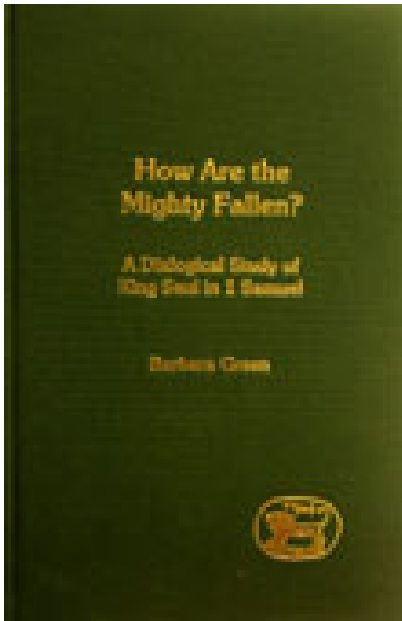


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Green, Barbara

How the Mighty are Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel

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The reviewed book begins with a detailed outline of its goals and exegetical principles (1–54). Green’s purpose is to determine the stance of the Deuteronomistic History/Historian (DH) on political power in general and the monarchic form of government in particular by examining the treatment of Saul, Israel’s first king, in 1 Samuel (or, to be more precise, in 1 Sam 1–2 Sam 1). Her approach to the studied text is strictly synchronic: she reads it as a purely authorial, temporally one-dimensional, and reasonably integral composition and eschews any discussion of the possible trajectories of its evolution over time. What is more, in contrast to such synchronically minded scholars as Lyle Eslinger, Philips Long, and André Wénin, Green does not deem it necessary to demonstrate that the DH is indeed what she presumes it to be. Instead, she simply postulates, after the manner of Robert Polzin, David Jobling, and especially Peter Miscall, that as an “existential utterance” in its own right the received DH “is roughly and adequately coherent and can be construed as such” (7–8).

Interestingly enough, Green’s flat refusal to discuss any diachronic matters does not prevent her from assuming an essentially historical-critical stance. One of her principal points of departure is that the DH is a creation of the late exilic and/or early postexilic Israelite community and that the corpus addresses, *inter alia*, this community’s

preoccupation with the problem of effective leadership. In effect, she goes much further than any other proponent of the synchronic approach (including Robert Polzin and David Jobling, who likewise accept the notion of the DH) and many diachronically oriented exegetes as well in constructing a highly determinate, if anonymous, author, complete with his or her sociohistorical milieu.

Finally, an important parameter of Green's hermeneutics is the combination of her interest in Bible-based Christian spirituality and her liberal commitments, especially in "the huge field of nonviolence" (49). Drawing on the writings of Sandra Schneiders, Michael Downey, and Gerald West, she concludes that from her point of view an ideal reading must be "transformative—that is, giving access to religious experience in a way that assists the integration of the reader or reading community toward what is perceived to be of ultimate value" (44). To put it bluntly, Green quests for an interpretation that would be both Christian and politically correct; in terms of the book's subject matter, this translates into the thesis that the DH strongly rejects the monarchy with its unequal and unfair distribution of power and wealth. To demonstrate this, Green massively deploys the methodological array developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, twentieth-century Russian philosopher, literary critic, and language theorist (out of about two hundred titles included in the book's bibliography, more than sixty are by Bakhtin or on Bakhtin), and known in its totality as dialogism.

The structure of the book's eight chapters is largely uniform. Each begins with a succinct statement of its objectives (titled "Point of Entry"), followed by a discussion of a relevant Bakhtinian theory or concept, a summary of Polzin's contribution to the study of the target fragment (in his *Samuel and the Deuteronomist* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989]), and an outline of the author's procedure and thesis. After these preliminaries, Green offers an "exposition of the text" that follows, with some exceptions, the progression of the biblical narrative; the main findings of this exposition are recapitulated in a brief conclusion. In chapter 1 (55–115), dealing with 1 Sam 1:1–3:20, Green builds upon Bakhtin's teaching on genre and utterance (he defines the latter as "the simultaneity of what is actually said and what is assumed but not spoken" [75]) to maintain that Polzin's interpretation of these chapters as an antimonarchic parable can be extended to the entirety of 1 Samuel. After having each of the narrative's characters, including Yhwh, retell it from his or her standpoint Green concludes, with Polzin, that their discourses and actions suggest a parallel between Hannah's request for a son in 1 Sam 1 and Israel's request for a king in 1 Sam 8. If so, 1 Sam 1–3 functions as a prologue to Saul's story as a *hugged* (a term coined by Green from the Hebrew root *ngd* "to say" to denote a "riddle to be propounded and explored, an enigma to be teased out and recognized" [114]) designed to condemn kingship.

In chapter 2 (116–62), Green reads 1 Sam 3:21–8:3 through the lens of Bakhtin’s concept of “chronotope” as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” and “the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied” (119). This reading convinces her that Polzin’s identification of the fragment in question as a generic and ideological counterpart of 1 Sam 1–3 is largely correct. Chapter 3 (163–222) examines the kingmaking process of 1 Sam 8–12 in terms of Bakhtinian “authoring” (i.e., contextualized and dynamically reciprocal construction) of Saul and his royal responsibilities by the narrator, the characters, and the audience. In Green’s opinion, this process reveals woeful inadequacy of royalty both as an institution and a persona: the kingly task “suffers from underdesign” (218), and the first king “is by turns uncertain, passive, amenable, dissimulating, impulsive, ducking away, conciliating” (220). Chapter 4 (223–61), focused upon 1 Sam 13–15, further develops the theme of Saul’s personal flaws by stressing his “incapacity to act answerably” (259), that is, to constitute himself, in accordance with one of the central planks of Bakhtin’s ethical agenda, as a distinctive and consummate self vis-à-vis both the deity and the people.

