiguous and contradictory figure. A head taller than any other Israelite (1 Sam 9:2), he is seemingly cut from the cloth of kingship. And yet he fails, ultimately to be abandoned and betrayed by the God who had chosen him as king (1 Sam 9:15–16 [choice] vs. 13:13–14; 15:10, 23 [rejection]), by the prophet Samuel who had anointed him as king (1 Sam 10:24; 11:14 [choice] vs. 15:26, 35 [rejection]), by the people who had acclaimed him as king (11:15 [acclamation] vs. 18:7 [rejection]), by his children Michal (1 Sam 19:11–17) and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:1–4; 23:16–18) who rejected their family's claim on kingship, by his servant David who supplanted him as king (as of 1 Sam 16:1), and by his own cowardice² and descent into madness and paranoia (as of 1 Sam 18:8).

The multifaceted nature of Saul and his variegated depiction in the biblical text have led to a wide variety of interpretations of Saul in post-biblical

¹ ASA-EL, *Legacy*.

² The reference here is to his fear of facing Goliath in battle (1 Sam 17:11). Indeed, it is most ironic that the tallest hero of the Israelites, Saul, is afraid to face the tallest of the Philistines in a battle of equal champions, and it is left to the small and inexperienced David to fell the Philistine giant. In his noble decision to march to battle against the Philistines at Gilboa, in spite of knowing that this will lead to his death, Saul at the end reverts belatedly and quixotically to his original heroic nature.

tradition up to and including the present day. The brief excerpt from Asa-El's essay already presented the reader with interpretations of Saul as modest, warlike, misguided, and tragic. Besides these "traditional" images of Saul, the twentieth century added a number of additional nuances. In the early part of that century, one of the most imaginative, poetic, and effusive portraits of Saul was offered by Rudolf Kittel, who wrote:

King Saul was like a brilliant meteor vanishing as rapidly as it came. Attracting the attention of all, making all hearts beat proudly with joy, and arousing great hopes, it appeared on Israel's horizon. Hardly risen, not yet having reached the zenith, the meteor turned quickly, only to sink and to fall slowly lower and lower. The brilliant hero, like a shining Siegfried, had killed the dragon, Ammon, and then in a swift course of victory, cheered by the people, with laurels crowning his brow, wearing the sparkling regal crown, having driven the country's enemy to the boundary, was suddenly halted and held as if spellbound by an invisible hand. Saul was like a steed that is unexpectedly checked in the midst of the joyful course, that stops, leaves the road, shies, and is turned from its course. The tall hero, whose noble appearance had been the delight of all who saw him, was bowed down. His clear, frank countenance was darkened, his sparkling eyes dimmed, clouded the brow that had formerly been held so high, that had reflected confidence, good fortune, and success. Furrows of grief and care marred his noble visage. Saul was the image of a man suddenly broken, an oak that was shattered in a night by lightning, or uprooted by a hurricane.³

Later historians may have been more sober in their judgment of Saul,⁴ but until the latter part of the century not much changed in the understanding of Saul's character. It was only with the rise of modern literary critical approaches to biblical literature that old assumptions about Saul and particularly his relationship with Samuel were called into question. No longer was Saul a heroic, noble, or tragic figure. Now he was reinterpreted as an incompetent, indeed as a bumbler, no longer the enemy of Samuel but his creation.⁵ Without evaluating the relative merits of such readings, it is surely not coincidental that they were produced during an age in which one of the aims of the historical biography became to cut the heroes of old, such as the tall Saul, down to size.

While it is his rival and successor David who is accorded much more importance by the biblical text and by post-biblical tradition, the ambivalent figure of Saul continues to attract attention. In spite of the recent spate of works dealing with the character of David and the debate revolving around his historicity and the nature of his rule,⁶ his hapless predecessor has managed to

³ KITTEL, *Great*, pp. 103–104.

⁴ See, e.g., MILLER / HAYES (*History*, pp. 135–146) who speak of "Saul's popularity, heroism, and the significance of his reign" (p. 145).

⁵ See, e.g., POLZIN, *Samuel*; COHEN, *Saul*.

