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Constructing the Ideal Interpretation: The Significance of King Saul's Mood in 1 Samuel

Fiona Macdonald

The First Book of Samuel traces the rise and fall of King Saul. His troubled kingship has been interpreted in numerous ways over the centuries by biblical scholars, literary critics, medical professionals and people of faith. The search for an explanation of King Saul's 'madness' that the text has been handled in several different ways, ultimately leading to the construction of various perceptions of the biblical narrative, of King Saul's character and of the biblical representation of mental health.

Saul's reign as the first king of Israel is fraught with challenges. He is a reluctant leader who regularly struggles with the various and sometimes conflicting demands placed upon him. Additionally, he suffers from repeated episodes of 'dark' moods: sadness, anger, jealousy and paranoia being some of the emotions he displays. These changes in Saul's mood have elicited much debate and discussion in recent decades, with many health professionals as well as biblical scholars trying to assign a medical diagnosis to the behaviour he displays. Various hypotheses have been proffered, some more convincing than others, yet the ethics of such diagnoses are questionable. Perhaps this desire to medicalise Saul's 'dark moods' grows out of an increasing awareness of biological rather than divine causes of illness. Perhaps it is complicated by the multi-faceted compilation of the Books of Samuel. Perhaps it is reflective of a wider desire to 'naturalise' problematic biblical narratives. Whatever the reason, the way Saul's mental state is constructed and interpreted has consequences, which differ depending on whether the book is read as history, literature or scripture. Ultimately, however, this text is most commonly and powerfully read as scripture and so any interpretation of Saul's moods could have a profound impact on the way people understand God and their own lives, particularly if they are living with a mental health diagnosis.

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From their arrival in the Promised Land just after the death of Moses, the Israelites remained within their tribes and were ruled by God through earthly mediators: the judges. [1] Early in 1 Samuel the Israelites grow increasingly worried about their aggressive neighbours, particularly the Philistines. They desire strong military leadership and petition for a king. God is unimpressed by this request but reluctantly agrees and instructs the final judge (Samuel) to anoint young Saul as Israel's king. Initially, Saul does well and wins various battles; however, he twice disobeys God's commands. As a result, God regrets making him king and Samuel anoints David as Israel's new king. From that moment onward, God is with David and Saul faces the decline of his kingship whilst David rises in power. It is Saul's moods and behaviour within this narrative that continue to intrigue readers. Those who seek to analyse his mental state tend to categorise key moments as indicative of either an elevated/'high' mood or a depressed/'low' mood. How these events are categorised, either as 'highs' or 'lows', leads commentators to label Saul with a particular condition. There is, however, a great deal of information about Saul's general character and personality that tends to be ignored or minimalized. This may be classed as 'background information' but could be significantly instructive when engaging with Saul's story as a whole.

Saul's highs are rare. Only one is unanimously labelled as such and that is the 'prophetic frenzy' Saul falls into when 'the spirit of God possessed him' not long after he is anointed (10:10). Two other events could be classed as 'highs' because of similarities with this episode. The first comes when Saul hears about the Ammonite siege of Jabesh-gilead: 'And the spirit of God came upon Saul in power…and his anger was greatly kindled' (11:6). The anger Saul feels could be interpreted as a 'low' but the fact that 'the spirit of God came upon [him] in power' suggests that this was a positive response to a bad situation, rather than uncontrollable rage. This is supported by the subsequent narrative in which Saul defeats and drives out the Ammonites (11:11). The second potential 'high' comes later in the story when Saul is hunting down David and Samuel: 'the spirit of God came upon him…he fell into a prophetic frenzy…stripped off his clothes…[and] lay naked all that day and all that night' (19:23-24). Again, the attribution of the event to 'the spirit of God' and the act of prophesying mark this episode as a 'high', even if it is not interpreted positively.

The lows are more frequent and begin immediately after David is anointed, which results in 'the spirit of the LORD depart[ing] from Saul, and an evil spirit from the

[1] R. Coggins, *Introducing the Old Testament,* 2nd Edition (Oxford, 2001), 23.

