Give Us a King

Analytical Reading Exercise

Objectives

* Students will develop an understanding of the broad themes in the stories of Samuel, Saul and David.
* Students will practice a strategy of active reading that involves
  + Making comments,
  + Asking questions,
  + Cross-referencing, and
  + Defining vocabulary.
* Students will write a synthesis essay in which they create their own answers to the questions asked by the student and teacher in Fox’s narrative.

Procedures:

* Go to the website <http://otrocks.wikispaces.com/> which is the wiki space that Mthr. Barbarito and Dr. Albritton. On the home page, click on the link that says “Give Us a King Analytical Exercise.
* Download the document there entitled “Give Us a King Summary.” You will need to use a computer that has Microsoft Word to do the steps in our analysis. Resave the document, making the new filename your last name, your first initial and then King Ex. So, if I am Jennifer Smith, the new document is “SmithJKingEx.doc” You will email your final version to your teacher for a grade.
* Before doing the detailed analysis, read the entire document quickly to get a feel for Fox’s argument.
* For each paragraph, write a thoughtful comment. Use the notes feature of Word to insert your comment in the margin. If you do not know how to use the notes feature of Word, follow the instructions at this link:
  + <http://screencast.com/t/ZjU0YWI5Y2Et>
* For at least every third paragraph, write a thoughtful question. Think about the issues involved. What is important? What would you like to know more about? What questions does Fox’s article raise in your mind?
* When Fox quotes or refers to passage of scripture, look that passage up in on <http://www.biblegateway.com/> Copy the passage, and insert it into Fox’s document. As with other paragraphs, make a comment and ask a question about the bible passage you have inserted.
* High-light at least 12 words in the text as vocabulary words for yourself. Look up the definitions. Insert the definitions *in your own words, not simply a copy and paste from the dictionary* as a note attached to the word you chose.
* You will receive a double-homework grade for this analysis.
* This analysis will also prepare you for a culminating essay you will write on in response to Fox’s article.
* You will receive the essay on Thursday.

***Give Us a King! Samuel, Saul, and David*** by Everett Fox

Introduction

Not long ago my wife was teaching the book of First Samuel to a thirteen-year-old student. As the two of them read chapter 8, which narrates how the Israelites clamored for a king and how God responded to their request, he looked up at her and said, “I don’t see what this has to do with my becoming a computer programmer.”

From at least one person’s perspective, then, the book of Samuel—for it was a single book in its early written form—is not a book for the turn of the century or the millennium. The balance of the world’s people no longer concern themselves with kings or prophets; God is not the determining factor in either foreign or domestic policy in America’ and the notion of community has been reduced considerably from what it once was. In such a world, which seems so distant from eleventh century B.C.E. Palestine, the stories of Samuel, Saul, and David would seem to have lost their value or their power to grab the imagination.

But the century that has seen the advances in science and technology that have absorbed our budding computer programmer’s attention has also been filled with over-population, exploitation, war, and genocide. It has pushed the great human questions of morality, dignity, and justice to their limits.

The book of Samuel is concerned with what may be the two most important problems arising from these issues: personal responsibility and leadership. Samuel’s narratives center around the choices made by individuals and collectives, leaders and the communities that select them, and around the consequences of those choices. Samuel reflects a people’s struggle with what it means to ask for leadership, how the leaders measure up to the task, and how the ideals of a culture fare in that process.

The stage is dramatically set in I Samuel 8. Throughout the preceding book of Judges, the Israelites—living precariously in the central hill country of Palestine, have relied on a charismatic system for protection against their enemies. Judges presents a series of rulers, appointed by God and possessed of military skills, who time and time again bail their tribal followers out of situations of foreign domination and oppression. But this system of instant heroes, who somehow always show up to rescue the people, eventually breaks down. The Israelites are unable to sustain what the Bible sees as the rule of God, a form of governance that depends, in Martin Buber’s words, on “pure voluntarism,” a community’s determined effort to realize the ideal society.

