

TITLE

The Relationship between Sawl

and Samuel w/ Specific Emphasis on

Don Isaac ben Judah Abravanel

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Of Love, Hate, and Necessity: The Relationship between
Saul and Samuel with Specific Emphasis on Don Isaac ben
Judah Abravanel

Andrea Fisher

1998

ב"ה

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Ordination.
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Referee: Dr. Samuel Greengus

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mentor,
teacher, and friend...

Lois Edelstein

ל"ד

I am grateful to Dr. Cooper for leading me to Abravanel and to Dr. Greengus for teaching me to drink of Abravanel's wisdom. Both men personify the inspiration and guidance which I have found in my professors here at Hebrew Union College. Dr. Greengus, thank you for your untiring patience and support throughout this exciting process.

To my family for filling my soul with laughter, my heart with love, and my mind with a craving for knowledge.

And especially for Sam:

“ויגדל שמואל והשמ היה עמו...”

“And Samuel grew up, and the Lord was with him.”

- First Samuel 3:19

כן יהי רצון

Abstract

In his Handbook of Leadership, Bernard M. Bass writes, "No leader can be successful if he or she is not prepared to be rejected." Both King Saul and his prophet, Samuel have to face rejection from those they rule, from each other, and from God. Both men attempt to fulfill their roles without precedent as they are respectively the first king and political prophet. The unique circumstances in which these characters find themselves make for an exciting story. As riveting as the Biblical narrative is, however, it leaves many questions unanswered. How do Samuel and Saul feel about each other as men, what drives each to act as he does, is Saul treated fairly by Samuel and God, does Samuel enjoy watching the fall of Saul, and does Saul harbor anger at Samuel for reporting to Saul his countless punishments?

One of the most profound commentators on this story is Don Isaac Abravanel. Through my own translation of Abravanel's brilliant observations of the human psyche, I will explore the motivations, actions, and reactions of Samuel and Saul. As a late fifteenth century commentator, Abravanel had the benefit of familiarity with the commentators who came before him. As such, I have also included in my "Summary and Additional Commentary" relevant remarks and discussions from other post-Biblical sources.

I will approach the Biblical narrative as a literary work without considering questions of history or historical accuracy. This approach is similar to that which Jack Miles uses in God a Biography. My thesis is not a work of theology, but a literary

study of three characters, one of whom happens to be God, caught up in a human drama.

The main texts which I have selected for the purpose of this thesis are: First Samuel 12:16-25, First Samuel 13:8-14, First Samuel 15:1-35, First Samuel 16:1-22, First Samuel 18:10-15, First Samuel 19:18-20, and First Samuel 28:8-19.

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I. Introduction

Originally, I was drawn to the story of Samuel because I was greatly moved by my first reading of First Samuel 3:1-18.

Young Samuel was in the service of the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; prophecy was not widespread. One day, Eli was asleep in his usual place; his eyes had begun to fail and he could barely see. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was sleeping in the temple of the Lord where the Ark of God was. The Lord called out to Samuel, and he answered, "I am coming." He ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But he replied, "I did not call you; go back to sleep." So he went back and lay down. Again the Lord called, "Samuel!" Samuel rose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But he replied, "I did not call, my son; go back to sleep." Now Samuel had not yet experienced the Lord; the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time, and he rose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli understood that the Lord was calling the boy. And Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down. If you are called again, say, 'Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.'" And Samuel went to his place and lay down.¹

I was struck by the humility and innocence with which Samuel first entered his prophetic career. I perceived a young child awakened in his sleep. He runs out to his guardian expecting simple

¹ First Samuel 3:1-9. JPS translation.

comfort from a bad dream. Yet, what this child does not realize, is that he stands on the precipice of a life of lonely commitment to a vengeful God. That very night, in fact, he must predict disaster to the household of the only father figure he has known. When Samuel first runs out to Eli crying, "Here I am; you called me," how could he know the great burden toward which he runs?

From this scene, I became interested in how this overly trained, severely pious prophet would relate to a man contritely placed in the most powerful position in the land; a man with neither training nor religious reverence. Samuel was forced to combine forces with Saul. Their relationship fascinated me.

Although my finished thesis now centers around the late fifteenth century writings of Don Isaac Abravanel, Abravanel was secondary to my original purpose. I knew that I wanted to concentrate on the relationship between Saul and Samuel using Biblical and post-Biblical sources. Upon reviewing countless rabbinic literature on the book of Samuel, I found most exegesis concentrated on grammatical, linguistic, chronological, logical, and theological issues. I, however, was interested in exploring the characters of this dramatic area of the Bible, and specifically the relationship between Samuel and Saul. I was lead to Abravanel by my first thesis advisor, Dr. Alan Cooper. I was astounded to find that Abravanel concentrates on the exact issues in which I was interested. I began by translating his questions at the beginning of each chapter. I was stunned by his unique and uncanny ability to highlight the psychological motives behind each of the

characters. He too seems to be interested not only in the relationship between Samuel and Saul, but in what drives them while fulfilling their divinely ordained roles. Abravanel is utterly unlike any other commentator with whom I have had experience. He spends less time trying to solve problems of the text than he does attempting to truly understand what occurs between and within the characters of the narrative. Abravanel is also unique in his access to knowledge of sickness and medicine. Because he was so prolific and had a hand in so many different arenas of life, he is able to bring to his commentary an unprecedented depth. Abravanel does not have the advantage of the psychological language we use today. If he had, he would have spoken in terms of co-dependency, depression, ego-booster deprivation, power pursuits, and power addiction.

I have allowed Abravanel's commentary to guide my selection of passages in the Biblical text. After reviewing his introductory questions to each chapter, I elected to translate the sections of Abravanel which specifically refer to either the relationship between Samuel and Saul or to their respective character traits. Each chapter of my thesis is then divided into these specific sections of the Biblical narrative. Following my translation of Abravanel there are discussions which incorporate other commentators.

I will approach the Biblical narrative as a literary work without considering questions of history or historical accuracy. This approach is similar to that which Jack Miles uses in his book,

"God a Biography." My thesis is not a work of theology, but a literary study of three characters, one of whom happens to be God, caught up in a human drama.

The main texts which I have selected for the purpose of this thesis are: First Samuel 12:16-25, First Samuel 13:8-14, First Samuel 15:1-35, First Samuel 16:1-22, First Samuel 18:10-15, First Samuel 19:18-20, and First Samuel 28:8-19.

Notes on Translation

Abravanel uses several different euphemisms for God, both within his quotations of Biblical text and his own commentary. Following are the ways in which each name for God has been translated:

Short for (האל יתברך). "The Blessed God"	האל ית'
Short for (השם). "Hashem"	ה'
"Blessed Hashem"	השם יתברך
"Hashem"	השם
Short for (השם אלקיך). "Hashem your God"	ה' אלקיך
"The Lord."	אלקים
Used as a conjunction, thus "divine."	אלקי
"Hashem your God"	השם אלקיכם
"God of..."	אלוה
Used as conjunction, thus "divine."	אלקית
"Your God"	אלקיך
"Adonai" This is used only once.	"
Short for (השם אלקיכם). "Hashem your God"	ה' אלקיכם
"My Lord"	אדוני
"The Holy God"	קדישין אלקין
"The Eternally Blessed"	הוא יתברך ערך
"Master of the World"	רבנו של עולם
"The Holy One Blessed be He"	הקדוש ברוך הוא

II. First Samuel Chapter Twelve

Verses Sixteen to Twenty-Five

TRANSLATION OF ABRAVANEL COMMENTARY:

16: "And now stand by and see, etc."² According to the sages Z"L, there were worthless people among Israel who said that it was acceptable to ask Hashem for a king.³ Because of this, Samuel demonstrated to them, through a sign, in order that they might see their great evil in the eyes of Hashem, "you asked for a king and could not deny this." I think that Samuel did this in order to remove any doubt that may have come from his words.⁴ If asking for a king was evil in the eyes of the Blessed God, why did Blessed Hashem chose Saul as king?⁵ How did Samuel anoint him and how was this made clear with the Urim and Turim? The answer can be found in the following verse, "and now stand by and see."⁶ The meaning of this is that the Blessed God gave man the ability to chose what is good and to reject what is evil. If he asks for what he wants, he will be given it, whether it is good or bad.

17: This is similar to the issue of the wheat harvest. Our sages Z"L said in (Ta'anit 1,12,72) that once Nisan is over and the

² First Samuel 12:16.

³ Abravanel is assuming that the reader understands that the contrary is true. Despite differing statements, in the Bible those of Abravanel's time generally accepted that Adonai found the idea of an Israelite king abhorrent.

⁴ Or, I had thought that Samuel did this in order to remove any doubt of the legitimacy of his words. Is Abravanel saying that he had originally thought that Samuel was doing this in order to prove how capable he was as a prophet? Or is Abravanel saying that Samuel was afraid to merely preach to the people, but rather wanted to demonstrate his point through a sign?

⁵ The emphasis here should not be on the character Saul, but rather on the fact that God Himself chose a king. Why would He do this if He was against the whole idea of Israel having a king in the first place?

⁶ First Samuel 12:16.

rains come, it is a sign of (and therefore Samuel's request) was a curse. For thunder and rain to come down at that time is undesirable, especially in the land of Israel where no rainfall comes down the entire time during the harvest. Because Samuel called Hashem and asked for this destructive thing, Hashem complied by bringing thunder and rain simply because Samuel asked it from Him. The matter of the king was similar; the people were given this evil thing only because they asked for it. The text teaches that this was Samuel's intent when he said, "now stand by and see."⁷ He means by this verse, "If you revered Him, why did he grant you this request which was evil? During the wheat harvest I will call to Hashem and He will bring thunder and rain, which is an evil thing. Through this you will see your great evil deeds as they are seen in the eyes of Hashem: you asked for a king which was evil even though he has been given to you." It says "your sins were great in the eyes of Hashem."⁸ It is only called a sin because they caused themselves great harm when they asked for a king. It would be very harmful to them. Thus it says, "in the eyes of Hashem."⁹ This means, "Even if you do not see now the evil and the damage which will follow from having a king, the eyes of Hashem, which observe and glimpse all things until the end of the generations, sees the damage that will be brought by a king."

18: The text mentions that when Samuel called to Hashem to give thunder and rain, it happened immediately that very day, even without there being clouds, fog, or other factors which proceed

⁷ ibid.

⁸ First Samuel 12:17. Abravanel leaves out two words in his quotation of the text, "אשר עשיתם" which appear in the middle of the quoted portion.

⁹ ibid. Hashem substituted for the Lord.

rain. Moreover, it was at the time of the wheat harvest and Samuel knew that the people would not reap on a cloudy day. The rain came from a miracle in order to teach a lesson, as I said. The text states, "all the people greatly feared Hashem and Samuel."¹⁰ This tells how much they were upset as a result of his words and the miracle which he did before their eyes. They were afraid because of what they did against Hashem and against Samuel; specifically the two tests which I mentioned in regard to their asking for a king.

¹⁰ First Samuel 12:18. "Hashem" substituted for the "Lord."

SUMMARY AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY:

Abravanel's commentary on First Samuel 12:16-25 reflects several important issues to Abravanel. Using the character of Samuel, Abravanel preaches on his own attitude toward the monarchy. Abravanel is commenting here on Samuel's reaction to the people's request for a king. Samuel was appalled by the request, but could not dissuade the people from their desire. God agrees to appoint a king over Israel. After Samuel informed the people that a king had indeed been set over them, Samuel performed a strange miracle. In the season of the wheat harvest, he prayed to God in order to make it thunder and rain. He declared that this would, "make [Israel] realize what a wicked thing [they] did in the sight of the Lord when [they] asked for a king." Indeed, no sooner had Samuel spoken that it began to thunder and rain. Abravanel elaborates on Samuel's disapproval, imbuing the text with his own anti-monarchy position. The request for a king was a result of Israel's evil inclination. Abravanel believed that Israel's request for a king was a hideous crime as it reflected a lack of faith in their One True Ruler, Adonai. In his commentary on verse seventeen, Abravanel curiously reports that the sin of asking for a king was "only called a sin because they caused themselves great harm when they asked for king." This however is somewhat inconsistent with his commentary on First Samuel 8:4 where he writes that "the crime of Israel was their rejection of the Divine Kingdom and the establishment of a human kingdom instead." As will be reiterated throughout his commentary, lack of faith is the most serious of all crimes in Abravanel's assessment. Perhaps one way of explaining the seeming inconsistency is in the manner in

which we understand the harm which will befall Israel. Abravanel continues in First Samuel 12:17 to say that "the eyes of Hashem, which observe and glimpse all things until the end of the generations, sees the damage that will be brought by a king." This damage could not only refer to the immediate destruction which will be wrought by the human king, but also to the subsequent punishment which will befall Israel due to their lack of faith which is illustrated by their request for a king.

In his commentary on First Samuel 12:16-25, Abravanel stresses human freedom of choice. This is the greatest gift given to man, distinguishing him from all other creatures. Even the heavenly creatures are unable to chose to decline performing God's will, leaving man the only character able to make such a choice. Through this particular commentary, Abravanel's views on prophetic power are also apparent. A prophet has the ability to perform miracles, as he (like all human beings) contains an element of the divine. When Samuel asked God to bring thunder and rain in the middle of the harvest time, he performed a miracle. Abravanel rightly points out that as this performance was not necessary in order for Samuel to prove his legitimacy as a prophet (as this had already been shown). Samuel had to have another motive; namely demonstrating the concept of free will to the people. Through his interpretation of Samuel, Abravanel teaches that God will not stand in the way of choices made by human will, regardless of the positive or negative affects of these choices.

Abravanel also uses this narrative as an opportunity to comment on

the method of selecting a monarch..The king of Israel is chosen solely by God. Despite the fact that God does not fully support the decision to have a king, God and only God can chose this king. In his commentary on First Samuel 15, Abravanel will make it clear that God is also the only One Who can depose the king that He has chosen.

III. First Samuel Chapter Thirteen

Verses Eight through Fourteen

TRANSLATION OF ABRAVANEL COMMENTARY:

8: "And he waited seven days."¹¹ It states that Saul waited seven days on Gilgal according to the term set by Samuel; this meant to say that the term Samuel "said."¹² 9: When Saul saw that Samuel did not come and that the people were beginning to scatter from him, he went to sacrifice the offering. 10: At the time that he (Saul) finished sacrificing the offerings, Samuel came. Saul went to greet him and offer him peace and blessing. 11: Samuel asked him, "what have you done?" Saul replied that he had sacrificed the offerings for three reasons. First, because Samuel had not come at the appointed day. Samuel had designated seven days during which he said that Saul should wait for him to come. Second, the Philistines gathered at Mitmash, and the people were dispersing from him. 12: Third, he was afraid the Philistines would kill him at Gilgal before he could entreat Hashem. He was expecting to be punished for not securing the Blessed God's protecting blessing, thus he sacrificed the offering.¹³ The sacrifices were the means and main way to secure Blessed Hashem's blessing. He said, "I held back."¹⁴ What he meant was, "I went ahead [I had been holding back] but then I transgressed my own wish and Your commandment."

¹¹ First Samuel 13:8.

¹² Whereas the text says, "שָׁמַר שְׁמוּאֵל," Abravanel would have it say, "שָׁמַר שְׁמוּאֵל."

¹³ He needed to go into battle, but was worried that if he did not offer the sacrifice he would be punished for not first securing God's blessing.

¹⁴ First Samuel 13:12.

13: "And Samuel said to him, 'You acted foolishly.'"¹⁵ Regarding this sin the sages Z"L wrote that Samuel said to Saul that he should have waited for him seven complete days. Saul did not offer the sacrifices for seven days, but rather, on the seventh day, in the morning at the usual time to offer the offerings, he sacrificed them. Samuel came immediately thereafter on the seventh day, and said, "you acted foolishly and did not guard the commandment of Hashem your God, etc."¹⁶ The sin was not that the sacrifice was offered by a non-priest, because at that time the high places were permitted and thus a non-priest could sacrifice upon an individual high place. I can add to their words (for the sake of illustrating my point). (The) first (matter refers to the statement), "I will be coming down to you to sacrifice the offering and to offer the peace offering."¹⁷ Thereby he made it known that even though an individual (non-priest) could offer a sacrifice upon a high place, it was the divine will that only Samuel should sacrifice upon it. The second matter is with regard to the verse, "Seven days wait until I come to you."¹⁸ He meant that there in Gilgal let them gather and wait seven days, but did not intend this to be the full measure of the term. Rather, Samuel said "until I come to you."¹⁹ He meant, "it will be seven days or more, but either way, wait until I come to you"²⁰." Certainly that was the term. Now the seven days which Samuel

¹⁵ First Samuel 13:13 The actual verse reads, "And Samuel said to Saul, 'you acted foolishly.'"

¹⁶ First Samuel 13:13. "Hashem" substituted for the "Lord."

¹⁷ First Samuel 10:8.

¹⁸ ibid.

¹⁹ ibid.

²⁰ ibid.

mentioned to Saul²¹ were intended for sacrificing offerings seven full days, and not that he should wait for him seven days only, as I stated above. For "seven days...you will wait until I come to you."²² Following this comes Samuel's statement, "to sacrifice the well being offering."²³ This is a separate matter, in that he should wait, for however many days, until Samuel came. As for the text, why does it refer to "the appointed time (set) by Samuel?"²⁴ The text does not refer to the time of waiting, rather to the time set aside for sacrifice. The third matter is in regard to the verse, "and I will make known to you what you will do."²⁵ Meaning that Saul could not decide by himself to wage war at that particular place because it was not in the manner in which Saul might suppose. Rather, Saul had to wait for the prophet to come to make known how he (Saul) should go about (the battle). This announcement was that victory in the battle would transpire in the manner of a miracle (just as the matter of Jonathan and his youth).²⁶ His own (strong) arm would not (by itself) deliver victory. Thus, by the manner in which he acted, Saul sinned in three ways. (First), he sacrificed the offerings himself, even though it was Hashem's will that the prophet Samuel alone should sacrifice that day and no other. (Second), he did not wait until

²¹ In First Samuel 10:8.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.* Abravanel suggests a change in the order of this verse. His emphasis is meant to illustrate that Samuel wanted them to sacrifice for seven days, but Saul had to wait until Samuel arrived.

²⁴ First Samuel 13:8.

²⁵ First Samuel 9:8.

²⁶ First Samuel 14. Jonathan decided that he and his arms bearer could defeat the outposts of the Philistines, not only single-handedly, but without informing his father, Saul. Jonathan repeats as a mantra, "the Lord will deliver them into the hands of Israel." Indeed, First Samuel 14:15 reports that "terror broke out among all the troops both in the camp (and) in the field; the outposts and the raiders were also terrified. The very earth quaked and a terror from the Lord."

Samuel came; and it was appropriate for him to put his faith in the Blessed God and to believe His words. After the prophet told him that he was coming and Saul saw that Samuel was late, Saul should have waited for Samuel whatever amount of time it took him to come, for he would surely come and not delay. All the more so Saul should have waited the entire time period which Samuel had set. For on the morning of the seventh day, he sacrificed on the very day Samuel came. (Third), Saul was prepared to make war without the command of the prophet. The prophet had already said, "and I will make known to you what to do."²⁷ Saul was afraid of the Philistines and the people were dispersing from him. It was (more) appropriate for him to roll (upon the ground) before Hashem who would deliver him. He should not have transgressed from the words of the prophet nor from the command either to the right or to the left.²⁸ Since he transgressed the word of the prophet he was punishable by death, as it says "if there is a man who does not hearken to the words of the prophet, which he speaks in My name, I will make him accountable to Me."²⁹ Indeed the matter here involved having insufficient faith and turning aside from the commandment of (the) Blessed God. This matter is similar to the matter of Uza who placed his hand in the ark of God because the

²⁷ First Samuel 9:8.

²⁸ Lest he depart even slightly from the path which he was commanded to take.

²⁹ Deuteronomy 18:19. This is not cited correctly by Abravanel. The verse states, "does not hearken to my words which he (the prophet) will not speak in my name" The verse is exact except for the word "הנביא" or "prophet" which does not appear in the Biblical text. More likely than not, Abravanel's mistake was accidental, though his emphasis is on the word "prophet." Without this word in the Biblical text, Abravanel can not use the logic of "כל־שכן." What leads me to believe that his mistake is accidental is the fact that his argument would be stronger and certainly more concise if he simply quoted the Biblical text as his proof that Saul's sin is punishable by death as this is exactly what the text says without the word "prophet." However, Abravanel's own philosophy of prophesy is apparent here; Samuel speaks the word of God as if it were spoken by God Himself.

cattle stumbled and God smote him there. He did not die for any reason other than his lack of faith.³⁰ So Saul's sin here was one of lack of faith as he doubted the commandment which was given to him by the prophet (Samuel) and he trusted in his own thinking and thereby transgressed the command of Hashem. This was more serious in that it was the first commandment which was given to him by Samuel in God's name. This sin was grievous because he so quickly departed from the path which was commanded to him.³¹ This is why Samuel said to Saul, "you acted foolishly in not keeping the commandment of Hashem, etc."³² He meant, "You thought you were acting intelligently, but it is the opposite, you acted foolishly. It was also foolish for you not to give your heart over to all the signs which I gave you and which came true. You should have believed in the words which I prophesied to you just as I had spoken them. Moreover, you did not guard the command of Hashem and rebelled against the words of Adonai. Turning away from Hashem's commandment by the king is a capital crime." He said to him, "Hashem would have established your dynasty, etc."³³ He meant, "You were anointed as king and sinned immediately thereafter, just as your sin was immediate so too will you be punished soon after this." **14:** "But now your kingdom will not

³⁰ Second Samuel 6:6-8. Saul is being compared to Uza. Both of their sins were caused by a lack of faith.

³¹ Here Abravanel is making the point that the commandment which Saul transgressed was the first commandment ever given to him by Samuel. This incident occurred immediately after Saul and Samuel met each other. Samuel had just told Saul to follow his words exactly. These are the very words which Abravanel and Samuel accuse Saul of transgressing.

³² First Samuel 13:13. "Hashem" substituted for the "Lord."

³³ First Samuel 13:13. "Hashem" substituted for the "Lord." The judgment to which Abravanel is referring is the loss of Saul's kingship as reflected by this verse and confirmed by verse fourteen.

endure."³⁴ He meant, "Just as there was a short amount of time between your anointing and your sin, so will you be shortly punished. He already announced to Saul that Hashem "will request another man who (would do³⁵) according to His heart and His will."³⁶ This man was David and "Hashem commanded him to be a leader for the people"³⁷, since you (Saul) had not listened to the words of Hashem." From this it is clear that the sin was not measured by the quantity of the deed but rather by (his) little faith, rebellion against the word of Hashem, and deviation from His commandments. Saul's punishment would not have been so great if he had only transgressed one commandment from the Torah. However, Saul transgressed a commandment which the Blessed God had specially commanded him personally. Further still, it was the first commandment which God had given him.

³⁴ First Samuel 13:14.

³⁵ Editors note by the ה"ר.

³⁶ First Samuel 13:14.

³⁷ ibid. "Hashem" substituted for the "Lord."

SUMMARY AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY:

Saul's crime and punishment greatly concern Abravanel. In his questions on chapter thirteen, Abravanel asks why Saul received such a stern punishment for such a seemingly insignificant infraction. Directly after Samuel anointed Saul king, Samuel instructed Saul to proceed on a journey in which he would come upon several signs indicating the validity of the anointing. At the end of this illustration, Samuel gave Saul his first command as king, "You are to go down to Gilgal ahead of me, and I will come down to you to present burnt offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being. Wait seven days until I come to you and instruct you what you are to do next."³⁸ Saul followed Samuel's command, until, when on the seventh day, the Philistines were poised to attack. Saul sacrificed the offering upon the altar before Samuel arrived. The infraction to which Abravanel refers in his question is that of a non-priest sacrificing upon an altar. Abravanel's question is leading, as he has three points he wishes to make.

