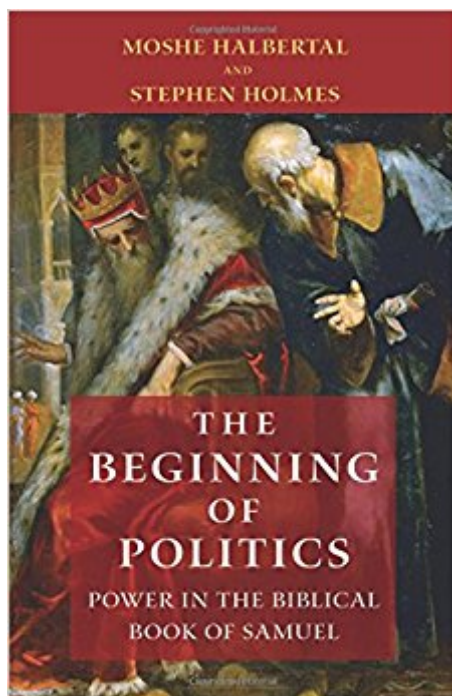


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# The Beginning Of Politics: Power In The Biblical Book Of Samuel



## Synopsis

New insights into how the Book of Samuel offers a timeless meditation on the dilemmas of statecraft. The Book of Samuel is universally acknowledged as one of the supreme achievements of biblical literature. Yet the book's anonymous author was more than an inspired storyteller. The author was also an uncannily astute observer of political life and the moral compromises and contradictions that the struggle for power inevitably entails. *The Beginning of Politics* mines the story of Israel's first two kings to unearth a natural history of power, providing a forceful new reading of what is arguably the first and greatest work of Western political thought. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes show how the beautifully crafted narratives of Saul and David cut to the core of politics, exploring themes that resonate wherever political power is at stake. Through stories such as Saul's madness, David's murder of Uriah, the rape of Tamar, and the rebellion of Absalom, the book's author deepens our understanding not only of the necessity of sovereign rule but also of its costs to the people it is intended to protect and to those who wield it. What emerges from the meticulous analysis of these narratives includes such themes as the corrosive grip of power on those who hold and compete for power; the ways in which political violence unleashed by the sovereign on his own subjects is rooted in the paranoia of the isolated ruler and the deniability fostered by hierarchical action through proxies; and the intensity with which the tragic conflict between political loyalty and family loyalty explodes when the ruler's bloodline is made into the guarantor of the all-important continuity of sovereign power. *The Beginning of Politics* is a timely meditation on the dark side of sovereign power and the enduring dilemmas of statecraft.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A brilliant analysis."--Marvin Olasky, *World Magazine*"Although an investigation of political power in Old Testament writings might be useful in squaring certain passages, the real value here is exploring these books as a first look into the dynamics of early politics."--*Library Journal*"The real value here is exploring these books as a first look into the dynamics of early politics."--*Library Journal*

"Though the biblical narrative of Saul and David has been the subject of much literary analysis, Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes illuminate it in a fresh way through their focus on politics. They make a persuasive case that the biblical writer evinces probing insight into the consequences of the pursuit of power, insight that is still relevant to the political constellations of our own era."--Robert Alter, author of *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*"The Beginning of Politics is an unprecedented feat that contributes to biblical scholarship as well as our understanding of politics in general. In particular, in their brilliant unraveling of the relations among David, Uriah, and Joab, Halbertal and Holmes show how the calculations of political rulers may be thwarted by their attempts to hide their intentions and by chains of obedience and violence that escape the control of their initiators."--Jon Elster, Columbia University"Truly remarkable. The greatness of the Book of Samuel is due in part to its matchless account of politics and political psychology, and there is no better book to bring this account to light than this one."--Avishai Margalit, Hebrew University of Jerusalem"By treating the author of Samuel as an ancient Machiavelli, Halbertal and Holmes enable readers to approach the biblical story in a new way while enhancing their understanding of the workings of political survival and the dynamics of power."--Steven Weitzman, author of *Solomon: The Lure of Wisdom*"For Halbertal and Holmes, the author of Samuel is a writer of singular political insight, a brilliant student of politics, and indeed, a political theorist avant la lettre. This is a wonderful discovery. The Beginning of Politics is a work of deep and original scholarship."--Michael Walzer, author of *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*

Excellent, well-thought out analysis of one of the Bible's most tantalizing books. All characters, Samuel, Saul and David have serious flaws, yet contribute importantly to our understanding of this period in ancient history.

The Beginning of Politics by authors and NYU law school professors, Moshe Halbertal and Stephen

