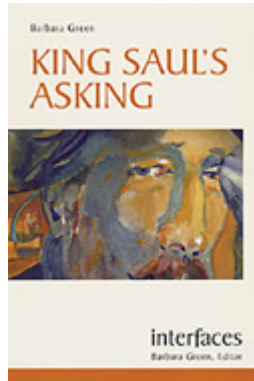


○ REVIEW OF BARBARA GREEN'S *KING SAUL'S ASKING*

Peter D Miscall

Peter D. Miscall reviews *King Saul's Asking*, by Barbara Green, O.P. (Interfaces. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press; 2003. ISBN 0814651097.)



This is one of a group of six volumes in the series *Interfaces*, each of which deals with a particular biblical character, in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Each author seeks to share their research interests and passions in a piece of original scholarship and in a style meant for college students. Green's chosen focus is King Saul in 1 Samuel and the opening chapter of 2 Samuel. Her concentration on Saul, and not David, in itself provides a different perspective on the Samuel narrative. David is the secondary character and she is concerned with Saul's views of and reactions to David's actions and speeches.

Bakhtin is a major influence on her approach and she borrows three main concepts for her reading. *Genre* organises thought and speech. This is not the relatively fixed and limited notion of biblical form criticism but is a larger, more inclusive concept giving shape to both thought and discourse. She reads the Saul story as a riddle, both as a question and answer genre and as the comparison of one thing with another. The story is a 6th century composition. When the exilic community returned to restore their society in the last part of the 6th century, they asked if they should restore the monarchy and again be ruled by kings. The story of Saul, the first king who fails miserably, answers with a resounding No! On the other hand Saul is an effective literary character in his own right and his story stands on its own. It is a *mashal* comparing this ancient king and his times with the situation of the 6th century community. It is not a point-by-point match. Green does not try to relate every facet of the story to the 6th century and confines her comments on the topic to a limited number of places.

Varieties of discourse addresses the linguistic and verbal complexities of the text both as the record of characters' speeches to themselves and to each other and as the narrator's speech to us, the readers. This is a flexible tool in Green's hands. She pays close attention to the specifics of character's statements, particularly Saul's, and how they fit and do not fit the context; there

is a matching attention to the narrator's discourse, to precisely what he says and how he says it. She often notes where the narrator leaves issues open – motivation, who or what is being spoken about, setting and such – and feels no need to argue for only one reading. She often comments on wordplay and word motifs and how they impact the narrative. Saul's name, 'the asked', invokes the frequent asking for sons and then for kings in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel.

Answerability relates to the realm of the ethical and moral. Put simply, is a character, here Saul, responsible or answerable for his actions or decisions or does he always offer excuses and alibis, does he consistently blame others? Lack of answerability is Saul's major weakness. He blames prophet, people, David and others for his failures and problems and he refuses to accept the fact that God has turned away from him, that he is in fact no longer king. Green traces this lack from Saul's introduction in 1 Samuel 9 to his death on Mount Gilboa in the last chapter. Only in his death at his own hand does Saul finally decide to act on his own and not to shift responsibility to others.

Saul is barely established as king when God rejects him, fires him from the job in Green's terms, and seeks another. Saul stumbles in situations at Gilgal that combine military and sacrificial demands (1 Samuel 13 and 15). He does not wholeheartedly pursue the military goals that should be primary for a king and uses matters of sacrifice as excuses. Green traces how, throughout the remainder of his reign, Saul consistently loses sight of a king's main priorities: to defeat the enemy, the Philistines, and to attend to the proper relationship between God and people. Maintenance of this relationship does not play an obvious or significant role in the narratives of Saul and I think that Green is looking ahead to the depiction of kingship in the books of Kings. In those books failure to properly worship God and to follow his word are consistent judgments of kings and consistent reasons offered for the destruction of people, cities and land.

Green does not give her usual attention to specifics to the muted and limited appearances of God in 1 Samuel, particularly in the clash between Saul and David in the latter part of the book. Her study can give the impression that God is much more involved in these narratives of king and would-be king than he actually is. For example, David, the man after the Lord's own mind, publicly confesses the Lord's might before slaying Goliath but says nothing of it after the fact. David's subsequent communication with God, if it can even be called that, is limited to consulting him through the ephod in specific situations with specific questions, for example, at Keilah (1 Sam. 23:6-14).

Green has an interesting take on Saul's increasingly troubled and violent relationship with David. Instead of the usual interpretation that Saul is obsessed with pursuing and then killing David (viewed as 'innocent'), she turns to the modern judicial notion of entrapment and reads David as actively drawing Saul away from his center in Benjamin. David in many ways is the pursuer. But David (or any other Israelite including Saul's armor-bearer) cannot in fact kill the king. David is geographically and morally distant from the scene of Saul's death.

This is an important part of Green's reading of the Saul tale as a riddle. The tale provides a definitive No! to the 6th century question of whether the restored community will have a king and a monarchy. At the same time it asserts that king and monarchy are not to be destroyed by Israel or Israelite. They will fall at their own hand and because of the weight of their own failures and sins; lack of answerability will be a major part of those sins. Green compares the fall of the monarchy to that of Eli, the blind and heavy priest who falls over dead. The focus on Saul as the

story of kingship, with its faults and eventual collapse, avoids the question, What of David? If Saul stands for kingship from its start to its end, then why such a lengthy narrative of David's reign? Is it also a *mashal*? If so, of what?

At junctures throughout her book Green notes that this reading of Saul is her reading based on her assumptions of genre (riddle), context (6th century), focus (Saul) and method (literary with special attention to speech). She challenges her readers to make their own judgments of the reading's validity and value within these assumptions or even to work with other assumptions. Without employing abstract analyses of theory and method, Green demonstrates the necessity of making just such assumptions for any reading or interpretation. It is a matter of making a number of assumptions about the text and about how one is going to approach that text, of clarifying for oneself and one's readers those assumptions and their implications and then working out their application to the specific text. It is not an issue of right or wrong, of reading the text in itself with the one accurate, objective method.

With the exception of a few passing comments, Green avoids the interminable debate about the historical validity of the Samuel narratives and the clash between minimalists and maximalists. Indeed, within the purview of her overall understanding of interpretation, a maximalist position is another reading based on different assumptions, particularly of genre, setting and method. Without the existence of other relevant textual or artifactual evidence historical readings have no different claim on us than any other reading.

For me Green's reading of Saul is effective. It both provides a novel perspective on Saul with many fine insights and spurs me on to reread 1 Samuel and beyond with her mode of interpretation in hand. My above comments on God's role and on the story of David point just as much to issues and direction for continued reading as they do to shortcomings in Green's analysis. Any reading of a text will have shortcomings; it will not read every section with the same attention and it will not address every possible topic and question. But a strong reading such as Green's will stand on its own and point beyond itself.