

A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF SAMUEL

by MOSHE GARSIEL

ספר שמואל, מפורש על ידי יהודה קייל (סדרת "דעת מקרא"), 2 כ./, ירושלים, מוסד הרב קוק, תשמ"א.  
*The Book of Samuel*, with commentary by Yehuda Kiel, 2 v. ("Da'ath Mikra" series) Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1981.

This series, which appears in Hebrew, already comprises commentaries on the books of Joshua, Judges, the Twelve Minor Prophets, Psalms, Job, the Five Megilloth, Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>1</sup> The new annotated version of the Book of Samuel constitutes a continuation of the Books of Joshua and Judges as regards subject-matter and method. The series is intended for teachers, mature students and the enlightened reader of the Bible.

---

Moshe Garsiel is Chairman of the Department of Bible at Bar-Ilan University. Translation by the Jewish Theological Seminary Translation Center — Neve Schechter (Dorothea Shefer-Vanson).

1. *Sefer Yehushu'a*, commentary by Y. Kiel (Jerusalem, 1970); *Sefer Shoftim*, comm., Y. Elitzur (Jerusalem, 1976); *Terey 'Asar*, 2 v. (Jerusalem, 1973–77); *Sefer Iyyov*, comm., Amos Hakham (Jerusalem, 1981); *Hamesh Megillot* (Jerusalem, 1973); *'Ezra–Nehemyah*, comm., M. Zer-Kavod (Jerusalem, 1982). Currently in press and scheduled to appear by the end of 1983 are four additional titles: *Mishley* (Proverbs), comm., M. Zer-Kavod and Y. Kiel; *Yermiyahu* (Jeremiah), comm., M. Bulah; *Yesha'yahu* (Isaiah), comm., A. Hakham, 2 v.; *Yehezqel* (Ezekiel), comm., M. Moskovitz. In addition, the series includes an edition of the entire Bible following the Aleppo Codex: *Torah Nevi'im Ketuvim, mugahim 'al-pi ha-Nusah vaha-Mesorah shel Keter Aram-Šovah u-Kitvey-yad ha-qerovim lo*, ed., Mordecai Breuer, 3 v. (Jerusalem, 1977–82); and a volume discussing the history and significance of this text: Mordecai Breuer, *Keter Aram-Šovah vaha-nusah ha-mequbal shel ha-Miqra [The Aleppo Codex and the Annotated Text of the Bible]* (Jerusalem, 1976).

In contrast to modern interpretations of the Bible by well-known Bible scholars which use the fruits of philology, literary analysis and history, this *fundamentalist* series is distinguished by the fact that it is primarily based on the classical, traditional approach — beginning with the commentaries of the Sages in the Talmud and the Midrashim, continuing with the medieval exegetes and extending to the latest Jewish scholars of the traditional, conservative school. Be that as it may, this series nevertheless takes into account some of the achievements of modern Bible research in the fields of literature, philology, history, historical geography, archaeology and other related areas, provided that the results of the studies in these spheres do not contradict or oppose Jewish religious tradition.

The authors of this series deliberately refrain from engaging in deep, scholarly discussion of most of the questions with which 'higher Bible criticism' has dealt. Thus, for example, there is no serious discussion of issues arising from the cultural and religious contact between the nations of the ancient Near East and the Jewish people; nor any penetrating analysis of the various opinions regarding the processes of the formation, composition and editing of the various books of the Bible. By contrast, the authors of this series attempt to demonstrate through a harmonistic approach the internal unity of the books of the Bible as well as their theological and literary uniqueness. In this respect the series follows — though only partially — the synchronic-literary school of modern Bible scholarship which has of late gained widespread prominence in the field. This modern school of thought also focuses on the work as a whole and the complete text before us, analysing and assessing it from a literary viewpoint in accordance with the eries of commentaries, the authors also do not deal with either "lower criticism" or textual emendations. In the footnotes, however, they will sometimes cite readings which differ from the traditional text. These readings are taken from the Qumran scrolls, ancient manuscripts or textual variants reconstructed from the Septuagint, the Aramaic translation or even the books of Josephus. The authors of the series, however, do not regard themselves as authorized to give preference to any of the variant textual readings above the traditional one. In his introduction (Vol. I, p. 159), Kiel states explicitly that he assumes that the traditional version is the best one, even though he also cites others.