First, Saul was not punished for sacrificing upon the altar, but rather for a more serious crime; lack of faith. Saul's faith was lacking not just in God, but also in the authority of the prophet. For Abravanel, this is an offense carrying a severe punishment. Abravanel does not believe that Israel benefits from the service of a king. He worries that the rights to which a king is entitled make him a very powerful and potentially dangerous force in any nation. In order to curtail this danger, the king must therefore be a man who will strictly follow both the Law and the mouthpieces of God - the prophets. Abravanel's anxiety toward the monarchy is

³⁸ First Samuel 10:8.

thus realized in this chapter. Saul could neither follow the command of God nor His messenger. Using his God-given free will, Saul chose to act upon his fear of the people and the battle and not his faith in the Divine. The crime was not that he sacrificed upon an altar reserved for priestly sacrifice (indeed Abravanel proves that this was not a possible crime as the altars in those days were open to anybody). Rather, his crime was that he did not wait with absolute faith that Samuel would indeed appear in time for Saul to win the battle against the Philistines.

Second, not only did Saul exhibit lack of faith in God and in prophecy, but he did so with regard to the very first command which he received as king. Saul had recently witnessed all of the signs predicted by Samuel. Yet, even after such a heavy display of prophetic power, Saul still managed to doubt the words of Samuel.

Third, Abravanel makes an interesting distinction in this chapter. He compares the transgression of a commandment from the Torah with a transgression of a direct and personal commandment from God. For Abravanel, the latter is the more grievous. Saul did not disobey a command found in the Written Law, but rather, he transgressed a commandment sent to him directly by God through Samuel.

After expressing the three contributing factors to Saul's sin; namely that he exhibited a lack of faith, transgressed the first commandment he received as a king, and disobeyed a direct

instruction delivered by Samuel from God, it is difficult to imagine a crime worse than the one committed by Saul. Saul's punishment was that he lost the kingship. Abravanel proves his point so thoroughly, that one may wonder why Saul's punishment was not in fact worse than the one he actually received.

Abravanel has a tendency in his commentary to concentrate on the motivations behind the characters. He does this eloquently in regard to Saul's actions at Gilgal. Why did Saul transgress the first commandment he was given as king? Abravanel is inclined to believe that Saul's actions are usually a result of trying to do the right thing, with the wrong awareness. Because of his character flaws and his inability to truly understand the nature of what was expected of him, Saul found himself in situations such as Gilgal. Abravanel offers three possible incentives for Saul's actions. First, Saul thought that Samuel had designated a limited time of seven days. When it was the seventh day and Samuel had yet to arrive, Saul figured that it would be appropriate to begin without him. Second, the people were beginning to leave Saul. Without an army, Saul knew that he could not defend the Philistines. Third, and most profoundly, he knew that before he could succeed in any battle, he had to first procure the blessing of the Lord. As discussed, no amount of reason or fear should cause anyone to act contrary to the command of the Lord. Thus, despite these reasons, Saul was punished severely.

Abravanel is not the only commentator concerned with the motives behind Saul's actions. Psalms Rabbah³⁹ also speculates as to the

³⁹ On Psalm 17.

reason why Saul defied the Lord's command.

IV. First Samuel Chapter Fifteen
Verses One through Thirty-five

TRANSLATION OF ABRAVANEL COMMENTARY:

1: "And Samuel said to Saul, etc."⁴⁰ Saul was very busy with the Philistine wars, as it says "and there was a heavy war against the Philistines, etc."⁴¹ Samuel, the prophet, commanded him regarding the war against Amalek and did not encourage him to rush the war against the Philistines on account of Amalek. Do not doubt that he said this because it was the very divine command that came to him in prophecy; and the text here abridges the account. We know that Samuel gave this command not as himself, but as the spokesperson (for God), since the spirit of Hashem spoke through him and filled his speech. Samuel began to speak by saying, "Hashem, sent me to anoint you as king over His people Israel."⁴² If there be a king over these people, he must tend to their honor and to their needs. Further it says, "listen to the Hashem's command."⁴³ This implies two things; first, that he fulfill the command of HaShem, and second, that he consider the honor of Israel by retaliating (deserved) punishment (upon Amalek).⁴⁴ 2: To this He said, "I am exacting penalty for what Amalek did to Israel,"⁴⁵ therefore, see that you exact punishment." It is possible to speak about this matter further, in connection with what (Samuel) said about the matter of Amalek. Although this

⁴⁰ First Samuel 15:1.

⁴¹ First Samuel 14:52.

⁴² First Samuel 15:1. "Hashem" substituted for the "Lord."

⁴³ ibid. "Hashem" substituted for the "Lord."

⁴⁴ By fulfilling God's command, Saul would also take vengeance for Israel.

⁴⁵ First Samuel 15:2.

problem existed from the day that Hashem brought them out of Egypt, do not speculate into matters concerning what is above and what is below, and do not speculate as to why Amalek was not punished until now.⁴⁶ 3: This is why he (Samuel) said, "Now listen to the words of Adonai, now go and smite Amalek⁴⁷." It means, "Now that you have heard the command, you will go and wage the war, despite the matter concerning Amalek going back to those far off days (i.e. Exodus)." (God) commanded him that it was not enough that he destroy the fighting men, but he had to also utterly destroy all that was Amalek's; as "herem" means total annihilation. According to Rabbi Joseph Kamchi (ר' יוסף קמחי) Z"L, "herem" implies destruction and curse.⁴⁸

10: "And the word of HaShem came to Samuel"⁴⁹ because Saul and the people turned their attention to the booty and plunder and not on taking revenge upon the enemies of HaShem. 11: Divine, prophetic speech came upon the prophet Samuel, "I regret that I anointed Saul king because he turned from me and did not carry out my commands."⁵⁰ This was what Samuel spoke about when he rebuked the people (for asking for) a king, "And you and also the king who rules over you shall follow HaShem your God."⁵¹ This explains that

⁴⁶ In other words, Abravanel will not be answering his own question.

⁴⁷ First Samuel 15:3.

⁴⁸ The rest of this discussion is in regard to why God commanded Saul to interrupt a successful campaign against the Philistines in order to wage a vengeful war against Amalek. As it does not deal with the relationship between the two characters about whom this thesis is written, I go on to verse ten where the discussion regarding Saul and Samuel is continued.

⁴⁹ First Samuel 15:10.

⁵⁰ ibid.

⁵¹ First Samuel 12:14.

the king should revere Hashem and guard His commandments, His laws, and His spoken words, but now He said that Saul turned from Him. Saul was unwilling to follow HaShem and neither obeyed His speech nor His commandments. Because of this, he did not remain king afterward. There are two matters⁵² which arise from this and relate to the statement, "because he turned from Me and did not obey My words."⁵³ This hints at the two sins which he committed. The first phrase, "and he turned from Me"⁵⁴ refers to the sin at Gilgal; when he did not follow the divine command but rather refrained from it. With respect to the sin he committed during the war against Amalek, the second phrase states, "and he did not obey My words."⁵⁵ The passage goes on to report that "Samuel was distressed."⁵⁶ It does not indicate that Samuel was distressed because of Gilgal. This is because he thought he would be able to reverse the decree through repentance and prayer. But when Saul added to this sin further, Samuel grieved tremendously because he loved Saul with all of his heart and with all of his soul. He loved Saul's beautiful appearance and form. (He believed Saul to be a man) of great valor and mighty deeds. Samuel also felt a deep affection for Saul because it was by his own hand that Samuel had anointed Saul king over Israel. Samuel loved Saul with a love of an artisan for his creation. Therefore Samuel grieved tremendously because he was afraid of the evil that would befall Saul from HaShem. And the Torah states that "he entreated HaShem

⁵² There are two matters as there are two references which Saul makes with his words. Saul admits that he turned from God and did not obey his words.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ First Samuel 15:11.

all night."⁵⁷ The Blessed God did not explain to Samuel what the nature of Saul's sin was and why Saul was going to lose the kingship. (God) only told Samuel that Saul had sinned. The nature of this sin was concealed from the prophet. Samuel entreated HaShem all night trying to find out what Saul could have done in order to have lost the kingship. **12:**It was in order to discover this answer that Samuel got up early to call upon Saul in the morning. He was told that Saul went to Carmel "and behold he built for himself a monument."⁵⁸ This means that Saul went to a place in Carmel to entreat the forces and to divide the booty. And thus according to Targum Jonathan, or perhaps according to our sages Z"L (Rashi and Radak), Saul built an altar there. This may suggest that the text means that Saul went to Carmel, left there, went down to Gilgal, and built himself an altar.⁵⁹ The text meant that Saul built the monument in Gilgal because it was there that Israel honored the place where the ark dwelt the first time. **13:**The text continues, "when Samuel came to Saul."⁶⁰ Saul came out to greet Samuel in order to receive him and honor him. Saul said to Samuel, "Blessed are you of HaShem. I have fulfilled the Lord's command."⁶¹ He meant, "The Blessed God blessed you because I have fulfilled His command which you told me and this merit can be found in you."⁶² **14:**"And Samuel said, 'then what is this sound

⁵⁷ *ibid.* Correct reading, "and he entreated the Lord all night."

⁵⁸ First Samuel 15:12.

⁵⁹ The difference here is in the order of the events.

⁶⁰ First Samuel 15:13. Abravanel cites the text incorrectly. Where Abravanel writes, "שבא" or "when he came," the text writes, "ויבא" or "and he came."

⁶¹ *ibid.* Abravanel substitutes the euphemism "HaShem" for "The Lord."

⁶² Because Saul thought he had fulfilled the word of God delivered by Samuel, Saul felt that God would bless Samuel on account of Saul's behavior.

of sheep in my ears and the voice of the cattle?' etc."⁶³ When Samuel heard this he knew in truth that Saul had brought booty and that this was Saul's sin.⁶⁴ **15:**Saul's reply was twofold. First, in reality, was the deed of blaming the people for his sin and not accepting responsibility himself. The second was because of the purpose; they did not do this to take the booty, but rather in order "to sacrifice it to Hashem, etc."⁶⁵ He (Saul) brought evidence from the fact that they had not intended these livestock for booty since they had in fact devastated the rest and did not take pity upon them - except upon what was needed in order to sacrifice to Hashem. This pertains to what is stated about divine, purpose as has been mentioned. Upon greeting Samuel, Saul said "in the name of your God,"⁶⁶ in order to honor Samuel. He meant to say, "to the God with whom Samuel is connected in prophecy."

16:"And Samuel said to Saul, etc."⁶⁷ Samuel now knew that Saul spared the sheep and the oxen and transgressed the divine command. Samuel realized that it was for this reason that (God) said to him (Samuel), "I regret that I made Saul king."⁶⁸ Samuel understood why (God) decreed upon Saul the punishment which was explained to Samuel by the Blessed God. This is why Samuel said to Saul,

⁶³ First Samuel 14:15.

⁶⁴ It was not until Samuel heard the sheep and oxen that he realized what Saul's sin had been. This is the very sin about which Samuel had petitioned God throughout the night.

⁶⁵ First Samuel 15:15. This is a rough citation of the actual text, though its meaning remains accurate.

⁶⁶ Saul's words are in fact, "Blessed are you of the Lord." Abravanel's possible objection is that Saul indicate that Samuel was "of" the Lord rather than blessed "through" the Lord.

⁶⁷ First Samuel 15:16.

⁶⁸ First Samuel 15:10.

"Stop, let me tell you what Hashem said."⁶⁹ It seems to me that Samuel hesitated to reveal the divine decree for the honor the kingship. Thus it says after that (an example can be found in chapter two) "if Saul hears of it he will kill me."⁷⁰ Samuel then said, "Stop."⁷¹ What Samuel meant was, "Give me permission and I will tell you what Hashem said. But remember that they were Hashem's words and I did not say them."⁷² Saul gave Samuel permission, thus Samuel told the matter to Saul. **17:**Thus, Samuel began to tell Saul the words of HaShem, "You may be small in your own eyes, but you are the head of the tribes of Israel."⁷³ He meant, "Why, in regards to this matter, did you say, 'because [they] spared, etc.?'"⁷⁴ You are the king and it was appropriate for you (as king) to prohibit action."⁷⁵ Samuel said that Saul had two powers. One was that he was king of the people. Even though he was small in his own eyes, he was a king who was head of the tribes of Israel and their leaders, even if he had been chosen by the people as were kings of other nations. The second, more important power, was that "HaShem anointed [Saul] king over

⁶⁹ First Samuel 15:16. The statement is quoted correctly except for Abravanel's usual insertion of HaShem in the place of the Lord.

⁷⁰ First Samuel 16:2. The explanation in parenthesis is edited in by the ר"י. Abravanel is using chapter sixteen in order to illustrate that Samuel was fearful of delivering the news to Saul that Saul had lost the kingship. Abravanel makes this point while also illustrating the great respect Samuel had for the position of the king. The question then arises as to which has primacy; Samuel's respect or fear for the position of king?

⁷¹ First Samuel 15:16. Abravanel needs to explain why, if Samuel held so much respect for Saul's office, he would speak so directly to Saul.

⁷² Abravanel has Samuel remind Saul that he is merely God's dutiful messenger. This accentuates Samuel's humility and Saul's temper.

⁷³ First Samuel 15:16.

⁷⁴ First Samuel 15:15. Saul said, "אשר חמל" or "which [they] spared." Abravanel quotes this as "כי חמל" or "that [they] spared."

⁷⁵ When confronted with the issue of keeping booty despite God's command not to do so, Saul blames the people with this statement.

Israel."76 Samuel77 meant, "If you had been chosen king by the (actions of the) people (alone), you should pacify them and comply to their wishes. [This is what I wrote (page 98:74) about a king who is chosen by the people.]78, but the Blessed God chose you and not the people and this is why I reiterated that Hashem anointed you. Since you are king, and you were made king and you were anointed by the Blessed God, and not by the people - knowing this, why did fear cause you to obey the words of the people and not the words of the Blessed God and His commandments?" The Targum explains that Saul was the head of the tribe of Benjamin first before he ascended to the kingship, then in addition, HaShem anointed him king over all of Israel. But what I explained is more correct. Another reproach the prophet brought against Saul was that the command was (given) to him and not to the people and for this reason how could he excuse himself because of what the people did? 18:This is what is written, "HaShem sent you on a task and said, 'Go and utterly destroy, etc.'"79 (God) stated (further), "until you have exterminated them."80 He meant, "HaShem sent you on account of what Amalek did to Israel during the exodus from Egypt. Thus the 'ב' (in בדרך) is the 'ב' of 'for a reason,' meaning, 'destroy them because of what they did to us during the exodus.' He told you to annihilate Amalek until they were exterminated." This statement suggests that he (Saul) should not put his hand on the booty to sacrifice it but rather to

76 First Samuel 15:17. This citation is correct except for the substitution of HaShem for the Lord. The brackets are my own edits.

77 Literally it was Samuel speaking, but the message was from God.

78 I have supplied the brackets, but the wording is that of Abravanel.

79 First Samuel 15:18. Correct except for Abravanel's substitution of "HaShem" for "the Lord."

80 ibid.

exterminate Amalek. The statement, "עַד כְּלוּתָם" means that he should totally destroy everything belonging to Amalek, as has been noted. 19: "Since the command was given directly to you to act in this manner, why did you not listen to the command of HaShem⁸¹ who commanded you? You committed this transgression yourself, not the people."⁸² Samuel said, "You swooped down on the spoil."⁸³ He meant to say, "These attractive items were booty and not for the purpose of sacrifice, as you said." "And you did evil in the eyes of HaShem."⁸⁴ That is to say, "One should not think that God will accept such a sacrifice; rather He is angry."⁸⁵ Thus, Samuel retorted against the two arguments which Saul made. First, as for what he said about the people taking pity..., Samuel could respond that Saul was head of the tribes of Israel and Hashem anointed him king and said to him "and utterly destroy, etc."⁸⁶ "Why did you not listen to the command of HaShem?" The second reply is with regard to Saul's statement that the sacrifice was for HaShem your (Samuel's) God. Samuel retorted that this was not so, but rather that he (Saul) swooped upon the booty because it was desirable and not for the purpose of the altar. This is what is meant by "and you swooped down on the booty and did the evil, etc."⁸⁷ Samuel did not mention Agag because as I have already said, the Blessed God

81 First Samuel 15:19. Correct except for Abravanel's substitution of "HaShem" for "the Lord."

82 Samuel's continuing dialogue as reported by Abravanel.

83 First Samuel 15:19.

84 ibid. "HaShem" substituted for "the Lord."

85 Saul's defense that the booty was for holy purposes is hence rejected.

86 First Samuel 15:3. Abravanel quotes a single word from the Biblical narrative. He does not include in the quotation the pronounal suffix. Abravanel quotes, "והחרמתי" or "and you will utterly destroy." The Biblical narrative reads, "והחרמתי" or "and you will utterly destroy *them*." It seems that the absence of "them" in Abravanel's quotation is a mere oversight as it adds no significance to his point.

87 First Samuel 15:19.

did not announce Saul's sin clearly, but only announced that He was removing the kingship from Saul. (God) only told Samuel of Saul's punishment and thus Samuel only knew Saul's sin from Saul's own words. Because the conversation was only about the mercy of the people and the choicest of sheep and oxen in order to sacrifice them to HaShem and did not include Agag, Samuel repented about this alone.⁸⁸ **20:**"Saul retorted to his (Samuel's words), "I hearkened the voice of Hashem."⁸⁹ Saul meant to say, "How could you ask me, 'how did you not hear the voice of HaShem?'" I heard the voice of HaShem, and His command was about Amalek and his people, not about living creatures. Amalek was the one who had sinned and they were the ones who came to make war against Israel, not the sheep and the oxen." This is (the meaning of Saul's statement), "I went the way which HaShem sent me."⁹⁰ And further he said that he acted in the manner of a king by bringing Agag, the king of Amalek, alive in order to shame him. (When Saul said), "I utterly destroyed Amalek,"⁹¹ (he meant to say), "These are the ways of the kings; to destroy the people and to bring back their king in fetters of affliction and iron." Just as was done to the king of Bazak in Judges 1:7, "Seventy kings are gathered under my table."⁹² **21:**Indeed, the matter of the sheep and the

⁸⁸ In other words, because Samuel could only discern Saul's sin from Saul's words, and since they did not speak about Agag, Samuel had no way of knowing that Saul had also sinned by not killing Agag. This is how Abravanel explains that Samuel did not mention this second half of Saul's transgression when Samuel was chastising Saul.

⁸⁹ First Samuel 15:20.

⁹⁰ First Samuel 15:19.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² The correct quotation is, "Seventy kings, having their thumbs and their toes cut off, gathered food under my table." Judah and Simon destroyed the Kena'ani and the Perizzi in Bezek. They took the king, Adonaibezak, and cut off his thumbs and his toes. Adonaibezak at that point declared that this was fair retribution because he had the thumbs and toes of seventy kings under his table.

oxen were the acts of the people. Saul himself did not worry about the sheep or the cattle. The people indeed did devote a great amount to destruction. It was from the choicest of the devoted animals they took these; and this was also for a good purpose as they were meant to be sacrificed to HaShem at Gilgal where there was an altar. From there they had gone forth to wage the war as (God) had commanded. It appears that Samuel had not yet finished what he was saying and that Saul entered during his words⁹³, because when Samuel said, "and why did you disobey the command of the Lord,"⁹⁴ Saul's immediately reply (began with the word "אשר"⁹⁵) saying, "I obeyed the command of HaShem, etc."⁹⁶ Samuel still had not had a chance to explain the divine decree.

22: "And Samuel said, 'does Hashem delight, etc.'"⁹⁷ Behold, Samuel did not accept Saul's argument in that he still blamed his sin on the people. Saul already said to Samuel that he was the king and leader of the people. He should have prevented their action and it was thus fitting that he bear the whole sin, transgression, and wrongdoing. Since Saul was very strong in arguing this point, namely that the act was benign because of its purpose (i.e. sacrifices to God), there was no sin in this, since they took it for a purpose which should be praised by Hashem. Thus, Samuel responded, "does HaShem desire offerings and

⁹³ Interrupted him.

⁹⁴ First Samuel 15:19. "HaShem" substituted for "the Lord."

⁹⁵ "אשר," meaning "which," is not used at the beginning of a sentence ; this implies that Saul had been speaking previously to where the text begins its quotation, thus indicating that Samuel must have interrupted Saul.

⁹⁶ First Samuel 15:20. "HaShem" substituted for "the Lord."

⁹⁷ First Samuel 15:22. "HaShem" substituted for "the Lord."

sacrifices? Rather, hearken to HaShem's command."⁹⁸ He (Samuel) meant, "Until now I denied what you said; that they took sheep and oxen to sacrifice them. I said that they only took it because of its quality. I said that even if we admit that they took it to sacrifice it, it is still a sin in any case. God is more pleased by how much one hearkens to His command than by 1,000 sacrifices and offerings." This was said as a question, "Does Hashem desire burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as hearkening to Hashem's voice?"⁹⁹ Indeed this is not so, as hearkening to the voice of Hashem and upholding His commandments is better than making sacrifices, hearkening to His words and carrying them out is better than sacrificing the fat of rams on the altar.¹⁰⁰ It is true because sacrifices are the repair of sins; but it is better not to sin (in the first place) than to sin and then to bring an offering in order to atone, just as the prophet Jeremiah said (in Jeremiah 7:22), "For I did not speak to your fathers, nor command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices, but this thing I commanded them, saying, 'Obey My voice,'"¹⁰¹ just as the great teacher, Rambam, says in chapter twenty-two paragraph three.¹⁰² They say "because rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is like idolatry and terafim."¹⁰³ Radak explains it according to the way of the Targum. **23:**His (Saul's) sin is like

⁹⁸ ibid. "HaShem" substituted for "the Lord."

⁹⁹ ibid. "HaShem" substituted for "the Lord."

¹⁰⁰ ibid. Abravanel does not quote directly but rather, he paraphrases the verse.

¹⁰¹ Cited correctly by Abravanel, except that he does add a "I" after the word "and I brought out" ie, "of my bringing out." This is not present in the Biblical narrative.

¹⁰² Moreh Nebuchim.

¹⁰³ First Samuel 15:23.

the sin of divination because the greatest sin is man turning his trust from the Blessed God. Thus rebellion is considered like the sin of divination.¹⁰⁴ After a man transgresses the command of Hashem, he (is like one who) removes his faith (in God) from himself and behold he is like one who transgresses with regard to this, just as the sin of the תרפים (terafim)¹⁰⁵ which is idolatry is the same as rebellion. This is the transgression of the word of Blessed Hashem and His commandment.¹⁰⁶ Ralbag explains that by use of conjuring, one is left without the influence of the active intellect. Thus, they say that conjuring is a sin. The deficiency of magic is the same as rebellion, since a man may perceive the goal of the words of HaShem but fail to carry them out because he lacks (God's) emanating spirit due to the deficiency (which overtakes him through participating) in sorcery.

(Compare the second half of First Samuel 15:23, "idolatry and terafim" with what it says in Zachariah 10:2, "for the terafim have spoken vanity.")¹⁰⁷, meaning that they were useless and embellished the truth. This is similar to (what is found in) Psalms 76:7, "he is put to sleep with chariot and horse." The "ו" does not really add anything here. Thus, "sin and idolatry" means

¹⁰⁴ Abravanel does not quote directly from the text here, however, his writing is very similar to the Biblical account. First Samuel 15:23 reads, "For rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft,..."

¹⁰⁵ This is a certain type of household idol.

¹⁰⁶ It seems that Abravanel is linking Saul's sin at Gilgal with the sin he commits when he has Samuel conjured up from the dead. The great sin which Saul has committed is that of a lack of faith. For Abravanel, once a lack of faith occurs, any sin is possible and indeed horrendous when committed. This is consistent with Abravanel's style. He is concerned with the thought process more than with the action. Just as he analyzes Samuel's behavior based on Samuel's great love for Saul, here Abravanel is analyzing Saul's behavior based on his feelings toward God.

¹⁰⁷ This notation was inserted by the ר"י.

"the sin of idolatry." In this way he (Samuel) told Saul that he (Saul) had sinned against (the Biblical proscription in Deuteronomy 9:2) "do not add or subtract from it." This is similar to witchcraft because in it one falls short (of observing the commandments) and to terafim because in this sin one adds (to the commandments). I think that the explanation is different. Saul claimed that he acted correctly when he brought Agag, the king of Amalek, alive. He perceived that it was appropriate for his own honor to announce a victory over them. (This was true as well with) what he took of the booty, for it was for the good purpose of sacrificing to Hashem. Thus Samuel retorted that neither good nor evil resulted from the deeds themselves, rather, (the sin resulted) from what he should have done to conform to the divine command. There are many things which are not evil in themselves, but only become that way when one fails to follow the divine command. For this reason (alone) sin and rebellion passed and connected to him (Saul) since he transgressed the command of Hashem. From this aspect his deeds were very evil against Hashem. Thus the saying, "because rebellion is like the sin of witchcraft."¹⁰⁸ This means that the sin and the rebellion which was witchcraft, was not because of the acts themselves since it should be good for a man to connect his intelligence to the spirits and devote himself to finding out what will happen in future days. This, after all, is what divination (witchcraft) is all about.¹⁰⁹ The sages Z"L say in The Chapter of Our Fathers, chapter two mishna eight, "Who is wise? One who foresees what is

¹⁰⁸ First Samuel 15:23.

