

The Rise and Fall of God's Chosen King: A Narrative-Theological Study of Saul in 1 Samuel 9–15

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Abstract

This study analyzes the ascent and decline of Saul in 1 Samuel 9–15 using a narrative-theological framework, emphasizing the transmission of theological significance through narrative rather than through abstract doctrinal expression. By closely looking at how the plot develops, how characters are developed, how dialogue is used, how repetition is used, how irony is used, how narrative time is used, and how the narrator evaluates the story, the study claims that the Saul story is a consistent theological picture of monarchy under divine sovereignty. The results show that Saul's monarchy starts with real divine choice, Spirit enablement, and narrative expectation. This goes against ideas that he was an illegitimate or only temporary ruler. The story also shows a pattern of disobedience caused by fear, confusion about roles, and self-justifying religiosity that eventually hurts Saul's calling. Saul's rejection does not stem from individual failures; rather, it is the climax of a continuous narrative trajectory wherein obedience, trust, and surrender to prophetic authority are supplanted by autonomous leadership. The study concludes that the Saul cycle serves as a foundational narrative theology of kingship, defining obedience to the word of YHWH as the essential criterion for legitimate leadership in Israel and providing lasting theological insight into the interplay between divine election and human responsibility.

Keywords: *Saul; narrative theology; kingship; obedience; divine election; fear; leadership; 1 Samuel*

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INTRODUCTION

The establishment of a monarchy signifies a pivotal transformation in Israel's ancient history, indicating a move from a theocracy to a royal institution (Gossweiler, 2019, 3; Putra, 2021: 1). This transition is most comprehensively depicted in 1 Samuel, whereby the character of Saul plays a crucial and illustrative role (Dietrich, 2020: 2). Saul, as Israel's inaugural king, serves not only as a historical forerunner to David but also as a theological framework for articulating the nature, obligations, and constraints of monarchy in Israel (Ellison, 2023: 94–96; Levinson, 2001: 518–520). The tale of Saul (1 Sam 9–15) serves as the initial test case for monarchy under divine rule, setting the standards by which future kings are assessed. Saul's importance in the story of Israel's monarchy is clear in both its breadth and its focus. A significant amount of 1 Samuel is dedicated to his ascent, kingship, and subsequent rejection, indicative of deliberate narrative construction rather than mere historical documentation (Desnitsky, 2020: 22–24; Davis, 2019: 141–143). The text meticulously delineates Saul's transition from obscurity to public authority, consistently emphasizing divine intervention at critical junctures:

his prior revelation to Samuel, his anointing, and his initial military triumphs through divine empowerment (Priede, 2017: 118–120; Ming, 2022: 2–4; Chia, 2024: 1). This persistent narrative emphasis suggests that Israel's monarchy arises not alone from sociopolitical need but from divine concession and direction within the covenantal context.

There is a really interesting paradox at the heart of Saul's story. Saul is depicted both as a monarch appointed by YHWH and as one repudiated by YHWH (Tsumura, 2007: 312). His election is clearly divine: he is chosen through prophetic revelation, anointed by Samuel, and publicly confirmed by holy lot (1 Sam 9–10). These actions confirm Saul's legitimacy not only as a political leader but also as YHWH's designated ruler (Israel, 2008: 274). Early depictions stress humility, moderation, and effectiveness, which leads to national deliverance and community unification (Alter, 2011: 56). These portrayals oppose interpretations that portray Saul as an intrinsically flawed or illegitimate king from the outset. But the story keeps moving toward rejection. Saul's decline is neither sudden nor random; it progresses through a recognizable pattern of dread, selective compliance, and self-justifying religiosity (Brockman, 2018: 67). His actions at Gilgal (1 Sam 13) and during the Amalek campaign (1 Sam 15) are not seen as isolated mistakes, but rather as moments that show a deep misunderstanding of what it means to be a king under God's power (Sýkora, 2024: 205). Samuel's declaration elucidates that Saul's rejection arises from his unwillingness to fully adhere to the word of YHWH, thereby reconstituting kingship as independent rather than responsible (Brueggemann, 1990: 113). The narrative asserts that divine election does not invalidate covenantal accountability, nor does ritual performance replace obedience. This dual representation of Saul has incited ongoing scholarly discourse, especially over the interpretive lens through which the Samuel narratives need to be analyzed. Political-historical and source-critical methodologies sometimes construe Saul's unfavorable portrayal as a manifestation of pro-Davidic ideology, influenced by retrospective editing agendas designed to legitimize the Davidic dynasty (Polzin, 1993: 34; Na'aman, 1992: 646). From this standpoint, Saul's rejection serves mostly as a political rationale rather than a theological assessment.

