

key approach to its reading. For many readers, whether they realize it or not, reading Samuel as history seems self-evident, so the only questions are then concerned with the quality of the history that it offers.

But what might a historical reading of Samuel look like? To some extent, the answer to that question depends on how much value is given to Samuel's testimony about the events it relates. But reading Samuel as history does not mean assuming it should be read in the same way as a contemporary work of history. No modern historian would write an account of a nation's history where the actions of God are placed so centrally because the acts of God are not subject to the principles of historical validation and verification. That is, the text may well insist that God did something (such as choosing Saul and then David), but that key theological claim is not something a historian can claim to analyze. Nevertheless, something that characterizes historical readings of Samuel is an interest in determining whether or not the events described are likely to have happened—this in contrast to those who insist that the historicity of the events is irrelevant (cf. Long, 1994: 88). It is not the case that anyone reading the text historically is interested in defending historicity at all costs, but it is true to say that they are concerned to say that the text's historical reliability is an important pointer to how we read it. The reason for this is that the text appears to make historical claims—that certain kings reigned, or that certain battles were won—and these are an important element in the book's interpretation.

An obvious example of this can be seen in the various histories of Israel that use Samuel as a source and in some recent biographies of David. Provan, Long and Longman argue that the testimony of these texts should be taken seriously, though this must be done with high literary competence (2003: 99), with the result that their history of the early monarchy (2003: 193-238) reads at times like an exegesis of the books of Samuel. So, when discussing David's rise and Saul's demise (1 Samuel 16–31), they place great emphasis upon the reliability of the traditions in Samuel. This is in contrast to two recent biographers of David, Steven McKenzie and Baruch Halpern. Halpern sees two sources running through 1 Samuel 8–2 Samuel 1 which, though they generally agree, sometimes conflict. Halpern is willing to date Samuel quite early—'no later than the 9th century' (2001: 69)—and thus based on records that are 'reasonably robust about major events' (2001: 72). McKenzie draws on a more traditional source analysis of Samuel, regarding 1 Samuel 16–2 Samuel 5 as a History of David's Rise, but still concludes that 'whatever their date of writing, they seem to contain genuine historical information about David' (2000: 35). As such, their conclusions about the dating and general reliability of Samuel are not dissimilar to those of Provan, Long and Longman, nor of the earlier history of Bright (1980: 184). But McKenzie and Halpern offer very different readings of David from that

presented in the biblical text, and hence Provan, Long and Longman. For both, David was a serial killer and generally responsible for the deaths of those who Samuel claims he did not kill. To take only the example of Nabal, McKenzie (2000: 96-101) argues that the apologetic nature of the material plus the benefit to David of Nabal's death makes it more likely that David arranged his death. Halpern (2001: 77) also notes the benefits to David of Nabal's death, arguing that Abigail possibly killed him for David. This conforms to his general line of argument that points where Samuel shows David did not kill someone indicates that the claim was made that he had, a claim Halpern is generally willing to accept as true. This is not the place to engage in depth with these arguments, though it is worth noting that there are other themes running through this particular narrative, not least showing David that violence was not the way he was to proceed to the throne (Firth 2009: 272-73). If so, then a reading which is literarily competent needs to question whether Halpern and McKenzie's proposals are true to the text itself.

Perhaps a more notable concern is with the underlying methodology of McKenzie and Halpern. Both are heavily dependent on the model outlined by McCarter (1980a), which reads the History of David's Rise as an apology for David, so that the historian needs to read against the grain of the apology to get to the historical reality. This is because he sees the apology as justifying the fact that David is a usurper who seized the throne by force (McCarter 1980a: 499). But this approach has recently been subject to a detailed analysis by Short (2010), who notes that the various charges from which McCarter claims the text defends David is dependent upon reading parts of it out of order. Because Saul has been rejected before David is introduced in 1 Samuel 16, readers know that David is the one chosen long before any of the events from which he is apparently defended (Short 2010: 144). David would not then need to be defended against these various charges. Beyond that, one might wonder what else the text could say about events it openly acknowledges. If to try and demonstrate David's innocence is to show that the charge was made in his lifetime and, therefore, true, then there is no way of proving his innocence.

