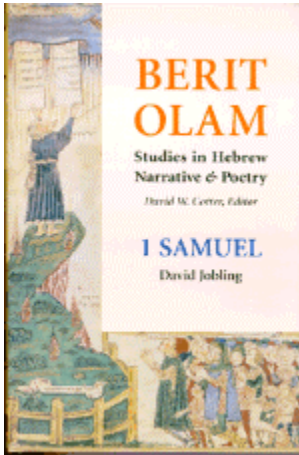


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Jobling, David

1 Samuel

Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry

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This volume is the first English-language study of 1 Samuel as a whole to appear after a five-year lull that followed publication of the concluding volume of Jan Fokkelman's monumental monograph (*Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses* [4 vols.; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981-93]). Whether by accident or not, the interpretive modes employed by Fokkelman and Jobling are widely divergent and in many respects antagonistic. While Fokkelman digs deep into the *text*, Jobling prefers to hover over it, in the sphere of *contexts* and *intertexts*. Fokkelman's project rests upon the premise that 1 Samuel can and must be dispassionately studied by objective scientific methods; Jobling is deliberately, if not provocatively, passionate, subjective, and partial. Fokkelman is interested mainly in the author's presuppositions and intentions implicitly operative in the book; Jobling's primary concern is his own interaction with it. Since both Fokkelman and Jobling eschew all kinds of diachronic analysis, differences between them reflect a deep rift within literary-critical, synchronic-minded biblical scholarship. This rift separates the scholars who believe that their task is to figure out what the Hebrew Bible is trying to tell us (text-oriented strategy) from those whose principal objective is to meet certain social, political, cultural, or ideological needs of the late twentieth-century readership (reader-oriented strategy). The reviewed book, repeatedly raising the issues of method and on several occasions (pp. 25-26, 143-44, 288-96) attacking the text-oriented "orthodoxy," represented by Robert Alter, Frank Kermode, Robert Polzin, and Lyle Eslinger, is in fact a large-scale affirmation of the latter approach.

Jobling's study offers neither verse-by-verse commentaries nor "close reading" of the biblical text. Organized as a collection of essays, many of which are based upon earlier publications, the book selects and arranges its references in accordance with the interpretational matrix of each section. Jobling often paraphrases the fragments he deals with, some of them in considerable detail and from several angles, but seldom, if ever, discusses literary features of these fragments and meaning of individual words and phrases. What matters for him, is the content of 1 Samuel, the way in which it takes up (or refuses to take up) and develops (or fails to develop) certain themes and motifs; his method is thus predominantly narratological. However, to him narratology is not an analytical exercise in its own right but rather a means of including the Bible in postmodern cultural/critical discourse. The opening chapter of the book (pp. 3-27), shaped as the author's intellectual biography, briefly characterizes six modes of such discourse: structuralism, feminism, poststructuralism, ideological criticism, new historicism, and psychoanalysis. It also explains how precisely these modes operate in different parts of the study. In chapter 2 (pp. 28-37), concluding the introductory part of the book, Jobling lists possible frameworks for the text we know as 1 Samuel and asserts that they strongly affect the reading of this text. He views canonical divisions as "a tendentious revision of the Deuteronomic work" (p. 36) in which the material of 1 Samuel was distributed between "The Extended Book of Judges" (Judg 2: 11 - 1 Sam 12: 25) and "The Book of the Everlasting Covenant" (1 Samuel 13 - 2 Samuel 7). In the main section of the book (parts II-IV), Jobling reads 1 Samuel in terms of class, race, and gender. Under the rubric of class he examines, in part II, "1 Samuel's treatment of government in Israel" (p. 41). Chapter 3 (pp. 43-76), analyzing "The Extended Book of Judges," interprets the complicated narrative structure of 1 Samuel 1-12 as a product of the author's largely unsuccessful attempt to incorporate idealization of judgeship into a story of its demise. Chapter 4 (pp. 77-104), focused upon 1 Samuel 13-31 as a part of "The Book of the Everlasting Covenant," traces structural manifestations of the contradiction between the notion that monarchy is dynastic by definition and the premise that Saul, the first king of Israel, failed to found a dynasty. Chapter 5 (pp. 105-25) demonstrates that in the canonical 1 Samuel power is always transferred from surrogate father to surrogate son and suggests that this pattern may be an alternative to both judgeship and hereditary kingship.