The cause of the people’s plight, in the view of the books from Judges through Samuel and Kings, is that they put their trust in fertility gods like Baal and Astarte and abandon their traditional (or at least ideal) reliance on a God of justice. At the end of the last judge’s—Samuel’s—career, this is what leads the Israelites to make the fateful move of requesting a king, “to lead us” so “that we may be like all the other nations.” In response, God comes to Samuel in a vision, saying “they have rejected me”: the people, in the name of security and a desire to fit in with the world’s definition of success, have put the old standards of justice and right on the back burner. Samuel, speaking to them in God’s name, is quick to point out the dangers of what they are requesting. His speech on “the practice of the king” (8:11-18) tells the Israelites what they can expect of such a system. It is built on the repetition of one key word: *take.* Kings will ultimately act in self-interest; they will seek to accumulate, and in that process the older tribal system, which depends for the ordering of society on families and elders, will be disrupted and violated. Samuel’s prophecy turns out to be right on target: kingship, coupled with the abandoning or erosion of time-honored traditions, leads in the book to a fratricidal, unjust, and ultimately defeated society.

This view of power is presented through the careers of three major characters—Samuel, Saul, and David. The narrative emphasizes the forbidding tasks with which they are charged, and the result is not encouraging. Samuel is chosen as a prophet in his childhood and fulfills his mission faithful, only to fail in the obligation of passing the mantle to the next generation. Saul is chosen as Israel’s first king and is granted military success, only to see his leadership dissolve into tentativeness, rejection, and paranoia. And finally, David, chosen to found a dynasty “for the ages,” is remarkably successful in his public endeavors, only to come perilously close to losing it all through his private actions. Driven from the throne by his own son, he is saved solely by the disobedience and ruthlessness of his subordinate, Joab.

In these dramatic stories, lies the kernel of a concept of what it means to be human and have leaders. Nowhere is this as clear as in the case of the book’s main focus, David. As the character whose name appears more often in the Bible than that of any other human being, and whose story is “its longest continuous story,” he occupies a central place in the biblical compilers’ world of ideas and images. In David we encounter a leader whose rise and decline are a match for any modern example. As a youngest son and a shepherd, he rises from powerless beginnings; his youth is marked by unparalleled success as a soldier and incipient leader; he is loved by women and by Jonathan, the crown prince (who should be his rival); he miraculously escapes death on numerous occasions in his flight from Saul; his path to the throne is enabled by overzealous subordinates, whose bloody deeds on his behalf somehow do not reach as far as their master, and ultimately he is able to unify a tribal society, secure lasting peace, and create a new order based on a triad of dynasty, royal city, and temple. What a success story! Yet at the very moment that worldly success betokens divine and human approval of David, his own actions topple him from the summit. He commits adultery with Bathsheba and has her husband Uriah murdered in 2 Samuel 11 and is condemned and punished in chapter 12.

Thus, in broadest perspective, the portrayal of David in Samuel, far from being an idealized hero account, is predominantly one of struggle, dominated by what Buber characterizes as “two great stories of flight.” That is, the Bible’s central human character spends more time in running than he does in victory parades or on the throne. By the end of the book David is back in Jerusalem, restored as king—but just barely, and it comes as no shock to the reader when we encounter, in the opening of Kings, a David who is enfeebled in virtually all the areas that he had previously mastered: military leadership, sexual prowess, and decision-making. Only in political ruthlessness does he retain any of his old flair, and that surely cannot be viewed as a virtue.

David’s story in Samuel thus illustrates a wider truth: the fate of the Bible’s characters is one means through which it confronts the areas of personal responsibility and of leadership’s most problematic aspect, the abuse of power. No one in the Bible gets away with anything—not Jacob, the ancestor of Israel, not Moses, the liberator and lawgiver himself, and not even the charismatic and beloved David, much as he is said to “strengthen himself in YHWH his God” (1 Samuel 30:6) and despite the fact that he is credited in biblical tradition with writing some of the world’s great religious poetry in the Psalms.

The Bible supplies a second answer to the challenge posed by kingly power: the counter-institution known as prophecy. In the biblical world this transcends the popular conception of “prophesying” (prediction), and becomes the most passionate, trenchant form of social criticism. The paradigm of the prophet who, at great risk to his own life, confronts the king, the nobles, and even his own people in the name of the truth, is central to the biblical mind-set. Prophecy’s first great exponent is Moses himself. In standing before Pharaoh, Moses sets the tone for all later prophets, who are charged by God with confronting kings in the halls of power.