In contrast, literary and theological perspectives argue that these interpretations inadequately address the text's coherence, narrative complexity, and theological purpose as it exists (McDonald, 2017: 142). These methodologies underscore that the Saul tale conveys theological significance through storytelling, utilizing characterization, repetition, irony, and evaluative narration to express a theology of kingship that surpasses dynastic issues (Israel, 2008: 281). In this interpretation, Saul's failure is attributed to the internal logic of the tale rather than to external ideological influence. The enduring nature of these disparate interpretations reveals a fundamental interpretive dilemma. Saul's rejection is often analyzed as a sequence of isolated acts of disobedience—especially at Gilgal and during the Amalek incident—without sufficient consideration of the narrative development that culminates in these pivotal events (Sýkora, 2024: 199). Such fragmented readings hide the theological coherence of the narrative, as Saul's collapse represents the climax of a developing pattern characterized by dread, insecurity, and resistance to prophetic influence (Nicholson, 2015: 102). Additionally, the theological tension between Saul's obvious divine election and his

definitive rejection is frequently presumed rather than meticulously illustrated within the narrative framework itself.

Even though many scholars have looked into how monarchy came to be in ancient Israel, Saul is still one of the most debated figures in Old Testament interpretation. Saul is a key and programmatic figure in 1 Samuel 9–15, however interpretations of his reign vary significantly in both methodology and outcome. Historical-critical and political interpretations often characterize Saul as a failed ruler, with his unfavorable portrayal functioning to legitimize the Davidic dynasty through retrospective ideological construction. Conversely, literary and theological perspectives underscore the narrative coherence and theological intentionality of the Saul tales, interpreting them as a continuous contemplation on monarchy under divine authority rather than as dynastic propaganda. This analytical schism has led to markedly divergent evaluations of Saul's importance in Israel's theological history.

A significant issue arising from this division is the propensity to view Saul's failure as a sequence of discrete acts of disobedience—especially the occurrences at Gilgal (1 Sam 13) and the Amalek campaign (1 Sam 15)—while neglecting the narrative development that culminates in these events. Such fragmentary readings distort the overall theological narrative presented by the narrator, in which Saul's rejection emerges as the conclusion of a developing pattern marked by fear, insecurity, and opposition to prophetic authority. Furthermore, the theological tension between Saul's clear divine election and his definitive rejection is frequently presumed rather than exegetically substantiated. Saul is selected, consecrated, endowed with the Spirit, and publicly validated, yet simultaneously repudiated within the same narrative context. The theological rationale underlying this paradox necessitates a more thorough analysis via a reading that facilitates theology to arise from story structure, characterization, and assessment, rather than from external reconstructions.

The importance of this research is that it adds to Old Testament narrative theology by showing Saul not just as a bad king, but as a figure who teaches us something about theology. His narrative delineates the parameters of rightful leadership in Israel and establishes the theological foundation for David's ascendance, while preserving the authenticity of Saul's divine vocation. In this way, the story of Saul gives us lasting insight into how divine choice, human responsibility, and the catastrophic results of leadership that is not based on loyal devotion to YHWH work together.