Kiel has written an extensive introduction to the first volume, which in and of itself deserves a separate discussion. The heading which opens the first section of the introduction asserts the unity of the Book of Samuel. The proofs which Kiel supplies of the book's unity are of a literary character. The unity of the book's subject-matter constitutes proof in Kiel's view, as does its unity of structure. The Book of Samuel deals with four generations (Eli, Samuel, Saul and David), four holy sites (Shiloh, Nob, Gibeon, Jerusalem) and four high priests (Eli, Ahimelech, Abiathar and Zadok). Kiel regards the number four as a predominant element in the organization of the work's literary material. At times, Kiel's attempts to prove

his point by finding the number four everywhere are somewhat forced. He also attempts to demonstrate the unity of the book by emphasizing the connections between each of its separate narrative sections, asserting in particular that all of the book's different sections are inherent in its very beginning. However, it is only through some very forced reading that Kiel succeeds in showing this intrinsic interconnection between the book's various parts and its beginning.

Kiel is correct, though, in contending that the Book of Samuel is well-written in literary terms, and that it can be assumed that its author was no mere "editor," in the technical sense of the word. However, it should not be ignored that this author used a number of varied literary sources for his composition. Kiel does indeed devote a few words (only one and a quarter pages! see pp. 163–164) to the formation of the book, but his discussion and approach to the problem is by no means satisfactory to the educated reader. It is interesting to note that even a dissenting view among the traditional commentators, such as that of Abarbanel, who maintained that the Book of Samuel was based on three sources — the writings of the three prophets, Samuel, Nathan and Gad — and that the prophet Jeremiah (or Ezra the scribe) edited these texts and made many additions to them, is cited by Kiel only in passing, in an extremely brief footnote, which in no way reflects the significance of Abarbanel's view expressed in clear opposition to Rabbinic tradition. In this respect, Kiel's view even differs from that of a conservative scholar such as Segal, whose interpretation of the Book of Samuel deals extensively with the questions of its formation and the problems raised by Higher and Lower Criticism, taking ancient translations, and the Septuagint in particular, into consideration as much as possible.

Under the heading "Matters of Style and Language," Kiel also reviews several aspects of the literary structure of passages in the Book of Samuel. Thus, for example, he analyses the use of gradual buildup in the book, citing a group of examples in which good or bad tidings are conveyed. The first example is the description given by a Benjaminite of the defeat in the battle at Eben-ezer (I Samuel 4:17). The message is conveyed in a gradual fashion, with the news becoming progressively worse. Phineas' wife also describes the disaster in a gradual way, but from a different viewpoint (*Ibid.*, v. 21). The Amalekite youth describes the defeat of Israel and the deaths of Saul and his sons on Mount Gilboa in a similar gradual fashion (II Sam. 1:4).<sup>2</sup>

---

2. For an analysis of the parallelism in the "tidings" of the survivors of the battle compare: D.M. Gunn, *The Story of King David — Genre and Interpretation*, [JSOT. Supp. Series, 6 (Sheffield, 1978)], p. 51 ff.; Y. Zakovitch, 'Al Sheloshah... ve'al Arba'ah | "For Three... and for Four" (Heb.) (Jerusalem, 1979), pp. 300 ff.

Kiel also quotes a number of cases in which phrases or expressions at the conclusion of narrative tales parallel those found at their beginning (Introduction, pp. 16–17). Thus, at the beginning of the episode of David's arrival at Saul's palace we read: "Now the spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord began to terrify him. ...'(they) will look for someone who is skilled at playing the lyre; whenever the evil spirit of God comes over you, he will play it and you will feel better'" (I Sam. 16:14–16). There is a similar passage at the conclusion of the narrative: "Whenever the (evil) spirit of God came upon Saul, David would take the lyre and play it; Saul would find relief and feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him" (*Ibid.*, v. 23).