Attempting to resolve questions over the historical reliability of Samuel is not the only way in which Samuel is read historically. A rather different approach is offered by Adam (2007). Where the scholars we have discussed so far all tend to date the material concerning David's rise relatively early, Adam believes it cannot have originated any earlier than the seventh century and was then continually re-written (known by the German term *Fortschreibung*) to justify later kingship (2007: 15, 29). Adam thus gives very little credence to the historical claims of Samuel as everything is addressed to later concerns in Judah. The historical importance of Samuel, for Adam, is thus not in the reliability of its claims about David since there is little

that can be trusted. Rather, its importance lies in what it reveals about later generations, especially in the Persian period, and how they constructed their own view of themselves through an imagined past that they recount. Although this is not a reading that is interested in constructing a history of the period of Saul and David, it is still a historical reading, though one that struggles to explain why such a text should begin to emerge in the seventh century. By contrast, Bodi (2010) draws on ancient Akkadian texts to situate David's story in the context of warlord behaviour, showing how David is critiqued in 2 Samuel 11–12. Although Bodi allows for later redaction, his argument places David historically in the time set by the text, showing that it can be interpreted in light of the Akkadian context (2010: 19–70). The key point here, though, is not that Bodi attempts to argue for or against the historicity of Samuel, but rather that wider historical concerns can shape our reading of Samuel. A further alternative is offered by Gilmour (2011), whose concern is with historiography (that is, how history is written), though it should be noted that her concerns move away from the historicity of Samuel to consider more how the past was being actualized by Samuel's composers.

Although it may be disappointing that these scholars cannot agree with one another, it is notable that methodologically they are not far apart from one another. What marks all these readings as historical is that for them 1–2 Samuel is a *source* to be interrogated in the process of a historical inquiry. Of course, all know that history is never 'as it really was' because history is always an imaginative construct, but the point is that a primary reason for such a reading of Samuel is an attempt to understand what happened in history. Although theological presuppositions clearly do play a part in how such readings are constructed (contrast, for example, Brooks 2005 with Tushima 2011), they are not particularly prominent. Of course, not all studies of Samuel are purely historical and many will use history as one element among others, but this pattern is evident in contemporary historical readings. But that Samuel cannot provide us with a comprehensive history of the period it describes on its own moves us towards recognizing that, although it contains work which can be considered in terms of history (however assessed), it is not purely a work of history. Reading it for history is a valid approach, but it is not the only one because to read it solely as history is to make a genre mistake. It contains history, but is not itself history.

Samuel as Prophecy

Our second approach to reading Samuel also has a venerable history and is, perhaps, even older than the approach of reading Samuel as history. Reading Samuel as prophecy goes back as far as the Hebrew canon, which divides

the books of the Old Testament into three groups—‘Law’ (traditionally), ‘Prophets’ and ‘Writings’. The second grouping within the canon is divided into two: the Former Prophets, which the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings constitute, and the Latter Prophets, consisting of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets. It is clear that the structuring of the canon in the Hebrew Bible operates on different criteria from those with which we are familiar in the Christian tradition, and, therefore, most English Bibles, which have followed the LXX. For example, where the Christian arrangement of the canon places Samuel in the histories along with Chronicles (which also covers this period), in the Hebrew tradition Chronicles is included in the Writings. Conversely, where the Christian tradition includes Daniel among the Prophets, in the Hebrew Bible it too is included among the Writings. Neither approach is necessarily better than the other, but each option leads us to read Samuel in a particular way. The emphases that we bring to reading the book come from its placement at a certain point in the canon because, whether we are conscious of it or not, these paratextual features shape our reading. But we should also note that the inclusion of Joshua – Kings among the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible also suggests a rather different understanding of ‘prophecy’ from that which most western Christians today might think it is.

An important difficulty to face is that we do not know what the criteria were for deciding that Samuel belongs among the Former Prophets. It seems reasonably clear that Joshua – Kings represents a literary whole, albeit one that emerged over several centuries. Its unity is thus more the result of editorial activity than of composition so that many points of tension remain within the text. But we do not have any clear reason for deciding that these works belong in a different part of the canon from Chronicles. It may be that the reason is simply one of historical process; Joshua – Kings was finished sooner and the Former Prophets as a canonical division was closed when Chronicles was composed, so it simply ended up in the Writings. But even if that is so, the Hebrew tradition concluded that Samuel had sufficient in common with Isaiah or Jeremiah to decide that it should be placed in the Prophets, though it was sufficiently different that these were the ‘Former’, not ‘Latter’ Prophets. Thomas Mann (2011: 10) is thus more confident than I am about this process when he says that ‘The Former Prophets were so named because the figure of the prophet plays a major role, especially in the books of Samuel and Kings, but also because the theological and ethical world-view of the prophets pervades the narrative as a whole.’ I am less certain than Mann about this because prophets play no part at all in Joshua and very little in Judges, though he is correct that they are influential in Samuel and Kings. But understanding these books as embodying the world-view of the prophets is perhaps closer to the mark, recognizing that these are not works told purely to recount the past. Rather, as is perhaps always true of