Consequently, this study confines its analysis to 1 Samuel 9–15, regarding this section as a unified narrative that delineates the theological underpinnings of Israelite kingship before David's ascension. The research utilizes a narrative-theological methodology, emphasizing plot development, characterization, dialogue, repetition, irony, narrative temporality, and narrator assessment as fundamental conduits of theological significance. The Hebrew Masoretic Text constitutes the textual foundation, accompanied by targeted lexical analysis where narratively pertinent. This work intentionally refrains from source-critical reconstruction, redactional analysis, or historical harmonization beyond the need for narrative clarity, nor does it engage in a comprehensive comparison between Saul and David. By restricting the study in this manner, the paper aims to provide

a concentrated and cohesive narrative-theological analysis of Saul's ascent and decline that significantly enhances current dialogues regarding kingship, leadership, and divine authority in Old Testament theology.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a narrative-theological framework to understand 1 Samuel 9–15, emphasizing the conveyance of theological meaning through the narrative structure of the text, rather than through critical analysis of its sources or historical progression. Narrative theology, as utilized in this work, aims to identify theology as it arises from the narrative itself—through the organization of events, the depiction of characters, and the evaluative viewpoint of the narrator—rather than through abstract doctrinal assertions. This article eschews historical criticism, source criticism, and redaction criticism, opting instead to examine the text in its ultimate canonical form as a cohesive theological narrative. The methodological study focuses on essential narrative elements, such as plot progression, character development, dialogue, repetition, irony, narrative temporality, and narrator assessment. Plot analysis follows the story from Saul's heavenly choice to his eventual rejection, paying attention to the narrative tension and turning moments that affect how people understand theology. Characterization looks at how Saul is shown more and more through his actions, words, and differences with other characters, especially Samuel and Jonathan. Dialogue is examined as a primary medium for theological revelation, particularly in prophetic discourse and royal self-justification. Repetition and irony are examined as narrative techniques that influence reader interpretation, while an emphasis on narrative temporality underscores the pacing, pauses, and emphases that indicate religious importance. Throughout the study, narrative evaluation—whether explicit or implicit—functions as a significant predictor of the narrator's religious perspective on kingship, obedience, and divine power.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Rise of Saul

The story of Saul's introduction is interesting because it focuses on how he looks on the outside. Saul is depicted as a man of distinguished pedigree, remarkable physical presence, and extraordinary stature, standing out among the people (1 Sam 9:1–2). From a narrative-theological standpoint, this description serves not just as biographical information but also as a deliberate narrative prompt that encourages assessment. The narrator emphasizes Saul's external qualifications for kingship, linking him with prevailing expectations of royal leadership in the ancient Near Eastern context (Alter, 2011: 45). This focus on physical stature also adds a subtle layer of irony, since later events in the story will show that Saul's outer look and his inner disposition are becoming less and less similar.

At this early stage, narrative irony becomes an important theological tool. The narrator doesn't say anything about Saul's spiritual insight or theological depth, even if he seems perfect by human standards. This stillness gets the reader ready for a story that will be full of conflict between visible qualification and covenantal duty. Fokkelman notes that the Saul story intentionally doesn't give an evaluative judgment at the beginning. Instead, it lets meaning develop gradually via action and

response rather than through direct commentary (Fokkelman, 1986: 105). The story makes it clear right away that Saul's rise to power as king was not due to human ambition but to supernatural intervention. Before Saul meets Samuel, YHWH tells the prophet who Saul is and what his job is. He says that Saul is the one selected to lead Israel and protect the people from their enemies (1 Sam 9:15–17). This expanded revelation definitively positions Saul's monarchy as an expression of divine sovereignty rather than political opportunism.

From a narrative-theological perspective, the mystery surrounding Saul's selection is crucial. Saul is still looking for missing donkeys, which is a rather ordinary duty that is very different from the divine purpose that is happening behind the scenes. This story juxtaposition emphasizes a fundamental theological concept: divine election frequently functions beneath commonplace human endeavors, without of human calculation or self-aggrandizement (Gordon, 1986: 88). The reader, endowed with privileged knowledge via the narrator, is encouraged to perceive Saul's ascent as an element of a divine design that surpasses present conditions.