¹⁰⁹ According to Abravanel, wanting to know the future is not necessarily a bad thing in itself. The reason why the text equates this sin with idolatry is because the Torah has specifically commanded not to pursue divination. The sin is in the act of transgressing a command, not in the act of wishing to know the future.

going to happen."¹¹⁰ However, the sin of divination is rebellion¹¹¹, meaning that whoever consults spirits rebels against the command of Hashem. Stubbornness is like idolatry and terafim¹¹², meaning, similarly, that the sin of idolatry and terafim is not that a man tries to learn the future, but rather that a man pursues rebellion, thinking, and transgressing the words of Hashem, the Blessed One, who has warned against divination and terafim. Thus, the matter is about the issue of accounting the good and the evil. Thus (Samuel said:) "Why do you reject the word of Hashem,"¹¹³ ie. either by doing what was good in one's own eyes or by doing evil, why transgress His word? According to what I have explained about this, the text did not lack in writing the "ו".¹¹⁴ For other commentators, they need to say that "the sin of divination is *like* rebellion," whereas I explain the text as it is written. Therefore, he (Samuel) goes on to state, "Why did you reject the word of Hashem?"¹¹⁵ Further, "For this reason He has rejected you from being the king over Israel."¹¹⁶ Not because of the deed itself, but rather because you caused yourself to transgress His command and word." It is possible also to explain the statement "He rejected you as a king"¹¹⁷ not a statement decreeing Saul's

¹¹⁰ This citation is very confusing. Sayings of the Fathers 2:9 has no such wording, while in 4:1 the famous quotation, "Who is wise? One who learns from all," is found. I am also puzzled as to the relevancy of this text.

¹¹¹ First Samuel 15:23. Abravanel adds the verb "to be" in the form of the word, "הוא."

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Abravanel points out that the Bible writes specifically that the sin is rebellion. Other commentators are tempted to understand the Bible as saying that the sin is "like" rebellion. If this were so, the Bible would have added the letter "ו" in order to indicate a comparative.

¹¹⁵ First Samuel 15:23.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ First Samuel 15:23.

punishment.¹¹⁸ But it follows from the fact of the sin mentioned. He (Samuel) said, "Why did you reject the word of Hashem? Truly, this was because of your proud soul. You thought that since you were king, you could do things not in accordance with the law. (You further thought) that it was possible to judge a matter not according to Torah which he (the prophet) will teach you."¹¹⁹ It did not say there that Hashem (at this time) removed him (Saul) from the kingship as it said after that. It only says here, "He rejected you as the king."¹²⁰ He (Samuel) refers back to the word of Hashem which was mentioned. It was as if he (Samuel) said, "You have rejected the word of Hashem, and treated it abominably because you are the king." Or he could be saying, "This is the manner in which you have acted during your reign." He (Samuel) means, "Since you (Saul) became king, you have rejected the word of Hashem." He already sinned at Gilgal before this and also rejected the word of Hashem there. This present rejection refers to the (divine) command and not (yet) to Saul (himself); they are consistently understood.¹²¹ Rabbi Joseph Albo's explanation in the Book of Dogmas (Sefer ha-Ikkarim, section 4, chapter 26) is too narrow, in order to clarify the text. He says that the sin was small in comparison to its stubbornness.¹²² The sin of rebellion can be equated to the sin of divination and like idolatry and terafim, which is real idolatry and is more serious than rebellion

¹¹⁸ Abravanel is addressing the problem that Saul has not yet received punishment.

¹¹⁹ This is a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 17:11.

¹²⁰ First Samuel 15:23.

¹²¹ The point Abravanel is making is that Saul has consistently demonstrated a disregard for the word of God throughout his reign as king and that God did not yet at this point remove Saul from the kingship.

¹²² The sin itself was insignificant compared to the stubbornness which caused the sin.

because it relates to the sin of stubbornness.¹²³ This addresses that which Saul said (reflecting his stubbornness), "I did not sin because I obeyed the voice of Hashem."¹²⁴ If this was so, the sin itself was like rebellion, but the stubbornness and argument which followed were as serious as if he had entreated idols¹²⁵. **24:**When Saul saw the true nature of Samuel's claim, he replied, "I have sinned because I transgressed the commandment of Hashem and Your words because I feared..."¹²⁶ He meant to say, "that which you told me I now understand; I did wrong." Why did he say, "the command of Hashem and Your words?"¹²⁷ This shows that Saul suspected Samuel of embellishing God's words. Saul thought that perhaps he did not really transgress the command of Hashem, but only the way in which Samuel reported them. Saul believed that Hashem's intent had already been fulfilled, and therefore he said, "the command of Hashem and Your words."¹²⁸ This tells us that Saul felt he had sinned against the words of Samuel and not against the words of Hashem. Saul said that even when he sinned, he was compelled to do so, and thus The Merciful One should pardon him. This was why he said, "because I feared the people, etc."¹²⁹ Samuel did not accept this excuse. **26**¹³⁰:Thus, (Samuel) said, "I

¹²³ In Abravanel's assessment, rebellion is equal in severity to divination, while stubbornness is equal to idolatry in its severity. Thus, both stubbornness and idolatry are a more serious sin than those of rebellion and divination.

¹²⁴ First Samuel 15:20.

¹²⁵ According to Abravanel, rebellion is the desire to sin and stubbornness is pursuing that desire. Thus, the latter is worse.

¹²⁶ First Samuel 15:24. Hashem substituted for the Lord.

¹²⁷ *ibid.* Abravanel wants his reader to pay close attention to the mention of the commandments from both the prophet and God.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Abravanel seems to have skipped twenty-five.

will not return with you for you have rejected Hashem, etc."¹³¹

This shows that his (Samuel's) words were full of anger. He meant to say, "You thought that the sin was against my words and not against the words of Hashem?! You are suspicious of me, thinking that I did not understand the divine command and that I added to His words. Thus, I will not return with you to bow down to Hashem since this matter is not like you think. You rejected the word of Hashem in suspicion. There was nothing added to the words. You did not understand that they were the words of Hashem coming through me. Because of this sin, you are rejected. How can I return with you to bow down before Him?" This is my point and also the matter of rebellion and stubbornness.

27: "And Samuel turned to leave, etc."¹³² It says that Samuel turned his face from him (Saul) in order to go and separate (himself) from Saul who then seized the corner of his cloak and ripped it. There are two sayings from Midrash Shmuel about this portion (Chapter 18). Some say that Samuel ripped Saul's cloak. This implies that whoever rips and tears the corner of a cloak, he will rule in place of the other. Thus, Saul conceded to David when David tore Saul's robe in the cave. In First Samuel 24:22, Saul said, "I know that you will rule as king."¹³³ (On the other hand), there are those who say that Samuel tore his own cloak, because this was the way of the righteous: they would tear their

¹³¹ First Samuel 15:26. Hashem substituted for the Lord. Abravanel left the letter "ה" off of the word, "מאסתי."

¹³² First Samuel 15:27.

¹³³ The conversation takes place in verse eleven and twenty. David shows Saul that he held in his hand the possibility to kill him (thought the sign of the cloak) but did not. Saul then relinquishes to David that he is the better person and then Saul says that he knows that David will surely be king.

cloaks at the time when their plantings (i.e. efforts) were not blessed¹³⁴. According to its plain meaning, it can be explained a third way; that when Samuel's face turned to go from Saul, Saul seized the corner of Samuel's cloak to request that he (Samuel) return him (Saul) to all his glory, and that he (Samuel) bow down in Gilgal because God was there at the tent of meeting.¹³⁵ In so doing, Saul ripped the corner of Samuel's cloak. When Samuel saw this, he understand it to be a sign of symbolic tearing. **28:**So Samuel said, "Hashem has torn the kingship of Israel from you this day and given it to another who is better than you."¹³⁶ He meant, "This is a sign to you that Hashem has already torn the kingship of Israel from you and has already given it to another who is better than you."¹³⁷ He (Samuel) said this about David, who afterwards became a companion of Saul in his battles and he (David) was more pleasing than him (Saul) before Hamakom^{138,139}

29:The Bible said, "and further the Glory of Israel, etc."¹⁴⁰ Rashi explains this according to the opinion of the Targum who puts this upon Saul, "If you think I can recover from my sin before Him, it will not be sufficient to take back the kingdom from someone to whom He has already given it because the Holy One Blessed be He, the Eternal One of Israel, will not fail to fulfill His promised word." Radak understands (that God says this) for

¹³⁴ ie, Saul.

¹³⁵ A tent of meeting was set up in Gilgal. According to Abravanel, Saul wanted Samuel to go there in order to petition God on Saul's behalf.

¹³⁶ First Samuel 15:28. HaShem substituted for Adonai.

¹³⁷ This seems to be an unnecessary change as there is no chronological problem that needs to be fixed here.

¹³⁸ Abravanel is using a popular euphemism for God, though one which he himself seldom uses.

¹³⁹ First Samuel 24:16-21.

¹⁴⁰ First Samuel 15:29.

the benefit of David. "If you think He might do evil to the one displacing me, it will not be so." It is not so because (God) had not promised Saul that He would pass the kingship to his sons, but he did swear so to David. There is a difficulty with both interpretations in that (they do not adequately explain) why HaShem could not change His mind. He could with regard to all of the evil that is predicted against Saul and with regard to the kingship of David, since He changed His mind about the reign of Saul. Why claim that He is not a Being who changes His mind?¹⁴¹

30:Saul here accepted his punishment and the (divine) decree (against him) but he said (to Samuel), "Indeed the kingship will be torn from me, yet do me honor now, I pray thee, among the elders of my people and among Israel."¹⁴² What I ask from you is worship of God." This is why he said to Samuel, "Return with me and I will bow down to Hashem..."¹⁴³ This was both an appropriate and precise worthy purpose, and so Samuel returned after Saul and went after him to honor the kingship. Saul bowed down to Hashem and gave Him thanks for His reward; for having dealt with him in mercy, and for defeating his enemies by the sword.

With respect to the matter of Saul's sin, why did he not receive repentance just as the Blessed God forgave David (may he rest in peace)? Many people have written a great deal about this. Rabbi

¹⁴¹ The rest of the discussion of verse twenty-nine has to do with the nature of God. Abravanel's main point is that God is not a man and thus can not be held to the standards of human beings. The discussion of Saul and Samuel continues in verse thirty.

¹⁴² First Samuel 15:30. The actual quotation reads, "Then he said, 'I have sinned: yet do me honor now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel.'" Abravanel's addition of "If indeed the kingship will be torn from me," is part of his intentional commentary and not a misquotation. Abravanel is making the point that Saul has finally accepted his sin and subsequently his punishment.

¹⁴³ *ibid.* HaShem substituted for the Lord.

Joseph Albo, in his Book of Dogmas (Sefer ha-Ikkarim in chapter 25, statement 4; page 125) has elaborated in sufficient manner. The principle which comes from his words, and from anyone else who has flexed his mind on this issue, comes to three points. In reference to them, I will remind you what the sages Z"L say in chapter two tractate Yoma (22b). Samuel (the Amora) said, "Saul's kingship should have been continued because Saul had no fault." According to the words of Rabbi Simon ben Yotzik, an official is not put over a community unless there is a box of insects behind him. This way, if he loses his way¹⁴⁴, you can turn to him and say, "look behind you." They allude to the wholeness of his integrity. For this reason there are many opinions on his sin and on what was done to him. One says, Saul sinned in the exercise of kingship, but David's sin was committed as a man and not as a king. The matter is like two scribes. The first made a false document, while the second one sinned in committing a sexual offense. There was no doubt that the one who sinned by lust committed a sin as a man and did not sin in his capacity as a scribe. In such a case, the first should get beaten and go back to his work. But one who commits a fallacy in the conduct of his profession by making a false document, should no longer return to his profession. Such was Saul's sin since he sinned in the manner in which a king should act during a war. Thus, Hashem tore away his kinship. David sinned only as a man and thus his punishment was in another manner and his kingship was not stripped from him. In the end, the Blessed God accepted his (David's) repentance, in that he returned to Hashem and to the throne in honor, and bequeathed it to his descendants. The second theory was that the

¹⁴⁴ Meaning, becomes too haughty.

repentance of David the king was complete in all of its particulars. He admitted his sin as it says in Psalms 32:5, "I will confess my transgression to Hashem." Saul hid his sin just as it says, "I did fulfill the word of Hashem and I obeyed the command of Hashem."¹⁴⁵ Already this is emphasized in the Midrash of the Psalms (Psalm 100) when they connected it to (Proverbs 28:12¹⁴⁶). One who covers his sin will not prosper, but he who leaves it behind will be an object of compassion. David did not excuse his sin; rather, he said, "I have sinned"¹⁴⁷ and it is always before me." Saul was always hiding his sin because (he said), "I was afraid of the people, etc.,"¹⁴⁸ since, "the people spared, etc."¹⁴⁹ The holding back from (full) repentance holds back the possibility thereof. David also repented sincerely and was not ashamed to express his sin. Rather he said in Psalms 51:16, "I will teach transgressors Your ways." Saul was worried about his honor just as he said, "Do me honor now, I pray, before the elders of my people."¹⁵⁰ He did not ask for pardon or forgiveness but rather for honor in the eyes of man, and therefore Samuel gave him what he asked for (he meant to say honor for the moment)¹⁵¹. What he did not ask for (forgiveness and repentance from his guilt forever)¹⁵² was not given to him. Saul also should have asked for a way to become a better king, but was afraid to ask for this. A

¹⁴⁵ First Samuel 15:20.

¹⁴⁶ In Proverbs it reports that when the evil rise, men hid themselves.

¹⁴⁷ Second Samuel 12:12.

¹⁴⁸ First Samuel 15:24.

¹⁴⁹ First Samuel 15:15. The verse reads, "the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen."

¹⁵⁰ First Samuel 15:30.

¹⁵¹ Note added by the ר"ף.

¹⁵² Note added by the ר"ף.

king should be angry at his cruel enemies and merciful to his servants. Saul was the opposite because he spared Agag his enemy and did not spare the priests at the city of Nob who were blameless. David did not do this when Moab¹⁵³ transgressed. He raked them over iron but saved his own people. He spoke before the angel in Second Samuel 24:17, "I have sinned and I have done wrong, but these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house." He (David) also appeared to be king in a second manner, in that he was good and rewarded kindness to the good ones among his people. If he did not do this, who would risk his soul for the sake of the king's honor? Saul did not do this. He was not good to David, who risked his life in the battle with the Philistines. He (Saul) pursued after him (David) in order to kill him. David did not do this, but rather, he commanded goodness to the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite because they assisted him when he fled from Absalom and escaped. Also he appeared to be king in a third way, that he was not a greedy king, but rather he shunned profit, just as is instructed in the Torah in Deuteronomy 17:17, "He shall not multiply for himself silver and gold." Saul was not like this, as is written about him that he pounded upon the booty. On the other hand, David divided the booty and said to all his people, "Behold a present for you of the spoil of the enemies of the Lord."¹⁵⁴

David also appeared to be king in a fourth manner, in that he was a man of valor and he did not fear other men. Saul said, "because

¹⁵³ In Second Samuel 8:20, David kills half of the men of Moav and makes the other half servants.

¹⁵⁴ First Samuel 30:26. Abravanel accidentally substitutes the words, "הא" for "הנה." In this story, David has sent all of the spoil of his successful battle against Amalek to the elders of Judah, whom the text describes as his friends.

I was afraid of the people and I obeyed their voice."¹⁵⁵ David was not like this, he was just and righteous to all his people and did not fear men and did not show preference. He also appeared to be king and a fifth way, in that he spoke the truth. No lie was found on his lips, while Saul lied to Samuel the prophet (when he said), "the people spared and the people took."¹⁵⁶ This was a lie, because he took it and not the people. However, when Nathan, the prophet, went to David he (David) only spoke the truth. David also appeared to be king in a sixth manner, in that (he was a) king (who) feared heaven, just as it says in Deuteronomy 17:20, "His heart not be lifted up above his brothers, and he not turn aside from the commandments, etc.." Saul turned from the commandments and transgressed the word of Hashem both at Gilgal and with regard to the war against Amalek. David said in Psalms 19:12, "Also by them (commandments) is a servant enlightened, etc." Behold, David repented completely while Saul repented insufficiently. These praiseworthy attributes apply to David (may he rest in peace) but Saul was lacking in them. Thus, Hashem tore the kingship over Israel from him (Saul) and gave it to David and to his seed forever.¹⁵⁷

34: "And Samuel went from Ramah and Saul, etc."¹⁵⁸ It mentions that after Samuel tore Agag to pieces, he went to his house in Ramah

¹⁵⁵ First Samuel 15:24.

¹⁵⁶ First Samuel 15:21.

¹⁵⁷ The remainder of the discourse on verse thirty-one is a continuation of the merits of David and the inadequacies of Saul as kings. Samuel is not mentioned, and therefore, the relationship between Saul and Samuel can not be explored until verse thirty-four. Verses thirty-two and thirty-three refer to the manner in which Samuel dealt with Agag and does not again mention Saul or the relationship between the two men.

¹⁵⁸ First Samuel 15:34.

and Saul went up to Saul's house in Gabeah Shaul.¹⁵⁹ This place is the same as Givat Benjamin which is mentioned above. It is not clear whether this is Saul's house, or the house of his father, or the house of someone who has the same name. **35:** "And Samuel never again saw Saul until the day of his death."¹⁶⁰ This is because Adonai changed His mind regarding Saul's kingship. Since Samuel loved Saul very much and hoped that by his hand he would be glorified, and since Saul was the first king who ruled over Israel, and since Saul was anointed by the hand of Samuel, Samuel could not bear to see Saul ever again because he was so pained over the evil which befell him. The Bible says "until the day he died."¹⁶¹ This implies that until the day of his death, Samuel did not see Saul, but after his death he saw him when the sorcerer called him up.¹⁶² Samuel spoke with Saul when Samuel came up. Let it not trouble you that Samuel saw Saul afterwards when he (Saul) went to Nayot and prophesied before him (Samuel) as it says "and he prophesied also before Samuel, etc."¹⁶³ It only intended to say that Samuel did not continue again to see Saul until the day of his death because he would not go to see Saul at his house, as he had done before this. At Nayot he saw him by accident since he (Saul) came to him (Samuel). It is also possible to say that he did not see him because he (Samuel) turned his face from him (Saul) (at Nayot).

¹⁵⁹ Abravanel is clarifying the actions of Saul and Samuel as reported in First Samuel 15:34.

¹⁶⁰ First Samuel 15:35. Abravanel accidentally misquotes this verse. In the text, "ולא יסוף" or "and he did not see" appears before the name "שמואל" or "Samuel." Abravanel switches these two words.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

¹⁶² First Samuel chapter twenty-eight.

¹⁶³ First Samuel 19:24.

SUMMARY AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY:

Abravanel finds several issues on which to comment in these verses. Saul was involved in a successful campaign against the Philistines. Samuel approached Saul, first reminding him that Samuel was the one who anointed him king, in order to instruct Saul to punish Amalek for what that nation did to Israel during the Exodus. Samuel commanded Saul to completely annihilate the Amalekites and everything belonging to them: soldiers, women, children, and all the livestock.

Saul obeys the commandment, leaving aside the war with the Philistines. He successfully wipes out all of Amalek, but he spares the king, Agag, and the choicest of the booty. God's voice came to Samuel that night, informing him that He regretted having ever made Saul king. The next day, Samuel awakes early in order to confront Saul. After Samuel finally finds Saul in Gilgal, Saul greets him with his boasts about successfully complying with God's words. Samuel interrupts him, pointing to the living ox and cattle and to Agag. He says, "You may look small to yourself, but you are the head of the tribes of Israel." He explains to Saul that Saul did not obey the Lord's command. Saul continues to argue with Samuel, blind to the evidence of his serious error. After a convincing dialogue, Saul finally admits his mistake and asks for forgiveness, requesting that Samuel return with him in order that Saul could bow down before the Lord. Samuel refuses. As Samuel turns to leave, Saul grabs the corner of Samuel's cloak, tearing it off. Samuel uses this opportunity to inform Saul that just as Samuel's cloak has been torn, so too has the kingship been

torn from Saul. Again, Saul begs Samuel to return with him. Samuel finally agrees.

The first issue which Abravanel addresses in this section, is Samuel's command to Saul with regard to issues of war. It seems that Samuel instructed Saul based on Samuel's own common sense. This is a problem for Abravanel who believes that prophetic advice is only reached through direct communication with God. Abravanel assures his readers that Samuel indeed received prophecy prior to his discussion with Saul concerning the battle of Amalek. This enhances the drama of Saul's transgression as it demonstrates that Saul did not only transgress the advice of a prophet, but a command given directly by God. Abravanel reiterates his opinion of the king's duties, "If there be a king over these people, he must tend to their honor and to the needs of Adonai." Saul's first priority should have been obeying the Lord's commands thorough this prophet - in order to properly serve the people Israel in a manner consistent with the will of God.

The second issue Abravanel raises can be found in his opening questions on chapter fifteen. He wonders why Saul was finally the one expected to exact punishment for the crimes of Amalek when all the leaders before him did not successfully annihilate Amalek. Abravanel's answer to his own question reflects another aspect of his theology. There are certain matters which he believes human beings can not comprehend. While the ultimate goal of humanity is to become one with God in knowledge and spirit, he purports that this can not be accomplished in our lifetime. Thus, he does not

find it problematic to leave questions unanswered, as he realizes that his human intellect is not formed in a manner in which he could possibly attempt to answer these queries. The command to destroy Amalek is one such matter. On this issue, he writes that humans should not "speculate into matters concerning what is above and what is below," and thus one should not, "speculate as to why God waited until now in order to exact punishment upon Amalek."

However, this does not stop others from speculating. In "The Rejection of Saul in the Perspective of the Deuteronomistic School," Fabrizio Foresti asks a similar question to that of Abravanel. Foresti's emphasis is dramatically different however, as he views the entire narrative as a prophetic redaction of the deuteronomist (the author of Deuteronomy). Foresti wonders why the deuteronomist needs to place Samuel in the midst of the continuing Amalek episodes.

Abravanel's third matter echoes with a theme which is evident each time Saul is punished. Abravanel raises the question of whether or not Saul's punishment was equal to his crime. In order to understand the true nature of Saul's sin, it is necessary to comprehend the implications of the command which Saul transgressed. Saul was command to perform מלחמה against Amalek, or complete destruction. In his thesis, "Rejection of Saul as King of Israel," Stephen Yonick points out that any war waged by the Israelites was considered a holy war, as God commands war and ensures victory. Because of the unique relationship between God and Israel, war was always sacred. Yonick also concludes that the

verb מָח means necessarily means the complete destruction of the enemy against whom war is being waged. This may not be accurate. The origin of the verb מָח first appears in Deuteronomy 3:6, where it reports that the Israelites performed this action against King Sihon of Heshbon and all who were in his towns. A problem arises when one continues to read verse seven where it states that all the cattle and spoil of the town were retained as booty. It is clear from this narrative that the verb itself means little more than waging a war which was commanded by God. The significance of Saul's sin lies in the instruction which follows God's command for מָח. Saul is commanded specifically not to spare anything living - human or animal - during his war against Amalek. The combination of this war being commanded with the verb מָח, which makes it a "holy war," and the commandment not to spare any living creature, creates a situation in which Saul must completely annihilate everything alive or he transgresses a direct command given him by God. Saul does not comply with God's wishes. He won the war against Amalek, killed all the men, woman, children, and most of the live stock. Saul committed his iniquity when he spared the choicest of the live stock and the king of Amalek, Agag. Abravanel will reach the same conclusion here as he did in chapter thirteen. Abravanel concedes that Saul did indeed wage a successful war against Amalek. He also points out that Saul believed he was acting out of love for God, as he transgressed the command of complete annihilation in order to use prized animals to sacrifice to God. Abravanel continues to conjecture as to how Saul pleaded his case. Saul explained that the people wanted to

spare the booty, he merely complied to their wishes. Saul would have been better off had he not tried to explain why he violated God's command. While Saul's greater sin was that he again transgressed the word of God, his secondary sin is that he tried to blame this transgression on the people over whom he reigned. According to Abravanel, Samuel points out that it was God who elected Saul as king and thus the people's wishes were irrelevant, especially when they were contrary to God's commandments. Thus, although Abravanel is able to empathize with Saul's motives, he nevertheless concludes that Saul was personally responsible for several infractions.