These great dissenters figure powerfully in the book of Samuel as well. Samuel, who is portrayed in the book as a prophet from childhood, undoes God’s choice of Saul as king (1 Samuel 13 and 15), and confirms this act of rejection from the grave (chapter 28) in the Hebrew Bible’s only presentation of a ghost. David, at the height of his temporal power and success (he does not even feel compelled to lead the troops in battle any more), is confronted by the prophet Nathan’s deceptively simple parable of the poor man and his lamb and then by his ringing denunciation of the king’s double crime of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 12). After these confrontations the book receives the only possible positive resolution, from a third prophet, Gad. He announces God’s punishment for a further presumption of power: David’s taking of a census, a king’s exercising God-like control over the lives of his subjects.

This focus in Samuel reflects above all the Bible’s great concern with justice. 1 Samuel 8 makes it clear that, unchecked, kings will take and not give, that they will look to expand their power rather than providing for a just society. This understanding of history is not a conventional one. It is not a list of kings, their battles and building programs, or a series of essays on economic cause and effect. The modern historian, to be sure, will find that kingship was undoubtedly useful and even necessary to the survival of ancient Israel. But Samuel’s understanding of history is, in the main, a judgment of leaders and events by the standards of the biblical covenant. Ancient Jews somehow understood that what matters to a community in the long run is not power but right. It was this vision, born of bitter experience and ultimately powerlessness, that perhaps enabled them to survive the experience of exile and return to create and sustain a culture that spawned Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

And so, in the end, our young computer programmer’s question can only be dealt with if we turn the question back to him. He or she should be asked: What does computer programming have to do with creating the just society? What will you do to ensure the flourishing of a just society? And what will happen to society if it seeks, and finds, leaders who are not just?

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After all is said and done, we are left with Samuel’s greatest enigma, the figure of David himself. He is a man whose feelings are often hidden from us, and man who is acclaimed and loved by others (including his readers) but of whom it is never said that he lived anyone. How may we reconcile the book’s complex portrait of him with what he came to mean to the generations of Jews and Christians? David, after all, was already an extremely important and positive symbolic figure in the Bible. Over time he came to stand as the unshakable symbol of God’s eternal promise of a political continuity and a holy city that would never disappear. This conviction, for Jews, remained firm even in the face of destruction and exile, and crystallized in the image of “Messiah son of David,” a future God-sent king of David’s line who, unlike most of the biblical kings, would not fail, and who would usher in a final age of peace and prosperity for all humanity.

For early Christians as well, David naturally was connected with the figure of the Messiah, both as a foreshadowing of Jesus, in the person of the popular ancient symbol of the “shepherd king” and as his ancestor. It is no accident that the Gospel of Matthew, the opening of the New Testament, begins with the phrase, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (NRSV). David thus provides the crucial link between Christianity’s literary and biological ancestors, the Hebrew Bible and the Jews, and the new community of believers.

It is likely that Samuel’s morally compromised figure of David has been retained by Jews and Christians precisely because of his depth and suitability as a mediator between the human and the divine. Like most religions, both Judaism and Christianity came to cultivate the concept of human redemption, the idea that human beings are capable of rising beyond their flaws and, through deeds and/or faith, of helping to perfect the world. David, as a man who is sincere but hardly a saint, has through the ages provided a powerful model for repentance: he admits his guilt, accepts responsibility, and places his fate in God’s hands.

Then, too, the choice of David as the forerunner and forefather of the Messiah touches upon a fundamental mystery in the Hebrew Bible, the reason for Israel’s becoming the “Chosen People.” Throughout Genesis, God favors younger sons—Isaac, Jacob, Joseph—over firstborns without explaining why. Are the people of Israel merely a small, helpless band of latecomers on the ancient Near Eastern scene, or are they God’s elect? The David portrayed in these pages is the very image of ancient Israel’s struggle to understand itself.