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Moshe Halbertal, Stephen Holmes. *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 232 pp. $27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-17462-4.

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There is a long tradition of claiming that politics and political theory in the West belong to Athens, rather than to Jerusalem, and another tradition just as long of rebutting this claim. Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes join the latter tradition with their new work, *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel.* The book will sit nicely on the shelf next to Eric Nelson's *The Hebrew Republic* (2010) and Michael Walzer's *In God's Shadow* (2012). The former argues for the centrality of the Hebrew Bible in general and Samuel/Kings in particular to seventeenth-century European political theory, and the latter asserts that the absolute dominance of God in the life of ancient Israel left no room for the development of an autonomous human political sphere. Halbertal and Holmes have set themselves the task of rejecting the latter claim, and judging by Walzer's blurb ("a wonderful discovery"), they appear to have convinced him.

The *Beginning of Politics* is a short book of four chapters and two hundred pages (counting endnotes). It makes its case concisely, and in jargon-free, accessible prose suitable for nonspecialists. That case is that the author of the Book of Samuel ought to be regarded not only as "the greatest author ever to write in the Hebrew language" (p. 163), but also as "an uncannily astute observer of politics" (p. 1). The term "observer" is key here. Working as he did in narrative form, our anonymous writer is of course not to be regarded as a systematic political "theorist" in the Aristotelian mode, but rather as a witness to an experiment, namely the institution of dynastic monarchy in a society to which such governance had previously been foreign, and as a savvy and trenchant commentator on the pitfalls and dangers of that experiment. Each chapter focuses on a carefully defined set of these pitfalls (and they are, nearly universally, pitfalls; the positive side of the experiment is discussed only in terms of why it was undertaken in the first place, a point to which I will return at the end of this review).

The first chapter, "The Grip of Power," presents as our authors' central insight into power politics a certain inversion of the relationship between means and ends, which Halbertal and Holmes define as twofold. On the one hand, centralized, hierarchical power itself, which is intended to provide security for the people and therefore is intrinsically a means, comes to be seen as an end in itself by the wielders of that power, who begin to frame plans of action oriented entirely around the aim of staying in power. On the other hand, much that ought to be seen as an end in itself, such as familial love, respect for the divine, human life, and moral principle, is turned into "means" toward the ruler's ends. This

double inversion of means and ends is hidden by both the inability of the public to discern the private motivations of those in power, as well as by the ambiguous intertwining of prudential and moral considerations within those rulers' heads and hearts. This theme recurs throughout the book, with countless examples of characters taking self-serving actions that are framed as pious and selfless, but which cannot simply be unmasked or exposed as merely self-interested. This inversion is crucial to power's transformation of the personality, whether that personality is initially unassuming and unambitious, like Saul, or canny and shrewd, like David. Under the isolating pressures of monarchic rule, and subject to the double inversion, the former becomes hopelessly insecure and paranoiac, the latter insufferably entitled and arrogant. Both end up turning the power they were granted to wield against external enemies against their own people—even their own families.

The other three chapters expand and develop these ambiguities in fascinating ways. "Two Faces of Political Violence" demonstrates how one of the central powers of power, namely action-at-a-distance through a chain of command, enables the powerful to conceal responsibility for their actions from both others and themselves. Here we find one of Halbertal and Holmes's best discussions, as they turn David's self-exculpating dictum that "the sword devours sometimes one way and sometimes another" (2 Sam 11:25 in the 2013 translation by Robert Alter) into an ancient phenomenology of the war machine. "Dynasty and Rupture" focuses on the rape of Tamar and the rebellion of Absalom, each incident illustrating a fundamental flaw with the patriarchal, dynastic form of monarchical power (the entitlement and impunity of the privileged, unworthy heir; the inevitable bloodshed of struggles over succession). Finally, "David's Will and Last Words" shows how David transmits all his political "wisdom" to his son Solomon, not just settling scores on his deathbed but underscoring the necessity of crime, ambiguity, and plausible deniability to the exercise of power. This brief encapsulation cannot do justice to the many compelling local readings that Holmes and Halbertal offer of characters and events. Joab, Nathan, Abigail, and many others all receive careful and close attention in ways that will likely persuade many readers of the plausibility of the central thesis of *The Beginning of Politics*. Anyone who resonates to this subject matter should certainly read the book.

There are, however, two reservations I would raise about this worthy endeavor. First, the genre of the book is a hybrid of biblical literary criticism and political thought. While historical-critical biblical scholarship is brought to bear in the notes, Halbertal and Holmes are less interested in arguing for the existence of a single author than in elucidating the argument they see as issuing from his pen. Discussion of possible historical-critical objections to their thesis, then, is kept to a minimum. The authors hope that readers will find the picture they sketch compelling enough that they accept its coherence, and having accepted its coherence it is a short enough move to accepting single authorship (and of someone who lived close in time to the events, no less, another contentious point the argument for which does not much occupy Halbertal and Holmes here).

The other reservation has to do with an attitude not uncommon to political scientists. Halbertal and Holmes argue that the author of Samuel is writing about politics, rather than merely staking out a partisan political position (say, pro-David or pro-Saulid). The Book of Samuel has grander aims; it "sets forth the proper attitude that should be assumed toward the political project as a whole" (p. 15). "The" political project, as seen here, is the centralization of political and military authority in a hierarchical structure with immense extractive power, including the ability to conscript and to tax. This is what makes Samuel relevant to our times—the dynastic monarchical form is only one historical manifestation of "the"

political project; the liberal state is another, which could also be subject to the same critique. The attitude is tragic; horrific flaws are endemic to such politics, and yet it is necessary, as dramatized by God's decision to abdicate the throne and allow the people to have a human king. "The" political project, then, is all of the following: autonomous, human, necessary, dangerous, flawed, and sovereign.

But we may ask ourselves whether this is, indeed, all that politics is. The decision to abandon the divine anarchy prevailing in Judges is presented in two ways that are somewhat in tension with each other: as absolutely necessary, and as a trade-off. "This is because leaderless interregna will inevitably invite attacks by foreign enemies and spark violent succession struggles, civil wars, or even a shattering of the community," as Halbertal and Holmes explain at the beginning of the book (p. 6). But they then go on to explain how the choice for monarchy, itself, invited attacks by and on foreign enemies, violent succession struggles, civil wars, and even a shattering of the community. So why wouldn't the conscious choice for anarchy—holistic, divine-human, contingent, dangerous, flawed, and nonsovereign—also count as "a" political project? (This was the position articulated by Martin Buber in his ***Kingship of God*** [1936], a book that Halbertal and Holmes cite; Buber already called Samuel "the biblical politeia" in the 1930s.) The answer, it seems to me, is tautological and embedded in the self-definition of political science as the study of a practice that can only truly emerge once God is dethroned. The real claim of ***The Beginning of Politics*** is that the author of Samuel engaged in such a study.

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