LORD torment[ing] him' (16:14). We are not told the nature of this torment but it was sufficiently visible for Saul's servants to notice and suggest music therapy. David's lyre-playing is helpful but it is apparent that the 'evil spirit from God came upon Saul' on a recurrent basis,[2] departing only when David played (16:23). Additionally, Saul flies into rages against David and his son Jonathan, seemingly either without justification or growing out of jealousy (18:8-11, 19:9 and 20:30-34). He throws spears at them in attempts to kill them and searches for them when they take flight. The end of Saul's life is similarly 'low'. Before his final battle against the Philistines, Saul is 'afraid, and his heart trembled greatly' (28:5). He seeks guidance from God but 'the LORD did not answer him' (28:6). In desperation, he consults a medium — a profession he had recently outlawed — to communicate with Samuel's spirit (28:8, 11). Unfortunately for Saul, Samuel predicts defeat for Israel and death for Saul and his sons (28:19). With this dire warning ringing in his ears, Saul goes into battle, where he is 'badly wounded' by enemy archers (31:3). Saul asks his armour-bearer to kill him 'so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust [him] through, and make sport of [him]' (31:4). The armour-bearer refused the request 'so Saul took his own sword and fell upon it' (31:4). This final act by Saul has been interpreted by many as Saul heroically taking back control of his life.[3] Whatever deeper meaning the reader may attach to this action — positive or otherwise — the taking of one's own life demonstrates a significant alteration of mind-set whereby the instinct to live is overwhelmed by a desire to die. Therefore, regardless of the wider meaning attributed to Saul's suicide, it should be interpreted as a 'low'.

Throughout 1 Samuel there are small hints that Saul might be prone to dealing negatively with challenging circumstances. An early example would be his worrying about his father whilst he is out looking for donkeys.[4] It is the boy with Saul who reassures him and offers a practical solution to Saul's concerns (9:5-8). Later on, after he is anointed, Saul seems reluctant to step forward as Israel's king, deciding to hide 'himself among the baggage' (10:22). This may be symbolic of Saul's general reluctance

[2] P. F. Esler, 'The madness of Saul: a cultural reading of 1 Samuel 8-31' in J. C. Exum & S. D. Moore (eds.), *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (Sheffield, 1998), 237.

[3] For example: W. L. Humphreys, 'The rise and fall of King Saul: a study of an ancient narrative stratum in 1 Samuel' (1980) 18 *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 76-77; J. C. Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge, 1992), 25; E. Nissan & A. O. Shemesh, 'King Saul's "evil spirit" (ruach ra'ah): between psychology, medicine and culture' (2010) 62 *La Ricerca Folklorica* 152.

[4] For an alternative explanation see Esler, 'The madness of Saul', 227.

or shyness or may be the actions of an anxious man. Saul also reacts badly whenever guilt, wrong-doing or a poor decision is pointed out to him; for example, when David decides not to kill Saul, 'Saul lifted up his voice and wept' (24:16). Such a public outpouring of guilt and emotion is unusual in someone of such stature,[5] and may indicate Saul's more vulnerable emotional state.

This brief overview of Saul's mental state demonstrates the complexity of his character. This may be explained by the way the books of Samuel were written and edited. Many scholars have argued that there are multiple sources for these texts which were later synthesised into one narrative plot. These different sources will have competing aims, e.g. anti-monarchy versus pro-monarchy sources,[6] and pro-Davidic southern versus anti-Davidic northern sources.[7] Each source seeks to achieve its own identity-forming and theological aim by framing and interpreting events in specific ways. If Saul is a pawn in a writer's political or theological argument then he must be constructed accordingly. This may explain why Saul is portrayed in a positive light at some points in the text and as a weak, ineffectual leader at others.[8] However, whilst this explanation might satisfy a historian seeking to discover the 'real' Saul depicted in 1 Samuel it is highly problematic: not least because there is no agreement amongst scholars about what the various source-texts are and when they were compiled. Moreover, such dissection does violence to a text that has been read as a 'whole' for centuries. When assessing the significance of Saul's moods it is, therefore, more pertinent to work with the final text as it stands and leave textual debates for another day.