⁶ See, e.g., ALTER, *David*; HALPERN, *Secret Demons*; KIRSCH, *David*; MCKENZIE, *David*.

maintain a steady – albeit not as strong a – presence in both the scholarly literature and in popular imagination.⁷

The following set of studies devoted to “Saul in Story and Tradition” does not attempt to break new methodological ground. In other words, unlike many volumes published nowadays, it does not view its subject as the test case in the application of a new methodological approach. On the contrary, the subject himself is in this instance indeed the major focus of our attention. Hence, the attempt has been made to enlist a number of scholars using various approaches to write about and view the subject matter of the book from a number of diverse methodological perspectives. Eclecticism is the hallmark of this enterprise. Nonetheless, reflective of current trends in scholarship, literary approaches predominate, although historical/archaeological studies introduce the volume, and the concluding essays deal with the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of Saul in various guises and formats.

The contents of this volume fall naturally into two parts of somewhat unequal length. The first eleven chapters deal with “Saul in Story,” in other words, with Saul as depicted in the Hebrew Bible. The final six chapters have as their subject “Saul in Tradition,” thus focusing on Saul as interpreted in various post-biblical religious, literary, and artistic corpora. In this manner the concept of the book as a whole allows us to look at Saul both synchronically and diachronically, in effect acknowledging that – even within the biblical texts – there are a number of Sauls.

The two introductory essays look at the archaeology and at the process of state formation in the central highlands of Canaan/Israel/Palestine at the time to which Saul is generally dated, namely toward the end of Iron Age I (ca. 1200/1150–1000 BCE). They thus provide anthropological, archaeological, historical, and social perspectives on the putative period of Saul and the rise of the Israelite monarchy.

In the first, Avraham Faust looks at the “Settlement Patterns and State Formation in Southern Samaria,” namely in that region to the north of Jerusalem that became the southern part of the later Assyrian province of Samaria and is viewed in the Hebrew Bible in part as the tribal allocation of Benjamin, from which Saul claimed descent. A major observation of his is that none of the rural villages identified with the rise of the Israelites in the central hill country during Iron Age I continued as a village into Iron Age II. Either they disappeared or they grew into cities/towns. While he does not discount internal factors – including the increasing complexity of society – enabling this change in settlement pattern, Faust clearly views external threats as the impetus for this change. In addition, evidence for the rise of a more complex society – including larger, fortified towns – is evident first in the

⁷ See, e.g., EDELMAN, Saul; GREEN, Mighty; GUNN, Fate; HENTSCHEL, Saul; LONG, Reign; NICHOLSON, Faces.

territory of Benjamin. Hence, he concludes that the process of state formation began in this region. Turning briefly at the end of his essay to a comparison of the archaeological and biblical evidence, Faust looks at “the Archaeology of (a) Saul” and concludes that there are some major points of contact between them, among which the location and nature of the process of state formation have pride of place. Since such developments in human society need human agents, he concludes that there is no reason not to posit the existence of *a Saul*, while remaining cognizant of the dangers of equating archaeological levels with individuals mentioned only in later textual traditions.

In the second, Siegfried Kreuzer offers “A New Perspective on the Rise of Kingship in Israel” by arguing that “Saul [was] – not always – at War.” In his attempt to identify pre-deuteronomistic material in the deuteronomistic account of the rise and fall of King Saul, Kreuzer posits the methodological criterion of “unintentionality,” whereby much valuable information can be gleaned by examining offhand comments in the text that do not fit into any identifiable theological or ideological pattern, an example of which would be the comment in 1 Sam 13:20–21 about the Israelites going to the Philistines to have their metal implements sharpened, which could be taken to indicate a period of peaceful relations between these peoples. Indeed, Kreuzer posits that the initial relations between Israel and Philistia were peaceful and based on mutual economic necessities and that Saul originally became king with the consent and support of the Philistines. He finds support for this contention in the entrusting of David with the city of Ziklag by the Philistines, which makes sense in his eyes only in the context of a state of non-war between Israel and Philistia at that time. Nonetheless, its purpose was to limit Saul’s growing power by fostering a counterbalance to it under Philistine control. It was only toward the end of his reign that Saul was forced into war against the Philistines occasioned by the rash act of his son Jonathan (1 Sam 13:3–4).