The fourth, and perhaps most fascinating issue raised by Abravanel in this chapter, has to do with the relationship between Saul and Samuel. Abravanel, being keenly interested in the motivations behind human behavior (what we now refer to as psychology), pays particular attention to the emotions of both Saul and Samuel: as they pertain to their motives, their feelings toward each other, and of their respective roles in the eyes of God. Abravanel first explains the motivations of Saul. He portrays Saul as a man who very much wanted to please both God, Samuel, and the people. He tried hard to act in a manner which he believed would please all three of these influences in his reign. Part of his problem, according to Abravanel, was that he tried too hard. If Saul were content to strictly follow the commandments given to him by God through Samuel, he would not have found himself in such difficult situations. Instead, he used his own intelligence to discover alternate paths to success. In this incident, Saul decided that

he should act as other kings act. Instead of killing Agag, king of Amalek (as Samuel had instructed him) he thought it would be far more favorable to spare Agag in order that Saul could parade him around; displaying the great might of the Israelites. In Abravanel's view, Saul was genuinely surprised that he was not praised for thinking of such a clever scheme. Saul also thought that it would be quite grand to spare the best of the sheep and oxen and sacrifice these to God. His intentions were rather noble, but once again, he would have been better off had he not tried to be innovative. Abravanel also understands Saul as a man of both weak will and poor self image. In verse sixteen, the text reads, "You may be small in your own eyes, but you are the head of the tribes of Israel." Abravanel interprets this phrase to mean two things. First, that Saul was too weak to stop the people from disobeying God's command. Second, that Saul still saw himself as "small" and did not view himself as the divinely anointed king over all of Israel. Through the mouth of Samuel, Abravanel argues that one who is chosen and anointed by God should have no fear of human beings. It seems that Abravanel feels that Saul never fully comprehended nor adjusted to his new power as king over Israel.

Abravanel also explores the thought process of Samuel. Here, Abravanel provides a moving account of a passionate and caring man, caught between what he knows to be right and his own reluctance to hurt one he loves. Using verse eleven, Abravanel illustrates the scene which took place in Samuel's home while Saul was busy transgressing God's commandments. Samuel was awakened by prophetic speech. He heard God bemoan the fact that He had

anointed Saul as king. Samuel was hurt by these words. First of all, he had thought that somehow he might be able to convince God to reverse the punishment inflicted on Saul at Gilgal. By hearing such strong regret in God's words, Samuel realized that God would never show such overwhelming compassion to Saul. Samuel also understood that Saul must have committed another crime in order to provoke God's strong displeasure. His pain over these two issues resulted from the fact that Samuel "loved Saul with all of his heart and with all of his soul. He loved Saul's beautiful appearance and beautiful vision. He believed Saul to be a man of great valor and mighty deeds. Samuel also felt a deep affection for Saul because it was by his own hand that Samuel had anointed Saul king over Israel." Abravanel is rare among the commentators in this powerful description of Samuel's feelings for Saul. Samuel not only loved Saul as a man, but felt personally invested in Saul's success. Though God chose Saul, it was Samuel who anointed him and gave him his first instructions with regard to Saul's reign. Abravanel speaks of Samuel as one might speak of father pained over the suffering which he knows will soon befall his only son. The second part of the Biblical verse states that Samuel "entreated the Lord all night." Abravanel points out that God never informed Samuel of the nature of Saul's sin. Samuel stayed up the entire night begging God not only to inform him of what Saul had done wrong, but also as an attempt to dissuade God from inflicting harsh punishment upon Saul. When morning came, Samuel could no longer stand the anticipation. He rose early and went out to find Saul.

Having now given his reader insights into the characters involved, Abravanel goes on to enhance the reader's understanding of the Biblical narrative. Saul saw Samuel, and not yet having realized that he committed any sin, went out to greet Samuel. According to Abravanel, Saul bragged about his actions, declaring that he fulfilled the commandment which God communicated to Saul through Samuel. It was at this moment that Samuel heard the noise of the sheep and the oxen. He suddenly realized what it was that Saul had done to cause such anger in God. As the text states, he cried to Saul, "then what is this sound of sheep in my ears and the voice of the cattle?" Saul, shocked at such a disapproving response, began to explain his reasons to Samuel (as mentioned above). Samuel listened as Saul recounted all of the foolishly independent decisions he had made. Samuel finally could no longer stand hearing Saul's weak justifications, when he knew that God had already decreed severe punishment against Saul. Abravanel again betrays his view of the monarchy at this point in his commentary. Though he is avidly anti-monarchy, he does believe that once a king is chosen and anointed by God, this king carries great honor. Apparently, the honor of a divinely chosen king is higher than that of one of God's prophets. Abravanel explains that though Samuel desperately wanted to tell Saul what had happened the night before, he first had to receive permission from Saul to speak. Thus, when the text states, "Stop, let me tell you what the Lord said," Abravanel interprets this to mean that Samuel first asked for permission to report God's words to Saul, with the understanding that Samuel was merely God's messenger, before he would interrupt Saul's explanations.

Following Samuel's recitation of God's words, an argument ensued between Saul and Samuel. Saul continued to try to explain how he had indeed acted in accordance with God's command while Samuel retorted by trying to show Saul the crime which he had committed. During the argument, Abravanel reveals yet another aspect of his theology. Samuel explained to Saul in verse twenty-two that God did not desire sacrifices, but rather He wanted His commandments obeyed. Abravanel comments that God is more pleased with "how much one hearkens to His command than by 1,000 sacrifices and offerings." He continues in his commentary to point out that it is true that sacrifice is necessary. Abravanel believes that sacrifices are one of the ways in which human beings can purify their souls in their attempt to move closer to God. However, in this commentary, he expresses that it is far better not to sin in the first place than to try to repair this sin by repenting. The argument between Saul and Samuel is concluded with Abravanel explaining the true nature of Saul's sin.

Not all commentators are so sympathetic to Saul, according to Pseudo-Philo¹⁶⁴, Saul's motivations were not as altruistic as Abravanel believed them to be. Saul spared Agag not because of any desire to act in the manner of other kings, but rather because he was offered a great amount of silver in order to do so. Pseudo-Philo¹⁶⁵ is also one of many commentators to enhance the ironic element of the story by expounding upon the events which occurred after Samuel discovered the fact that Agag was still

¹⁶⁴55:58.2-4.

¹⁶⁵55:58.3-4.

alive. God ordained that Agag and his wife should come together one final time before Samuel disposed of Agag. His wife would live only long enough to give birth to a son. In a final moment of dramatic irony, this son would be the very arms bearer responsible for the final blow of the sword that would kill Saul in the battle of the Philistines.¹⁶⁶ This act not only amplifies the drama of the narrative, but it serves another purpose as well. Agag, the king of the Amalekites, is traditionally believed to be the ancestor of Haman, the evil courtier who attempted to kill the Jews in Persia in Biblical times. In order for this to be true, Agag must live long enough to sire an heir. This same legend is chronicled in Seder Eliahu Rabba¹⁶⁷, the Alphabet of Ben Sira¹⁶⁸, and Targum Sheni¹⁶⁹. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer¹⁷⁰ contradicts the lasting effect of Amalek upon the children of Israel. According to Eliezer, Samuel prayed on the behalf of Israel and thus was able to destroy any power that the children of Agag might have against Israel. Pseudo-Philo, continuing in his discourse, does attribute to Samuel the type of affection for Saul which Abravanel believes he had. Instead of representing Saul's interest to God, as Abravanel believes Samuel did, Pseudo-Philo contends that following the slaying of Agag, Samuel reiterated his disapproval of the kingship. In an "I-told-you-so" manner, Samuel asserted his conviction that Israel sought after a king much too early in her development as a nation.

¹⁶⁶ First Samuel 31:4-6. In the Biblical narrative, the unnamed arms bearer was too intimidated to slay Saul as Saul had requested. The midrash reports, though, that the man actually did issue the final blow to Saul in order that he not suffer from his self-inflicted wounds.

¹⁶⁷ 20, 115 and 21, 117.

¹⁶⁸ 11c.

¹⁶⁹ 4.13.

¹⁷⁰ pg.388

Other commentators, however, do believe that Samuel was committed to helping Saul. According to Makkot¹⁷¹, Genesis Rabba¹⁷², Midrash Shmuel¹⁷³, and Yelammedenu in Likkutim¹⁷⁴, Samuel successfully interceded on Saul's behalf after the Amalekite war. (Abravanel differs in that he does not view Samuel as having had any impact on God's mercy.) Samuel was able to spare Saul an early death, as he prayed that God not destroy Saul before Samuel's own days diminish. Samuel did not want to see his handiwork destroyed before his eyes. Thus, God was placed in a bind. He wanted to destroy Saul, but in order to do so, he realized that he must first destroy Samuel. If Samuel died in his prime, God worried that the people would speak badly of him. Thus, Samuel successfully persuaded God to spare Saul's life.

Abravanel is again concerned with the sin and punishment of Saul. Abravanel's pervasive concern with obedience can be detected in verses 23-26. In verse 23, Samuel continues his chastisement of Saul's failure to destroy Agag and the entire lot of booty. He speaks almost cryptically when he says, "For rebellion is like the sin of divination. Defiance, like the sin of terafim." Samuel then delivers the final blow, "Because you have rejected the Lord's command, He has rejected you as king." Saul is obviously distraught by this harsh proclamation, and finally admits that he has sinned. As will be shown, Abravanel pays particular attention

¹⁷¹123b.

¹⁷²85.1.

¹⁷³14, 90-91.

¹⁷⁴90b-91a.

to the wording Saul chooses when he asks for forgiveness. Saul first admits that he transgressed God's command, then that he disobeyed Samuel's instruction, and then he reiterates his excuse that he was afraid of the people. He asks Samuel to return with him in order that Saul may beseech the Lord. Samuel refuses, but while doing so, reiterates the devastating news that "you have rejected the Lord's command, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel." Abravanel will again show his uncanny ability to read the character's emotions in this final verse. Through profound insight, Abravanel will suddenly reveal an important side of Samuel which has been previously hidden.

Using verse 23, Abravanel illustrates that Saul's sin was not the action itself, but rather the assumptions and underlying lack of faith which led to his actions. In verse 23, Samuel compares rebellion to divination and defiance to terafim. This comparison seems out of place, and thus lends itself to interpretation. What was Samuel's intended message in this comparison? According to Abravanel, Samuel was explaining that Saul's sin was one of the worst, as it was equal in weight to that of idolatry. First, Abravanel explains that the desire to know the future is not necessarily a sin, despite the fact that Samuel equates rebellion with divination. It is natural for a human being to crave insight into the days yet to come. The problem with wanting to indulge in this craving is that it has been specifically prohibited by Hashem. One cannot know why the prohibition exists, but the fact that it should be enough to prevent anyone from trying to divine the future. Thus, if one begins to follow one's curiosity, one

has committed a sin of rebellion, and not of divination. It is the act of transgression for which one is guilty and not the pursuit of divination itself. According to Abravanel, this is why Samuel says, "For rebellion is like the sin of divination." One is held accountable for the sin of rebellion when one desires to pursue divination. The remainder of Samuel's words, "Defiance, like the idolatry of terafim," refers to one who acts on one's desire to pursue divination. One has rebelled by wanting to know the future through divination, but one is defiant when one continues in this pursuit. Thus the latter part of the verse refers to the more severe crime. One rebels by thinking, "it would be nice to know what will happen in a few months." One is defiant when one then tries to discover the answer knowing divination is prohibited. According to Abravanel, idolatry (referred to as tarafim) is far worse a crime than divination, just as defiance is far worse a crime than rebellion. Thus, Abravanel concludes that Samuel's words, "For rebellion is like the sin of divination, Defiance, like the sin of terafim," mean, "Saul, you were already in enough trouble when you wanted to learn the future. For this, you would be punished for rebellion only. But you were stubborn, and persisted in your pursuit of learning the future. You acted on your desire, and now your sin is much worse. You will now be held accountable for the act of defiance, a much more severe transgression."

After successfully explaining the meaning of Samuel's statement, Abravanel runs into a problem. Abravanel will later illustrate that Saul's sickness is a result of realizing that God has indeed

ripped the kingship from him. In order for this shock to be as profound as Abravanel needs it to be, Abravanel must somehow explain why Samuel's statement that God has rejected Saul as king does indicate to Saul that he will lose the kingship. The problem is obvious, but Abravanel's solution is not. He simply states that when Samuel says, "He (the Lord) has rejected you as king," Samuel only means to say that God has not been happy with Saul's career as king, so far. Samuel implies that God has rejected Saul's past actions, and is not making any statement as to God's future plans. This way, Abravanel is able to preserve the drama of rejection for his later commentary.

In verse 24, Abravanel provides one of the most dramatic insights into Samuel's character. Saul finally admits that he has sinned, but he does in an interesting manner. He says that he sinned "because [he] transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words." Abravanel immediately picks up on the duality of this verse. Why did Saul distinguish between God's command and Samuel's words? Because Saul clearly did not accept that Samuel's words were the exact duplicate of God's. If Saul believed that Samuel was truly the mouthpiece of God, he would not have needed to distinguish between a command from God and words from Samuel. For Abravanel, this in itself is problematic. Abravanel absolutely believes that the prophet speaks directly for God, neither adding nor subtracting from God's own speech. Thus, Abravanel again reveals his low opinion of this weak king. At this point, however, Abravanel elaborates on Samuel's feelings. Saul makes the request that Samuel return with him to worship God.

The text merely states that Samuel refused. Abravanel believes that this refusal is quite telling. Samuel was incredibly angry with and hurt by Saul. He only refused to follow Saul because he was so incensed that Saul rejected his abilities as a prophet. Abravanel goes so far as to say that Samuel's "words were full of anger." He attributes Samuel as declaring to Saul, "You thought that the sin was against my words and not against the word of Hashem!? You are suspicious of me, thinking that I did not understand the divine command and that I added to His words. Thus I will not return with you to bow down to Hashem since this matter is not like you think." Abravanel's report of Samuel's words continue. Abravanel's understanding of Saul and Samuel's relationship is intense. Samuel obviously cared so much about Saul that he was capable of feeling intensely hurt by Saul's rejection. Samuel's prophetic calling was his entire life, the most important aspect of his being. Gradually, Saul became the most important human being in Samuel's life, as Samuel's task revolved around his relationship with Saul. As Abravanel has already shown, Samuel also developed a deep love for Saul as a human being. How devastating it must have been for Samuel to realize that this man, to whom he was completely bound, rejected the most valued aspect of Samuel's being. In this light, verse 35 becomes the pivotal tragic moment of the entire book. Samuel will never again see Saul. Abravanel has shown, in his unique ability to enhance the character's as human beings with real emotions, that Samuel was too hurt to maintain any sort of relationship with Saul. How very sad, and how very real.

In verse twenty-seven, when Samuel turned to leave, the corner of his cloak was ripped. The text does not clearly state who ripped whose cloak. After summarizing two different opinions on the matter, Abravanel offers what seems to be his original opinion, though other commentators before him have reached the same conclusion. Abravanel believes that in desperation, Saul grasped the corner of Samuel's cloak, hoping that Samuel would have pity on him and return with him to Gilgal where the two could bow down together before God. When Saul grasped Samuel's cloak, Samuel was still moving, and the corner was torn from the cloak. Abravanel explains that Samuel took this as a sign that the kingdom would be torn from Saul. In the Biblical narrative, Samuel uses the opportunity of his torn cloak in order to explain to Saul that he lost the kingship. This proclamation seems to be impromptu. If this is so, then Samuel made a declaration without first receiving prophecy. It is unusual that Abravanel, who generally attributes any statements on the part of the prophet as stemming directly from God, does not embellish the text in order to rectify this problem. Though, God did speak, albeit incompletely, to Samuel in First Samuel 15:10-11 and Samuel earlier prophesied on the lack of continuity in Saul's reign in First Samuel 13:14.

Abravanel uses the same verse, First Samuel 15:30, to both exonerate and condemn Saul. First, Abravanel seems to move from his harsh judgment of Saul to a more compassionate one. According to Abravanel, Saul at this point, finally understood the true nature of his sin and willingly accepted his punishment. Abravanel interprets the statement, "yet do me honor now, I pray

thee, among the elders of my people..." to mean that Saul wanted Samuel to return with him in order to facilitate Saul's worship of God. Because this request was not only appropriate, but in Abravanel's perspective, the first worthy request Saul made of Samuel, Samuel agreed. Saul worshipped before God by giving thanks both for God's mercy towards Saul's person and for fortitude in Saul's military pursuits. Abravanel then uses First Samuel 15:30 to back away from his compassion toward Saul. Abravanel uses this verse in order to accuse Saul of being interested merely in momentary honor. Through a comparison with David's response after his sin, Abravanel points out that Saul neither asked for forgiveness nor ever fully admitted to his sin whereas David, when he understood the nature of his sin, fully and publicly admitted to having transgressed. This comment is not an inconsistency in Abravanel's comments. It is merely a matter of the way in which Abravanel spaces his commentary. He first reports that Saul asked Samuel to return with him in order that Saul could worship God. Samuel viewed this as an appropriate response considering the situation. At this point, Abravanel does not expound on Saul's attitude toward his guilt. It is only later, during the discussion comparing the two kings, that Abravanel elaborates. He explains that the reason why Saul was punished so severely for his sin while David was not, was because Saul could never accept responsibility for his actions.

Abravanel continues to amplify the difference between David and Saul. He does so by demonstrating seven ways in which David exhibited his superior disposition toward the kingship. In order

to fully appreciate the meaning of this discussion, it would be worthwhile to delve into a deeper understanding of why Abravanel maintains such a strong preference for the character David. The surface reasons may seem obvious. As we have already seen, Abravanel did not approve of the kingship as an institution in general. However, if Israel must have a monarchy, Abravanel held very strict standards to which he measured a king. The most important trait that a king must have is obedience and faith; faith in God and in the prophet as His mouthpiece, and obedience to the Torah and to the personal commands given him by the prophet. Abravanel also believed that there exists among the human race superior and inferior people. Upon examination of Saul's three major crimes, one finds that they violate Abravanel's most precious values. In Nob, Saul slaughtered the priests of the Lord (who are, according to Abravanel, the single most superior group of people who exist). In Gilgal, Saul exhibited a lack of faith in the prophet's words. With the battle of Amalek, Saul demonstrated a disobedience toward the direct commands of God. While Abravanel did expect the king to maintain a high moral standard, he did not view David's sin with Bathsheba nearly as devastating as those of Saul. David transgressed commands which were given in the Torah, and not commandments which were directed to him personally by God. David also sinned privately, while Saul's evil actions were carried out as king of the Israelites.

There also may be a personal reason for Abravanel's preference toward David. Abravanel enjoyed a successful life as a courtier to King Alfonso V in Portugal between the years of 1478 and 1481.

Abravanel greatly loved this king, and believed him to be a man of integrity, acting in the best interest of his country and his subjects. In 1481, King Alfonso V died. His son, Joao II, succeeded him to the throne. Abravanel was not nearly as fond of this king, in fact, his opinion of him was the opposite than that he held of Alfonso. Not only did Abravanel personally dislike Joao, but he feared for the status of the Jews under his reign. During the early reign of Joao, Abravanel lived in the countryside with his family. These were years of plague. In an attempt to keep his family safe from the plague ravaging the country, Abravanel moved often in an effort to avoid the spreading calamity. His absence from the Court, combined with Joao's ominous policies against the Jews, placed Abravanel in a precarious personal position. He was also in danger due to who his allies were. For years, Abravanel had enjoyed the close friendship with Ferdinand, the Duke of Braganza. Not only was Abravanel an intimate advisor to the Duke, but the Duke most likely helped Abravanel maintain his position in Court despite the death of Alfonso V. Relations between Joao II and the Duke of Braganza, however, were quite strained. This strain would change Abravanel's life forever, and in my opinion, created in Abravanel immense sympathy for King David.

After not having been present at Court for an extended period, and worrying about the security of his position, Abravanel received a summons via royal messenger on May 30, 1483. While journeying to the capital, Abravanel rested in Arrayolos, quite close to the Court. Here, Abravanel learned from friends that the day before

Duke Braganza had been arrested by the king. Abravanel also learned that he himself was suspected of being a co-conspirator in a treasonous plot. The king was most likely using this accusation in order to both purge his Court of opponents and to acquire the great wealth of his victims. Abravanel realized that he must flee from Portugal, leaving both his family and his fortune. He successfully escaped to Segura, Castile. There he was able to send warning to his family, and also learn of the continued increasing effort to defame his character and his position. It was there, in exile; that he proceeded to write the majority of his commentaries. Abravanel arrived in Castile at the very beginning of June. He wrote his commentary on Samuel between the months of November and March.

Early in his career as the designated though unknown king of Israel, David enjoyed a honored position in Saul's Court. He was much relied upon by the king in order to provide soothing music which seemed to alleviate Saul's strange condition. David was honored among the people and successful in both family and career; much like Abravanel's time in Portugal. David's life was greatly changed due to the outside force of another's affliction. Saul became a different type of man, a king changed by paranoia, a paranoia which caused him to pursue David. At first, David's friendship with Jonathan aided David in maintaining a position in Court. However, as Saul began to be suspect of all those around him, even Jonathan, Saul's own son, could not help David. After being urged to flee, David stole into the night and escaped the fate which Saul wished upon him. How could Abravanel help but

identify with David's story? Here are two men; both leaders of their people, both enjoying honored positions in the courts of kings, both involved in close friendships with important members of the court, and both were turned into hunted men, fleeing for their lives, because of the whim of an evil king.

As Abravanel analyzes the differences between David and Saul, two analogies are apparent. David reminds Abravanel of both Alfonso V, an ideal king, and of himself when he fled from Joao II. Saul must then represent Joao II; a man suspicious of his own Court, a man who was "greedy...bloody...deceitful...and tyrannical."¹⁷⁵ Thus, when God tore the kingship from Saul and gave it David, Abravanel must have felt some sense of justice.

The seven ways in Abravanel believes that David manifested his superiority are: 1)David sinned in his role as a man and not as king and completely repented for his actions, 2)he rewarded those who were loyal to him, 3)he was not a greedy king, 4)he was strong and brave, 5)he spoke honestly, 6)he feared the heavenly creatures, and 7)David was given a monarchy which was guaranteed to be inherited by his descendants. Psalms Rabbah¹⁷⁶ also compares the two kings, reiterating Abravanel's first point. Psalm 100 reads, "He that covers his transgressions shall not prosper." According to Tehilim Rabbah, this verse refers to Saul, who lost his kingship to David on account of the fact that he tried to excuse his sins while David was quick to confess his wrongdoing.

¹⁷⁵ From Abravanel's commentary on Joshua and Second Samuel and his work Passover Sacrifice as translated by Netanyahu.

¹⁷⁶ One Psalm 100.

Berakot¹⁷⁷, Erubin¹⁷⁸, Yoma¹⁷⁹, and Alphabet of Ben Sira¹⁸⁰ add one more way in which David revealed his worthier constitution toward the kingship. David was kind and compassionate to children, where Saul was severe.

In verse thirty-five, Abravanel's uncanny ability to analyze the emotions of the characters is once again demonstrated. The text explains that after Samuel and Saul left each other, following the matter of Agag and the spared booty, "Samuel never again saw Saul until the day of his death." According to Abravanel, this was because of the powerful love which Samuel felt for Saul. Samuel cared so much about Saul, that it pained him to the core of his being to see the evil that he knew was in store for Saul. Samuel could not bare to see Saul suffer so, and thus never again saw him until "the day of his death." This theme is also expounded on by other commentators. Makiri¹⁸¹, Ta'anit¹⁸², Yerushalmi Berakot¹⁸³, and Midrash Shmuel¹⁸⁴ elaborate that the day of Samuel's death was timed in order that he die around the time that Saul's death was decreed. According to these commentaries, this was in order that "the planter would not survive the destruction of his planting." As already read mentioned, Abravanel was also sensitive to the parental feelings that Samuel had toward Saul. Numbers Rabbah¹⁸⁵,

¹⁷⁷ 12b.