Kiel devotes a special section of his book to a literary feature he terms "the closing of the circle" (Introduction, pp. 17–18). His survey of this literary technique in the Book of Samuel is quite extensive, containing many examples of great interest, from which the probing student may derive many far-reaching conclusions. We shall examine here two of his examples, to give the reader a sense of his work. In both cases, the same description of setting appears in two separate scenes situated at different places within a narrative text. The first is taken from the episode of David and Michal. In the first scene, David's wife, Michal, helps him escape from Saul "through the window" (I Sam. 19:12). In a later scene, Michal watches King David "through the window" and despises him (II Sam. 6:16ff.). The angry verbal exchange which follows indicates the change that has occurred in the relationship between David and Michal since the prior "window" scene.<sup>3</sup> A second instance of this literary technique is found in the affair of David and Bathsheba. "From the roof of the royal palace" David saw a woman washing, and desired her (II Sam. 11:2). This phrase is the beginning of the "circle" of David's sin and deterioration. A slightly later scene shows how the rebellious Absalom comes to his father's concubines "on the roof" (II Sam. 16:22). In this way David is punished "measure for measure," this punishment aptly fitting this past crime. At the very spot where David's sin began, he is punished, and so the circle is closed.<sup>4</sup>

Kiel devotes two chapters of his work to the systems of rule and leadership in the times of Eli and Samuel, Saul and David, as well as to the sanctuary and the priesthood. In these areas, which relate to general sociology and history, one only wishes that Kiel would have made greater use of those modern Biblical studies

---

3. On this, compare R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), pp. 141–127; Shulah Abramski, "The Woman Gazing Through the Window" (Heb.), *Beth Mikra* 25 (1980), pp. 116–121.

4. See M. Garsiel, *Malkhuth David [The Davidic Kingdom — Studies in History and Historiography* (Heb.) (Tel Aviv, 1975), pp. 105–106.

which specialize in comparison of the contemporary cultures of ancient Israel and her neighbors.

Special attention should be paid to the list of parallels which Kiel has placed in an appendix at the end of Volume II. This list includes literary parallels of language, expressions, and even, at times, of literary motifs between the Book of Samuel and those of the Pentateuch, as well as between the Book of Samuel and Joshua, Judges and Ruth. In his commentary, Kiel indicates on various occasions that parallels found in later works, such as the prophetic books, may allude to or quote from the Book of Samuel. This abundance of parallels constitutes first-rate raw material for the study of the internal links among the books of the Bible. Thus, Kiel provides scholars wishing to study this important sphere with invaluable material.<sup>5</sup> Kiel himself occasionally utilizes these parallels in his introduction, as when he draws an analogy between Samuel and the prophets who preceded him, or between Samuel and Moses (Vol. I, pp. 105–109). Most of the material, however, is not exploited to its full extent, and awaits those scholars who will be able to exhaust all of its implications.<sup>6</sup>

In his summaries at the end of each chapter and each narrative group, Kiel pays particular attention to the overall structure of the Book of Samuel, to the links among one group of narratives and another, and to the connection between different chapters and even different passages. All this is in deliberate contrast to the approach of many scholars, whose aim has been to analyse and reconstruct the nature of the ancient materials from which the book was composed. Kiel takes the opposite approach, in each section seeking those distinguishing features which connect it with what has gone before and what follows.

Thus, with regard to the problem of the positioning of the story involving David, Nabal and Abigail (I Sam. 25), Kiel is aware of the fact that this chapter would seem to artificially separate the one preceding it (Ch. 24) from the one which follows (Ch. 26), both of which deal with a common theme: the final encounters between Saul and David. Kiel maintains that the tale of David, Nabal and Abigail has been deliberately placed between the descriptions of the two meetings between Saul and David in order to emphasize the vast difference between David's

---

5. For an example of the analysis of parallelism between the narrative of the battle fought by Saul and Jonathan at Michmas (I Sam. 13–14) and the Gideon narratives (Judges 6–8), see M. Garsiel, "The Battle of Mikhmash — a Historical-literary study (I Sam. 13–14)" (Heb.), in M. Goshen and U. Simon (eds.), *'Yuneq Miqra u-Farshanut | Studies in Bible and Exegesis — Arie Toeg In Memoriam*] (Ramat Gan, 1980), pp. 39–50.

6. Many comparisons of this kind may be found in my recent book, *Sefer Shemuel Alef — 'Yun Sifrut... | I Samuel—A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (Heb.) (Ramat Gan, 1983).

behavior and Saul's. The latter has no mercy on Nob and its inhabitants, whom he kills; and even though Saul is temporarily persuaded to stop pursuing David, he is hardly consistent in the matter. On the other hand, David has mercy on Saul and refrains from killing him, even though this opportunity came his way on two separate occasions. While David does intend to destroy Nabal and his household for refusing to help him, Abigail knows how to persuade him that this is inappropriate behavior for someone who is destined to be king. In this way, a comparison is drawn between Saul and David.<sup>7</sup> In similar fashion, Kiel resolves the problem presented by the positions of the passages concerning David's return to Ziklag (I Sam. 30) and those describing Saul's last battle in Jezreel and on Mount Gilboa (I Sam. 28–II Sam. 1).