Samuel's anointing of Saul is a key occasion in the story from a religious point of view. Anointing means that God has given Saul the right to be king, and it shows that Saul's rule is based on God's choosing, not public support. Samuel's attendant signs, culminating in Saul's participation in prophetic ecstasy, further validate his divine calling (Carlson, 2021: 115). The change that happened to Saul by the Spirit of God is very important for narrative theology. The scripture says that God "changed his heart" and that the Spirit came upon him with great power, which allowed him to prophesy among the prophets. This event reveals that Saul's reign commences not solely with institutional legitimacy but with heavenly empowerment (Klein, 2012: 98). The narrator sets up a theological expectation by saying that Saul's rule will only be successful if he stays close to YHWH and is open to divine initiative.

The story also hints at possible confusion at the same time. Saul's prophetic experience is evident externally and transient, prompting inquiries over the permanence of this transformation. The narrator does not guarantee the continuation of this Spirit-empowered condition, so preserving narrative tension concerning Saul's future fidelity. The throwing of lots makes Saul king in front of everyone. This shows that God chose him, not people. When Saul is picked, he is hidden amid the luggage, which has led to many interpretations. From a narrative-theological standpoint, this gesture can be seen as a manifestation of humility or insecurity, both of which influence the reader's initial evaluation of Saul's character.

Importantly, the narrator does not judge right away. Saul's quiet in the face of opposition, on the other hand, makes the positive early picture even stronger. People who don't like Saul are disregarded, and his self-control is shown to be a good example of leadership at this point in the story. The lack of direct criticism from the narrator keeps the story's positive tone, which makes the reader more likely to see Saul's beginnings with cautious optimism (Fokkelman, 1986: 108; Exum, 2010: 82). The peak of Saul's rise happens in 1 Samuel 11, when he leads Israel to victory against the Ammonites at Jabesh-gilead. The story makes it clear that Saul's determined move was caused by the Spirit of God, who came upon him with power and inspired him to be a good leader (1 Sam 11:6). This part of the story marks the

high moment of Saul's reign as king, when divine choice, Spirit empowerment, and national unity come together.

Saul's reaction to winning strengthens a positive theological view even more. Instead of getting back at his detractors, Saul gives credit to YHWH for the deliverance and asks for a new beginning for the community of Gilgal (1 Sam 11:12–15). This moment sets up the perfect example of a monarch, one who is humble, relies on God, and respects God's might (Klein, 2012: 102). In terms of the story, chapter 11 finishes Saul's ascension and meets the expectations set in prior episodes. The reader feels real hope, which makes Saul's later failings even more heartbreaking. The passage asserts that Saul's kingdom commences favorably—not merely due to human competence, but because of divinely ordained selection appropriately acknowledged and executed.

The Turning Point

After the story's high point, when Saul leads with the power of the Spirit in 1 Samuel 11, chapter 13 marks a big change in the tone and direction of the story (Sýkora, 2024: 202). The first few lines set the stage for Saul's reign by showing that there was a military threat, especially from the Philistines, who were better at technology and had better positions, which made the situation seem even worse. The narrator deliberately builds tension by focusing on how weak Israel is, how scared the people are, and how Saul's troops are slowly spreading out (1 Sam 13:6–7). The story time slows down a lot, giving the reader time to think about the growing stress on Saul and the weak morale of the people. Fear becomes a major theme in the story. People run away, hide, and disperse, while Saul stays at Gilgal, waiting for Samuel. The repeated use of fear-related images serves as a theological signal, getting the reader ready to see Saul's next actions not just as practical choices, but as choices made out of fear instead of confidence in YHWH (Brueggemann, 1990: 94). This backdrop sets the stage for Saul's leadership to be put to the test. It changes the focus of the story from heavenly empowerment to obedience to the covenant under pressure.

