Michelson, Marty Alan

Reconciling Violence and Kingship: A Study of Judges and 1 Samuel


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The picture on the cover the book shows the illustration by Gustav Doré of the story of Saul threatening to kill the young singer David (1 Sam 18:10–11). This is not particularly well chosen, because Michelson wants to highlight the more positive side of Saul, who is inaugurated as the good king after he had showed that he was able to minimize violence according to the story told in 1 Sam 11.

The author, Marty Alan Michelson, graduated in 2007 from the Nazarene Theological College in Manchester, England, writing a dissertation titled “Chaos to Conciliation through Violence in Judges and I Samuel,” supervised by Graham Ward. Although this is not mentioned in the book, we can assume that the book under review is a revised version of this dissertation. This origin is not only confirmed by the reference to “this dissertation” on page 85 but also by a superabundance of references to secondary literature in the attempt to earn a place within the scholarly ranks. On the one hand, Michelson claims to offer “a new and unique contribution to the study of the books of Judges and I Samuel” (153); on the other hand, his argumentation is usually built up as a chain of sometimes very long quotations from other authors. What is, in his opinion, new is that it can be demonstrated that read together with parts of the book of Judges, the book of Samuel offers a far more positive picture of Saul as the first king than is usually
assumed. According to Michelson—and this is another innovative aspect—this can be proven on the basis of an analysis of the stories from the perspective of René Girard’s theories on violence. Most important in this connection are what Girard says about *mimesis* as a basis for conflict and the scapegoat to solve the conflict. Rivals imitate each other in desiring the same object. The resulting violence can be redirected toward a third party: the scapegoat. This scapegoat is the victim, but it can also be seen more positively as the “god” who rescues from the crisis. According to Girard’s theory as presented by Michelson, “the office of king emerged from the event of the victim/scapegoat newly seen as ‘god.’ The king is the community’s scapegoat” (9). On the basis of a close reading of Judg 9; 17–21 and 1 Sam 9–11, he wants to show that this is precisely what happened to Saul.

Before discussing these texts Michelson gives an overview of the history of scholarly research on composition and kingship in the Deuteronomistic History. This is well done (although he wrongly assumes that Kari Latvus is a woman [17]), but it hardly adds anything to his argumentation. During his presentation of the well-known historical-critical research he time and again asserts that he wants to read the text “as it stands.” The only positive result that he can take from this overview is that it shows the ambivalence toward kingship, not only in the texts, but also among modern readers. Surprisingly, he does not pay attention in his overview to the many synchronic studies that have recently been published on the books of Judges and Samuel, although he mentions many of them in the following exegesis.

The best part of the book is where Michelson gives a detailed account of his close reading of the biblical texts. He makes useful observations, for instance, on the use of the words denoting kingship and on anonymity. He also makes a reasonable case for reading these chapters of the books of Judges and Samuel together. This is not new. Michelson often quotes the article by Jan Fokkelman about the relation between Judg 9 and 19, and the dismembering of the ox in 1 Sam 11 has been related to the dismembering of the concubine in Judg 19 before. What is new is Michelson’s emphasis on the sacrificial character that would bind these texts from Judges and Samuel together. This is hardly convincing, however, and seems to be influenced by the wish to read these stories from the perspective of Girard’s theory in which the sacral element plays an important role.

Michelson gives good arguments for reading the story in 1 Sam 11 about Saul liberating Jabesh-Gilead from the Ammonites as the positive counterpart of the events described at the end of the book of Judges. Saul proves to be able to end the violence instead of only contributing to the vicious circle of bloodshed. According to Michelson, this was the moment of his inauguration as a king, not, as is usually translated, the renewal of his kingship (1 Sam 11:14–15). An important argument for this he takes from historical-
critical research by others who assume that 1 Sam 11:1–11, 15 is the oldest story we have of how Saul was crowned by the people (141). In a study based on a synchronic reading this is hardly valid. It seems more likely that Michelson makes the story fit in his “Girardian” theory about the character of his kingship.