Taking 1 Samuel as it has been received by current readership, then, there are a growing number of theories as to why Saul acts and reacts as he does. The Bible is quite clear: God is immediately responsible. For when the spirit of God is with Saul he performs well and experiences moments of elevated mood. But when this spirit leaves him to be replaced by an evil spirit from God, Saul spirals downwards. God's spirit is what drives Saul either for good or bad.[9] Yet there could be more than one link in the

[5] Nissan and Shemesh, 'King Saul's "evil spirit"', 151.

[6] G. P. Williams & M. Le Roux, 'King Saul's mysterious malady' (2012) 68 *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 1.

[7] Humphreys, 'Rise and fall', 75.

[8] Ibid., 76.

[9] S. Nicholson, *Three Faces of Saul: An Intertextual Approach to Biblical Tragedy* (London, 2002), 91 and 108.

biblically-explained chain of causation. Saul is only anointed king because the Israelites demand one, which displeases God (8:4-9, 19-22). It might be interpreted, therefore, that God is seeking to punish Israel as a whole via Saul for their rejection of God. Or God might be reacting to Saul's disobedience to God's orders regarding a burnt-offering at Gilgal (13:8-15) and the destruction of Amalek (15:1-33).[10] Either way, the text shows that God is not acting arbitrarily but in response to events and decisions by other people. In other words, the blame does not necessarily lie just with God: it would appear that Saul and the Israelites should also bear some responsibility for their actions.[11]

If the biblical reason for Saul's mood changes is relatively straight-forward, the recent medical explanations are anything but. Biblical scholars and medical practitioners alike have mined the text for signs and symptoms that could pin-point the 'real' reason Saul acts as he does. Their conclusions can be loosely grouped into two sections: physiological and psychological. Interestingly it is only biblical scholars who propose diagnoses under the former category, with Robert Gordon giving the most detailed, and complicated, exposition, discussing the various ways in which the term *barsan* can be interpreted.[12] He links it with the Arabic word *birsam* which 'denotes a disease often associated with delirium'[13] and goes on to state that 'the nearest term in current medical terminology would be meningitis'.[14] Although this article is etymologically intriguing it is of very limited use when considering Saul's malady. It is focused very narrowly on just one episode in Saul's troubled life (19:18-24), and whilst delirium might be a helpful term to describe some of Saul's other signs and symptoms it sheds no further light on the cause. To suggest that Saul was ultimately suffering from meningitis makes little sense. He may have had some sort of brain inflammation during the particular episode Gordon is discussing but such diseases are usually fatal, even with twenty-first century medical technology. Even so, if Saul did survive one bout of meningitis it is still unclear what was happening throughout the rest of his reign. Another suggested diagnosis that limits itself to Saul's prophesying episodes is epilepsy.[15] This is more convincing than Gordon's suggestion due to its chronic,

[10] Esler, 'The madness of Saul', 236.
[11] Nicholson, *Three Faces*, 79 and 101.
[12] R. P. Gordon, 'Saul's meningitis according to Targum 1 Samuel XIX 24' (1987) 37 *Vetus Testamentum* 39-49.
[13] Ibid., 41.
[14] Ibid., 42.
[15] Williams and Le Roux, 'Mysterious malady', 2.

recurrent nature but also does little to explain Saul's wider condition. Of course, it is entirely possible that Saul was suffering from more than one illness and that epilepsy was but one of his conditions.