history, it recounts Israel's past in order to bring a message to its own time. Particularly, if the finished work of Joshua – Kings emerged in the exile, then we should understand it as a text which addresses the needs of the exilic community. Moreover, it is presented as a work that is concerned with what Yahweh is doing, interpreting Israel and Judah's past through a profoundly theological reading of that past. To give one simple example, it is possible to examine the evidence for David's existence and the probability of him becoming king in place of Saul. This is historically accessible, even if that evidence is interpreted quite differently. But what cannot be assessed is the claim that David's rise was because of Yahweh's choice of him (1 Sam. 16:1-13). Likewise, we can assess the historical probability of the rebellions of Absalom (2 Sam. 13-19) and Sheba (2 Sam. 20). But we cannot historically assess this as Yahweh's punishment of David for his sin in 2 Samuel 11.

So, it is not unreasonable to understand Samuel as forming part of a prophetic message to the exilic community, although, we will argue in Chapter 4, it also addressed earlier generations, so that a message for one period was seen as having continued validity for the exilic community. But the validity of that message is in part, at least, determined by the presence of the message from the various prophets whose ministries are recorded throughout Samuel, and whose message in their own time is consistent with the message that the book as a whole wants to bring—that for all his failings, David is Yahweh's chosen king. Moreover, as we shall note in Chapter 2, the songs that form the boundaries of Samuel are also understood as a prophetic witness in the text and these confirm that Yahweh is prepared not only to work with a king, but with David in particular (cf. 1 Sam. 2.10, 2 Sam. 23.5). As Samuel is brought into an integrated history in the exile, Yahweh's choice of David is then related by the book of Kings to the failure of subsequent kings to remain faithful, though the promise to David becomes a reason why Yahweh refrains from taking the sins of Israel to their apparently logical conclusion (1 Kgs 15.4-5).

David's importance for Samuel can be seen in the amount of space devoted to him, but also in the prominence the text gives to the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7. Noth tends to downplay this text because of his belief that the Deuteronomistic History was opposed to kingship and so gives scant attention to it. But McCarthy (1965) has shown that 2 Samuel 7 is actually pivotal to the whole work, while Gerbrandt (1986) has shown that it is not monarchy as such that is opposed. So, there is a strong interest in David as God's chosen king in Samuel, an interest that is given prophetic voice in Nathan's oracle in 2 Sam. 7.4-16. Moreover, David's 'last words' (2 Sam. 23.1-7) are also given a strongly prophetic twist. This is notable through the close parallels with Balaam's oracles (Num. 24.3-4, 15-16; cf. Starbuck 1999: 186-89), so that David's words simultaneously look both back and forward. Although David is prohibited from building a temple himself, Yahweh promises to establish

a dynasty ('house') for David, a house that David can claim is secure with Yahweh (2 Sam. 23.5). That David reflects on this covenant relationship with Yahweh after the events described in 2 Samuel 9–20 suggests that this security for his house remains in spite of David's manifest failures (cf. Firth 2005: 97-98). The importance of David is thus established through prophetic messages, messages that thus confirm the narrative's own emphasis on David. But in recording this through prophets, the abiding significance of David is affirmed for later generations, thus making it the basis for prophetic reflection in later texts (see Avioz 2005: 71-192, Schniedewind 1999).

The prophetic reading of Samuel does not depend on 2 Samuel 7 alone. With Samuel's birth narrative (1 Sam. 1) we are shown the importance of prophetic figures right from the outset, with Samuel's importance emphasized through his initiatory experiences in 1 Samuel 3. It is notable, though, that the message that Samuel is to bring Eli (1 Sam. 3.11-14) largely repeats that of an anonymous man of God in 1 Sam. 2.27-36, though such repetitions are typical in Samuel (Firth 2005b). The importance of Samuel as a prophet is then established in the comment in 1 Sam. 3.19–4.1a, a commendation that also assures subsequent readers of Samuel's importance. This is then demonstrated in Samuel's role in the appointment of Saul as Israel's first king, a process that climaxes in his speech to the people in 1 Samuel 12. Here, Samuel lays out a way forward by which the nation can live with a king and yet still have Yahweh as the great king, so that in renewing kingship (1 Sam. 11.14) Yahweh's own reign was also renewed (Vannoy 1978: 178). Samuel's task here is to lay out the means by which kingship could succeed, a model in which civil responsibility was given to the king, but where Yahweh's authority continued to be mediated through his prophet, so that kings still stood under divine authority (cf. Firth 2009: 148-49). Thus, although the Davidic promise is crucial for the books of Samuel, it is a promise that is mediated and under Yahweh's authority through prophets.