It is difficult to understand how according to this theory Saul plays the role of scapegoat in these chapters. Michelson assumes a first indication in the fact that Saul is hiding among the baggage after the casting of lots that pointed to him as the new king (1 Sam 10:22). Because the word for “baggage” is mostly used for priestly utensils, Saul’s hiding there would point forward “to the priestly role he will serve as the one who brings the scapegoating mechanism to Israel’s history” (140). What is more decisive here is that Saul is a member of the tribe of Benjamin, which is “scapegoated” in Judg 19–21. Whereas the goal was not reached there because the violence did not stop, Saul was able to do so at precisely the same city of Jabesh-Gilead. But does this make Saul “the scapegoat of the narrative”? Michelson refers in this connection twice to a phrase by David Gunn in his study of the biblical story of Saul: “Saul, therefore, is kingship’s scapegoat” (194, 196). This seems to have been what suggested to Michelson the idea of using the theory of Girard in interpreting these texts, because on page 116 he states, “It is with some gratitude that I begin this chapter in tribute to the continuing exemplary work of David M. Gunn whose work on the David and then Saul Narratives was inspiration to my own desire to read more closely and study more diligently the many narrative units that permeate the entire narrative of the Deuteronomistic History.” In his analysis of the biblical story of Saul, however, Gunn uses the term scapegoat in a completely different way. The quotation by Michelson is from an article by Gunn in 1981 (“A Man Given Over to Trouble: The Story of King Saul,” in Images of Man and God: Old Testament Short Stories in Literary Focus [ed. B. O. Long; Sheffield: Almond, 1981], 98–112). In Gunn’s The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984)—also used by Michelson—Gunn also uses the term. With it he does not, like Michelson, put Saul in a positive light. Quite differently, Gunn explains with this term how Saul was used by Yahweh to introduce kingship within Israel: “At the very outset Yahweh is depicted as a jealous God…. He resents the people’s cry for a king which he interprets in terms of disloyalty to himself. Yet the status quo is clearly unsatisfactory. Saul, therefore, is kingship’s scapegoat. Yahweh responds to the people’s cry, but through Saul he ‘demonstrates’ (perhaps to himself as much as to the people) the weakness of human kingship (about which he has warned): through Saul’s ‘disobedience’ the people, temporarily delivered from their enemies, are once again reduced to enslavement (which is the outcome of the battle of Gilboa [1 Sam 31]). Thus God’s initial hostility is vindicated and the way is open for him, now freely and out of his own gracious
benevolence, to bestow kingship anew and on new terms (with a David, not a Saul, as king)” (125).

It is clear that Michelson’s “scapegoat of the narrative” is not the same as the “kingship’s scapegoat” of Gunn. The basic reason for the difference is that Gunn comes to his conclusion after reading the whole story of Saul. He did not stop, as Michelson did, after Saul’s first victory when everything still seemed to be all right. The question is whether one can do justice to the story of Saul, especially in a synchronic approach, without taking into account that Saul is the predecessor of David. This also applies to the introduction to this story in the book of Judges. There are good reasons, for instance, to assume that already in Judg 19 there are not only references to the later king Saul but also to David. On the one hand, as is rightly remarked by Michelson, the place of the offense, Gibeah, and the act of dismembering point to Saul. On the other hand, it should be noted that it is hardly a coincidence that it is told that the Levite decides not to go to Jebus because he does not want to “turn aside into the city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel” (Judg 19:12). This points forward to David, who later conquered this city and made it to his capital. The message is clear: if only there had been a king like David, then all this evil would not have taken place. Also relevant here is the fact that earlier in the story the Levite had found the hospitality, which he missed so much in Gibeah, in Bethlehem, the city of David.

Michelson’s book ends with an impressive bibliography. Not every title listed there, however, also occurs in the lengthy footnotes. What is missed, for instance, is a discussion with Jan Fokkelman about the analysis of the chapters in the book of Samuel. Michelson often quotes with consent Fokkelman’s article on Judg 9 and 19 (in the Festschrift for Talmon, 1992), but nowhere in his exegesis of 1 Sam 9–11 does he refer to Fokkelman’s important monographs on the Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel (4 vols., 1981–1993). In the bibliography Michelson only mentions the first two volumes. In the fourth volume Fokkelman gives a very thorough analysis of 1 Sam 1–12 using the same method as Michelson but coming to different conclusions, with, for instance, much more attention to the role of Yahweh and Samuel.

In conclusion, Michelson’s book can be recommended as a helpful tool in a close reading of the chapters in Judges and 1 Samuel. However, the use of Girard’s theory on violence did not result in a convincing new interpretation of these texts.