The vast majority of the literature, and all of the medical literature, focuses on psychological diagnoses. Three aspects of Saul's story make a psychological diagnosis more convincing. The first is that they encompass all the manifestations of Saul's malady in the text, not just specific examples. The second is that acute episodes tend to follow an external or environmental stimulus, such as the women's song after the slaying of Goliath (18:6-11) or the advancing Philistine army coupled with a silent God (28:3-23). The third is similar in that David's lyre playing has a positive effect on Saul (16:23). Whilst it is not impossible for external factors to have an impact on a purely physiological illness, they are more important in psychological ones. The specific diagnosis, however, is subject to more debate. The various options proffered are: general anxiety disorder (GAD), depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As only one manic or 'high' episode is required to shift a diagnosis of depression to one of bipolar disorder,[16] the narrative tends to reject depression as the sole disease affecting Saul. Subsequently, the recurrent episodes of paranoia and delusions leading to violent attacks potentially shifts the diagnosis towards schizophrenia.[17] GAD[18] and PTSD[19] have wide-ranging behavioural signs which could encompass most of what we are told about Saul, but the lack of evidence about his thought-processes make these difficult to pin-point with any accuracy. Given Saul's warrior status, the argument for PTSD is convincing, particularly as Saul does not appear to go into battle from the coming of God's evil spirit (16:14) until his final campaign against the Philistines, when 'he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly' (28:5).

Any medical diagnosis of Saul's behaviour is highly problematic, however, and perhaps even unethical.[20] As Esler highlights, there are 'difficulties inherent in an attempt to apply etic [contemporary Western] psychiatric perspectives to a narrative text from

[16] L. Ben-Noun, 'What was the mental disease that afflicted King Saul?' (2003) 2 *Clinical Case Studies* 276.

[17] Esler, 'The madness of Saul', 276-77.

[18] Ibid., 249-52.

[19] Williams and Le Roux, 'Mysterious malady', 2-3.

[20] C. C. H. Cook, 'Psychiatry in scripture: sacred texts and psychopathology' (2012) 36 *The Psychiatrist Online* 225-26.

another historical epoch'.[21] There is little explicit evidence of Saul's continuing signs and symptoms, particularly once the narrative shifts from Saul's initially successful reign to his cat-and-mouse pursuit of David. For example, whilst PTSD seems a compelling option because the narrative contains no indication of Saul repeating his earlier battle victories, this may be due to a change in the narrator's focus rather than Saul's morbidity. Moreover, an unsophisticated reading of only one English translation of the text could remove some of the nuance needed to make an accurate diagnosis. Esler, for example, asserts that Saul's episodes of 'prophesying' would be better translated as 'fell into a possession trance', which has implications for any putative diagnosis.[22] Moreover, no self-respecting doctor today would seek to diagnose someone on such scant information, particularly not with a psychological condition, which requires hours of exploration and testing. It may be that Saul was 'simply overwrought and terribly stressed', struggling with the pressures of being king;[23] after all, David's subsequent reign is not without tension and poor decisions. Any suggested diagnosis, therefore, can only be tentative at best for there is much potential for harm if labels are attached too readily to Saul.

Yet many people remain keen to diagnose Saul. For some this will come from a natural curiosity and a need to fill textual gaps: J. Cheryl Exum has termed this process 'naturalization'.[24] Whenever people read any text they inevitably imagine the story in a particular way and this visualisation, like film-making, requires assumptions to be made. Such assumptions can be unconscious and reflect the reader's socio-politico-cultural context and their pre-conceived understandings of the Bible.[25] For people who have suffered from, or know people who have suffered from, signs and symptoms similar to Saul's there will be a strong urge to identify with him.[26] Readers naturally want to connect with characters and every reading of a biblical story involves a process

[21] Esler, 'The madness of Saul', 243.

[22] Ibid., 229 and 249.

[23] Williams and Le Roux, 'Mysterious malady', 6.

[24] J. C. Exum, 'Michal at the movies' in M. D. Carroll R., D. J. A. Clines & P. R. Davies (eds.), *The Bible and Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson* (Sheffield, 1995), 273.

[25] B. Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel* (London, 2003), 466.

[26] This was certainly my experience: I initially diagnosed Saul with severe clinical depression because that was my diagnosis and I could see similarities in our respective conditions.

of re-writing and re-constructing the text.[27] Saul and his struggles, in particular his 'illness', provide some specific and emotive points of correlation to draw-in the reader, thereby enabling them to re-imagine, re-construct and re-tell the story in their own way.

