Multivalent Readings of Multivalent Texts: 1 Samuel 10:27 and the Problem of Textual Variants in the Interpretation of Scripture

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At a recent Bible study, a congregation member expressed frustration at the multiple Bible versions used by the group. "I wish," he said, "that there was just one English version." After a discussion about functional and dynamic equivalence, I assured him that we could trust all our Bibles to be the same whenever it mattered. While the spirit of such a sentiment is quite true, the reality is something different.

Take, for example, the case of the transition between 1 Samuel 10 and 11. Many older translations, including the KJV, end chapter 10 with simply, "But he kept his peace." The NRSV contains an entire additional paragraph at this point, while the NIV relegates this paragraph to a footnote.[1] Moreover, both the Good News Translation and NRSV begin chapter 11 with, "About a month later," which seems

to be missing from most other versions.

The textual problem with the ending of 1 Samuel 10 is well-attested.[2] The issue revolves around the verse's final two Hebrew words, *wayhiy kəmaċariyš* ("and he was like one who is silent") and the possibility of correcting this somewhat strange Hebrew form to *kəmaċadaš* or even *kəmow ċadaš* ("and it was about a month") and prepending it to the following verse. The difference in the consonantal text between the two options can be explained by scribal error giving a *resh* for a *dalet*.

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1. "Now Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had been grievously oppressing the Gadites and the Reubenites. He would gouge out the right eye of each of them and would not grant Israel a deliverer. No one was left of the Israelites across the Jordan whose right eye Nahash, king of the Ammonites, had not gouged out. But there were seven thousand men who had escaped from the Ammonites and had entered Jabesh-gilead" (1 Samuel 10:27 NRSV).

2. See, for example, the discussion in Frank Moore Cross, "The Ammonite Oppression of the Tribes of Gad and Reuben: Missing Verses in 1 Samuel 11 found in 4QSamuelᵃ," in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures,* H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld, eds. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), 148–158; Alexander Rofé, "The Acts of Nahash according to 4QSamᵃ," in *Israel Exploration Journal* 32 (1982): 129–133; and the excellent treatment in Edward D. Herbert, "4QSamᵃ and its Relationship to the LXX: An Exploration in Stemmatological Analysis," in *IX Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies,* Bernard A. Taylor, ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 37–55.

The Septuagint suggests this correction, reading "and it was as after a month" at this place. The issue is further complicated by the Dead Sea discovery of a scroll known as 4QSamᵃ which adds the additional paragraph introducing chapter eleven. The information contained in this paragraph found at Qumran was also known to Josephus, though in *Antiquities of the Jews* he presents it in a slightly different order.[3]

How we resolve this issue has ramifications for our understanding of both pericopes, for the character of Saul, and even for our view of David, one of the most important figures of the Hebrew Bible. This paper discusses the results of each choice and suggests that rather than coming to a resolution, we allow the paradoxical choice of multiple readings to stand, so that the reader can enter into dialogue with the variant interpretations.

Interpreting the textual revision and Qumran addition

Reading "and it was about a month" at the beginning of chapter 11 places the account of Nahash the Ammonite's siege of Jabesh-gilead firmly in the earliest days of Saul's kingship. This placement is satisfying in a few ways. The account takes place before the summary of Saul's reign that begins chapter 13, suggesting an earlier date for the Ammonite campaign. It also places the success against Nahash long before Saul's decline. The powerful reaction of Saul toward the Ammonites—his message sent with a piece of the divided yoke of oxen to all of Israel[4]—may be a hint of the madness that is to come, as may be the comments about his prophetic ecstasy in chapter 10.[5]

All this taken together foreshadows Saul's eventual descent.

The insertion given in 4QSamᵃ gives additional background information for the account of the Ammonite campaign against Jabesh-gilead. Frank Moore Cross suggests that the addition helps to explain the severity of Nahash's behavior toward the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead, gouging out their right eye, by explaining that they were harboring fugitives.[6] This explanation, however, is unsatisfactory, since it simply transfers the question. Why, then, was Nahash originally gouging out the right eye of the Gadites and the Reubenites?

Instead, the Qumran material serves to intensify the horror of Nahash's attack on Jabesh-gilead. Not only was he threatening to take the region of Gilead, but he had already devastated all the Israelites who had settled on the far side of the Jordan and left no one there with both eyes. It may surprise us, if this is so, that no action was taken against the Ammonites prior to the campaign of Saul.

What should not surprise us, if the intensity of Nahash's cruelty is increased, is the strength with which Saul responded. In the verses that follow,[7] we are told that the spirit of God came to Saul, and some 370,000 men were mustered to battle against the Ammonites. This divine power and vast army is certainly excessive if only for the siege of a single city. It is a more appropriate reply to the subjugation of two entire Israelite tribes.

Such power given to Saul's command can be read as widespread approval of him as king by the vast majority of Israelites. With hundreds of thousands of men at his command, nearly the whole population of Israel would have been involved;

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3. Cf. *Antiquities* VI.v.1.

4. 1 Sam 11:7.

5. 1 Sam 10:9–13.

6. Cross, 156.

7. 1 Sam 11:8ff.

even taking this to be the Bible's typical hyperbolic style in describing military might, we still have a massive army that involved the response of the entirety of Israel. After the counter-siege against the Ammonites, the Israelites who rejected Saul initially[8] seem to have come around to his side. This helps to give reason for the final comments on Saul's ascent to the throne in 1 Sam 11:12ff.