The next two articles deal with the figure of “Saul in the Deuteronomistic History.” As Steven L. McKenzie points out in his essay of the same name, this in effect means Saul in the Books of Samuel, unlike David whose range of references is exponentially greater. McKenzie’s central thesis is that the function of Saul in the Deuteronomistic History is to act as a counterpoint to David. Saul first appears obliquely in the narrative in 1 Samuel 1, which – whether or not one views this as an original birth narrative of Saul – through its incorporation of wordplays on the Hebrew root *šʾl* prepares the reader for Samuel’s later rejection of Saul. The first true appearance of Saul is in the five literary units that comprise 1 Samuel 8–12 and encapsulate an ambivalent attitude toward kingship. While Saul is successfully anointed as a *nāgīd* “designated one” (a type of military leader), the use of this term in reference to him in the Deuteronomistic History indicates that he is a transitional figure between the period of the Judges and that of the Israelite monarchy. In

addition, McKenzie singles out the difference between the ambivalent acclamation of Saul as ruler and the later unconditional acclamation of David as king. As king Saul can do little right; and the later stories about Saul as of 1 Samuel 13 deal in various ways with the central theme of his rejection by God in favor of David, which leads Saul to a life of madness and murder. Ultimately Saul himself is responsible for his fate and that of his house. McKenzie's conclusion is that the Deuteronomistic Historian has so greatly subsumed the story of Saul to that of David that very little if anything historical about Saul can be deduced from this narrative.

In her essay Yairah Amit has chosen to highlight the tension in the text between the need to present Saul as worthy of election as king and conversely as worthy of rejection in favor of David. It is this that gives rise to "The Delicate Balance in the Image of Saul and Its Place in the Deuteronomistic History." According to Amit this is accomplished by means of three literary devices: (1) Saul is depicted as a tragic hero; (2) Saul is shown in conflict with other major figures, namely Samuel and David; and (3) the characterization of Saul is ambivalent, allowing the reader both to empathize with him and yet to understand his fall. In accord with the first point, Amit identifies all five of Aristotle's characteristic elements of tragedy in the story of Saul. In the case of the second point, she argues that all the major figures in the story of Saul are painted in tones of gray, which allows for subtlety and nuance in their characterization. As for the third point, Amit contrasts the nuanced portrait of Saul in Samuel with the one-sidedly negative one in Chronicles. She concludes that this "Delicate Balance in the Image of Saul" is not characteristic of the Deuteronomist as author, but is indicative of the integration of earlier material into the Deuteronomistic History by an editor who decided not to change the tenor of his sources.

The following four essays focus on different aspects of the character and nature of Saul within the biblical narratives about him. The first one seeks to uncover Saul as a hero, the second one views him in the context of the Persian era discussion about prophets and prophecy, the third one deals with him as the father of his son Jonathan, and the fourth one looks at the creation of his royal body.

First Gregory Mobley attempts to discover the lost heroic Saul of history by comparing and contrasting the narratives of Saul in which he plays the leading role (1 Samuel 9–14) with those in which he serves negatively as the foil for the David story (1 Samuel 15–31). Mobley's methodological assumption is that positive details in the depiction of Saul in the former that are mirrored negatively (as in a photographic negative) in the latter must be based on authentic tradition and will provide us with "Glimpses of the Heroic Saul." Thus he investigates six instances in which facets of the earlier Saul narrative are mirrored in the David story in order to turn something positive

into a negative: Saul's stature, which is contrasted with that of David; his inspiration from the divine, which becomes an evil spirit; his performance in battle, which pales in comparison with David's; his spear, which is never used to good end; his men, who are implicitly criticized in the story of the raped and murdered concubine in Judges 19; and finally his prophetic ability, which becomes a sign of his descent into madness.