In reading Samuel as a prophetic message built around history that includes numerous prophetic messages, we also begin to realize that its message is not simply laid out for us as a few bullet points that can be drawn from its narrative. Rather, the narrative itself is an artistic composition, one that lays out patterns early on that are only fulfilled later and which constantly interact with its various elements. So, we realize that, although Samuel is a prophetic text, it is not just a prophetic text. Again, to read it only as prophecy would be a genre mistake.

Samuel as Narrative

These observations lead us to recognize that we not only need to approach Samuel as history and prophecy, but also as a work of narrative. Indeed, Provan, Long and Longman's insistence that a historical reading needs to be literarily

competent (2003: 99) has already highlighted the need to consider the nature of the text as a narrative. At one level, that might appear to be stating the obvious. Samuel tells a story, the story of how Israel becomes a kingdom under Saul, of his rejection and then the securing of the kingdom under David. Of course Samuel is a narrative. But it is important at this point to distinguish between a story and a narrative. A story is what happened (whether or not the story is fiction or history, does not affect this), but the narrative is how the story is told (Walsh 2009: 6-9). Put simply, in choosing to present a given story in a particular form, a narrator invariably emphasizes certain points that another narrator might not. So, a narrator selects the information from the story in order to present it and does so because of the message that the narrative is intended to communicate. All history does this to some extent as historians construct a narrative from their sources, but reading Samuel as narrative means recognizing that its narrative has been artistically constructed.

Reading Samuel as narrative does not have the same venerable history as reading it as history or prophecy, at least not in terms of the structure of the canon. Nevertheless, that Samuel has good stories, which grip us and grab our attention, is something that has long been recognized. Sunday school curricula, for example, have long made stories like David's encounter with Goliath (1 Sam. 17) a staple. It would be fair to say that the book presented to children has been somewhat sanitized, so, although David's encounter with Goliath is well known, the revolts of Absalom and Sheba (2 Sam. 13–20) are not. And of course, David's encounter with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11) or Amnon's rape of Tamar have long been deemed unsuitable for children. But even allowing for this, it is clear that reading at least parts of Samuel as a narrative has a long pedigree, even if, until comparatively recently, such readings have been deemed fit for children rather than adults.

Biblical studies took a literary turn in the 1980s, something that triggered a growing interest in Samuel as a narrative. The key figure here was probably Robert Alter whose *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), though in reality building on a range of studies from the previous decade, opened the way for serious consideration of Old Testament narrative through its focus on methodology. As a result of this turn, we are not simply concerned to read the stories—rather, we are concerned with how Samuel tells its story, because understanding how it tells its story is vital to appreciating its message—hence the distinction between 'story' and 'narrative'. It is this increased awareness of the literary character of the text that has driven many recent studies of Samuel. Indeed, where for Old Testament studies the term 'literary criticism' could be used forty years ago to refer to source criticism and the like, it is now more likely to describe studies which are concerned with how Samuel narrates its story. As such, a unifying feature of narrative studies of Samuel is their focus on the text as we have it rather

than its sources, though this does not mean such readings are ignorant of the book's development.

One of the key figures in studying Samuel as narrative is Alter, since his commentary on Samuel (1999) takes an explicitly narrative approach, though the work of Shimon bar-Efrat (1999, 2007, 2009) is equally important in bridging narrative theory and commentary on Samuel. But, since the books of Samuel have proved particularly fertile ground, pride of place should probably be given to the extensive readings of Polzin (1989, 1993) and Fokkelman (1981, 1986, 1990, 1993), both of whom have offered narrative analyses of the whole of Samuel. Others, like David M. Gunn (1978, 1980), Lyle M. Eslinger (1985, 1994) and Barbara Green (2003a, 2003b), have provided substantive narrative analyses of portions of the book, while Uriah Kim (2008) has offered an expressly postcolonial reading of Samuel in light of his experience as a Korean-American. We cannot examine each of these here, but note that the approaches taken by these scholars in the pursuit of a narrative reading differ considerably.