Holmes, is a brilliant analysis of the biblical Book of Samuel, and how the political lessons gleaned from the book are timeless and applicable to different forms of government. Halbertal and Holmes argue that there is a singular author to the Book of Samuel, who was familiar about court politics, although he was likely an outsider. The Book of Samuel is not intended to be an eyewitness account, rather it is based on what Halbertal and Holmes call a faithful skeletal account of historical events supplemented by fictional material, written from the vantage point of an "all knowing" narrator (this was the tradition at the time). What makes the Book of Samuel unique for its time is its unflattering description of its characters. Rather than show a monarch as a god/king as was common in ancient near east/neighboring accounts of tribal monarchs, the author of the Book of Samuel portrays its kings, Saul and David, as men who are subject to the influences and corruptions of power. Halbertal and Holmes argue that the author is trying to convey the following themes when it comes to the influence that political power has on its wielders: 1. The instrumentalization of members of one's community: using people as a means-to-an-end to obtain political goals. People become pawns within the power wielder's schemes. 2. Politics as a means to maintain power for its own sake: once "in office" the power wielder will strive by any means to hold onto power, including morally unacceptable actions. 3. The ruler's obsessive fear of betrayal: due to the ambitious nature of those who surround the ruler - and their ability to control information flow to the ruler - the ruler will constantly question the motives of those closest to him. 4. Morally unjustifiable acts of violence that can be taken because they can be plausibly denied, being performed through a anonymous chain of emissaries: the responsibility of heinous acts is defused through the use of others in a government. The excuse is, "I was only following orders." Halbertal and Holmes dissect relevant passages of the Book of Samuel to convey the above themes through analyzing the reigns of Saul and David, and their interactions with subordinates. After reading this book, it's not hard to deduce that the themes/lessons are timeless. One doesn't have to step too far back into history (or step back at all - example, North Korea) to see the corrupting effects of political power on the human condition. Even in less extreme forms of government, power wielders are prone to be influenced/corrupted by the power they hold. *The Beginning of Politics* is not a long book (roughly 173 pages or so), but it's highly engaging and well-written. Highly recommended!

Much of human history can be encapsulated in the astute observation by Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* - the more things change, the more they stay the same. That holds true for many things, politics included. And that being both modern politics, and that from thousands of years ago. In *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical*

Book of Samuel, authors Moshe Halbertal (Professor of Jewish Philosophy at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and Stephen Holmes (Professor of Law at New York University) have written a masterful work detailing the narratives of Kings Saul and David, how politics and power shaped their destinies, and set the stage for politics of the future. While the events in the Book of Samuel occurred over 3,000 year ago; Halbertal and Holmes astutely write how these events are similar to all politics and monarchies that have since followed. One might initially think that the biblical book of Samuel has nothing to offer the modern political theorist. But the authors note that what makes Samuel not only a literary masterpiece, but also a profound work of political thought, is the way in which the narrative comprehends the true nature of human politics. The very nature of power and politics as they note is independent of time and location. The notion of monarchy came late to the history of Israel. Gideon, the prophet from Book of Judges, told the people that any attempt to establish a human monarch was idolatrous. And it was in that environment in which Saul and David followed, as did their political struggles. The book focuses on the dynamics of Saul and David, the first two kings of Israel. The underlying themes are the dynamics of power and monarchical families. The authors note that Samuel is arguably the first and greatest work of Western political thought. Where this book succeeds, and what separates it from most others that try to integrate modern thought with a biblical narrative, is both Halbertal's overall scholarship, combined with his comprehensive understanding of the classic biblical texts in their native Hebrew. Halbertal can accentuate and bring out the nuances of the Hebrew language, which is key to understanding the underlying story. That combined with Holmes understanding of political theory make this a most fascinating work. Another nuanced theme relevant to the Book of Samuel detailed is the notion of revenge cultures. In these cultures, vengeance is considered one of the highest moral obligations that family members owe to one another. The book ties this with the David's obligation, who as king, had to ensure that he was able to restrain blood revenge, as the essence of kingship needs to rise above that of kinship. The book details covert uses of sovereign power, the connection between violence and paranoia and violence and deniability, dynastic succession and more. A particularly fascinating chapter details the relationship between King David and his rebellious son Absalom. The underlying theme being the conflict between the power logic of power and the logic of love. There is no shortage of books with titles similar to What Does the Bible Say About Politics? Most of them have corny evangelical answers, written by unsophisticated authors. Halbertal and Holmes are in a completely different league and are able to effectively and eloquently articulate how the events in Samuel are highly relevant to the study of political power today. The Book of Samuel can be a manual for modern political life, be it a monarchy

or democracy. Halbertal and Holmes have written a brilliant work which showcases the timeless wisdom of the author of the Book of Samuel. Samuel is a lens through which to read what can potentially go so horribly wrong in politics. In *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel*, Halbertal and Holmes makes that light shine quite clearly.

I brought up in atheistic family and I am not religious person by myself. So I did not study biblical texts either in school or elsewhere. But I live in Israel the last quarter of century and is confronted with stories and quotes from the book of Samuel here and there while wandering around the country on historical trips and lectured by guides. As a result I was familiar with literally all the episodes described there. Still reading the ancient text is the hard task for me and this book became the key opening magical door into literature treasure of Bible. I've just started reading "Beginning of Politics" and covered less than a half of its text. With that it's clear that this book is not just about THE literature. This book is about THE THINKER. In narrow sense this book speaks about one occupation: politician. But amazingly page after page it provokes the thoughts about unavoidable moral compromises any man at any time endures on his way up on social hierarchy. Obviously, different occupations demand different level of compromise. That's why intuitively people trust one over another. Compare profession of a physician with one of a lawyer...

This is a hatchet job on the biblical account of Samuel, David and Saul. I am a conservative who reads lots of "liberal" and left-wing material just to get all the fresh info I can on biblical studies, but this is really a speculative piece of destructive garbage masquerading as "scholarship." Not worth anybody's time and effort.

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