The theme of "Saul among the Prophets (1 Sam 10:10–12 and 19:18–24)" provides the segue to the next essay, in which Christophe Nihan looks at "The Reworking of Saul's Figure in the Context of the Debate on 'Charismatic Prophecy' in the Persian Era." As the title already indicates, Nihan dates these aetiologies of the saying "Is Saul also among the prophets?" to the Persian period (539–332 BCE), in which case they would convey no information about a historical Saul. Using redaction-criticism Nihan attempts to show that 1 Sam 10:10–12 is a later, post-deuteronomistic addition to the original story of Saul's anointing (1 Sam 9:1–10:16). He finds a historical context for this "spiritualization" of Saul's receipt of the spirit of God (originally a military motif) in the need for a reinterpretation of the role of leadership in the Judean community in the early fifth century BCE after the failure of Zerubbabel's attempt to reassert national autonomy in the Persian province of Yehud. Nihan traces this text and others like it to ecstatic groups living in Yehud, who argued that even those not specifically trained as prophets could be recipients of the divine spirit. The second version of the story in 1 Sam 19:18–24 served as the response of the classical prophetic school attached to the Jerusalem temple to the phenomenon of ecstatic prophecy. Hence, it is phrased in the negative and is to be dated slightly later than the first version of Saul's prophetic possession. Nonetheless, taken together, these passages present evidence of the continuation of a debate between official and charismatic prophetic circles, which probably predated the exile.

In her essay on "Saul and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 1 and 14," Marsha White investigates the two chapters framing what she considers to be – minus some mainly Deuteronomistic additions – an original History of Saul's Rise, which is to be found in 1 Sam 1:1–14:48. In distinction to the prevailing hypothesis of the historical-critical school, according to which an original birth narrative of Saul – indicated by the prevalence of wordplays on the root *š'l* – was transferred at some later date to Samuel (1 Samuel 1), White argues that the aim of the story was to validate Samuel as a proper priest and prepare the reader for his action in anointing the one who was to be the first king of Israel. Thus Saul appears in this narrative, but only obliquely through the sevenfold use of wordplays on his name, as indeed there are seven wordplays on the name of his son Jonathan (using the root *ntn*) in this chapter. In this pre-Davidic layer of tradition, Samuel's only function is to doom the Elide priests and raise the Saulides to kingship. Saul's near sacrifice of Jonathan in 1

Samuel 14 is understood by White as a sign of his great devotion to God and is prefigured in Hannah's dedication of her son to God in 1 Samuel 1. Saul's readiness to sacrifice Jonathan and Jonathan's last-minute reprieve parallel Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, who is also rescued at the last moment. The king and deliverer of Israel has proven his faithfulness to God.

In his essay on "The Creation of Saul's Royal Body. Reflections on 1 Samuel 8–10," Mark W. Hamilton focuses on the treatment of Saul's body in the story of his appointment as king over Israel. Basing himself on this discussion, he proceeds to draw conclusions regarding the Hebrew Bible's view of the king's body and person. He introduces his topic by outlining three important conclusions reached by scholars in the field of body studies upon which his investigation is based: (1) "the movements and disciplining of the body both reflect the values of a culture and shape them," (2) "cultures construct bodies through ritual," and (3) "royal bodies reflect the culture's ... cosmology, to such a degree that we can say that governance consists of the creation and maintenance of a proper body." Although Saul is introduced as one of truly regal carriage (1 Sam 9:2), it is only when he receives "another heart" (1 Sam 10:9) that he becomes receptive to the divine spirit that will transform him (1 Sam 11:6). Drawing on ethnographic parallels, Hamilton understands the critique of the institution of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 8 as a formalized ritual designed to ward off the very evils being listed. Its success in the case of Saul is indicated by the continuation of the narrative about his reign. Notably, it is his beheaded and violated body, hung on the walls of Beth-shan, that signifies the end of his rule as king. The ritual that Hamilton has identified in 1 Samuel 8–10 is the antithesis of this conclusion, namely the creation of a royal body capable and worthy of publicly channeling the divine.

The following two essays are concerned with objects that play an important role either by their presence or by their absence in the Saul narrative, namely his sword and the Ark of the Covenant. Both of these essays employ literary analyses to arrive at an understanding of the object in question and its place in the larger narrative.