¹⁷⁸ 53b.

¹⁷⁹ 22b.

¹⁸⁰ 3b.

¹⁸¹ PS51 282

¹⁸² 5b.

¹⁸³ 4, 7b.

¹⁸⁴ 25, 122.

¹⁸⁵ 3.8.

however, attributes the timing of Samuel's death to Hannah's prayer. She had pledged that Samuel would act as a prophet of the Lord all the days of his life. According to Numbers Rabbah, once Saul died, Samuel would no longer be able to carry out this task. Thus, Numbers Rabbah does not believe that David and Samuel will continue the same association shared between Saul and Samuel. Without Saul, Samuel was no longer needed as a prophet. Thus, Hannah inadvertently shortened Samuel's life with her prayer for a son.

Abravanel is also able to rectify a potential inconsistency in the text. Samuel actually did see Saul before his death. Saul fell in a prophetic spell before Samuel at Nayot¹⁸⁶. Abravanel corrects this by offering a different understanding of either the passage which states that Samuel never again saw Saul or the passage which describes their meeting at Nayot. When the text states that "Samuel never again saw Saul until the day of his death," Abravanel explains that what the text really refers to is the fact that Samuel no longer purposely went to Saul's house in order to see Saul. Abravanel also suggests alternately that when in Nayot, Samuel turned his head away from Saul, thus Samuel indeed never again saw Saul until after he died.

Hidden within this commentary, there is a section which seems to be autobiographical. When one reads the second part of Abravanel's commentary on verse 26 in light of his own life, one can not help but feel a profound sense of sadness. Abravanel seems to be speaking less about the characters in the Bible and

¹⁸⁶ First Samuel 19:24.

more about the characters he has encountered in his own life. Abravanel begins a new paragraph in the middle of his commentary on verse 26. In it, he shifts his discussion from Saul and Samuel to Saul and David. He begins his discourse by asking why Saul did not receive forgiveness for his sin while King David did. After summarizing and dismissing the commentaries who came before him, Abravanel launches into a lengthy discussion about the merits of a king. He compares the six ways in which David was a better king than Saul. As has already been explained, Abravanel wrote his commentary on Samuel shortly after he escaped from the oppressive and dangerous reign of Joao II. Much like David's escape from Saul, Abravanel fled to Castile, barely saving the life of himself and his family. The great sadness for Abravanel was that his tenure in Portugal had been marked by a successfully career in close relations with a king, King Alfonso V. It was only because Alfonso V died leaving Joao II in charge that Abravanel was required to make his escape. Thus, while writing on the Book of Samuel, Abravanel was in the midst of mourning his bad fortune in losing one good king and being required to deal with a bad king. The seven attributes which Abravanel discusses in First Samuel 15:26 could apply directly to King Alfonso V and King Joao II, though they are expressed in the language of King David and King Saul.

Four of Abravanel's six points seem to speak directly to a comparison of Kings Alfonso V and Joao II. Abravanel's second point regarding David's propensity toward the kingship concerns the way in which he treated his subjects. Abravanel demonstrates

that, unlike Saul, David rewarded those who were good to him and punished those who were his enemies. For Abravanel, this must be the most important comment in this particular discourse. Alfonso V treated Abravanel quite well, rewarding his loyalty with matched respect and admiration. Alfonso turned to Abravanel for financial, political, and personal advice. It could even be argued that Abravanel was able to use his good relations with Alfonso in order to benefit the Jews. Joao II, on the other hand, paid no heed to the good service of Abravanel. When discussing Saul's inferior traits, Abravanel writes that despite David's good service, "He pursued after him in order to kill him." How easily these pronouns could apply to Joao and Abravanel! The third reason why Abravanel admired David was because of his lack of greed. Natanyahu¹⁸⁷ believes that one of the traits Abravanel most despised in Joao was his greed. Alfonso did not appear to be this way. Abravanel's comment on Saul's greed can be seen as a lament for the lost days of Alfonso V. The fourth comment Abravanel makes regarding David's character has to do with his bravery. It has already been discussed how uncomfortable Abravanel was with Saul's excuse that he sacrificed the booty because of the demand of the people. Abravanel need not look to the Bible for an only example of the danger of a king who listens to the people instead of to God. Joao bowed to the pressure of the Jewish enemies in the court, and especially to the enemies of Abravanel, when he attempted to arrest Abravanel for conspiracy. Alfonso, however, was a man who listened to his heart and instinct. When he brought the Jews before him in a debate with Christians, he listened with intellectual curiosity and was not swayed by any pressure to

¹⁸⁷ Natanyahu, 20

convert the Jews. Abravanel also believes that David's honesty was in sharp contrast with Saul's deceit. So, too, did Alfonso and Joao stand at opposite ends. In his introduction to his commentary on Joshua, Abravanel describes Joao as "deceitful." Alfonso, on the other hand, held fast to his "moral fervor"¹⁸⁸ and would not lie.

¹⁸⁸ Natanyahu, 20

V. First Samuel Chapter Sixteen

Verses One through Twenty-two

TRANSLATION OF ABRAVANEL COMMENTARY:

1: The text mentions that the Lord said to Samuel, "for how long will you grieve."¹⁸⁹ He (God) meant, "How is possible that you do not see that the time for anointing is growing long. Now it is enough mourning. Therefore, go fill your horn with oil."¹⁹⁰

Behold, this (was) the horn appropriate for use by the prophets to anoint a king. It was placed at the tent of meeting with a vessel of oil for the sake of anointing, as it is said of Solomon (First Kings 1:39), "And Zadok took the horn of oil from the Tent."¹⁹¹

The text says "your horn"¹⁹² because it was his (Samuel's) since he was a prophet. Even though it mentions a correct anointing procedure by the hand of Zadok the priest, Nathan the priest was standing by (to give it to him)...^{193/194}

2: Behold what Samuel said, "How can I go, if Saul hears he will kill me?"¹⁹⁵ It is my own understanding that this was a false excuse. Samuel did not

¹⁸⁹ First Samuel 16:1.

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Abravanel forgets to add the word "הכהן" or "priest" after Zadok's name. Abravanel cites this passage because it shows that there is a horn with oil readily available at the tent of meeting. In this particular instance, Zadok is anointing Solomon king.

¹⁹² First Samuel 16:1. Abravanel emphasizing the second person possessive suffix.

¹⁹³ Abravanel is explaining the inconsistency he creates for himself. He initially explains that Samuel had access to the horn because of his status as a prophet. He uses the First King's quotation to show that this horn was stationed outside the tent of meeting. He then must explain, however, how it was that Zadok had access to the horn despite the fact that he was not a prophet. Abravanel explains this by saying that the horn was given to Zadok by a prophet and then used to anoint Solomon.

¹⁹⁴ Abravanel now continues to explain the correct procedure for anointing a king. As this has no relevancy to the topic of this thesis, we continue with Abravanel's commentary on verse two. Abravanel does point out at the end of his commentary on verse one that only David and Solomon were anointed with the "divine" oil.

¹⁹⁵ First Samuel 16:2.

want to anoint another man while Saul was living. This act was bad in his eyes and he was bitterly sad that he must destroy his own creation and do so by his own hand.¹⁹⁶ It was in order to avoid going that he said, "How can I go, if Saul hears he will kill me?"¹⁹⁷ Samuel knew that God was not going to abandon His abiding kindness which guarded Samuel. He also knew that Saul would not put his hand against a prophet of the Lord. Samuel also knew that Saul loved Samuel very much, he was reverent to him and honored him more than his father, so how could he kill him?¹⁹⁸ But without doubt this (excuse) was intended to stay his hand - even though (he was aware) that the Blessed God knows the thoughts of man. The prophets chose and requested many times that they not have to carry out their directions before the Holy One Blessed be He. About this matter Moses said to our Lord (Exodus 6:30) "so how will Pharaoh heed me?"¹⁹⁹ He knew that the word of Hashem would stand, but he did not want to go. Instead, he chose such a plea so that, he need did not (openly) say, "I do not want to go." Because of this Hashem responded here²⁰⁰, "Take a heifer with you, etc."²⁰¹ He responded to his (Samuel's) question with a pertinent

¹⁹⁶ According to Abravanel, Samuel was grieved because he anointed Saul with his own hand and by his own hand, as well, the kingship will be taken from Saul when Samuel anoints another.

¹⁹⁷ First Samuel 16:2.

¹⁹⁸ According to Abravanel, Samuel's remark had nothing to do with fear of actually being killed. First of all, he knew that God would not allow any harm to come to him. Secondly, he knew that Saul would never injure a prophet of God. And thirdly, he knew that Saul loved him too much to harm him. The statement, therefore, was made as a desperate attempt to avoid anointing someone other than his beloved Saul.

¹⁹⁹ This takes place when Moses is first asked to represent the Israelites and their God to Pharaoh. He explains that he is slow of speech and cannot speak to Pharaoh. God responds that He has made Aaron a prophet for Moses, with Moses acting like a god (giving the orders to Pharaoh through Aaron).

²⁰⁰ Since Samuel lied about his reasons for not wanting to go, God maintained the dialogue on that level. He knew perfectly well why Samuel did not want to go, however He responded to Samuel the same manner in which Samuel spoke to Him; vaguely and indirectly.

²⁰¹ First Samuel 16:2.

answer, even though He knew that in fulfilling Hashem's mission no harm would befall him (Samuel). Rather, He spoke according to what was said and implied by the surface meaning of his (Samuel's) words.²⁰² The sages Z"L said that one cannot rely on a miracle happening (Kedushin chapter 1 page 36b and Yevamot chapter 6 page 65b). From Samuel they (the rabbis) prove that one should not test Hashem our God. Thus for them, Samuel truly feared Saul and the Lord advised this strategy in order to protect Samuel and not let him rely upon a miracle.²⁰³ Yet, you see that this is not the tradition among the prophets; that they are always fearful. The Holy One Blessed be He promises (to protect them) and does not teach them strategies to escape, so why did He do this to Samuel? The truth is just as I said. Basically, in the matter of the sacrifice, He commanded that he (Samuel) should go there in order to sacrifice. (This is because) at the time while the tent of meeting was at Nob and in Giba, there were sacrifices and burned incense everywhere. Thus, it is apparent that Samuel said many times, "HaShem told me to sacrifice in a given place on behalf of the people there or to give thanks to Hashem for something." Therefore, he now said that he would sacrifice to God under the same circumstances. (God) commanded Samuel to go to Jesse with the sacrifice so that there He would reveal to him (Samuel) whom to anoint and what to do then. (God) did not reveal David's name

²⁰² Abravanel is explaining why Samuel did not follow the exact words of God. It is because he knew that God was only speaking on a level consistent with Samuel's dialogue. Samuel knew what God's command really was, and even thought God commanded that Samuel bring a heifer, He only meant this as a way of forcing His hand. If God told Samuel to bring a heifer in order to sacrifice it, then Samuel no longer had the argument that Saul might find out his mission and kill him. God forced Samuel to give up his manipulative attempts at avoiding performing God's will.

²⁰³ For the rabbis, it was not possible for a miracle to occur before the Temple in Jerusalem was built. Samuel was also provided a way to proceed where he did not have to rely upon God to save him from Saul.

to him immediately, in order that he might see all the sons and know that Hashem did not chose them, but rather He chose the youngest of them all.²⁰⁴

14: "And the spirit of Hashem was lifted from Saul, etc."²⁰⁵ The scripture writes that immediately upon David being anointed king, the spirit of the Holy God gripped him, and exactly at that time the spirit of Hashem fled from Saul. It is my opinion that the reason for this²⁰⁶ is that this "spirit" is not made up of only the spirit of valor, which is found and shared by many men, but there is also the spirit of the great heart, the spirit of justice, and the spirit of passion which, as fitting, belong uniquely to the king of Israel in particular. It is impossible that (this spirit) could be found in the two of them at one time.²⁰⁷ Therefore, when David was anointed king, immediately (the spirit of the Lord) gripped him. Since it is impossible that the two kings share one crown (Hulin chapter 3 page 60b), immediately the spirit of Hashem which is connected with (being) king, fled from Saul. This is why it does not mention this (loss of spirit) earlier, at the time of

²⁰⁴ Abravanel's commentary until verse fourteen has more to do with David than with the relationship between Saul and Samuel.

²⁰⁵ First Samuel 16:14. HaShem substituted for the Lord. The second word in Abravanel's quotation is missing its final letter, a "ה," rendering the word "סר" instead of "סרה."

²⁰⁶ Abravanel is offering an explanation as to why the spirit is reported as having left Saul yet he is able to maintain a strong level of "valor."

²⁰⁷ Abravanel is troubled by the seeming contradiction in the text. On the one hand it says that when David was anointed king, the spirit of God fled from Saul. On the other hand, however, one can see that Saul remained capable of ruling as king for quite some time. Abravanel explains this by qualifying the Biblical term "spirit." For Abravanel, this spirit is not just a singular spirit of God, but rather a unique combination of God's spirits which enable one to be king of Israel. The spirit of valor remained with Saul, and Abravanel points out that this spirit is not unique, in fact many men have it. However, the combination of the spirits of heart, justice, and passion fled from Saul when David received them, changing David into the king of Israel in the place of Saul. It is interesting that Abravanel understands the ascent to the throne as a complete change in one's character.

Saul's sin, but only (later) after David's anointing. Indeed, the text says, "and an evil spirit from Hashem began to terrify him."²⁰⁸ It is possible to attribute this to Blessed Hashem, (insofar as He) is the first cause in all things.²⁰⁹ Just as our great teacher, Rambam, says in (Moreh Nebuchim) chapter 2:48. Or, this was a result of his (Saul's) sin and for this reason it says that this is from Hashem.²¹⁰ Indeed, what was this evil spirit? Behold, the commentators do not say anything about this matter. You see that at one point it is written "an evil spirit,"²¹¹ while at another point it is written "a spirit from God,"²¹² and at yet another point it is written, "an evil spirit of God."²¹³ The wise ones among the Christians comment on this. They say that a demon entered him (Saul), and that David's playing was like prayer and therefore David could bring the demon out from his (Saul's) body with help from the Lord. But David's playing alone could not do this. Others say that Saul suffered from a dark natural sickness. The playing brought Saul happiness and strength, and moved him from one (mental) state to another. It is my opinion that after the spirit of Hashem left Saul as mentioned, he was no longer as other men. At that time, evil thoughts and demons surrounded him.

²⁰⁸ First Samuel 16:14. HaShem substituted for the Lord.

²⁰⁹ Abravanel is asking if it is really possible that an evil act is attributed to God, and not to Saul's change of mood. This is conceivable only insofar as God was the cause of Saul's loss of spirit.

²¹⁰ This statement begins the argument that the reference to the "evil spirit from the Lord" is true not because God sent Saul an evil spirit, but because God sent Saul a punishment which caused Saul to feel this evil spirit, thus the spirit is indirectly from the Lord. Abravanel understands the psychology of depression and obsessive thought, as we will see later. He defines this as an "evil spirit." Though this spirit is indigenous to the person experiencing it, the action which caused it in this case was done by God.

²¹¹ First Samuel 16:14.

²¹² *ibid.* The first quotation is in regard to the spirit which left Saul while the second quotation is in regard to the spirit which came upon him. The entire verse reads, "But the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him."

²¹³ First Samuel 16:15.

It happened that he was always ruminating about his sin, about Hashem tearing the kingship of Israel from him, and about (God's) good spirit being lifted from him. When this happened, his blood would boil and he would make himself sick with melancholy, which happens to people due to the boiling of red blood. The doctors have already written that in this type of illness one suffers weakness of imagination and mental power. One experiences anguish, worry, fear, trembling, and shaking with sadness. This (same thing) occurs with a person sitting in the dark who feels his spirit become cloudy and dirty and no longer pure. (This is why) the Bible states that "an evil spirit tormented him from Hashem."²¹⁴ Meaning that he was terrified and he trembled and he was afraid often because of the evil spirit and the constant dark mood. This evil thought was "from Hashem."²¹⁵ This means that he constantly thought that Hashem had departed from him and was his enemy. This was the idea that surrounded him with sickness and trembling. Thus, they said that it was from Hashem, because the reason he experienced the disease was due to the Blessed God separating from him. It was not the Blessed God Himself that was the direct cause of this illness. Truly, his servants thought that the spirit of the Lord did not leave Saul, but rather that it was still attached to him. They thought that the נָבִיא²¹⁶ came to him to predict evil things yet to come and that this was why he was terrified and why he trembled, due to the quality of the prophesy

²¹⁴ *ibid.* Substitution of HaShem for Adonai.

²¹⁵ *ibid.*

²¹⁶ God's natural overflow. Abravanel is saying here that the servants thought that Saul was experiencing prophesy.

that came upon him. **16**²¹⁷:Thus his servants said to him, "behold an evil spirit of God is tormenting you."²¹⁸ "Let our master command,..."²¹⁹ This was their way of saying, "your servants will do everything which you command them." "Let our master command us to seek out a man who knows how to play the harp, and whenever the evil spirit of God,²²⁰ meaning, "the said prophesy," comes upon you, he will play a melody and it will be better for you."²²¹ This meant to say, "even if the evil spirit from itself was evil, it (the music) will be good and lift your spirit and you will not be sad."²²² **17**:Saul heeded their words and he said to his servants, "find me a man good at playing and bring him to me."²²³ **18**:One of the servants who was standing before him said, "Behold, I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who knows how to play."²²⁴ The sages Z"L said (Sanhedrin 103b) that Doeg the Edomite said this. Doeg had noticed David's six qualities. One, "he knew how to play"²²⁵... Two, "he was a valiant fellow"²²⁶... Three, "he was a

²¹⁷ Abravanel comments on verses fifteen and sixteen together.

²¹⁸ First Samuel 16:15.

²¹⁹ First Samuel 16:16.

²²⁰ *ibid.* Abravanel misquotes the text. The text states, "Let our lord now command your servants, who are before you, to seek out a man, who knows how to play on the lyre: and it shall come to pass, when the evil spirit from God is upon you,..." Abravanel leaves out the entire phrase, "who are before you." He also misspells the word "מנגן" rendering it, "לנגן."

²²¹ Continuation of First Samuel 16:16. Abravanel accidental substitutes the word, "המנגן" meaning, "the playing of" for the word, "בידו" meaning, "in his hand."

²²² The point which Abravanel is making is that since the thoughts which plagued Saul were from his own head and not from God, soothing music could sooth Saul's spirit enough to enable him to control his ruminating and temporarily alleviate his affliction.

²²³ First Samuel 16:17.

²²⁴ First Samuel 16:18.

²²⁵ First Samuel 16:18. As the details of each of these description have nothing to do with the topic at hand: the relationship between Saul and Samuel, I have skipped the detailed description and merely reported the six outstanding characteristics which Doeg noticed.

²²⁶ *ibid.*

warrior"²²⁷... Four, "he was intelligent"²²⁸... Five, "he was handsome in appearance"²²⁹... And six, "Hashem was with him"²³⁰...

22:Saul sent word to Jesse asking that he let David stand before him (Saul) since he (David) had found favor in his (Saul's) eyes.

23²³¹:And it tells, "whenever the spirit of the Lord came to Saul,

David would take his harp and play"²³² and his grieving and trembling would leave him. This means that when Saul thought about the matter of God ripping the kingdom from him (this is God's spirit which is mentioned above²³³) he would grieve and David would play. Thus, by this method Saul would be able to rest from his thoughts as the melody entertained him and he would no longer grieve with his thoughts. This was how the spirit of Saul would receive reprieve from the distress which was on him. It appears that this power was unique to David and it was a divine thing. The text hints at this when it says, "the playing by his hand"²³⁴ was good for him" because David alone had this special talent. This indicates that the divine power was already on him, promoting David as "the sweet singer of Israel"²³⁵ and his melody was

²²⁷ *ibid.*

²²⁸ *ibid.*

²²⁹ *ibid.*

²³⁰ *ibid.* "Hashem" substituted for "the Lord."

²³¹ The relevant discussion continues with verse twenty-three.

²³² First Samuel 16:23. The sentiment is quoted correctly, though grammatically Abravanel's quotation is riddled with mistakes.

²³³ The parenthesis are Abravanel's. he is again reminded the reader that the only reason why the text says, "the spirit of the Lord," is because Saul is remembering the punishment he received from the Lord and not that the spirit actually came from the Lord. The fact that Abravanel must reemphasize this point every time it appears in text is a clear indication of how troubled he was by the phrase and its possible implications.

²³⁴ First Samuel 16:23. The full quotation reads, "...and the playing with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him."

²³⁵ Second Samuel 23:1.

pleasant to Blessed Hashem. This is how it was that his playing healed the sick who were not sick by natural causes. He healed him without compounding²³⁶ and reversed the illness so that the evil spirit left him.²³⁷ The fact of the matter is that it does not say "the evil spirit of the Lord," but it says only, "the evil spirit."²³⁸ In order that this is explained in truth, understand that it is written precisely.²³⁹ In reality, what is said earlier about the evil spirit being of God is the word of Saul's servants, who were speaking about what they thought and not about what was actually the case. As for later on, "and an evil spirit of the Lord gripped Saul and he raved in the house,"²⁴⁰ I will explain that in its place. So are answered the fifth and sixth questions. Behold, the purpose of all this is written in order to testify that immediately, when God's spirit rested upon David, it was removed from Saul. Thus, his heart was saddened when he felt and realized what would (therefore) befall him. Also, it meant to tell that David became a "sweet singer" and he could remove from Saul the stress and worry by his melody, just as he says about himself in his final words, "the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the songs, sweet singer of Israel."²⁴¹

²³⁶ Perhaps this is a medical term, apparently referring to the process of making a medicinal mixture.

²³⁷ Earlier Abravanel asks how it is possible the David's playing could soothe a illness which has occurred from supernatural causes. It seemed that Abravanel had already addressed this issue when he explained that the cause of Saul's illness was his own thought process and not a supernatural infliction. here, however, Abravanel readdresses his original question and seems to contradict himself. he explains that David's playing carried with it the spirit of God and therefore it was able to sooth a supernatural illness.

²³⁸ First Samuel 16:23.

²³⁹ By this statement, Abravanel is indicating that the exact wording in First Samuel 16:23 is crucial to the Biblical implication. The nuance of the text makes the difference between being able to understand the text and not being tied to the implication that God was directly involved in the evil which plagued Saul.

²⁴⁰ First Samuel 18:10.

²⁴¹ Second Samuel 23:1.

SUMMARY AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY:

Abravanel again delves into the profound relationship between Saul and Samuel in chapter sixteen. After Samuel left Saul at Gilgal and went to Ramah, God ordered Samuel to cease his mourning for Saul and go anoint the next king of Israel. Samuel's response is quite puzzling. He told God that he was afraid that if Saul heard about the anointing, Saul would kill him. To Abravanel, it is unacceptable that Samuel felt such fear. It was well known that a prophet of the Lord was protected from such a fate, especially if he was on a divinely commanded mission. It was also obvious to Abravanel that Samuel knew Saul would never raise a harmful hand against Samuel. This is one of the few places in which Abravanel expounds on the feelings Saul had for Samuel. They were the reciprocal to those Abravanel attributes to Samuel. Saul "loved Samuel very much, he was reverent to him and honored him more than a father." Thus, it does not make sense to Abravanel that Samuel should fear Saul. According to Abravanel, Samuel did not want to anoint a new king because of his love for Saul. How could he have dishonored Saul by anointing another while Saul was still alive? Abravanel's language here is quite powerful, reporting that Samuel was "bitterly sad that he must destroy his own creation and do by his own hand." Again, Abravanel uses the image of a creator when referring to Samuel's role in Saul's life. Abravanel also illuminates the irony of this act. It was Samuel's hand which "created" Saul, and if Samuel anointed another, it would be his hand which "destroyed" Saul as well.