The story's turning point happens when Saul, after waiting seven days as told, offers the burnt offering himself while Samuel is away. The narrator's pace is intentional and ironic: Samuel shows up right after Saul finishes the sacrifice, which makes it seem even more like Saul's failure is not just about timing, but also about his inability to follow God's instructions all the way through (Sýkora, 2024: 205). Narrative irony is strong here and has a lot of theological meaning. It shows that Saul's impatience was the cause of his disobedience. From a narrative-theological standpoint, waiting constitutes an act of faith. Saul's inability to wait indicates a more profound lack of trust and authority (Briody, 2016: 82). The narrative does not depict Saul's behavior as a misinterpretation of ceremonial process; rather, it portrays it as a deliberate choice driven by the fear of losing control over the populace and the circumstances. The failure of waiting thus emerges as the initial clear indication that Saul's reign is commencing to function autonomously from prophetic intercession and divine authority. Saul's justification of his actions exposes the religious essence of the incident. Saul gives three reasons for his actions in his conversation with Samuel: the people are scattered, Samuel is late, and the Philistines are about to attack. These arguments reveal a leadership rationale predicated on expediency rather than compliance (Tsumura, 2007: 392). Saul says

that he "forced himself" to make the sacrifice (1 Sam 13:12) because he thought it was essential and even spiritually accountable.

This dialogue is very important for character development in terms of the story. Saul does not disavow the conduct; rather, he reinterprets disobedience as faithful initiative. This rhetorical shift shows that roles are becoming less clear: Saul takes on the position of priest while downplaying the function of prophet. The implicit but clear narrative appraisal shows that Saul has started to change the meaning of kingship from delegated authority under YHWH to independent leadership (Klein, 2012: 135). This confusion of roles is a theological rupture because the word of God spoken through the prophet is clearly more important than monarchy in Israel. Samuel's remark is one of the clearest narrative judgments in the Saul cycle. He says that Saul's actions are unwise and that his dominion would not last. It is important to note that the conclusion is based on theology rather than politics (Briody, 2016: 89). Saul's failure is characterized not by military incompetence or administrative frailty, but by a transgression of YHWH's order. The mention of a future ruler "after [God's] own heart" adds a new narrative aspect that changes what the reader expects (Sýkora, 2024: 208). In actuality, Saul is still king, but theologically, he has already been rejected. Narrative time functions on two levels: Saul's reign persists historically, while his legitimacy has been irreparably compromised (Israel, 2008: 282). This conflict between present function and future displacement heightens the tragic aspect of Saul's narrative.

1 Samuel 13 marks the point of no return in Saul's rise and fall. This chapter starts the theological break that will define Saul's kingdom from now on. In succeeding episodes, Saul's rejection is reinforced and confirmed. The episode shows that Saul's main shortcoming isn't just one ceremonial violation, but a way of leading that is based on fear, impatience, and self-authorization. From a narrative-theological perspective, the chapter delineates a fundamental tenet of Israelite kingship: obedience precedes success, and reliance on YHWH transcends strategic calculation (Tsumura, 2007: 398). Saul's choice to behave "religiously" without following orders reveals a theology of control that is the opposite of covenantal dependence. The story changes the way we think about kingship from being about handling crises to being about being obedient to God's authority, even—and especially—when things are unclear.

Progressive Decline

Chapter 14 presents a notable narrative dichotomy that hastens Saul's religious deterioration. The narrator compares Saul's leadership, which is becoming more passive and fearful, to Jonathan's brave, faith-driven effort (Israel, 2008: 285). Jonathan's attack on the Philistine garrison without the king's permission but because he trusted YHWH is similar to how Saul led with the Spirit in chapter 11. This contrast operates narratively to highlight Saul's transformation: the king who previously acted forcefully under supernatural empowerment now hesitates, consults ceremonial procedures unduly, and delivers foolish directives.

Jonathan's theology of faith—"nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few" (1 Sam 14:6)—implicitly critiques Saul's leadership. The story doesn't need to say anything bad about anyone; the difference itself tells the reader what to think (Tsumura, 2007: 412). Saul's oath, which weakens the troops and

nearly results in Jonathan's death, reveals a shift from Spirit-led leadership to rule by coercive religiosity. The irony is strong: Saul's attempt to maintain religious authority works against the same deliverance that God is bringing about. The narrative appraisal achieves a delicate climax when Saul, failing to distinguish divine silence, abandons investigation and moves forward militarily. The king, who used to rely on prophetic mediation, now sees divine counsel as unnecessary (Israel, 2008: 288). This episode signifies a further deterioration of Saul's theological stance, as religious formalism gradually supplants obedient faith.