In chapter 5 (262–322), Green uses Bakhtin’s multifaceted theory of discourse, especially his concept of polyphony, to unlock complex interactions between the characters of 1 Sam 16–19, set in motion by David’s designation as substitute king and propelled by Saul’s conflicting desires. She traces Saul’s mounting isolation not only from the deity and the people but also from his family and court and gradual degeneration of his rule into a survival project, increasingly at odds with God’s purposes. Chapter 6 (323–66) applies Bakhtin’s notion of “surplus of seeing” (“that which an author can see of a hero who is being drawn but which remains inaccessible to that character” [327]) to 1 Sam 20–23. Green construes this fragment as an exposé of the incumbent king’s cluelessness: not only is David the one who enjoys surplus of seeing by being privy to knowledge that is denied to Saul, but the latter seems unable to put whatever information is available to him to good use because of his unwillingness to face the bitter reality looming behind it. As a result, the scenario of Saul’s pursuit after David that begins in the chapters in question is, paradoxically, dictated by the latter.

Chapter 7 (367–410) draws on Bakhtin’s concept of loophole that “allows one to avoid finalization threatened by anyone who brings essential surplus to bear” (369) to interpret the continuation and conclusion of this pursuit in 1 Sam 24–26 as a series of “efforts by Saul and David both to entrap and to escape each other” (406). In particular, Saul desperately tries to avoid surrendering the throne, and David with almost equal desperation tries to avoid inheriting it in an illegal way. This, argues Green, brings to the fore the issue that has been looming in the story’s background since David’s anointment: How can a failed king (and, by implication, the failed institute of monarchy) be removed? The issue’s resolution in 1 Sam 27–2 Sam 1, explored by Green in chapter 8 (411–46),

renders this fragment what Bakhtin would call an architectonic center of the entire book, one that brings together diverse aspects of the narrative and of its principal hero's personality.

Overall, the reviewed volume is a rare, if not unique, and therefore welcome attempt at direct application of Bakhtin's concepts, theories, and reading strategies to the study of the Hebrew Bible. The results of this attempt are mixed. The book abounds in insightful, sometimes stunningly refreshing observations and interpretations. Suffice it to cite Green's comment that while referring in 1 Sam 8:4 "to the deficiency of their dynastic experience, [the elders] ask for something too closely resembling it" (181) and her hint that Saul's somewhat enigmatic conversation with his *dwd* in 1 Sam 10:14–16 may be a preview of his interaction with David (211). It is, however, difficult to tell which, if any, of these insights should be chalked up to Bakhtinian methodology rather than Green's innate keenness as a reader.

On a broader scale, Green's emphasis on Saul's flaws and failures is a healthy counterbalance to the tendency of synchronic scholarship to depict him as an (almost) blameless victim of divine and/or prophetic conspiracy. Not all aspects of Green's case contra Saul are equally compelling: for example, her oft-repeated contention that with David's appearance on the scene Saul's reign "becomes narrowed to a quest to simply hold his place" (461) founders on 1 Sam 23:27–28, where Saul conscientiously fulfills his primary duty, to defend Israel against Philistine raids, at the expense of a personal vendetta. Of much greater consequence, however, is Green's failure to demonstrate that Saul's largely negative portrayal can be plausibly construed as an indictment of the monarchic regime as such. With the DH consistently touting David as a positive alternative to Saul and David's dynasty as exclusively eligible to reign over Israel, it appears much more likely that Saul epitomizes vulnerability of non-Davidic rule rather than that of the monarchy in general. The argument, going back to Polzin, that Saul's reign is a preview of David's (see, e.g., 420) depends heavily upon parallels between the situations of Mephibosheth in 2 Sam 9 and Jehoiachin in 2 Kgs 25 while overlooking a major difference between the trajectories leading to these situations. In Saul's case, it is the dynasty's hapless founder who utterly ruins its fortunes, denying kingship to his otherwise worthy descendants (Jonathan, Ishbosheth, Mephibosheth); David, by contrast, is a successful founding father whose legacy his unworthy sons may or may not have succeeded in squandering altogether. If so, instead of implicitly attacking Davidic kingship the account of Saul's reign in 1 Sam 9–2 Sam 1 implicitly supports it by claiming that an alternative has already been tested and found wanting.

Given that 1 Sam 1–8 does display strong antimonarchic tendencies, this makes one wonder whether the DH is indeed as integral and coherent as Green presumes it to be

and, accordingly, how justified is her summary rejection of diachronic approach. This is by no means to imply that she should have necessarily embraced a diachronic frame of reference, but an open-minded and meaningful dialogue with the vast and diverse body of diachronic literature would hardly be out of place in a “dialogical study.” By largely ignoring this literature, apart from the standard commentaries of Kyle McCarter and Ralph Klein written more than twenty years ago, Green contributes, perhaps inadvertently, to the split of current biblical scholarship into two groups that talk past each other. Her utter disregard of non-English publications, including even Wénin’s strictly synchronic monograph, is equally regrettable.

Even so, Green’s book may prove of interest to at least two sizable audiences. Some scholars will find it valuable as a test case probing the usability of Bakhtin’s methodology (developed mostly on the material of nineteenth-century Russian novel) in biblical exegesis, and both experts and lay readers will doubtlessly savor some of the specific interpretations scattered across the book’s pages. If this reviewer’s response is any indication, many will remain unconvinced that 1 Samuel is indeed a politically correct antimonarchic *hugged*, but Green’s ability to offer what Jewish savants call *hiddush*—a novel, ingenious reading of a familiar text—is in itself a thing to be celebrated.