Taking as his point of departure Hannah's observation that "The bows of the mighty are shattered, but the feeble gird on strength" (1 Sam 2:4), Samuel A. Meier looks at "The Sword. From Saul to David." A particular focus of his is the ambivalent and oftentimes unexpected use made of weapons in the Saul narrative, which Meier ties in with a general biblical theme of the reversal of fortune and expectations. The large and mighty are not always the powerful or successful. Indeed, as the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17) illustrates, the possession of weapons is no guarantee of victory, nor is their absence necessarily a precondition of defeat. Saul's spear is wielded against any number of people without success, and it is only David's compassion for the king that allows Saul to be spared the ignominy of death by his own weapon.

He does not, however, escape this fate later in his life, when he turns his sword on himself in order to be spared death at the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam 31:4–5). Indeed, as Meier demonstrates, the theme of the violent death of those who use weapons is one that runs throughout the Book of Samuel. The only warrior who lives to an old age and dies peacefully in bed in this work (extending into 1 Kings 2) is David. Even though David's family bears the consequences of his actions, Meier speculates that it is David's frequent distancing of himself from participation in bloodshed that allows this to take place from the narrator's perspective. Ultimately, Meier concludes that the text, part of the Deuteronomistic History, displays an ambivalence toward weapons and those who use them. On the one hand they are indispensable particularly in the exercise of power, on the other they threaten to consume whoever wields them.

C. Mark McCormick's essay "From Box to Throne. The Development of the Ark in DtrH and P" begins with a tension in the biblical text: The Ark of the Covenant is missing from the Saul narrative (except for one brief mention of "the ark of God" in 1 Sam 14:18, which should be read as "the ephod of God" according to the Septuagint), and yet it frames that narrative. In addition, the function of the ark is ambiguous, serving both as a divine throne and as a container for the covenant tablets. McCormick criticizes those who take a phenomenological approach to understanding the ark as an object. For him the ark is a textual icon and must be understood in literary terms. In its current form the Ark Narrative is a Deuteronomistic composition that concludes with the ark's placement in the Temple (1 Kings 8). According to the Deuteronomistic picture of the ark, it was a simple box that housed the tablets of the covenant, around which the central part of the Temple was built. It is Priestly elaboration of this that has added such features as an ornate golden cover and poles to this image, transforming it into a portable throne of God. Since the interest of the Deuteronomist is in bringing the ark to the Temple, there is no need to insert it into the Saul narrative, since he was not associated with that movement.

Fittingly concluding the "Saul in Story" section of this volume is an essay by Gary N. Knoppers on "The Place of the Saulide Monarchy in the Chronicler's Historiography." Thus far nearly all the essays have dealt with some aspect of Saul within the context of the Deuteronomistic History, more specifically within the Book of Samuel, which forms the major source of our information on Saul and his story. Nonetheless, Saul also appears within the Book of Chronicles, the last book in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Knoppers' essay is an attempt to understand Saul and his house within the ideology and theology of this latter work. His essay begins with a conundrum. In addition to a number of scattered allusions to Saul within Chronicles, the Chronicler's main interest in him is in his genealogies (1 Chr 9:35–44) and in

his death in battle (1 Chronicles 10). The Chronicler conveniently skips over the ensuing civil war as related in 2 Samuel, and implies that David was immediately chosen as king over all Israel. In light of the Chronicler's ignoring of the history of the northern kingdom of Israel and his contention that "the kingdom of YHWH [was] in the hands of the sons of David" (2 Chr 13:8), why mention Saul at all? One aim was to absolve David in any way of participation in the demise of Saul, from whose death in the Chronicler's opinion he would not have benefited, as is indicated by the Chronicler's non-mention of David's relationship to Saul through Michal (except for 1 Chr 15:29, in which Michal despises David for his dance before the ark). The Chronicler's narrative of David avers that he was supported by Benjaminites (from Saul's tribe!) while Saul yet reigned. Indeed, while Saul still lives, the Israelites turn to David of their own volition. This is justified in part through Chronicles' presentation of Saul as an apostate. Ultimately, Chronicles' presentation of Saul is situated in the Persian period, when Judah and Benjamin were the two non-priestly tribes vying for power. The Chronicler's account of Saul acknowledges Saul's primacy, but also his inadequacy. The Benjaminites of Saul's day realized this and flocked to David, just as the Chronicler hopes that the Benjaminites of his day will flock to the Davidic house.