Chapter 15 is the most important theological test of Saul's kingdom. Samuel gives Saul a clear and direct order from God: he must destroy all of Amalek (hērem), leaving nothing behind (Brockman, 2018: 72). The clarity of the command in the story makes it clear what God expects. Saul cannot reasonably assert uncertainty or insufficient guidance, in contrast to previous incidents (Gilmour, 2019: 192). At first, Saul seems to be following orders, but the narrator quickly shows that this isn't true. The decision to spare King Agag and the best of the livestock is presented as a form of selective obedience motivated by practical and reputational considerations (Zimran, 2014: 8). The use of evaluative terminology like "what was good" and "what was despised" shows that Saul's standard for judging changed from heavenly mandate to human judgment. This story detail makes an important theological point: when God tells you to do something, only doing half of it is the same as not doing it at all.

The conversation between Saul and Samuel in 1 Samuel 15:10–21 is one of the most important parts of the story that shows how Saul's character changes. Saul greets Samuel with a declaration of obedience—"I have carried out the command of the LORD"—a statement immediately undermined by the audible evidence of disobedience (Zimran, 2014: 11). Narrative irony is used again to show how Saul's remarks don't match up with reality. Saul's defense tactic is really smart in terms of language. He redirects culpability to the populace, reinterprets disobedience as altruistic desire, and invokes religious motive (Frisch, 1996: 363). This tendency of self-justification signifies a major theological decline. Saul no longer merely disobeys; he now endeavors to redefine obedience itself (Gilmour, 2019: 171). The story shows a ruler who has learnt how to speak religiously but has lost his promise.

Samuel's prophetic response is the theological apex of the Saul narrative. His statement, "to obey is better than sacrifice," serves as an authoritative interpretive key for the entire story (Briody, 2016: 108). The statement does not outright deny ceremony, but it does make it clear that compliance is more important. Rebellion is associated with divination, and hubris with idolatry, illustrating the profundity of Saul's theological failure. This statement makes clear what the story has been trying to show all along: Saul's problem isn't just disobeying orders now and then; it's a complete change in how he views authority (Zimran, 2014: 14). Saul has replaced the word of YHWH as the main rule of kingship by linking religious performance with faithfulness. This moment resolves the narrative tension introduced in chapter 13 and verifies the verdict already announced.

Saul's confession that he feared the people more than God offers the most explicit insight into his inner disposition (Frisch, 1996: 365). Fear, which has been a repeated theme in the story, is now openly accepted as the reason behind his choices as a leader. Even in his confession, Saul's major concern is still public

honor, not restoring the bond. The ripping of Samuel's garment and its symbolic meaning show that Saul's rejection is definitive in the story. The physical act represents a theological judgment: the kingdom is taken from Saul and handed to someone else (Briody, 2016: 115). The narrator stresses that this decision cannot be changed, and that divine rejection is not a sudden decision but the result of long-term disobedience. The chapter ends with a sad story: Samuel never sees Saul again, and YHWH wishes he had not made Saul king. This heavenly sorrow shapes the story not as a matter of political expedience but as tragic theology (Gilmour, 2019: 176). Saul's story ends not in mockery but in sadness, which shows how severe it is to break a bond under divine election. In terms of the story, 1 Samuel 14–15 shows how Saul went from being a potential leader to a king who was turned down. The fall is gradual, characterized by heightened self-reliance, the misuse of religious terminology, and the usurpation of divine power (Israel, 2008: 293). The tale posits that kingship under YHWH necessitates not perfection but enduring obedience founded in trust. Saul's tragedy consists in his endeavor to maintain heavenly favor by religious performance while opposing divine mandate (Zimran, 2014: 18). The story gives us a serious view of leadership: God chooses leaders, but obedience keeps them in their jobs (Tsumura, 2007: 445). Saul's ascent and decline serve as a prototypical cautionary tale, presented in story form, that readies the audience for an alternative conception of kingship while affirming the authenticity of Saul's true vocation.