We can take Fokkelman as one end of a spectrum. He is quite clear that one should not begin with a specific method in mind because to do so is to limit the questions that one can put to the text (1981: 3). Instead, a narrative reading aims to consider the way the text itself is formed, so that method emerges from the process of reading a given text. His reading is, therefore, like a series of concentric circles (1981: 3) as he engages with the text. Although this might sound as if he aims to read in a way that is methodologically free, this is not strictly the case, as he acknowledges (1981: 10-12) the influence of bar-Efrat's 1975 dissertation (in Hebrew), a work which formed the basis for his own later work. However, Fokkelman does not often draw this material into the formal discussion as his goal is to interpret the text through intrinsic study (1981: 1). A result of this is that his sprawling study moves to consider a range of issues in reading any given text in Samuel, though Fokkelman frequently comments on the artistic structures employed within the book, at both the micro-textual (e.g. 1986: 266, 1989: 94-95) and macro-textual levels (e.g. 1981: 415, 1993: 540-49). However, for Fokkelman, it is crucial that no one methodology for reading narrative should control the reading process. Rather, the features particular to a passage should generate one's reading questions.

A radically different approach is taken by Polzin. He is clear that he is not interested in the pre-history of the text and, indeed, is quite critical of readings which focus on it (1989: 1-6). Likewise, he is sharply critical of readings (such as Noth) which treat the author as a largely mechanical compiler of existing traditions (1989: 9-12). For Polzin, it is better to work on the assumption that, however worked over it might be and allowing for problems with textual criticism, the text, as we have it, makes sense

(1989: 17). With all this, Fokkelman would be largely in agreement. Where Polzin differs is that he draws extensively on the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin (among other Russian formalists). This tends to be introduced within his reading of a particular passage, rather than as part of a methodology outlined in his introduction to the volumes on Samuel (e.g. 1989: 18, 1993: 14), though it is briefly outlined in an earlier volume (1980: 18-25). This approach is developed further by Green (2003a), who structures her reading of each section of 1 Samuel around a particular point of Bakhtin's literary theory, though her roots in Polzin's reading of Samuel are clear. So, rather than pointing to the ways the structure and features of the text hold it together in a literary unity, as Fokkelman tends to do, Polzin (and Green following him) explores the dialogical tensions he identifies within Samuel.

What unites these readings of Samuel as a narrative is that they are concerned with the final form of the text; a reading that shows considerable literary skill is employed in the construction of its narrative. But where they differ is in where they locate the leading questions—are they those generated by the text or those brought by the reader? Since in reality all readers come with certain questions to Samuel, the issue is perhaps more accurately whether or not they seek to privilege those questions. But narrative readings of Samuel as a whole recognize it as a text with a high level of literary artistry, something that is an abiding gain of reading Samuel as narrative.

We could draw on a range of other literary discussions of these narratives, but the pattern would be largely similar. The literary turn has seen Samuel read as a work of narrative. One result of this is that the questions of history tend to fade from the central place that they held for so long in Old Testament scholarship, though this is far from absolute (e.g. Edelman, 1991, integrates a literary reading of 1 Samuel with historical concerns). On the other hand, the prophetic element continues to be emphasized. So it should not be presumed that all literary readings are ahistorical, but it is certainly a trend they follow. Nevertheless, this in turn raises questions for us about the relationship between Samuel and history. It certainly seems to describe historical events, but it is not simply history any more than it is simply prophecy. Literary readings have opened up new perspectives, but the questions left unanswered also highlight the fact that reading Samuel only as narrative is also a genre mistake. It is an artistic telling of the past, an interpretation of it, and some of that interpretation can be unpacked by examining it as a narrative. But we need to consider other ways in which it works.

