Barbara Green offers a brief narrative commentary on 1 Sam 1–2 Sam 1 that focuses on the character Saul (not to the exclusion, but certainly with much lighter treatment of other characters). In 2003, Green also published another book on Saul of close to five hundred pages (*How Are the Mighty Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel* [JSOTSUP 365; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press]). But *King Saul’s Asking* is far from being a mere condensation. It belongs to a very interesting Liturgical Press series on biblical characters, entitled Interfaces, in which several other volumes have already been published (e.g., Gina Hens-Piazza, *Nameless, Blameless, and Without Shame* [on the “cannibal mothers” in 2 Kgs 6]; John Kaltner, *Inquiring of Joseph* [comparing the biblical with the quranic Joseph]), as well as a companion survey booklet (*From Earth’s Creation to John’s Revelation*, by Green and others).

A reader wishing to know what makes this book tick should turn first to the conclusion. There Green asserts the fundamental aims of her book (and the Interfaces series), namely, to write with students and the classroom setting in view and to persuade undergraduates that biblical texts are worth reading. She engages the students’ religious and theological interests: the Bible is “one of the most privileged places for God’s self-disclosure.” But she prepares them for difficulties in reading: “The storyteller does not make it easy for
us.” She states as her main thesis that the character Saul “embodies” Israel’s whole experience with kings. Perhaps best of all, she tells in an autobiographical way what drew her to Saul (“the human enigma”).

I was impressed throughout with the palpable “presence” of students as the implicit addressees of the book. When she speaks of “sharing our scholarly passions with” students, she means it. She repeatedly checks on the students’ “sense of engagement with the story.” She reminds them that they will have to decide the difficult questions for themselves, for example, the not always admirable or comprehensible attitudes of the character “God.” Yet she does not talk down; when she introduces difficult concepts (such as those of Mikhail Bakhtin), she introduces them as difficult concepts before showing how they can be useful. This is a book to be put with confidence in the hands of undergraduates or seminarians. In a way that is both respectful and challenging, it will get them into deep issues in the current debate over biblical interpretation, and it will invite them to develop their own positions. I finished the book feeling (and I intend this in the most positive way) that I had read only the teacher’s class notes, which needed to be filled out with a transcript of what actually happened in the classroom.

This book is too short (as the guidelines for the series compel it to be) to provide an adequate introduction to any kind of narrative theory. It teaches about Bakhtin much more by the Bakhtinian way in which Green proceeds than by the brief paragraphs on particular Bakhtinian terms. Students who want to go deeper have available Green’s own *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (SemeiaSt 38; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000) and Robert Polzin’s *Moses and the Deuteronomist: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History 1; New York: Seabury, 1980). In terms of narratology generally, as well as in her use of Bakhtin, Green mostly follows Polzin (especially *Samuel and the Deuteronomist* [New York: Harper & Row, 1989]). Among her many valuable insights into the reading of biblical narrative, I highlight a few: the consistent interrogation of the text’s manifold references to “sons”—for example, Samuel, Hannah’s son but also Eli’s (1 Sam 3:6, etc.)—as potential pointers to the hereditary character of kingship; the interest in Saul’s inner dialogue (“talking to himself”) and the observation that the narrator takes us “inside” Saul much more than David (xviii); the contrast of secular Jonathan with religious Saul (53); the sense of narrative necessity—“Saul must die, but David must not kill him” (92); and the Abigail story as “a sort of (day)dream” (100). The list could be extended indefinitely.

I have a number of basic disagreements with Green’s reading (for my own approach, see my *1 Samuel*, 1998, also from Liturgical Press). She wants to write a commentary on a biblical book that is also a study of one particular character. This seems to me (to borrow an anonymous expression) “impossible but not difficult.” Saul is a wonderful character.
who has attracted all kinds of study, and Green enters beautifully and brilliantly into this tradition. She understands and leads students into the dynamics of Saul’s early inability to grasp what kingship is about, his over-compensation into tyranny, his disintegration but emergence into heroism at the end. But she fails to see that all this strong characterization undermines her thesis that Saul “embodies” Israel’s experience with kings (119). I agree that 1 Samuel is a debate about monarchy, in which Saul is one of the terms. But I disagree with Green’s solution in two ways. First, Saul is only one of the terms in the debate. He indicates kingship as a failure—but only in dialogical relation to other characters who indicate other possibilities, especially David (kingship as, at least possibly, a success) and Samuel (an alternative system of government antithetical to kingship). So a study of a single character must inevitably fail to comprehend the whole book. Second, the characters, Saul’s above all, are developed in so interesting a human way in order to (appear to) reduce the intractable problem of kingship as a system to the graspable dynamics of human personality.

Another side of this problem can be seen in Green’s choice of what precise biblical text to write about. She starts at the beginning of 1 Samuel, though Saul does not appear before chapter 9. This is surely to admit that the “debate” of 1 Samuel cannot be accounted for adequately by reading only the textual section defined by the character Saul. Green rightly points out anticipations of the Saul story in 1 Sam 1–8 (especially the “confusion” of names between Saul and Samuel) but largely ignores the more important anticipation in the last chapters of Judges, namely, the negativity toward Saul’s hometown of Gibeah. Where does Saul’s story begin? In Judges. More importantly, where does the debate over kingship begin? In Deuteronomy. One of my few criticisms of Green’s treatment of her student readers is that she invites them to develop and answer, on the basis only of 1 Samuel, questions that they need the whole Deuteronomistic History to answer adequately.

My last problem lies in the area of political reading of biblical texts. For Green, following Polzin, it was in the exile that the story of Saul became a vital one for Jewish readers. She conjures a picture of exiles debating whether a resumption of kingship would be a good or a bad idea and reading the story of Saul to help them decide. This seems to me ridiculous. Surely there was no time (before the Hasmonean period, when kingship was resumed) in which such a debate could have occurred realistically. Whether in exile or the postexilic period (in my view, a likelier setting for the Deuteronomistic History), Israel was under the power of kings other than its own, and it was they who decided how Israel should be governed. Judaism’s choice was over the identity it would assume in its constrained situation—accepting the reality of its life “among the nations” or living on fantasies of past glory—and how the scriptures would help determine that choice. The Deuteronomistic History, which I (against Green and Polzin) see as unable finally to
decide whether monarchy is good or bad, offers possibilities for either of these identity choices.

The book is well and engagingly written, though I winced a couple of times before I was far into it. First, at “Abraham and Sarah, whose descendants had refugeed to Egypt…” (xiii). Students are all too ready to produce sentences like that without being taught to. Second, at “Bakhtin … lived his life under Soviet domination” (xiv). Most of this generation of undergraduates have no personal memory of a time when there was a serious alternative to global capitalism. If they are to decide for themselves (as Green herself so often demands), they must not be fed little hints as to the “correct” way of assessing things such as the history of the twentieth century.