Narrative Theology

1. Divine Election and Human Responsibility

The story of Saul shows that divine election is both a kind act and a hard job. Saul's kingdom is firmly established from the beginning in divine selection rather than human aspiration or political strategy (Tsumura, 2007: 312). His anointing, enablement by the Spirit, and early success show that YHWH really summoned and sent Saul. The story does not support any reading that sees Saul as a temporary or illegitimate leader who is sure to fail. The narrative continually asserts that divine election does not function independently of human accountability. Saul's rejection illustrates that election creates a connection rather than conferring entitlement (Briody, 2016: 76). In terms of theology, kingship in Israel is not seen as an unconditional gift but as a covenantal position that is kept via obedience. Saul's failure is not due to an erroneous choose, but rather his unwillingness to adhere to the relational obligations inherent in that choice (Baker, 2025: 58). The story thus conveys a dynamic theology of election, wherein divine calling necessitates continual attention to the voice of YHWH.

2. Fear as the Root of Disobedience

Fear serves as a cohesive theme throughout Saul's narrative arc and is identified as a key theological explanation for his failure (Frisch, 1996: 362). From the Gilgal crisis to the Amalek campaign, Saul's choices are always influenced by anxiety—fear of military danger, fear of losing public support, and finally, fear of the people instead of fear of God. The story makes this clear when Saul says, "I was afraid of the people and did what they said" (1 Sam 15:24). Narrative theology here sees fear as more than just an emotion; it sees it as a competing authority (Gilmour, 2023: 192). Saul's terror redirects his allegiance from YHWH to popular approbation and pragmatic survival. This transference of terror represents the

theological essence of Saul's insubordination (Frisch, 1996: 368). The story shows that obedience is a sign of trust, whereas disobedience is a sign of misguided fear.

3. Obedience as Relational Fidelity Rather Than Ritual Performance

One of the most important theological points of the Saul story is that it changes the meaning of obedience. The text delineates between relationship fidelity to YHWH and simply ceremonial obedience through recurrent narrative contrasts (Tsumura, 2007: 435). Saul's growing dependence on sacrifices, vows, and religious language signifies a transition from obedience as covenantal responsiveness to obedience as performative religiosity. Samuel's assertion that "to obey is better than sacrifice" serves as the theological fulcrum of the narrative, elucidating that ritualistic actions devoid of obedience do not embody loyalty (Briody, 2016: 108). The tale does not repudiate cultic practice; rather, it unequivocally reduces it to the word of YHWH. Saul's tragedy consists in his endeavor to obtain divine favor through religious practices while simultaneously defying divine order (Zimran, 2014: 12). In narrative-theological discourse, obedience is depicted not as a religious act but as continuous vigilance towards divine power.

4. Kingship Under Prophetic Authority

A defining feature of the Saul cycle is its consistent subordination of kingship to prophetic mediation (Zimran, 2014: 8). From Saul's initial anointing to his final rejection, the prophet Samuel functions as the authoritative bearer of YHWH's word. Saul's gradual marginalization of prophetic authority—first through impatience, then through reinterpretation, and finally through symbolic rupture—signals a theological breach rather than a procedural error. The narrative thus establishes a clear theological hierarchy: kingship in Israel operates under, not alongside, the divine word mediated through the prophet. Saul's assumption of religious authority represents a rejection of this order, redefining kingship as autonomous leadership (Baker, 2025: 62). By contrast, the narrative implicitly prepares the reader for a different model of kingship, one characterized by submission to prophetic instruction rather than control over religious practice.