Samuel as Myth

If Samuel tells a story, and we realize that it tells a story that seeks to generate a fundamental understanding of Israel's position, then it opens up

questions as to the nature of what that story is. One way in which that story is being read is as myth. Now, reading parts of the Bible as 'myth' is again something that has a venerable history. Arguably, the fact that the Church Fathers read so much of the Old Testament allegorically is because of the fact that they wanted to understand it as containing more than its surface meaning, though often enough it is also because they clearly didn't want it to mean what it appears to say on the surface! For example, Francke (2005: 266-67) points both to Paulus Orosius, reading 1 Sam. 17.3-7 allegorically and equating Goliath with the Pelagians (an early Christian group regarded by most of the Fathers as non-orthodox), and Chrysostom, who sees David as an example of faith. The allegorical reading has little interest in the surface meaning of the text (though Chrysostom's reading is closer to it), but rather with the sort of homiletic turn that is common enough today. But in neither case is the primary concern with what the text itself actually says.

There has, in fact, been a movement among some scholars in recent times to revive an allegorical reading of the Bible generally, and this is, to some extent, represented in Leithart's *Brazos* commentary on Kings (2006), though his treatment is perhaps evidence of the difficulty of deciding when a typological reading has moved into allegory and also the difficulty of writing a commentary on Kings that is specifically shaped by Trinitarian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, it is apparent that his reading looks for something more in the text than it appears to say of itself. Those familiar with the history of the interpretation of the Old Testament in the first half of the twentieth century might also be familiar with Gunkel's (1901) work on myths or the so-called myth and ritual school of interpretation centred on the work of S.H. Hooke, though more contemporary approaches to myth differ from them in that they are not interested in uncovering the traditional myths that lie behind the biblical text, but rather in reading the Old Testament material itself as myth.

But reading the Old Testament, or, at least, parts of it, as myth, immediately raises questions for many, especially as many would equate 'myth' with 'legend', so that questions of history are challenged. However, reading Samuel as myth takes on a rather different perspective, though, at the more popular level, it often expresses itself in a statement something like 'it doesn't matter whether or not it happened like that.' It seems to be the case that this is typically applied to those situations where the Old Testament describes things we might rather wish it didn't. But reading Samuel as myth involves us drawing on contemporary anthropology as a guide to reading, much as the narrative approach draws on contemporary literary theory. So, Douglas Earl (drawing on the work of William Doty) suggests that myths 'draw on a network of symbolic stories that address the heart as well as the head so as to evoke ways of making sense of and living in a particular

community' (2010b: 19). A myth is thus a story which is told which, in some way, creates a shared sense of identity, helping a community to draw on a range of resources to explain its existence and the challenges that it faces. It is a means by which cultural memory is formed (Earl 2010a: 15). Wright (2010: 141-42) has criticized Earl, though his methodological concern is more with the way the word myth is used in general speech.

It should be noted that myth is not necessarily opposed to history. Contemporary societies also have their myths, even if they are shaped in a particular moment of history. For example, the story of the Pilgrim Fathers is rooted in real history, but it has come to mean considerably more for contemporary America. Likewise, in British history, the story of Henry VIII and his separation from Rome is rooted in history, but has also taken on a mythological character as it seeks to explain to Britain something about the existence of the Church of England. Myths do not have to have any particular link to history either, but it is important to stress that 'mythical' does not have to mean 'unhistorical'.

The move to draw formally on myth is a recent one, though it has perhaps been evident in a number of readings of Samuel. Perhaps the most obvious is seen in the efforts of historians wrestling with the events of David's census (2 Sam. 24). No historian today is going to write a history that speaks of the agency of the angel of Yahweh striking down thousands of Israelites, with the result that many look for a naturalistic explanation for what happened. In effect, they are treating the account itself as a myth. But this in turn highlights the wider point that we made when considering the historical readings of Samuel—a historical reading cannot assess the central theological claims being made by the text. And a consistent emphasis of Samuel is that Israel's history takes the shape that it does because Yahweh acts in and through Israel and that history involves a close interplay between human action and divine determination—note, for example, David's comments on why he cannot kill Saul in 1 Sam. 26.9-11. But such an assessment of the narrative can rightly be described as mythological because it is a means of explaining why Israel's history in Samuel worked out as it did.

A more specifically mythical reading of 1 Samuel 15 is suggested by Earl (2010b), though not really developed by him since his primary concern is with the book of Joshua. He deals with the apparent devoting of Amalek to destruction (sometimes called 'the ban', *hērem*) as something that can be understood as myth. As such, in the world of the text, it functions as a test of Saul's faithfulness, so that how readers respond to it (with Amalek standing mythically for evil) becomes a test for their faithfulness to Yahweh. It is unclear if Earl is saying that this did not actually happen because of his focus on what myth does (cf. Wright 2010: 142), since for him the text's purpose is more important than historical claims, though this is an issue for