Abravanel's commentary on this verse departs from the traditional commentators. Talmud Kedushin²⁴² and Yevamot²⁴³ both believe that indeed Samuel truly feared Saul. Otherwise, it would seem that Samuel was testing God by lying to Him. Pseudo-Philo also expounds on Samuel's reaction to the news that a new king would be anointed. Samuel felt the need to point out to God that if Samuel were to anoint another king, Saul's rule would be destroyed. In Pseudo-Philo's assessment, God bluntly states, "I will destroy it." Thus, Samuel had no choice but to proceed to the house of Jesse the Bethlehemite. The only problem was that he might accidentally anoint the wrong son. Midrash Shmuel²⁴⁴, when expounding on First Samuel 1:11, explains the importance of Samuel's fear. Hannah, Samuel's mother, promised that no razor would touch Samuel's head. Rabbi Nehori believes both this verse combined with the fact that Samuel showed fear toward Saul teaches that Samuel was indeed a man of flesh and blood. This concept reiterates the rabbinic proscription against placing any of the great historical figures on the same level as God. Rambam, on the other hand, compares Samuel's reluctance to anoint David to Moses's hesitation to approach Pharaoh. Both Samuel and Moses were humble men. Their reluctance to represent God to their respective kings does not reflect a lack of faith in God's ability to protect them, but rather, Rambam believes that the two men were so humble that their initial reactions to their respective callings were ones of amazement that they were selected for such tasks. This does not, however, seem sufficient to explain Samuel's hesitation since

²⁴² A 36b

²⁴³ 6 65a

²⁴⁴ Buber chapter 2 section 8

earlier he had already anointed Saul as king.

Pesikta d'Rav Kahana²⁴⁵ remarks on an apparent inconsistency in the text. In his view of the text, Rav Kahanah believes that God's words in First Samuel 16:1, "For how long will you mourn Saul," reveal that God did not heed Samuel's pleas on Saul's behalf. Despite Samuel's reluctance, God still wanted Samuel to stop mourning Saul and anoint another man in Saul's place. Yet, in First Samuel 7:9, Samuel cried out on behalf of Israel and "the Lord responded to him." Why did God ignore him in one case, yet respond to him in another? According to Rav Kahanah, this is simply because sometimes God chooses to listen to prayer and at other times, does not.

Abravanel's prolific abilities are displayed poignantly in his commentary on verse fourteen. Immediately after the text narrates the anointing of David, it indicates that the spirit of the Lord gripped David from that day on." Samuel then began his journey to back to Ramah. The very next verse, First Samuel 16:14, describes how Saul lost the spirit of the Lord and was overtaken by an evil "spirit from the Lord." It terrified him, apparently startling his servants as well. The servants suggest that Saul find a man who can play the harp and thus sooth Saul when he is consumed with this spirit. Saul concedes. the man solicited for this task in none other than David himself.

Abravanel had a natural gift for understanding psychological concepts and used this knowledge to understand the phenomenon of

²⁴⁵ Supplement 7.

Saul's "evil spirit." Before indulging in his own interpretation of what was happening to Saul, Abravanel first explains away the problem of having something "evil" disseminate from the Lord. According to the text, the "spirit of the Lord was lifted from Saul and an evil spirit from the Lord began to terrify Him." The first half of this verse is difficult in that despite the fact that the text reports that God had left Saul, the man still displayed immense tenacity in his war efforts. Abravanel explains that there are different types of spirits to which the text refers. In this particular case, the spirit which left Saul was the unique combination of spirits which form a single spirit necessary for a divinely ordained monarch. Because David had been ordained as the king of Israel, Saul lost this combination of spirits and remained only with the "spirit of valor," which was displayed during his successful battles. More problematic for Abravanel is the second half of the verse which reports that Saul was "gripped by an evil spirit of the Lord." Abravanel held an interesting view regarding the possibility of evil disseminating from the Lord. He did not believe that evil could directly come from God: he is thus challenged by verse fourteen. Abravanel did believe, however, that there are messengers who carry out God's will toward mankind. This will is often times the execution of punishment. There are specific beings imparted with harmful missions toward humanity. These beings do not have their own free will, and thus are not fallen angels as others might view them. Abravanel wrestles with this verse using this theology. The evil which Saul experienced did not come directly from God. Rather, it was a result of the just punishment which Saul received

from God. Saul suffered from a sick spirit as a result of losing the kingship and having God depart from him. This sickness was indeed evil. Though the punishments came directly from God, the evil thought originated in Saul himself. In this manner, Abravanel is able to maintain the true essence of Saul's misfortune without tainting the purity of God. As mentioned earlier, Abravanel utilizes his familiarity with human behavioral concepts in his exposition on the meaning of Saul's predicament. Abravanel describes a man suffering from what modern psychology would call either clinical depression or an anxiety disorder. Saul was plagued by his own thoughts. He would ruminate uncontrollably about his misfortune. The power of his thoughts would cause his "blood to boil and he would make himself sick with melancholy." In Abravanel's assessment, Saul was clinically depressed. He suffered from "anguish, worry, fear, trembling, and shaking with sadness." Abravanel paints a profound picture of a man caught in his own depression. He compares Saul to one who is "sitting in the dark who feels his spirit become cloudy and dirty and no longer pure." This type of writing reflects a man highly in tune with the inner workings of the human mind. It is because of this insight that Abravanel is able to shape the Biblical characters into human beings who we can appreciate and read as contemporary to ourselves.

Abravanel again reveals his preference for David during his discourse on David's healing powers. Abravanel finds it quite remarkable that David's playing was able to relieve Saul's sickness, especially since the sickness reportedly had a divine

source. Abravanel uses this opportunity to extol the great merits of David. The fact that David's playing could actually soothe Saul proves to Abravanel that the Lord was already residing with David. Because of this, David was able to play such sweet music that he temporarily relieved Saul of his oppressive thoughts. Abravanel is so caught up in David's character, that he suggests that the entire passage regarding Saul's illness is written in order to demonstrate the fact that divine powers were already present in David and were manifested in his playing.

Abravanel was not the only commentator to extol David.

Sanhedrin²⁴⁶, Ruth Rabbah²⁴⁷, Midrash Shmuel²⁴⁸, and Midrash Numbers Rabbah²⁴⁹ all relate that when Doeg praised David's knowledge of Torah, Saul became greatly jealous.

²⁴⁶ 83b.

²⁴⁷ 2.1.

²⁴⁸ 19, 104.

²⁴⁹ 13.10.

VI. Abravanel Chapter Eighteen

Verses Ten through Fifteen

TRANSLATION OF ABRAVANEL COMMENTARY:

10: "And the next day a spirit of God, etc."²⁵⁰ Scripture writes that on that day, which was on the morrow of the same day, Saul was gripped by an evil spirit of the Lord. This implies that he was quite worked up the day after the women called to each other, singing, and said "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands."²⁵¹ He (Saul) brooded in his heart about the matter with David, "Perhaps this was to what Samuel had been referring when he said, 'and given it (the kingship) to your neighbor who is better than you.'"²⁵² Thus, he (Saul) took the words of the women as a sign that they were telling him that the stature of David would be higher than his and that this was a sign of kingship. This thought grew stronger in him while he was resting and his sanity fled from him. Therefore, the next morning the evil spirit of the Lord came upon Saul. It is my opinion that the spirit spoken about here is (one of) will (or consciousness), just as in Proverbs 29:11, "a dullard vents all his rage (רוח)." (This can be found as well in) Isaiah 40:13, "Who knows the will (רוח) of Hashem?"²⁵³ In The Guide chapter 40 verse 1, (the Rambam) writes: the next day (the day after the women were chanting) was the day on which the evil spirit of the Lord settled in Saul's

²⁵⁰ First Samuel 18:10.

²⁵¹ First Samuel 18:7.

²⁵² First Samuel 15:28.

²⁵³ Abravanel's point here is unclear. What is the relationship between the words "רוח" and "רצון?"

imagination. He means to say that (it was) when (Saul thought about) the kingdom having been torn from him that "he raged in the midst of the house."²⁵⁴ This means that he was thinking about the future because everyone who sees the future and acts like a prophet is referred to as being "in a rage." You should know that there is a great difference between a prophet and one who acts like a prophet. A prophet (experiences) true emanation from the Blessed Hashem while one who acts like a prophet is a man who prepares himself and who attempts to know the future, thus isolating (himself) in a meditative state. (We see this in) Numbers 11:27, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."²⁵⁵ This means that they were isolated in a meditative state and attempting to be prophets. This being the case, the text did not intend to say that Saul became sick from an evil spirit of Hashem. His(Saul's) words were worthless according to the knowledge of the Targum and the conclusion of the sages Z"L. Rather, the text intended to reveal that evil intention did not come to him from the Blessed God. He (Saul) prophesied from his own mind about what would be and he was engrossed in his own psyche. His thoughts roamed (and he knew that) David was truly going to take possession of his kingship. 11:Thus when he (David) played before him (Saul) and sang the songs to soothe the evil heart, Saul raised the spear²⁵⁶ which was in his hand in order to pin David. He did this with such strength that it passed over (David's head)

²⁵⁴ First Samuel 18:10.

²⁵⁵ The standard location in which to prophecy was in the tent of meeting. When it was pointed out to Moses, however, that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp, Moses's response was, "would that all the Lord's people were prophets." Abravanel has a different attitude toward Eldad and Medad. He views their prophesying outside in the camp as separating themselves from the rest of the people.

²⁵⁶ Paraphrase of First Samuel 18:11.

and (the spear) entered the wall. It appeared that this was unintended. Rather, it was his (Saul's) true wish to kill (David) in a cunning manner lest he (Saul) see him (David) rule in his place. David was playing and his eyes were watching his own hands (as he played), and without intention, he turned himself away and he was saved. **12:**When Saul saw that David turned around without intent, twice, he (Saul) knew that Hashem was with him (David). He (Saul) realized that it was Providence that he (David) should turn from him (Saul) and that (the spirit of the Lord) stuck to David and he (Saul) was afraid of him (David). He thought, "Without a doubt this one will rule after me and God will disturb me." **13:**Saul took solace in the idea further "that he (Saul) should make him (David) a captain over a thousand. And he went out and came in before the people,"²⁵⁷ just as Moses prayed about a leader for the people in Numbers 27:17 who could bring them out and bring them in.²⁵⁸ David's greatness was not achieved by strategy or timing like Samson²⁵⁹ and the son of Nimshi^{260/261}. **14:**He (David) "succeeded in all his ways,"²⁶² was wise, and greatly

²⁵⁷ First Samuel 18:13. Abravanel omits the word "לו" and adds the word "והיה." These are minor changes which can be attributed to the fact that Abravanel is quoted the text by memory.

²⁵⁸ Moses knows that he is going to die before being able to bring the people into the land of Israel. He asks God to provide a leader who can lead the people out of the wilderness and into Israel. Abravanel is suggesting that Saul's appointment of David as a captain is a similar altruistic gesture.

²⁵⁹ Samson never anointed his own successor, but his final act in life was to pray to God for a surge of strength in order that he might collapse the walls of the house in which he stood, thereby killing the Philistines and also himself.

²⁶⁰ First Kings 19:15. Elijah was commanded by God to anoint Yehu, son of Nimshi as king over Israel in the place of Ahab. At that time, Elijah was also commanded to anoint his own successor, Elihu. Both these commands followed Elijah's prayer in First Kings 19:4 in which he beseeched God to take his life as he was not as worthy as his ancestors.

²⁶¹ Both Abravanel's commentary and the point which he is trying to make in this section are unclear.

²⁶² First Samuel 18:14. Abravanel substitute the prefix "ל" for the correct prefix, "ב." Again, this can be attributed to his attempts at quoting by memory.

feared God. This is why it says that "Hashem was with him."²⁶³

15: "When Saul saw that David acted with effective intelligence, he feared him even more."²⁶⁴ Not because of his (David's) strength, which he (Saul) already heard much about, but (rather he feared David) because of his wisdom and intelligence. All this came about because it appeared to him (Saul) that he (David) would rule his people and that he (David) was the fellow (who was) better than himself, about whom Samuel had told him. This explains the matter of Saul's prophesy and the matter of Saul's fear of David. He was not afraid that David would kill him but rather that he would rule after him. This is how the entire chapter ties together, and thus the first and second questions are answered.

²⁶³ ibid. Hashem substituted for the Lord.

²⁶⁴ First Samuel 18:15 reads, "When Saul saw that he succeeded so well, he was afraid of him." The vocabulary used in the text is different from that which Abravanel uses, though the meaning is the same.

SUMMARY AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY:

Abravanel once again delves into the character of Saul when he comments on First Samuel 18:10-15. In First Samuel 18, David and Saul returned from waging a successful campaign against the Philistines. The Israelite women came out of their houses, dancing, singing and playing the timbrel. They were crying and shouting. The mantra which they repeated during their dance was, "Saul has slain his thousands; David, his tens of thousands!" First Samuel 18:8 explains that Saul was "greatly distressed" by what he heard the women shout. He was threatened by David, and he thought to himself that the only thing David was lacking was the actual throne. The day following this incident, the text reports that again an "evil spirit of God gripped Saul and he began to rave in the house." He was holding a spear and listening to David playing the harp. He threw the spear at David, hoping to "pin him to the wall", but David eluded him twice. The text then mentions Saul's fear, saying that "Saul was afraid of David, for the Lord was with him and had turned away from Saul."

Abravanel does not pass up this opportunity to probe deeply into the psyche of Saul. He knew from the text that Saul was greatly troubled by women's words. Abravanel already demonstrated his belief that Saul was plagued by troubling thoughts. He suggests that this incident triggered Saul's anxiety and depression so that he obsessed about the matter of the singing women. He wondered if perhaps it was to David that Samuel had been referring to earlier in First Samuel 15:28 where Samuel said that Saul's kingship would be given to another better than Saul. When the "evil spirit"

again took hold of Saul, Abravanel believes that Saul lost his own will. Just as one who today would be classified as insane, Saul lost his ability to control his actions. Abravanel imagines Saul sitting, listening to David's music, dwelling on the women's words, when he suddenly realized with clarity that it might indeed be David who was going to rule after him. He happened to be holding a spear. With every ounce of strength he contained, he hurled the spear at David, not even realizing what he was doing. The spear missed David. Saul again threw a spear at David, this time fully intending to kill him. When the spear again missed David, apparently without David even trying to dodge the object, Saul resigned himself to the horrifying fact that Providence protected David from Saul's actions, as well as having ordained that David was going to be the next king of Israel.

Psalms Rabbah²⁶⁵ contends that Saul came to know long before the end, who would succeed him as king. When, in chapter fifteen, Saul tore the corner of Samuel's robe, Psalms Rabbah asserts that Saul immediately inquired who would replace him on the throne. According to Psalms Rabbah, Samuel replied, "I will give you a clue: he who rends your robe shall take away your kingship." Psalms Rabbah foreshadows First Samuel 24, where David sneaked up to Saul and cut the corner of his cloak. Later in the chapter (First Samuel 24:20), Saul conceded to the knowledge that David would be the next king. Psalms Rabbah believes that Samuel's words during the incident at Gilgal prepared Saul to decipher the meaning behind David's action. Psalms Rabbah also elaborates on the dialogue in First Samuel 24, attributing to Saul this

²⁶⁵ On Psalm 57.

proclamation made to David, "You will be king in this world, and you will rule the world to come."

Abravanel's continues with First Samuel 18:15. He finds it difficult to believe that Saul could truly fear David, since later when Saul pursued David, Saul received a promise that David would never physically harm him (First Samuel 24:17). Abravanel believes that Saul had no fear for his physical well-being. Rather, his great panic resulted from knowing that David would replace Saul as king. The question that Abravanel leaves to linger is why was this so terrifying to Saul? Was it because the kingship was that important to him, or did it have more to do with the fact that it was David who would be the one to replace him? Abravanel has already commented on the fact that the mere thought of the lost kingship drove Saul into a depressive state. It seems that once Saul was forced to face the actually man who would replace him, Saul's loss became even more real. He desperately wanted to remain as king over Israel. Faced not only with the threat of this expulsion, but with the actually reality of the next king, Saul was terrified.

VII. Abravanel First Samuel Chapter Nineteen

Verses Eighteen through Twenty

TRANSLATION OF ABRAVANEL COMMENTARY:

18: "And David fled and he came to Samuel."²⁶⁶ Scriptures mentions that David came to Samuel and told him all the ways in which Saul had dealt with him.²⁶⁷ (He told him) all four ways in which he (Saul) had already tried to kill him. David did this because Saul had been anointed by the hand of Samuel and David had also been anointed by his (Samuel's) hand, (as well as the fact that) Samuel was a prophet of God. David went to him to lament about what Saul had done against him and to request from him counsel and comfort. (He also wanted Samuel) to tell him in the spirit of prophesy what he should do and how he could save his soul since he (Samuel) spoke authentically about all of judgments and ways of Hashem. It mentions that David and Samuel went and sat in Nayot. It mentions David first and Samuel after him for the honor of the kingship. It appears that Nayot was a place near Ramah where the students of the prophets could sequester themselves in a holy place. They went there to seek the word of Hashem. Thus the Targum says it was a "college for prophets." Our sages Z"L ask in tractate Zevachim in chapter five page fifty-two bet, "What is the relationship between Nayot and the place of Ramah? They dwelled in Ramah and busied themselves with the beauty of the world by trying to figure out where the Beit ha-Mikdash should be built."

19/20: When Saul heard that David was at that place he sent messengers to to get David. They all became prophets. Why did

²⁶⁶ First Samuel 19:18.

²⁶⁷ *ibid.* Abravanel's vocabulary is different from that of the text, but the general meaning remains intact.

they not return to Saul? The wise ones among the gentiles explain that the prophesy which is mentioned there is that of praise. They were praising and thanking the Blessed God, as in Isaiah 57:19²⁶⁸, "a new expression of the lips."²⁶⁹ However, this does not work. They say there that Saul was also among the prophets. Saul was not a good prophet. It appears to me that all of the messengers saw a band of prophets. This means that they were a group, because the (Hebrew) word "band" is the same as "community", as it seems, a metathesis. They were all prophets, meaning that they all told (what) would happen in the future; (specifically) that David would rule over all of Israel and that the Lord would not permit Saul to kill him. When the messengers saw that Samuel stood above them²⁷⁰, confirming that their words were true, the messengers also prophesied. This means that each began to separate himself in a meditative state, think, and fell (into a state), and (then) also prophesied about what would happen; specifically that David would rule each of them. They refrained from taking David captive because they did not want to place a hand upon the anointed one of Hashem. They also did not want to help Saul because they feared Hashem and scorned Saul's words. **21:**This was what happened to the other messengers whom Saul sent three times.²⁷¹ **22/23:**When Saul saw that all of his servants turned to love David, he went to Ramah, to that place in Nayot. There the spirit of God was upon him. He (Saul)

²⁶⁸ The citation given is actually 57:59, however not only is there no verse fifty-nine in chapter fifty-seven, but Abravanel is referring to verse nineteen.

²⁶⁹ God is promising that He will forgive the transgressions of the sinners. Abravanel is offering the technique of גזרה שבה in order to define the type of prophesy experienced by the messengers.

²⁷⁰ Abravanel paraphrases First Samuel 19:20.

²⁷¹ Abravanel paraphrases First Samuel 19:21.

understood that this was not the evil spirit of God because the emanation of prophecy came down upon him while he was set on his journey; he was constantly meditating so that the prophesy might come upon him in order that he would know about the matter of the kingship. This was how (we should understand:) "he went and prophesied."²⁷² He attempted to prophesy but it did not work, just as I had mentioned on page 107 side two. When he (Saul) came before Samuel, he became worked up, so much so that the blood of his heart began to boil and he ripped his clothes off and "fell naked on the ground before him (Samuel) in his prophetic state the whole day and the whole night."²⁷³ All of this was because of the power with which it consumed him in his imagination and how it troubled his thoughts about the matter, smiting his heart so much so that the spirit of prophesy fell upon him. This is the "spirit of God"²⁷⁴ which is mentioned causing scripture to say, "Saul is also among the prophets."²⁷⁵ This means to tell that he reached the full level of prophesy like the prophets who dwelled there in Nayot. Saul was in a trance and prophesied until he lost his senses. Thus, David had time to flee from there and come to a place and be saved. He went to Jonathan to tell him all that had happened and about that which he did not (yet) know.

²⁷² First Samuel 19:23.

²⁷³ First Samuel 19:24.

²⁷⁴ First Samuel 19:23.

²⁷⁵ First Samuel 19:24.

SUMMARY AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY:

In chapter nineteen, verse eighteen, Abravanel begins to illuminate the complex position in which Samuel finds himself. Samuel has been chosen as a representative for God. Part of his job is to ordain, train, and guide the kings of Israel. At first, Samuel wanted no part of this. He pleaded with the people not to persist in their request for a king. When God relented to the request, however, Samuel complied and accepted his responsibilities. As discussed earlier, Abravanel views Samuel as a man who not only resigned himself to the presence of a king, but one who became passionately committed to this king's welfare. The mere act of anointing Saul bound Samuel to him. So concerned was he for Saul, that he did not want to anoint another during Saul's lifetime. But again, he relented to the will of God, and anointed David king. This second act placed Samuel in a conflicted position. He was responsible for the welfare of two men, with both of whom he shared a similar relationship. Abravanel hints at this conflict when he comments on verse eighteen. David was forced to flee from Saul in order to save his life. The text reports that David made his escape to Samuel. When he arrived, the text states that he accounted for Samuel the four ways in which Saul tried to kill him. According to Abravanel, David chose to go to Samuel because it had been by Samuel's hand that both Saul and David had been anointed. David knew that he would receive both guidance, comfort, and prophetic speech from Samuel. Abravanel merely hints at this conflict. He points out the irony of Samuel having had to anoint both men with his own hand, but he does expound fully upon the implications of this irony. Abravanel

certainly attributes jealousy to Saul's motivations when discussing his actions toward David. The envy that Abravanel attributes to Saul, however, has to do with the institution of the kingship and not with the relationship between David and Samuel. One can assume that David and Samuel began to enjoy the same type of relationship to that of Saul and Samuel. David lived with Samuel and assumed that Samuel would protect him against Saul. David was clearly God's favorite between the two kings, as well as that of the people. Saul knew that David went to Samuel because he had been tracking David's flight and knew when he arrived in Nayot. What was it like for Saul not only to lose the kingship, God's presence, the affection of the people, but his relationship with Samuel as well? What was it like for him to fall out of favor with all of the people, only to be replaced by David in each area of his life? All of this anguish must have contributed to Saul's anxiety and depression. There is also the matter of Samuel's conflict. When he heard David's report of Saul's actions, what was his reaction? According to Abravanel, Samuel was so pained by the evil that was to befall Saul that he pleaded to God on Saul's behalf. He was distressed enough to remain awake an entire night begging God to relent. Here, however, when he hears accounts of even more of Saul's disturbing actions, Abravanel does not have Samuel say anything. Abravanel does not speculate as to Samuel's grief or anger toward Saul. This silence is surprising, particularly since Abravanel was so sharp in his evaluation of Samuel's feelings toward Saul in the earlier part of his commentary on First Samuel.

Abravanel does not abandon his psychological analysis for long, however. In verses twenty two and twenty three, he uses his insights into prophesy and psychology in order to understand the puzzling phenomena of Saul's prophetic state. After Saul sent three groups of messengers to seize David, and after each group did not return because they joined the band of prophets in which David and Samuel participated, Saul went himself to Nayot in order to capture David. On his way, he was overtaken by God's spirit and began to speak in ecstasy. When he finally reached Nayot, he removed all of his cloths, lay naked before Samuel, and prophesied the entire night. Abravanel first points out the difference between this spirit which gripped Saul and the evil spirit which had previously laid siege upon him. Though Abravanel does believe that this was indeed the spirit of prophesy, he also believes that prophesy when experienced by one who is untrained, is dangerous. Saul was not capable of receiving true prophesy. Thus, when this spirit overtook him, he was in a trance and received a distorted type of prophesy. There was not enough truth in his vision, however, for him to see the future of his own kingship. Saul's experience with prophesy was incredibly painful. According to Abravanel, the strength of his troubling thoughts overwhelmed him and "smote his heart so much so that the spirit of prophesy fell upon him." Abravanel's powerfully portrays Saul as a lonely man invaded by terrorizing images.