5. Saul as a Theological Paradigm of Failed Kingship

The Saul narrative serves as a theological model rather than a mere historical record (Humphreys, 1978: 22). Saul's ascent and decline set the standards by which all future kings are judged. His narrative delineates the parameters of legitimate leadership under YHWH: divine calling must be upheld by obedience, fear must be oriented towards God rather than humanity, and authority must remain answerable to the divine word. The story does not show Saul as a bad guy, but as a tragic figure (Humphreys, 1978: 25). Divine sorrow over Saul's rejection contextualizes the narrative in terms of loss rather than victory (Gilmour, 2023: 198). Theologically, Saul's failure is neither predetermined but conditional, underscoring the gravity of covenantal obligation within the framework of divine election. His narrative is a warning against leaders who put control, looks, and approval ahead of true obedience.

6. Theological Contribution of the Saul Narrative

In the larger setting of 1 Samuel, the Saul cycle is the theological basis for later royal stories (Israel, 2008: 290). Prior to David's ascension, the narrative delineates the nature of monarchy, so influencing anticipations regarding its ideal

characteristics. Saul's narrative illustrates that leadership failure in Israel is mostly theological rather than political. This narrative-theological interpretation asserts that the Saul tale conveys lasting theological understanding through narrative rather than abstraction (Nicholson, 2002: 165). By integrating theology into narrative development, characterization, and evaluative commentary, the novel encourages readers to engage reflectively with the concepts of authority, obedience, and divine sovereignty (Humphreys, 1978: 27). Saul's ascent and decline serve as a cautionary tale and theological lesson for all types of leadership undertaken under divine mandate.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the ascension and decline of Saul in 1 Samuel 9–15 through a narrative-theological perspective, emphasizing the conveyance of theology via plot progression, character development, dialogue, repetition, irony, narrative temporality, and narrator assessment. The analysis has shown that the story of Saul is not just a bunch of failures that don't make sense together; it's a clear theological story about kingship under God's control. The results show that God clearly helped Saul ascend to power. His election, anointing, empowerment by the Spirit, and early military victory show that he is a true king who has been chosen and given power. Narrative anticipation is intentionally crafted to depict Saul as a potential leader whose reign commences in accordance with divine intention. This favorable depiction counters theories that regard Saul as only a temporary or intrinsically defective sovereign. The study also shows that Saul's collapse happens slowly over time, not all at once. The pivotal moment in 1 Samuel 13 reveals dread, impatience, and role uncertainty as essential theological deficiencies, while the following events in chapters 14 and 15 reinforce and exacerbate this trend. Saul's limited compliance, misapplication of religious terminology, and continual self-justification indicate a transition from covenantal trust to independent leadership. His rejection, thus, represents the culmination of a prolonged narrative arc rather than a consequence for discrete actions. Theologically, the narrative presents a conception of kingship founded on obedience, faith, and surrender to divine authority as conveyed through prophetic discourse. Fear of the people takes the place of fear of YHWH, ritual performance takes the place of faithfulness in relationships, and kingship changes from delegated authority to self-directed rule. These narrative dynamics jointly portray Saul as a tragic archetype of failed monarchy rather than merely an antagonist in Israel's history.

This narrative-theological analysis contends that the Saul cycle in 1 Samuel 9–15 serves as a fundamental theological examination of leadership within the context of divine authority. Saul's narrative shows that being chosen by God starts a vocation, but it doesn't mean that it will last without obedience. The myth depicts kingship as being upheld not by looks, charisma, or religious performance, but by steadfast adherence to the word of YHWH. This analysis has underscored the biblical narrator's intention to educate through narrative by permitting theology to arise from narrative form rather than from abstract formulation. Saul's rise and demise elucidate the transition to Davidic royalty and delineate the theological parameters of rightful leadership in Israel. His grief is not solely in rejection, but in the forfeiture of a really granted calling. The story of Saul gives us lasting

theological insight in this way. It warns against leaders who are driven by fear and self-preservation, questions religious activity that isn't based on obedience, and says that anybody in power under God is always accountable to God's word. The Saul cycle is a story-based theology of kingship that is still relevant today. It makes readers think about what it means to be called, to obey, and to be responsible in all types of leadership that are done in front of God.

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