This assists the reader in shaping an understanding of Saul as a biblical character. He is the one who, though accepted as king by the people, was rejected by God. This is concomitant with Samuel's words in I Sam 10:19, where he interprets the Hebrews' demand for a king to be a sign of their distrust of God as their leader. Although Saul is selected to be king by God, it is clear that God would prefer no king at all. The choice of Saul, approved by all despite his evident insanity from the first, is consequence of the Israelites' distrust of God.

Interpreting the Masoretie Text

If, however, we read the words in question as, "And he kept his peace," we have no additional information about Nahash at all—not even when his campaign took place. We may guess that the battle happened early in Saul's career from its placement in the book, but how early remains in question. We cannot, then, read in the Nahash story as an early and wide acceptance of Saul on the part of Israel.

Instead, the report of Saul's election by lot to the kingship ends with his reaction to the "sons of worthlessness" who despised him and presented no gift for his coronation. The inclusion of this response softens the previous words. Without it, the account ends by saying that "they brought

him no gift," a rejection that resounds in the listener's ear. The clear point of the verse is to let the reader know that not everyone in Israel approved of Saul as king. This begins to prepare us for his eventual replacement. By adding the two words, attention is shifted from the repudiation of the king by "some worthless fellows" to Saul's response to their repudiation, a response that moderates his rejection.

With this shift, we learn more about Saul's character. In 1 Samuel 10, we find Saul speaking with the spirit of prophecy. In 1 Sam 11:6, the Spirit of God inspires him in his campaign against the Ammonites. If this is not insanity, it is clear that God has chosen Saul for the kingship, not just through the circumstances of his election, but also through the presence of the Spirit and deeds of power.

The inclusion of Saul's response to his detractors in 10:27 helps the reader to understand God's choice. At the start of his reign, Saul behaves thoughtfully and compassionately. Rather than retaliating against those who reject him, Saul remains quiet. Perhaps he hopes that they will come to appreciate his leadership after some time passes; perhaps he simply understands his calling to kingship as leader over even those who dislike him. In any case, this behavior is described using a participle, indicating ongoing action.[9] This may be a hint that his reaction is in line with his personality more generally understood. The man we meet here is a far cry from the character we will come to know in the depths of his madness later in the book. A king who knows how to be silent is in line with the ideal found in Israel's wisdom tradition.[10]

8. Cf. 1 Sam 10:27.

9. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed., E. Kautzsch, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 360.

10. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1962), 432.

By keeping the received text in 10:27, we have evidence that Saul is not mad at the beginning of his story. This draws Samuel's pronouncement against him in 1 Sam 13:13ff into even starker relief. When Saul improperly offers a sacrifice instead of waiting for Samuel to appear, God rejects him. With this, Saul's downfall begins—a downfall that will eventually lead to the anointing of David and Saul's insanity directed at David. It is worth noting that this reading fits nicely with the cultic goals of the Deuteronomist author.

This reading also strengthens the character of David. Gerhard von Rad suggests that "the stories of Saul and David are really stories about David."[11] If Saul is simply a foil for David, the bad king to David's good, then we can see this development in Saul's character as a reflection on David as well. David is, of course, not unscarred by error. His behavior toward Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite, is certainly deplorable to God,[12] and yet his reign is marked by an eternal covenant. Saul's kingly character in 1 Samuel 10 contrasted with his later failing gives us further evidence for the interpretation that David, while imperfect, behaved rightly *with respect to the cult* and, thus, in the eyes of the author, was the ideal king.

Implications for interpretation

We see, then, that our choice of text will affect the character of Saul put forward by the text as well as his place in the larger biblical account. With the received text, Saul is a good choice as king whose slow descent into madness and ugly death are the cause of cultic impropriety. Emending the text gives us a Saul who is a poor

11. Ibid., 324.

12. Cf. 2 Samuel 12.

choice from the start, a clear sign that all of Israel has spurned God's protection by demanding a king.

Of course, we should not argue for one interpretation over another from its

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results. Neither is there clarity over which version of the text is more original, given that new evidence in the debate continues to come to light. For that matter, one might wonder whether the question of originality truly should dictate our choice. Both textual variants are attested to by authentic witnesses to the Jewish tradition—Josephus and the community at Qumran favored one reading ("it was about a month"), the Masoretic Text the other ("he held his peace"). We could easily argue that the longer usage period of the received text gives it an authority on par with divine inspiration, even if it is a textual innovation. And yet our choice over

such a small matter—between a *resh* and a *dalet* in this case—makes a significant difference in the portrayal of one of the most important characters in our scriptures!

The scholarly tradition has always striven for exactness. When faced with a choice, we make a decision based on the best evidence we can. But perhaps we would benefit, in some instances, with holding multiple possibilities in tension. As we interpret our texts, we could record the possible implications of *both* readings, allowing the reader to make her own choice as she encounters the text and listens to God through it. Instead of choosing *dalet* or *resh,* why not suggest *dalet* and *resh?*

This may be difficult to reconcile with the needs of scientific inquiry, but it is authentic to both Jewish and Christian tradition. The medieval rabbis, even when coming down clearly on a particular issue, tend to record minority opinions; for example, the differing viewpoints of the schools of Hillel and Shammai pervade the Tannaitic literature. Christianity also understands that one text can have multiple meanings; the medieval scholastics codified the fourfold sense of scripture as one way of acknowledging this. We, too, must be able to recognize, even in the rational setting of our interpretive work, the multivalence of textual meaning, particularly when, as people of faith, we assert that the Spirit of God is at work in and through the texts. If we allow it, interpretative problems like textual variants may become one more way we can discover the rich diversity of God's word speaking through the biblical corpus.