Whichever way people diagnose or identify with Saul, there are consequences for the reading of this text. These will differ depending on whether someone reads 1 Samuel as a historical text, a piece of literature or as a sacred text. For centuries the Bible was read as it is presented: a history of the Hebrew people. This is particularly true of the historical narrative of the Hebrew Bible[28] of which 1 Samuel is a part. More recently, however, the historicity of the even the monarchy narratives has been questioned so that it is no longer possible to say with certainty that Saul is a 'real' historical figure who lead the Israelites as their first king.[29] Indeed, it may be that readers can learn more about the time the texts were written — along with the traditions that shaped the source community —rather than the period about which they were written. Ultimately, however, the Bible is 'a body of literature'[30] and so increasingly readers have applied all forms of literary criticism to it as a way of engaging anew with these ancient texts. Yet throughout its history, the Bible has been read first by Jews then Christians as a sacred text: as a means of God-inspired revelation about God and God's relationship with humankind. Some insist on a literal interpretation of the text, often in reaction to historical, literary or even scientific criticism. Many people of faith, however, engage to some degree with such criticism in a constructive manner to inform their own reading and understanding of often complicated, contradictory and challenging material.

Considering 1 Samuel as history first of all, the story of Saul illuminates the community's attitude and approach to changes in people's behaviour during that period, whichever period is assigned to the text. That it was Saul's servants who diagnosed him rather than his family is historically and culturally interesting, as is the proposed remedy of 'music therapy' (16:14-15): his 'symptoms…are noted and socially

[27] S. Tongue, *Between Biblical Criticism and Poetic Rewriting: Interpretative Struggles over Genesis 32:33-32* (Leiden, 2014), 159-65.
[28] This is known in the Christian tradition as the Old Testament.
[29] Coggins, *Old Testament*, 30-32.
[30] Ibid., 113.

interpreted' but he is otherwise allowed to 'continue as king'.[31] This also says something about the growing understanding of the king's role and people's attitudes towards Saul himself. That his servants were willing to help and support him, rather than depose him in favour of another, 'stronger' man, is important, particularly during this period of transition to kingship. The text also provides insight into how people perceived and understood God's role in the world. For example, there is no suggestion of dualism in this text: bad things come from God rather than a satanic figure.[32] God also appears to be mutable: God gives in to Israelite demands for a king (8:22) and regrets anointing Saul (15:10-11). Additionally there was a belief 'that all goods…exist only in finite quantities', hence God's positive spirit could not be with both Saul and David at the same time.[33] Such cultural beliefs could impact on how people worshipped and interacted with God, which not only enables a richer understanding of religious practice in that period but also helps date the text.

If 1 Samuel is read as a piece of literature, the previous discussions around historical information help establish the setting for the work but Saul's characterisation adds further areas for debate. 'The rise and fall of King Saul' is considered to be 'the clearest example of biblical tragedy'.[34] Such an allocation of genre then leads to a discussion about the role of Saul's character flaws versus God's role as the harbinger of fate.[35] This very much positions Saul in relation to the other characters and probes his role in this particular narrative. He could be the man who transitions Israel from judge-rule to kingship, a scapegoat for God's anger at being rejected, or a comparison to promote David as *the* king for Israel.[36] Exum suggests that shifting the narrative focus from Saul's downfall to 'David's rise to power' gives an 'alternative to the tragic perspective'.[37] However, it is more likely that David's role in Saul's malady only adds to the tragedy, for it is deeply ironic that the only person who can improve Saul's health is the very person who causes him most angst. It may also be the case that Saul's personal 'failure' fits into the wider early narrative of the Hebrew Bible. Particularly in Genesis, the preference for the second-born is clear: e.g. Abel over Cain (Gen 4:1-5),

[31] Esler, 'The madness of Saul', 246.
[32] Nicholson, *Three Faces*, 108-9.
[33] Esler, 'The madness of Saul', 222 and 237.
[34] Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 16.
[35] D. M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (Sheffield, 1980), chapter one and Nicholson, *Three Faces*, chapter two.
[36] Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 35.
[37] Ibid., 20.