The six essays that comprise the second part of this volume, the "Saul in Tradition" component, fall naturally into two groups of three. The first three essays represent investigations into the rewriting of the Saul story in the first millennium CE. The final three look at interpretations of the Saul story in second millennium music, literature, and art.

Whereas the other two essays in the first triad examine specifically theological interpretations of Saul in midrashic and Quranic literature, the essay by Louis H. Feldman on "Josephus' View of Saul" examines the rewriting of the Saul story by the first century CE Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. Following the traditions of the Isocratean school of historiography, Josephus emphasizes Saul's heroic and tragic nature. For Josephus, Saul is a pivotal figure in Jewish history; and Josephus' treatment of him is disproportionately long when compared with the biblical texts and also much more positive. While avoiding the rabbinic "whitewashing" of Saul, Josephus nonetheless stakes out a position opposed to that of his contemporary Pseudo-Philo, whose Saul is a villain. Josephus' Saul embodies the qualities that would most appeal to a Greek audience, thus becoming a paradigm of Josephus' apologetic aims. In this manner Josephus draws attention to Saul's good birth, his physical attractiveness, his embodiment of the four cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, temperance/modesty, and justice), and his sense of piety. A somewhat amusing example of Josephus' need to render the biblical narrative more palatable for a Greek audience is the change of the Hebrew

Bible's bride price for Michal from one hundred Philistine foreskins to six hundred Philistine heads. Feldman speculates that Josephus had Homer's Hector and Achilles in mind when formulating his portrait of Saul. In spite of Josephus' generally positive attitude toward Saul and his rewriting of Saul's story in a manner intended to glorify him, Josephus must also explain the tragedy of his downfall. His cruelty in the case of the priests of Nob, for example, is explained as a consequence of the corruption of power; and it is that cruelty together with his disobedience to God in the case of the Amalekites that are the direct causes of Saul's downfall. Nonetheless, Josephus arouses sympathy toward Saul by emphasizing his remorse for his negative actions. Finally, Josephus attributes Saul's descent into madness to a medical condition and not to an evil spirit from God, and his antipathy toward David is rationalized as the understandable fear of a rival.

In her essay on "The Innocent King. Saul in Rabbinic Exegesis," Hanna Liss attempts to come up with a coherent interpretation of the various rabbinic traditions concerning Saul. Her primary observation is that the rabbis were much more sympathetic toward Saul than the biblical traditions were. This is reflected also in the rabbis' treatment of David, who is hence evaluated in a much more critical light than in the Hebrew Bible. In keeping with scattered hints in the biblical text, the rabbinic Saul is a modest man. The rabbis play up that aspect of his character to such a degree that they have Saul himself question his suitability for the role chosen for him by God. In this manner, Saul anticipates his failure and cannot be accused of causing it. In keeping with a rabbinic tendency to view significant figures from the past as proto-rabbis, Saul too is cast in this mold, being particularly enamored of legal (i.e., halakhic) discussions. In general, the rabbis tried to interpret any ambiguities in the biblical text in Saul's favor and to rationalize and temper his biblical sins, even ascribing much of the responsibility for them (his mercy in the case of Agag, his murder of the priests of Nob) to Samuel and David, i.e., to those whom the biblical text depicts as innocent. Saul's bravery in going to battle at Gilboa in the knowledge that it would be his last is admired in rabbinic writings even by God himself. This inversion of biblical evaluations of personality is characteristic of rabbinic interpretation, not only in the case of Saul. The larger aim of this process is to evaluate important figures from the past in terms of their supposed devotion to Torah and to the people. As Liss concludes, "The preeminence of rabbinic Judaism, therefore, can be attributed to its adoption of and emancipation from the Hebrew Bible."

In his article on "King Saul (Tālūt) in the Qur'ān and Post-Quranic Literature," Walid A. Saleh uses the example of Saul to formulate a methodological critique of Quranic scholarship's understanding of the Qur'ān's reworking of biblical traditions. The Qur'ān's treatment of Saul is relatively brief and limited to one sura (Q. 2: 246–253), and it deviates quite

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Edited by Bernd Janowski, Mark S. Smith
and Hermann Spieckermann

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