VIII. First Samuel Chapter Twenty-Eight
Verses Eight through Nineteen

TRANSLATION OF ABRAVANEL COMMENTARY:

8: "And Saul disguised."²⁷⁶ Scripture reports that Saul disguised himself. According to the Targum, he did this by putting on different clothes in order that the woman not recognize him and the two men who came with him. It says in Midrash Shmuel (chapter 24) that Saul lost the kingdom immediately when he came to inquire through the deed of a spirit. They say, moreover, that the two men were עמשא²⁷⁷ and אבנר²⁷⁸. I have already written that this is far fetched because how could the king leave the camp without leaving Abner, chief of hosts?²⁷⁹ Rather, Abner remained in the midst of the camp in place of the king.²⁸⁰ They also went at night in order that no-one should see them and gather in a crowd and thus reject Saul. Midrash Tanhuma states that Saul actually went during the day. It refers to the night metaphorically, as they went to the witch in the middle of Saul's troubles which made it feel as if it were in the middle of the night. Saul said to the

²⁷⁶ First Samuel 28:8.

²⁷⁷ In Second Samuel 17:25, Amasa replaces Yo'av as the one in charge of the army. Amasa is not mentioned before First Samuel 18, thus is it puzzling that he would be one of the men meant to have accompanied Saul to the witch's residence.

²⁷⁸ Abner is described in First Samuel 17:55 as "the captain of the hosts." Both men have been charged with the duty of commanding troops.

²⁷⁹ Abravanel's commentary on First Samuel 17:55. Abner was a trusted servant of Saul. When Saul observed David fighting successfully against the Philistine's, Saul inquired from Abner as to who David was. Abravanel makes the point that Saul would not leave his camp with his chief of hosts because he would need to leave the chief of hosts in charge.

²⁸⁰ Apparently, Abravanel is portraying Abner as standing in the place of Saul when he and others ventured forth to the witch in order that no-one recognize that the king of Israel is going to speak to a diviner.

woman, "divine for me by means of a spirit."²⁸¹ The term divination refers to all such activities, especially by means of a spirit which involves raising the dead and having him speak. Saul wanted to learn the outcome of the matter (ie. the battle) from Samuel. Therefore, he chose (divination via a spirit) and not by a seance or another method. **9:**The woman was afraid to perform the action because of her fear of Saul (because Saul as king had forbidden it)²⁸². **10:**Saul had to swear to her by Hashem, thus he said, "as Hashem lives, no punishment will befall you for this matter."²⁸³ He swore about this because he was Saul and he had the power to forbid or to permit the act and to guarantee that she would not die.²⁸⁴ In Leviticus Rabbah (chapter 26 page 195b) it states in the name of Rabbi Simon ben Lakish, "To what can Saul be compared at that hour? To a woman who was secreted with her lover and then swore by the life of her husband." Likewise, Saul asked for a spirit and then said, "[by] the life of Hashem."²⁸⁵ **11:**She asked him, "whom do you want me to bring up for you?"²⁸⁶ Saul told her to bring up Samuel, the prophet,²⁸⁷ He knew that Samuel was known as a prophet of Hashem in all of Israel, and even Ralbag writes that the woman thought that it was another Samuel, not

²⁸¹ First Samuel 28:8.

²⁸² Parenthesis are mine.

²⁸³ First Samuel 28:10. "Hashem" substituted for the "Lord."

²⁸⁴ Abravanel seems uncomfortable with the idea that Saul is swearing by the name of Adonai, a direct violation of the ten commandments. He solves this problem by pointing out that this was not a false oath since, as king, he could swear that he himself would not kill her. She was the only who did know that she was receiving the oath directly from the king himself.

²⁸⁵ First Samuel 28:10. "Hashem" substituted for the "Lord."

²⁸⁶ First Samuel 28:11.

²⁸⁷ Abravanel is paraphrasing and interpreting the text. In this verse, Saul does not actually mention that Samuel is a prophet.

Samuel the prophet.²⁸⁸ In regard to this matter of divination and in regard to how the woman reacted when she saw Samuel, the sages Z"L, have much to say...²⁸⁹

12:"And the woman recognized Samuel...and she said to Saul."²⁹⁰

Scripture writes that she was able to see Samuel both with her wisdom and with the use of sorcery. The one who brings up the spirit recognizes his form as it had been in life. She was correct because she saw that Samuel had been buried in his robe. Our sages Z"L have already mentioned this. Therefore, she recognized him because the figure raised resembled his form and his clothes. They say in Tanhuma (Chapter Amor) that he was wrapped in a cloak, and earlier in the text (First Samuel 2:19) it says that his mother made him a small cloak.²⁹¹ This teaches us that he grew up in the cloak and was buried in it. Thus, the woman cried in a loud voice to Saul, "why have you deceived me, you are Saul."²⁹² Saul replied, "do not fear."²⁹³ He meant to say, "do not fear me because I am the king who forbade sorcery and I will not punish you." **13:**He kept asking her what she saw until she told him that it was Samuel. She thought he was a god, "I saw

²⁸⁸ Abravanel paraphrases Saul's response in First Samuel 28:11. Abravanel adds to Saul's words the explanation that Samuel is a prophet. He justifies this change by citing that even Rambam reports that the woman had been confused as to whom Saul had been referring, thus making the addition necessary.

²⁸⁹ Abravanel now catalogs the various explanations and understandings given by the sages regarding the sorcerers' reaction to seeing Samuel. As this is not relevant to the topic of the thesis, I have skipped to verse twelve.

²⁹⁰ First Samuel 28:12. Abravanel splits the quotation, leaving out the words, "and she cried in a loud voice." There seems to be no significance to this deletion on Abravanel's part.

²⁹¹ First Samuel 2:19.

²⁹² First Samuel 28:12. Abravanel paraphrases the events up until the woman's words to Saul.

²⁹³ First Samuel 28:13. Again, only Saul's words are quoted correctly by Abravanel. The text reads, "and the king said to her...".

a god come up from the earth."²⁹⁴ She meant to say, "I saw an important man coming up from the earth." This incident is similar to Exodus 22:27 "and you will not curse God."²⁹⁵ In Midrash (מסרת תעניות)²⁹⁶ it says that Samuel brought up with him the soul of Moses to ask for mercy upon Israel.²⁹⁷ Therefore, the text uses the plural of the verb "to come up." This is what is written in Jeremiah 15:1, "[even] if Moses and Samuel stood before me [I would not be won over], etc."²⁹⁸ Targum Jonathan then stated, "she saw angels of the Lord who came up from the earth." But there is no reason to say this because this plural construction has already been noted many times as singular, just as what is written about the incident of the golden calf from Exodus 32:4 "This is your god, Israel who brought you out." This was said by the mistress of sorcery in regard to Samuel, "I see a god coming from the earth."²⁹⁹ She called him this because of his honor and his important rank. 14: The woman gave signs in order that Saul might know who it was. She said, "it is an old man and he is wrapped in a cloak."³⁰⁰ Truly, how did the woman know that it was Saul? I

²⁹⁴ First Samuel 28:13.

²⁹⁵ Abravanel is using this quotation from Exodus in order to illustrate his views of the use of the word, "אלוהים," or "lord," to indicate a human ruler, as it is used by the sorcerer.

²⁹⁶ The ר"י could not find Abravanel's reference but found it in Hagiggah chapter fourteen bet.

²⁹⁷ In the Hagiggah text, Samuel asks Moses to come up with him because he may be summoned to judgment. Samuel believes that there does not exist a word in scripture which he did not fulfill. He wants Moses to testify on his behalf. The midrash centers on a play on the word עלם. It attempts to explain why this word, "to come up," is written in the plural.

²⁹⁸ This is used to back up the midrashim that Moses accompanied Samuel. Abravanel is illustrating that the two men have been paired as a team.

²⁹⁹ First Samuel 28:13.

³⁰⁰ First Samuel 18:14. Abravanel leaves out the verb in the sentence, "עלה" or "comes up." This seems inadvertent.

already mentioned Midrash Tanhuma which is not accurate.³⁰¹ It is my opinion that Samuel bowed to Saul for the honor of the kingship. The woman saw that he was old and his face was bent below his head. She already knew that he was Samuel because Saul had commanded her to bring up Samuel. She saw him bowed face to the ground, and she said to herself, "this is Saul," for why would Samuel, the prophet, bow to another man? And therefore she cried, "why have you deceived me? You are Saul."³⁰² It is written further that "Saul knew that it was Samuel and he placed his face to the earth and bowed."³⁰³ This bowing and prostrating can not refer to Saul because he could not see Samuel, so how would he bow? Rather it applies to Samuel, as mentioned. It says that Saul knew that it was Samuel and Samuel bowed his face to the ground for the honor of Saul. That is why the woman screamed and she said, "why have you deceived me, you are Saul."³⁰⁴ This was the sign that was given to indicate to Saul. She had said, "a god is coming up from the earth."³⁰⁵ That is, if it were a god or a highly important man with his face bowed to the ground, this could only be for the honor of the kingship. This is the solution to

301 Tanhuma reports that the woman knew who Saul was when Samuel was called up from the dead face up. Tanhuma believes that only a king can call up someone from the dead face up. Abravanel believes that when Samuel was called up, he immediately bowed to Saul. This was how the woman knew. It is unclear from the text who bowed to whom.

302 First Samuel 28:12.

303 First Samuel 28:14.

304 First Samuel 28:12.

305 First Samuel 28:14.

the fourth question.³⁰⁶ 15:"And Samuel said, etc."³⁰⁷ Samuel said to Saul, "why have you disturbed me to bring me up?"³⁰⁸ Its interpretation is not that Samuel had been disturbed from resting his soul as indicated by the words of the commentators, rather she brought up his body, as I believe. She would have disturbed him by rejoining him with his holy body, which was his when he was alive, from the place in which dwelled the shechinah. This was done by the power of the demon. And our sages Z"L write in tractate Haggigah (chapter 1 4b) that Samuel said, "I was afraid it was the day of judgment and I thought that I was being called to be judged." When Rabbi Eliezer came to the following verse, he wept, "Samuel said, 'why have you disturbed me to bring me up.'"³⁰⁹ Eliezer cried and said, "How righteous is Samuel, yet he was afraid of judgment. For us, how much the more so!"³¹⁰ Saul admitted that he had been wicked and rebellious because of what he had asked the sorcerer to do, but that he (still) needed to bring up (Samuel). Thus he said, "I am greatly distressed. The Philistines are attacking me."³¹¹ If you say that I should have

³⁰⁶ Abravanel points out that Saul could not see the man coming from the earth, or he would not have asked the woman to describe him. He knew that indeed this man was Samuel when the woman screamed at Saul for having deceived her. She could only have known who Saul was if indeed she saw a prophet with his face bowed to the ground. The use of the word "אלוהים" let Saul know it was a man of God. The fact that she scream let him know that this man was bowed down to him. Thus, Saul could only conclude that indeed the woman had done what he had asked and called Samuel from beyond the grave.

³⁰⁷ First Samuel 28:15.

³⁰⁸ ibid.

³⁰⁹ ibid.

³¹⁰ Abravanel uses Haggigah in order to illustrate that Samuel was disturbed because he was afraid that he was being called up in order to be judged. He failed to explain this to Saul. Abravanel makes the distinction between being disturbed physically and spiritually. The Haggigah passage proves that it was a physical disturbance which Samuel experienced. Abravanel believes that demons took over Samuel's body while his spirit returned to God. The demon has divine powers of peregrination??, but the body had been visited by the Shechinah thus the demon was exorcised.

³¹¹ First Samuel 28:15.

asked God, know that God has left me and will not answer me, etc.³¹² He meant to say that if it had been in the earlier days of his kingship he would have been able to receive prophesy but "now that it has been cut off from me and I do not receive prophesy from the remaining prophets; neither through the way of other prophets nor even if I ask in a dream."³¹³ He does not mention that he had urim and turim available, because he did not have them since Aviather went with it in his hand over to David.³¹⁴ Our sages Z"L say in tractate Brahot (chapter 1 12b) that Saul was ashamed to tell Samuel about losing the urim because he had killed the priests at Nob. They also say that because of his shame (for having committed this sin), Saul atoned for his sin. For this reason Samuel retorted, "tomorrow, you and your sons will be with me."³¹⁵ Why does the text say "with me?" He means, "in my section (of heaven)."³¹⁶

16:Samuel responded further, "why do you ask of me when Hashem has departed from you and become your enemy,"³¹⁷ saying, 'why did you request from me?' Did you not yourself say that Hashem left you, just as you said? And even more, that the Eternally Blessed, is now your enemy, which you did not realize." **17:**"And therefore,

³¹² ibid.

³¹³ ibid.

³¹⁴ First Samuel 22-23. Aviathar was the only priest who survived the slaughter by Saul at the house of Nob. He escaped to David with an ephod in his hands. David used this ephod in order to beseech from God whether or not the men of Keila would deliver him into the hands of Saul. By using the ephod, David was able to remain outside of Saul's grasp.

³¹⁵ First Samuel 28:19.

³¹⁶ This seems to be Abravanel's way of enunciating that Samuel is predicting that when Saul dies in the battle against the Philistines, he will have a share in the World to Come.

³¹⁷ First Samuel 28:16. Hashem substituted for the Lord.

Hashem has done as He had spoken through me and ripped the kingdom from you and given it to your companion, David.³¹⁸ This is when Samuel informs Saul who it will be that will take over the kingdom, because Samuel never told him this while he (Samuel) was alive. It is possible to explain the term "companion" further. Since as Blessed Hashem is now with David, he has become Saul's enemy; thus explains Rashi and Midrash Shmuel. In (Chapter 24:18)³¹⁹ he explains why he must die and why the kingship was torn from him. **18:**Samuel said, "Because you would not obey the command of Hashem."³²⁰ He meant to say, "because of your sin at Gilgal and because you did not deal angrily with Amalek, you sinned twice. The second sin (is being dealt with now); you did not carry out the decree against him and the kingdom was torn from you. This is the matter which is being done to you by Hashem today." Nothing was said about the killing of the priests at the city of Nob according to the commentators, because Eli's sons death had been arranged by God. I do not accept this, because even if Eli's sons were guilty, Saul should not have been allowed to kill them. The Blessed God did not command Saul about them nor did he kill them for that reason. Rather, he slew them because they received David as a fugitive. Thus, how could the matter not have been connected to his sin? In Midrash Tanhuma (chapter Amor), Rabbi Joshua discourses in the name of Rabbi YB"L, that The Holy One Blessed be He showed Moses, peace be upon him, David and his kingdom, as well as Saul and his sons falling by the sword.³²¹ Moses said before

³¹⁸ Paraphrase of First Samuel 28:17.

³¹⁹ Parenthesis are provided by the ר"י.

³²⁰ First Samuel 28:18.

³²¹ The entire event was preordained by God.

Him, "Master of the World, will the first king that will rise before you be stabbed by the sword?" And He said to Moses, "and to whom will you tell this? Tell it to the priests, the sons of Aaron, etc."³²² The rabbis learned that for five sins was this righteous one³²³ slain; he killed the priests at the city of Nob, he spared Agag, he did not obey Samuel at Gilgal, he sought out a sorcerer, and he did not seek out Hashem. Notice that the first sin they mention which will kill Saul is the matter of the priests. It is my opinion that Saul's sins are threefold. First, he did not listen to the word of Hashem at Gilgal, for this he was punished by not being allowed to continue ruling over Israel. Second, he did not utterly destroyed Amalek because he spared Agag and kept the booty, for this his punishment was that the days of his life were cut short and David was anointed king over Israel; this punishment was great indeed. The third sin was that he killed the priests at the city of Nob, and for this his punishment was that he and his three sons would be killed by the sword during the war. After one spills the blood of man, his punishment is that by man will his blood be spilled.³²⁴

³²² Though this phrase is recurring in the Bible, the most likely reference is to Leviticus 21:1. This is the beginning of the legal code in Leviticus. Moses is continually commanded to speak to the sons of Aaron, instructing them about holiness. Ralbag attributes a note of sarcastic anger to God's response. Saul killed the priests in Nob. In Abravanel's assessment, this is why Saul died by the sword in battle with the Philistines. Abravanel quotes Ralbag in order to prove that Saul was being punished for his sin at Nob. thus, God essentially is attributed as saying to Moses, "You are so concerned about Saul's death? Why not bring your case before the priests and see how compassionate they are toward their enemy."

³²³ Referring here to Saul.

³²⁴ Abravanel attempts to solve the problem of why his sin at Nob was not mentioned at this point in the narrative. The following discourse has nothing to do with the relationship between Saul and Samuel.

SUMMARY AND ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY:

The text of chapter twenty-eight orates the dramatic conclusion of Saul's dependence on Samuel. Abravanel's commentary illuminates several issues, both pertaining to the act of calling Samuel from beyond the grave and to the predicament in which Saul found himself.

Saul found that preceding his impending battle with Philistines, he had no-one who could advise him. He had killed all of the priests at Nob; David was in hiding; Samuel was dead; and the Lord would not answer him. He was desperate for advice and greatly afraid of the Philistines who now surrounded him. Saul disguised himself and went to seek the counsel of a witch; one who could call the dead from beyond the grave. The witch called up Samuel at Saul's request, whereupon Samuel informed Saul that the following day both he and his sons were to die in battle. Saul threw himself on the floor in a state of both weakness and despair.

This narrative is problematic not only for Abravanel, but for the sages as well. The dilemma of Saul successfully reaching an already deceased Samuel through means of divination, which is strictly forbidden by the Torah, gives birth to a plethora of comments. Pseudo-Philo not only does not have an issue with the fact that Saul sought the help of a diviner, but he goes as far as to suggest that God preordained that Saul would have to solicit the help of a witch in order to receive knowledge of the future. Pseudo-Philo relates that Saul had been jealous of the way in

which Israel mourned for Samuel. He wanted Israel to weep for him in such a manner when he died. He thought that if he banished the wizards from the land, he would earn favor in the eyes of both God and the people. God saw through this manipulative act, and decided to mock Saul. The only manner in which Saul would be able to obtain divination would be through the wizards which he so eagerly banished. In this way, God was punishing Saul for the crime of envy. (Leviticus Rabba³²⁵, Midrash Tanhuma³²⁶, and Midrash Shmuel³²⁷ concur with Pseudo-Philo, remarking also that Saul banished the diviners from Israel, not because of his great devotion to God, but rather because he wanted to be remembered after his death.)

The rabbis expend much effort trying to figure out whether or not the actions of the witch were legitimate. Tractate Shabbat³²⁸ supports Abravanel's view that the divination was in fact successful. It maintains that the bodies of the righteous take a year before they begin to decompose. During this time, the souls of these bodies ascend to heaven and then descend again to their bodies. It is not until after the decomposition of the body that the souls remain in heaven. In this manner, the witch was able to call Samuel at a time when his soul happened to be with his body. The majority of authors, however, believe the witch to be a fraud. Kimhi³²⁹, Tractate Sanhedrin³³⁰, Rabbi Bahya, Ziyroni, and Kedoshin

³²⁵ Chapter 26, verse 7.

³²⁶ Buber, chapter 3 verse 81.

³²⁷ Buber, chapter 24 verse 118.

³²⁸ 152b.

³²⁹ On First Samuel 18:25.

³³⁰ 65b.

all comment on the fraudulent practices of the witch.

Pseudo-Philo also has another interesting point. It was no accident that the Philistines rose to attack at such a vulnerable time in Saul's life. They knew that Samuel was dead and that David was gone. What a perfect time to wage war against a king, when his advisors could be of no use to him! Pseudo-Philo also comments in a similar manner to that of Abravanel in order to understand the emotions of the characters. According to Pseudo-Philo Saul did not disguise himself on purpose, as the text implies, but rather realized that the woman did not recognize him because his appearance had changed so dramatically. This upset Saul. Midrash Leviticus Rabba³³¹, Midrash Tanhuma³³², Midrash Shmuel³³³, and the Septuagint³³⁴ also theorize that the reason why the witch did not recognize Saul was because he had lost his great beauty. It was not until Samuel explained to the witch who Saul was that the witch was able to see beyond the shambles of Saul's physique and recognize him as the king. Though the Bible and commentators all agree that Saul was originally a man of beauty, Yerushalmi Sotah³³⁵, Midrash Shmuel³³⁶, and Midrash Numbers Rabbah³³⁷ describe Saul as a man who lacks beauty of the soul.

Abravanel is unique in his assessment of the story in First Samuel

³³¹ Chapter 26, verse 7.

³³² Buber, chapter 3 verse 82.

³³³ Buber, chapter 24 verse 119.

³³⁴ On First Samuel 28:14.

³³⁵ 1b.

³³⁶ Chapter 13 verse 85.

³³⁷ Chapter 11 verse 3.

28. Abravanel boldly asserts that the witch was indeed successful. She was both honest and accurate in her description of Samuel. Abravanel did not believe that she realized that it was Saul requesting this forbidden act until she saw Samuel rise from the ground. Since she did not know it was Saul and could not possibly have known how to accurately describe Samuel, Abravanel concludes that her tactics must have been successful. This interpretation is consistent with Abravanel's concept of life after death. Abravanel believed that the final goal of man is to cleave to God by concentrating completely on God's essence. Moses was the only human being who was able to successfully complete this goal. For the rest of humanity, this task is too difficult to be realized during life on earth. Thus, it is postponed for life after Resurrection. Until then, man's humble objective is establish sovereignty of spirit over earthly matter. By remaining aloof from physical attachments, the human soul is able to purify itself in this life time. Abravanel recognizes that this is also an arduous mission. Because the human spirit is immortal, it has endless opportunity to reach this purified state. In order to this, human souls can be reincarnated until the Final Day of Judgment, the Day of Resurrection. Until then, the body waits for the day when its soul will be returned. Abravanel also believes that any manipulation of nature is possible, as it is a miracle. These miracles can be performed by any messenger of God; a prophet, a higher intelligence, a priest, or even a demon. A demon to Abravanel is merely a messenger of God, carrying out His Divine Will. In the case of the witch, a demon assisted her in prematurely reuniting Samuel's soul to his body in order that he

could be called to appear before Saul. Abravanel also has established detailed rules for how this type of divination works. He does not agree with the countless commentators³³⁸ who, when speculating on how the woman knew it had been Saul making the request, dictate that when a king calls up someone from the dead, that person arrives head first. In fact, Abravanel mocks this type of conjecture, as he asks in question four on chapter twenty eight, "Can we say that she had so many clients who were kings that she knew [the manner in which the dead rise for a king]?" This does not stop Abravanel from agreeing with Midrash Shmuel³³⁹ that the one who requests a soul to be called from the dead can not see the person but can hear him, the one who is called can see but not hear the caller, and the one who performs the actual act can both see and hear the caller and the one who is called. These guidelines lead Abravanel to again remark on the way in which Saul and Samuel relate to each other. The text is unclear when in remarks in verse fourteen that "he bowed low in homage with his face to the ground." It does not reveal who is bowing to whom. According to Abravanel, it must be Samuel bowing to Saul since Saul could not see Samuel. Why would Samuel bow to the ground upon being called from beyond life? For the honor of the kingship, despite the fact that he is angry with Saul for having disturbed him. This act of homage enabled the diviner to understand that Saul was in fact the king.

One should not allow the fact that Abravanel believes in the

³³⁸ Midrash Shemuel (Buber chapter 24 section 4), Leviticus Rabbah (chapter 26 verse 7), Midrash Tanhuma (chapter 3 verse 82), Midrash Shemuel (chapter 24 verse 119) and the Septuagint (on First Samuel 28:14).

³³⁹ Buber chapter 24 section 5

efficaciousness of the act to indicate that he believes in its merit as well. Quite the contrary! Abravanel considers this use of divination to be Saul's final act of deviance against God. Saul must swear to the witch that no harm will befall her if she complies with his wishes. Previously, Saul had banished all those who perform acts of divination from his kingdom. The woman expressed her fear that if she brought up Samuel, the king would kill. Still not revealing his true identity, Saul swears to her, by the name of God, that she would not be injured. Abravanel compares this oath to a woman who, while committing adultery, swears on the life of her husband. Abravanel's assessment of Saul's betrayal of the Lord is clear.

During this particular commentary, Abravanel again displays his belief that the prophet is merely the mouthpiece for God and must act according to the desires of the Lord. Despite the great love that Abravanel reports Samuel having for Saul, Samuel knows that if God has left Saul, so must he. While commenting on verse sixteen, Abravanel expounds on the dialogue taking place between Saul and Samuel. According to Abravanel, Samuel asked Saul, "Why did you request me? Did you not yourself say that Hashem left you?"³⁴⁰ This comment reflects an obligation on Samuel's part to abandon any man who had been abandoned by God. In Abravanel's view, he has no choice. He can not assist Saul if he is unable to receive prophesy on Saul's behalf. If God had left Saul, as Saul conveyed to Samuel, then there would be no way for Samuel to help Saul within his role as prophet. Thus, Saul found that he was totally alone, and would soon discover that he was condemned to

³⁴⁰ Fjrst Samuel 28:15.

death, as well.