Part III deals with the category of gender. Chapter 6 (pp. 131-42) twice rereads the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1-2, exploring the possibility to interpret her request for a son, especially her promise to dedicate him to Yhwh, as a bold attempt to provide Israel with a new, better leader. Chapter 7 (pp. 143-75), taking a broader look at 1 Samuel, argues that it tends to characterize women (including Jonathan, who plays a woman's role) mainly as cooperators in David's quest for kingship. Juxtaposing this tendency with narrative trends in Judges and certain aspects of Hannah's story, Jobling concludes that it reflects a decline of social and legal status of women caused by transition to monarchy. Chapter 8 (pp. 176-94) surveys "all the women of 1 Samuel," paying special attention to the medium of Endor and arguing that her characterization is unexpectedly positive.

In part IV, Jobling attempts to explore the Israelite/Philistine dichotomy dominating 1 Samuel as an issue of race. Chapter 9 (pp. 199-211) investigates conceptualization of "Philistines" in the nineteenth-century discourse represented primarily by the writings of Clemens Brentano and Matthew Arnold. In chapter 10 (pp. 212-43), these writings serve as an intertextual background against which Jobling discovers in 1 Samuel two conflicting concepts of the Philistines, one fantastic and exclusive, another realistic and inclusive.

In the concluding part of the book, Jobling turns from analysis to synthesis. In chapter 11 (pp. 250-81), he contends that 1 Samuel, created in a futile quest for an irretrievably lost ideal, can be treated as a tragic text. Intertexts in this chapter include H. Rider Haggard's *Nada the Lily*, Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*, Mieke Bal's *Reading "Rembrandt"* and Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. Chapter 12 (pp. 282-309) reverses the roles, using 1 Samuel as an intertext for methodologies and presuppositions of literary-critical scholarship. Employing the principle of transference, Jobling draws parallels between methodological options of literary critics and Israel's options in 1 Samuel (monarchy versus anarchy, monotheism versus polytheism, exclusion of the Philistines versus their inclusion). He argues that the "literary orthodoxy" perpetuates and aggravates schizophrenia of the biblical text caused by suppression of unwanted thoughts about alternative possibilities whereas subversive readings, liberating these thoughts, heal the Bible and thereby the whole Bible-based Western civilization.

The multifocality of Jobling's study makes it impossible to evaluate it point by point within the framework of a short review. I will limit myself to two general comments. First, Jobling's attempt to "[organize] a book on the Bible according to . . . the guiding categories of recent ideological criticism" (p. 3) resulted in an impressive demonstration of the Bible's remarkable capability to reject such categories. As he reluctantly admits (pp. 103-104, 247-48), 1 Samuel does not think in terms of class, gender, and race. Likewise, his own exegetical practice seem to belie his thesis that "if we read the Bible subversively the text of the Bible will be found to undergird (sic) this style of reading too" (p. 297). As long as Jobling interacts with the book's logic, for instance, discusses government instead of class (a related but not identical topic) and uses Deuteronomistic summaries in Judges 2, 1 Samuel 12, and 2 Samuel 7 as structural markers (p. 29), his inferences find strong support in the text. Some of them, for example, the suggestion that Saul's rejection was caused by his failure to assert himself as king (pp. 85-88) and the reconstruction of the "surrogacy pattern" (see above), have important implications for understanding of the book. Conversely, whenever he sticks to models imported from elsewhere, links between the text and its interpretation become tenuous. Thus, in a bid to deconstruct the book's particularistic notion of Israel's identity Jobling groundlessly postulates (on pp. 186, 217, 304-305) "proximity" of the medium of Endor to the Philistines (contrary to his claim, the Bible does not place Endor at the boundary between Israel and Philistia). Since an inadequate and implausible reading can hardly be relevant (see Jobling's discussion of these criteria on pp. 26-27), the reviewed study strongly

suggests--contrary to its author's intentions--that although postmodern agenda may and should play a role in biblical exegesis, forcing them upon the Bible is counterproductive.

Second, despite constant self-control and self-analysis Jobling seems to overlook certain disturbing implications of his readings. For example, his identification with the Philistines (pp. 242-43, 299-300), coupled with quest for a suppressed narrative in which David and Israel as a whole choose to remain under Philistine domination (pp. 232-41, 284-88), can be easily understood as a procolonialist stance. What is more, Jobling's claim that the episodes wherein Israelites confront Philistines rather than submit to them are "fantastic" (pp. 225-32) plays into the hands of anti-Semites who regard assertive Jews as an oxymoron.

These concerns notwithstanding, Jobling's book is worth reading. Powerfully written, emotionally charged, and abounding in daring, unconventional interpretations, it is both captivating and rewarding. Many of Jobling's hypotheses are unlikely to change very many minds outside his interpretive community, but even struggling with them can prove a fascinating experience.