Isaac over Ishmael (Gen 21:8-14) and Jacob over Esau (Gen 27). Even David is the youngest of his brothers (16:11-13). It may be, therefore, that the preference for the underdog in the Hebraic narrative meant that Saul could never be allowed to prosper as king—that had to be left for his successor.

Saul's changing moods and behaviour provide interesting points of departure for academic debate but are unlikely to have a dramatic impact on the way historians, literary critics or doctors live their lives. This is less true of those who read 1 Samuel as sacred. For people of faith, how they construct and interpret any given text could have a profound impact on their lives, and 1 Samuel raises some serious questions. It probes theological doctrine generally: is God a changeable deity prone to petty jealousy and vengeful behaviour?[38] Answers to such questions may determine how and why people pray or how they expect God to respond to their decisions and actions. Moreover, the debate around the source of evil and suffering in the world concerns not just people of faith but also those considering whether to join or leave a particular religious organisation.[39] Is it possible to worship a God who sends an evil spirit to torment the very person God chose to be king or who ignores someone's desperate pleas for help (e.g. 14:37 and 28:6)? For many people the answer is 'no' and this has implications for how they choose to interact (or not) with God/religious groups.[40]

More specifically, however, Saul's experiences in 1 Samuel speak directly to those who are facing hardship of some kind, particularly those living with a mental health diagnosis. Such engagement is only given further credence by the growing body of medical literature that seeks to 'diagnose' Saul. There is a very real danger that medical diagnoses become popularly linked with the biblical explanation of Saul's mood-changes: suffering is caused by God's rejection which, in turn, is a result of human sin. This is highly problematic as conflating mental illness with punishment from God indiscriminately labels those who already face substantial public prejudice. Instead of becoming a source of help and support, the synagogue and church risk being places of ostracisation, ridicule and fear. This may 'discourage people who might benefit from

[38] Nicholson, *Three Faces*, 106-7.

[39] Ibid., 107-10.

[40] A recent interview with Stephen Fry is a powerful case in point: 'Stephen Fry on God' in The Meaning of Life with Gay Byrne, *RTÉ Commercial Enterprises Limited*, broadcast in the Republic of Ireland on Sunday 1 February 2015 at 22:30. Available: <http://www.you tube.com/watch?v=-suvkwNYSQo>.

psychiatric help from seeking it' as they encouraged by others to work out how they could have incurred God's displeasure.[41] The remedy becomes repentance and prayer rather than medication and psychological treatment. This is not to suggest that prayer is not a powerful tool for many, rather that such advice from the faithful does not follow a diagnosis of cancer quite as frequently as it does a diagnosis of mental illness. Then, when prayer does not seem to work, individuals can start questioning themselves, questioning their faith and questioning God. As such, searching for the 'right' or 'ideal' interpretation of Saul's life is more than just an interesting academic endeavour: it can be life-changing.

Saul is a pivotal character in the biblical narrative. As the first king of Israel he represents the transition between heavenly and earthly kingship. His tragic characterisation sets the scene for the Davidic dynasty from which the Messiah will come and the portrayal of Saul's mood is instrumental in this. The significance of the changes in his mood varies depending on how the Bible is read. Whilst it is academically interesting to note how Saul's behaviour is construed by others or drives the plot, such implications will have little impact on the life of the reader. The same may be true of those who read it as scripture. But for people of Jewish or Christian faith who are facing hardship, illness or a mental health diagnosis the significance could be profound. It will speak to the heart of their experiences, their understanding of God, the relationship between God and suffering, and their own culpability in suffering. Such an outcome requires everyone engaged in biblical interpretation to read responsibly and critically engage with the implications of their respective readings. A wider recognition that there is not, and cannot be, one correct or 'ideal' construction of the Bible will enable healthier religious practice, more fruitful interfaith dialogue and a safe space for people of faith to explore their own relationship with God within a tradition that respects particularity.

[41] Cook, 'Psychiatry in scripture', 228.

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