Abravanel believes that there are three sins for which Saul received punishment, two of which had already been exacted. The first was the sin he committed for prematurely sacrificing at Gilgal without Samuel. For this, he lost the kingship. The second was the sin he committed by sparing Agag and the booty of Amalek, thereby ignoring God's command for complete destruction against the Amalekites. For this, the days of his life were cut short and he would have to witness David rise to the throne. The third sin, and perhaps the most heinous in Abravanel's eyes, was the act of slaying the priests at Nob. As discussed, Abravanel viewed the priests as a superior group of human beings. It must have been quite troubling to Abravanel that after Saul commanded the slaughter of eighty-five priests, God did not punish him further. Thus, it was for this third and final sin that Abravanel believes Saul is finally being punished. When Samuel ominously warned that "tomorrow your sons and you will be with me," he predicted the execution of Saul's third punishment; death. In Abravanel's view, Saul died in battle with the Philistines as a direct result of his actions against the priests at Nob.

Other commentators do not believe that Saul required punishment for his actions at Nob. According to Yerushalmi Sanhedrin (10, 29a), the priest's fate at Nob was an act of Providence. Not only had they been polluting the Lord's holy objects and mocking the gifts of the first-fruits, but God still needed to exact

punishment for the wicked ways of Eli's sons.³⁴¹ Abravanel's opinion is clear on this matter, "I do not accept this, because even if Eli's sons were guilty, Saul should not have been allowed to kill them. The Holy One did not command Saul about them nor did he (Saul) kill them for that reason. Rather, he slew them because they received David as a fugitive. Thus how could the matter (of his impending death in the Philistine war) not have been connected to his sin?"

Pesikta de Rabbi Eliezer's³⁴² view is consistent with Abravanel: that Saul's death atoned for his sins. His understanding of this mortal repentance is broader than that of Abravanel, however. Eliezer elaborates on the dialogue between the newly arisen Samuel and Saul. Samuel tells Saul, "If you will listen to my advice to fall by the sword, then your death will be atonement for you, and your lot will be with me in the place where I dwell." Thus, according to Eliezer, when Samuel says in verse nineteen, "Tomorrow your sons and you will be with me.." he means that they will be able to join him in his portion of heaven. Midrash Tanhuma³⁴³ is more in harmony with Abravanel than the previously mentioned commentators. It asserts that Saul was so distraught over his responsibility over the deaths of the priests at Nob that

³⁴¹ Eli was the priest who raised Samuel. His sons did not pay attention to the Lord, they took more from the sacrifice that was their due, they ate the meat before it was cooked, and they frequented harlots. Samuel's first prophetic experience informed him of the fate that would befall Eli's sons. First Samuel 3:13-14 reports God's words, "I sentence his (Eli's) house to endless punishment for the iniquity he knew about - how his sons committed sacrilege at will - and he did not rebuke them. Assuredly, I swear concerning the house of Eli that the iniquity of the house of Eli will never be expiated by sacrifice or offering."

³⁴² Eliezer pg 246. This same view is also expressed by Pseudo-Philo, Midrash Shemuel, and Ecclesiasties Rabbah (46:20).

³⁴³ Chapter 3 verse 45.

he willingly obeyed Samuel's command and went into battle, knowing that he would die.

Pesikta de Rabbi Eliezer describes God's compassion not only toward Saul's soul, but toward his body as well. Thirty years after Saul died, there was a famine in the land of Israel. For three years, David went to prayer before God. During the third year, God finally told him that because Saul remained buried outside the land of Israel, Israel suffered from the famine. God extolled Saul's virtues; he had been anointed by Israel, there was no idolatry in his day, and he secured his position with Samuel (an interesting comment on Samuel's undying devotion to Saul). After exhuming Saul's body from Jabesh-Gilead, and finding that there were no worms or broken bones, he placed the body in a coffin and buried Saul and his sons in the land of Israel. The entire people of Israel then came out to demonstrate their love for Saul and his sons, and the famine finally subsided.³⁴⁴

Rabbi Hillel, however, not only does not believe that Saul was capable of being redeemed, but that he was responsible for the entire fall of Israel. Israel would not win the battle against the Philistines because Saul spared Agag and used a witch in order to divine the future. As he was the shepherd of the flock of Israel, God would deliver the entire country into the hands of Philistines on account of Saul's actions.

As mentioned before Pseudo-Philo believes that man responsible for Saul's death, the arms bearer who drives Saul through with the

³⁴⁴ Eliezer pg.119 of Second Samuel 21:14 and First Samuel 31:12-13.

sword, was Agag's son. The irony was not lost on Saul, who according to Pseudo-Philo, inquired as to the arms bearers identity before he died. The informed him that he was Edabus, Agag's son. Undaunted by this news, Saul asked that his final request be carried out; to tell David that Saul had died and that his final words were, "Do not remember my hatred and my injustice." Pseudo-Philo again portrays Saul as a vain man caring more about his image than about the harm he perpetrated in his lifetime.

IX. Conclusion

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SAMUEL AND SAUL:

In his book Handbook of Leadership, Bernard M. Bass writes, "No leader can be successful if he or she is not prepared to be rejected." Both King Saul and his prophet, Samuel, have to face rejection from those they rule, from each other, and from God. Both men are required to fulfill their roles without precedent from which they can learn, as they are respectively the first king and political prophet. The relationship between Samuel and Saul is marked by the personalities of each.

At a very early age, Samuel's mother gratefully offers him to God. On account of her barrenness, Hannah prays to God, promising that if she has a son she will give him up to be reared by Eli the priest in God's service. In modern terms, this could be viewed as the earliest rejection felt by Samuel. Samuel grows up without parents. Immediately after he is weaned, Samuel is sent away. He is raised by a man whom he knows is not his father, who has other sons, and who trains Samuel specifically for a task. Samuel is raised not as a child, but as a man meant to fill a role. The only self-identity Samuel possesses is intrinsically tied to who he is as a prophet and to how well he fulfills this task. Samuel sees very early on that he is different from others; even while Eli's sons rebel, one can assume from the text's lack of lament that Samuel obeys. Knowing his mother has dedicated him to the priesthood, he must feel enormous pressure. Samuel is not coddled as a child, never receiving any of the normal support one would

expect, even for a child of Biblical times.

The way in which Saul and Samuel's meet, destines Samuel to feel threatened by Saul. The people of Israel want a king and persist in their request despite Samuel's advice against one. Eventually, God, whose favor Samuel has previously enjoyed, agrees to grant the people's request. Thus, God and the people of Israel seemingly reject Samuel. This rejection is how Samuel comes to meet Saul. The two men are set up from the beginning to conflict with each other. Samuel, however, according to Abravanel, quickly comes to love and admire Saul for his strength and beauty. Samuel not only resigns himself to the fact that he must live with a king, but also that his task as a prophet is now in service to this king. Samuel gives Saul his first command in First Samuel 10:8, taking great care to report to Saul God's exact words.

After that, you are to go down to Gilgal ahead of me, and I will come down to you to present burnt offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being. Wait seven days until I come to you and instruct you what you are to do next.³⁴⁵

Saul transgresses this commandment. Thus, the first act that Samuel watches Saul perform as king, can be perceived as another rejection of Samuel. Here Samuel stands, rejected early on by his mother, rejected by the people of Israel, rejected by God, and now rejected by Saul, King of Israel.

Saul, on the other hand, is a man of humble background. The text

³⁴⁵ JPS translation.

emphasizes that Saul comes from the smallest of the twelve tribes, the tribe of Benjamin. He repeatedly displays a lack of self-confidence yet is instantly raised to the most powerful position in Israel. Saul neither adjusts to the power he receives so quickly, nor seems to realize the full implications of his position. It is far more important for the king to obey the commandments of God, and trust in the accurate transmission of the commands by the prophet, than for an average Israelite. When Saul sins, God considers Saul's sin very severe because of the power Saul holds as king. The first command Samuel transmits to Saul sets a precedent for Saul's career of mistaken endeavors and severe punishments. Saul also does not believe that he directly disobeys the first commandment, but rather thinks that he may know better than what was commanded him. Abravanel picks up on this first transgression as it is the first opportunity to begin commenting on how each character comes to act as he does, how each responds to the other's action, and how each responds to the other's response to the action. This is the first time Abravanel begins to comment on the relationship between Samuel and Saul.

Saul is placed in a position of power by God via Samuel. Samuel is his instructor, mentor, and primary connection to God. As such, Saul craves the approval of Samuel. Samuel does not know how to give approval, however, because he himself has never received it. The first time Samuel successfully completes the task of reporting God's word is when he prophesies to Eli the priest, the man who raised him. His prophecy to Eli tragically predicts the untimely death of Eli's sons. Eli never has the

opportunity to reward Samuel for Samuel's successful prophecy. Thus Saul constantly tries to receive the approval of a man who will never be able to provide it. Saul also does not realize that Samuel can never fully approve of Saul because it would entail admitting that Samuel was wrong about the kingship. What Saul needs most from Samuel is denied him by Samuel's ego.

Saul experiences the unhappy consequences of events for which he was not present and could not know had occurred. Every time Saul tries to win Samuel's approval, he realizes afterward by Samuel's words that his desire for approval has in fact caused him to disobey God's command. Whether or not Saul actually sins against God's direct command is sometimes unclear from the Biblical narrative. Abravanel, however, is very strong in his position that not only does Samuel report only words which come directly from God, but it breaks Samuel's heart every time he has to chastise Saul. Abravanel is compassionate toward Saul in that he does believe that Saul acts with the purest of intentions. The problem is that Saul is fool enough to believe that he can somehow decide what is best even when this means not following the direct command of Samuel.

Abravanel also picks up on the theme of rejection, though he would not couch Samuel's life experience in this term, as I have done above. There is, however, one time when he writes about Samuel's feelings of rejection: during his commentary on Saul's worst crime. Abravanel holds that when Saul commits the sin at Gilgal, sparing the booty and King Agag in First Samuel 15:1-35, he does

so not because he believes he is transgressing the word of God but because he believes that when Samuel reports the word of God, Samuel actually adds to God's command. Saul apparently thinks he is transgressing only Samuel's words. This, according to Abravanel, greatly hurts and angers Samuel more than any of Saul's other crimes as it is a very clear rejection and mistrust of Samuel as a prophet.

Armed with the advantage of modern psychology, one could describe the relationship between Saul and Samuel as co-dependent. Both men crave the approval of the other. At the same time, neither one properly expresses this need, nor realizes how much the other truly needs him. Each character sees himself as the weaker and as lacking the other's approval. In a co-dependent relationship, each person's mood has a strong effect upon the other. Each partner in the relationship requires the other to validate his/her own self worth. This is clearly the case with both Samuel and Saul: Saul because he is placed in the position of king by Samuel, and only knows when he is doing his job properly based on Samuel's reaction to him. It is also true for Samuel, because whether Saul succeeds or not and how Saul reacts to Samuel, is a direct reflection on how well Samuel is doing the only task for which he is trained. Without intervention, a co-dependent relationship will either continue in its unhealthy process, or will fall apart completely. Saul and Samuel's relationship undergoes the latter. In First Samuel 15:35, Samuel finally treats Saul in the manner in which Saul most fears: Samuel utterly rejects Saul. In a dramatic finale to their relationship,

Saul is left grasping the corner of Samuel's cloak, clawing for the approval he has always needed. Samuel declares that God has utterly rejected Saul, implying that Samuel, too, has cast out Saul. The two never speak again while living. This poignant end to their tumultuous relationship is a classic example of what happens when a co-dependent relationship ceases to function.

Saul's desperation and utter dependence on Samuel is highlighted in First Samuel 28. Even after Samuel's death, Saul continues to crave attention from Samuel. Saul uses a witch in order to raise Samuel from the dead. Saul is able to receive prophecy from Samuel after Samuel's death, but only to hear the prediction of his own demise. Cryptically, Samuel tells Saul that the following day Saul and his sons will die in battle. Samuel's final words to Saul predict doom to everything Saul holds dear, and finally end the tumultuous relationship between Samuel and Saul, "Tomorrow your sons and you will be with me; and the Lord will also deliver the Israelite forces into the hands of the Philistines."³⁴⁶

THE LIFE OF DON ISAAC ABRAVANEL:

Don Isaac Abravanel's commentary is intrinsically bound with who he is as a human being. His views of Biblical characters, as well as their relationships, are shaped by the experiences of Abravanel's life. He is a brilliant and prolific commentator; as stunning in his logical abilities as he is in his profound insights. He is also unique in many ways. First, he has an uncanny ability to reach toward the soul of a given character, striving to understand the psychological motivation behind each

³⁴⁶ First Samuel 28:19. JPS translation.

characters' actions. Second, he is remarkably uninhibited in his use of Christian sources, often summarizing what the "famous ones among the Christians" have to say on a given subject. Third, he has the advantage of living in the late part of the Middle Ages and is thus able to benefit from the writings of the sages, Z"L, who came before him (though he is more apt to disagree with the medieval writers than to agree with them). Fourth, he was not only well versed in his Jewish heritage; its language, laws, rituals, writings, and values, but he was trained in contemporary classics as well; benefiting from science, medicine, astrology, literature, law, finances, poetry, and art.

When reading Abravanel's commentary, one can not help but be stunned by the kaleidoscope of resources upon which Abravanel draws. His unique combination of knowledge and skills creates an exciting and dramatic commentary, paralleled only by the circumstances of Abravanel's life.

Abravanel served in the court of six different kings. He lived in six different countries, each time creating a life of fortune and political power, only to have them swept away by political hatred against the Jews. He served his people, not only as a caretaker of his people's political interests, but as one concerned with their spiritual direction as well. He was known across enemy borders as a brilliant financier and loyal subject. He was the head of a large family, taking his wife and children with him as he fled tyrannies and pursued new careers and opportunities.

It would be impossible to write a thesis based on Abravanel's commentary without also probing into the dramatic events of his life. For, as this thesis demonstrated, Abravanel writes his commentary on the Book of Samuel through a lens of empathy. He can not help but identify in each Biblical character a person with whom he dealt in his own life; including himself. It is apparent that his commentary is influenced by the timing of his writing. Abravanel's commentary on the Book of Samuel was written at a dramatic time in his life, was pursued after abandoning his works on the Torah, and was written in a startling time-frame and challenging circumstances.

A brief discussion of his life leading up to the writing of First Samuel, as well as the ways in which First Samuel may have affected him, has proven to be useful as one reads through Don Isaac Abravanel's translation.

Abravanel was born in 1437 to a family distinguished by their financial bounty, political power, and prestigious lineage. Abravanel's father enjoyed a position in the court of Prince Fernando, the son of the king of Portugal. Abravanel's grandfather served in the court of three Castilian kings and Abravanel's great-grandfather worked for Fernando IV, the king of Seville. Each of these men not only provided their employers with financial expertise, but political advise as well. They were the noted leaders of the Jewish communities in their respective times. Subsequently, they also served as the representatives of the Jewish communities to the monarchy.

Abravanel's family also enjoyed a claim (which would be impossible to prove or disprove) to royal lineage themselves. Abravanel reports in his introduction to his commentary on the Book of Joshua, that the Abravanel family were direct descendants of King David.

Abravanel grew up during a time of great political turmoil in Portugal. He was born and raised in Lisbon, where in 1449, the first major outbreak against the Jews took place. Abravanel's education was influenced by his family's heritage. As his father was a prominent leader both in the court of the monarch and among the Jewish community, and as Abravanel was expected to follow in his father's path, young Abravanel was educated in Latin and Roman classics as well as the Hebrew tradition. He was well versed in Latin, Portuguese, Castilian, and most successfully, Hebrew. He was trained in Jewish philosophy of the middle ages. This education was complimented by its Greek and Arab counterparts. He learned about medicine and astrology. As a young boy he was greatly interested in philosophy, though as he grew that interest gave way to his religious and mystical pursuits. Regardless of the medium, however, there is no doubt as to his intellectual abilities. A keen mind combined with a great thirst for truth made Abravanel excel at all of his studies. It is also apparent from his later life that he was a genius in the financial realm, a skill he must have acquired early. His diplomatic prowess also resulted from early training. He accompanied his father on official trips to the court of princes and kings, and was thus comfortable in their presence from an early age. Throughout

Abravanel's life, one can sense a struggle to balance the secular and religious. He knew his livelihood rested in the world of the monarchy, but he kept returning to his true passion; Biblical commentary. Abravanel was often forced to leave the service of a particular royal. These many transitions, instead of saddening him, provided him with the opportunity to work more on his literary pursuits. His craving to comment on the Biblical narrative is evident in that during brief periods of time during which he had the luxury of writing, he wrote quickly, finishing mass volumes in short time periods. Abravanel was already working as a leader of the Jewish community and a representative to the court when, in 1472, he bemoaned the fact that he did not have time to complete his commentary on Deuteronomy. This commentary was one of the earliest to be begun, and one of the latest to be completed. Little did Abravanel know that the circumstances of his tumultuous life would dictate the timing of its completion.

Abravanel's career as a court Jew began in his home country of Portugal. He inherited his father's friendship with the Duke of Braganza. After the duke died, Abravanel became exceedingly good friends with his son, Ferdinand. It is this friendship which may have helped Abravanel rise in the court of Alfonso V.

Circumstances lent themselves to Abravanel's success in Alfonso V's court. The king was in need of a good financier and had a basically pro-Jewish policy. Abravanel greatly admired Alfonso V, and the two became bound together in professional and personal admiration. King Alfonso V and Duke Ferdinand also put to use Abravanel's insights into politics. They each used Abravanel to

advise them with regard to personal and state politics. Abravanel thus enjoyed good relations with these two powerful men, other members of the court, and the Jewish community. He was respected universally for his knowledge, scholarship, and diplomacy.

Abravanel was also acquiring a great amount of wealth. He was a good businessman and well versed in the laws of the state. He was able to find time to continue his writing. He finished his book, Vision of God, continued his work on the Book of Deuteronomy, and began delivering and publishing lectures on his commentary of Rambam's Guide to the Perplexed. From this last work, one gets the first glimpse of Abravanel's departure from traditional medieval thought.

Abravanel succeeded in all arenas of his life during his time in Portugal. His achievements, however, were not to last. In 1481, King Alfonso V died of a plague which was ravishing the country. His successor was Joao II. It seemed expected that Abravanel would remain in service at the court, though neither Joao II nor Abravanel were thrilled with each other's presence. Abravanel believed Joao II to be a terrible king; one who displayed little respect or responsibility toward the people he served. His policy toward the Jews was the opposite of that of his father. This, in combination with two other factors, left Abravanel in a precarious situation. Abravanel was desperate to keep his family from being harmed by the plague. In order to avoid illness, he moved them around the country, escaping the heavily affected pockets. These moves kept him away from court for long stretches at a time. The court politics were also changing. Abravanel's friend, the new

Duke of Braganza, also shared a strained relationship with Joao II. Little did Abravanel realize how much these tensions would affect his life.

On May 30, 1483, Abravanel was called to court by means of a royal messenger. He began traveling, stopping overnight in the town of Evora. There, friends informed him that the day before the Duke had been arrested for treason during an official audience with Joao II. The friend urged Abravanel to flee the country, assuming that Abravanel's presence was requested for similar reasons.

Abravanel was aware of the tensions at the court, and of his own tenuous position; he respected his friend's advice and fled to Segura de Orden, on the boarder of Castile. Abravanel eventually learned that Joao II believed Abravanel to be a co-conspirator in a plot of treason. How much of this Joao II actually believed is debatable. If Abravanel was convicted of treason, Joao II would have inherited Abravanel's vast fortune while ridding himself of a potential adversary. Abravanel remained in Segura, sending notice to his family to join him there with their fortune. While it was too late to rescue the family's wealth, his wife and children safely escaped the country.

Abravanel writes little about how he felt during his flight from his home country; yet, he reveals its profound affect on his psyche through his choice of commentaries on which he would work while in Segura. Up until this point, Abravanel had expressed a desire to finally finish what had seemed to be his favorite work; his commentary on Deuteronomy. Not surprisingly, however,

Abravanel now abandoned this work in favor of another, more political area of the Bible; the Prophets. Here, he could spend more time expressing his own views on politics, political figures, and most specifically, the monarchy. Abravanel wrote at a frenzied pace. He had lost his entire fortune, but decided that this was an act of Providence as he had spent too much of his energy pursuing the material pleasures of the world and not enough developing the spiritual side of his nature. He began his endeavor to enhance himself spiritually by giving lectures throughout the border of Castile and Portugal. These lectures turned into his commentary on Joshua and Judges. Immediately after he completed these two books, he began his commentary on Samuel. His speed never faltered, as he completed Samuel in one hundred days. I believe that this timing is crucial to the content of The Book of Samuel. Much of Abravanel's commentary seems to be an autobiography of his experience in Portugal. In moments of profound insight, Abravanel projects his own frustrations with the monarchy onto the experience of Samuel. His clear partiality toward Samuel and against Saul, can be seen as his own feelings toward his relationship with Joao II. Perhaps Abravanel sees himself as the faithful prophet, suffering the consequences of his righteous behavior. When reading Abravanel's commentary on Samuel, one can sense a rushed work. I found several places where Abravanel's citations were incorrect. Abravanel's life journey up until his Samuel commentary is telling of how his experience and personality affect his writing.

Not only did Abravanel's experiences affect how he viewed First

Samuel, but it seems that First Samuel had an equally important affect on Abravanel. It was not long before Abravanel was once again be drawn away from his spiritual work. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain were in need of money in order to recover from the war with Portugal. They were also anticipating a war with the Moors, and thus were in great need of a man with a reputation for financial expertise, military knowledge, and a connection with other Jews across enemy borders. In March of 1484, Abravanel was summoned to appear before Isabella and Ferdinand and thus began an eight year career working for the Spanish monarchy as a chief financial counselor. His relationship with Isabella and Ferdinand, was quite different from the one he enjoyed with Alfonso V of Portugal. In Portugal, Abravanel was used to giving political and personal advice in addition to his financial predictions. In Spain, the king and queen were not interested in what this Jew thought of their politics; they needed him solely for his financial expertise. While working for the Spanish court, Abravanel was again able to amass a considerable personal estate. He became a leader of the Jewish people (though his position was less official than it had been in Portugal). Once again, Abravanel was able to create a life of fortune, power, and prestige. As Jew in the sixteenth century, however, he could not rely on the longevity of his fortune.

In 1489, the Spanish Inquisition began actions against the Jews. The following year, accusations of blood libel became a widely accepted tool of anti-Semitism. A year following these charges, the first convictions and executions of Jews began. On March 31,

1492, the edict to expel the Jews from Spain was signed. Though Abravanel and other Jewish leaders were prepared for its announcement on April 29, 1492, they had been shocked when they first learned of the king and queen's plans. Abravanel tried four different times to plead the case of the Jews before the court. During his first two attempts, he spoke with King Ferdinand, first offering him solid logical arguments, and then bribing him with a sum of gold. The third time he stood before Ferdinand, he was told that he would have to plead his case before Queen Isabella. It is most likely that the case was lost before Abravanel had the opportunity to appear before the queen. His plea, however, was remarkable in its power and especially in its origin. In "Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher," B. Natanyahu describes the way in which Abravanel spoke with Isabella.

He spoke to her now like a scion of the House of David and as a representative of an unconquered - and unconquerable- people. He spoke to her, moreover, like a prophet of old, in daring, castigating and threatening language.

Abravanel became the characters about whom he had written. He became the eloquent Samuel; firm in his knowledge that he spoke for God and His people. He became the warrior David; sure that no matter what befell the Jewish people on earth, their eternal existence was guaranteed by a divine covenant. Abravanel knew the rhythm of how a prophet of the Lord should speak to a monarch. During his conversation with Isabella, Abravanel lived his commentary on the book of Samuel.

Despite his mighty efforts to save the Jews, they were expelled

from Spain. Abravanel and his family were among the last to leave. Most of the Spanish Jews fled to Portugal, but Abravanel knew that an edict for his execution still existed there. He took his family to Italy, once again leaving his life behind him, shattered.

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