Kiel also discusses at length the manner in which the narratives are themselves constructed and connected internally by means of key words. This method, whose beginnings can already be found in Rabbinic literature and which has been developed by such scholars as Rosenzweig, Buber, Weiss, N. Leibovitz and others, has reached an even greater refinement here in Kiel's work. Throughout his work, Kiel indicates the use of key words within the internal texture of separate passages and at times in the sections linking chapters. Although it is possible to disagree with Kiel's interpretations regarding certain specific instances which he presents, one can find no fault with the extensive material Kiel places at the disposal of the scholar of the narrative art found in the Book of Samuel.

As he did in his commentary to the Book of Joshua, which appeared in the same series, Kiel devotes a considerable portion of the book to a discussion of the geographical background of the Book of Samuel. His analysis has been clearly influenced by his renowned teacher, Professor S. Klein. In the area of toponomy, Kiel often cites the most up-to-date identifications proposed by recent research. Thus, he suggests that Eben-ezer should be located somewhere within the region of Izbet Şarta, following the excavations and studies undertaken by Kochavi, Garsiel and Finkelstein at that site.<sup>8</sup> He also notes that Ba'al-Shelisha should be identified as Hirbet Mirjama, following Kalai's suggestion. In some cases Kiel cites the conventional identification of a site, while suggesting another possibility in a footnote. An example of this can be found in his commentary on I Samuel 7:6, in which he identifies Mizpeh as Tel el-Natzbeh, as do most scholars, but adds in a footnote: "Some people identify Mizpeh as Nebi Samuel." The commentator should have added here why the first site is preferable, and what deficiencies scholars have found in the latter suggestion. In explaining the

---

7. Compare: J.D. Levenson, "1 Samuel as Literature and History," *CBQ* 40 (1978), pp. 11–28.

8. See M. Kochavi, "An Ostrakon of the Period of the Judges from Izbet Şartaḥ," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977), pp. 1–13; M. Garsiel and J. Finkelstein, "The Westward Expansion of the House of Joseph in the Light of the Izbet Şartan Excavations," *Tel Aviv* 5 (1978), pp. 192–198.

geographical background to Saul's last battle, Kiel proposes identifying the fountain (*ha'ayin*) in Jezreel (I Sam. 29:1) with Ein Harod at the foot of Mount Gilboa, or with another spot known as Ha'ayin (the fountain). Kiel does not elaborate as to what is meant by the latter suggestion, nor does he mention the view generally held by scholars that the fountain in Jezreel should be identified with the fountain known as 'Ain el Mitha, which flows at the foot of the town of Jezreel (Tel Zar'in). However, the illustration which appears beside the identification shows a spring surrounded by vegetation beneath which we read: "Ha'ayin in Jezreel (Zar'in)." This presumably refers to 'Ain el Mitha, although this is not stated explicitly. The suggested identification is thus left unclear. Despite several instances of lack of clarity and certain inaccuracies in identifying geographical sites, Kiel's explanations give a reasonable picture of the geographical reality to the reader of the Bible. The maps and pictures of the sites which accompany the commentary help the reader to understand both the military- and demographic-geographic reality of ancient Israel. Kiel's ample collection of geographic explanations and identifications, however, are in no way an original contribution to Biblical research in this area.

In summarizing the significance of this commentary, we can say that for the Bible-lover Kiel's exegesis is first rate, providing the reader with the best to be found in the wealth of traditional Bible commentary as well as offering a great deal of what is to be found in modern "non-critical" Bible scholarship. Even Bible scholars will find something new in this book, particularly as regards literary analysis and the study of parallel passages, where Kiel provides much material for thought and study. But what is most lacking in this commentary is its failure to refer to those views which disagree with its traditional approach—an omission which underlies the entire series of commentaries of which it is a part — and that it makes no appreciable effort to tackle the vast literature of scientific research dealing with the "Higher" and "Lower" criticism of the text.

*Immanuel* 16 (Summer 1983)