



David's Family: The Lord finds a Man after His Own Heart (1 Sam 16)

Commentary: Week Eight

New American Commentary¹

2. The Lord Elevates and Empowers David

Saul's work for God had ended, but God's work would go on. The Lord had already "sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people" ([13:14](#)). This chapter portrays the unfolding of God's plan as it centered in the person of David.

At one level this chapter presents an interesting historical narrative about how one of Saul's adversaries outwitted the king to anoint a royal rival. But the writer's intention was clearly to present more than historical fact. This chapter is not so much about Samuel and David as it is about God. It portrays the Lord's infinite and effortless superiority to all things human. The ways of the Lord confound even the greatest spiritual intellects and frustrate all earthly forces that would stand in his way. This chapter provides one of the most fascinating examples of the Lord's inclination to choose "the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are" ([1 Cor 1:28](#)). When this story concludes, an unlettered rural shepherd boy has become the Lord's anointed—"a brave man and a warrior" (v. [18](#)) who uses his supernaturally enhanced abilities to overpower even evil spirits.

(1) The Lord Has Samuel Anoint David [16:1-13a](#)

[16:1-3](#) In the previous chapter the Lord had spoken through Samuel about another; here the Lord spoke to Samuel about Samuel. In the midst of Samuel's mournful depression God gave him a word of motivational reproof (cf. [Exod 10:3, 7](#); [Num 14:27](#); [1 Sam 1:14](#); [2 Sam 2:26](#); [1 Kgs 18:21](#)) and a job to do, one that Youngblood terms "the capstone to Samuel's career." Perhaps to dispel doubts that may have arisen in the prophet's mind, the Lord first confirmed the stern prophetic word spoken by Samuel against Saul, the most powerful man in Israelite society: "I have rejected him as king over Israel" (v. [1](#)). Having said this, God then gave the prophet a divine mission spelled out in specific terms. Samuel was first to "fill" an animal horn flask with specially prepared olive oil (cf. [Exod 30:23-25](#)). Then he was to take it along on a journey "to Jesse of Bethlehem" for a specific reason: Samuel was to anoint "one of his sons to be king."

Samuel's task was simple yet dangerous. As Israel's kingmaker and most esteemed servant of the Lord, Samuel's actions were of great interest to Saul. If Samuel were to make an unexpected journey, especially one to a location outside of his normal judicial circuit, it would likely be reported to the king. Saul would then certainly view Samuel's actions for what they were—a threat to Saul's own claim to the throne.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 176-183.

Consequently, the Lord gave Samuel an additional task that would help mask the central purpose of his trip to Bethlehem. Samuel was to make a sacrifice in that region and would “take a heifer” along for that purpose. As a levitical judge, Samuel was authorized to sacrifice such an animal as part of a ritual that atoned for an unsolved murder committed in a rural region (cf. [Deut 21:1–9](#)). Thus Samuel’s journey to a rural region with a sacrificial animal accompanying him would not have raised undue suspicions.

[16:4–5](#) Perhaps the elders “trembled” at the sight of Samuel because they interpreted Samuel’s arrival with a heifer as an indication that a murder had occurred in their territory and that a legal action was being initiated; Youngblood suggests the elders were “awed by his formidable reputation,” established in part by his recent execution of Agag.

In preparation for the sacrifice Samuel instructed the elders to “consecrate” themselves, that is, to place themselves in a condition of ritual cleanness. Entering into ritual cleanness normally involved bathing, putting on clean clothes, the temporary suspension of all sexual activity, as well as avoidance of contact with any dead body. Samuel then went to the house of Jesse, where he personally invited him and his sons to the sacrifice and oversaw their consecration.

[16:6–10](#) An unspecified amount of time later, Samuel began the anointing ceremony, the central purpose of his trek to Bethlehem. However, as this event began, the prophet was portrayed not knowing the Lord’s will; this is the only time in biblical narrative when Samuel was shown in this uncomfortable position. Samuel was forced, therefore, to initiate the search for “the man after the Lord’s heart” with only the use of his own insight. When he “saw Eliab,” Jesse’s firstborn son (cf. [17:13](#)), he was impressed by “his appearance or his height” (v. [7](#)) and concluded that “the LORD’s anointed stands here before the LORD” (v. [6](#)). After all, Samuel had previously been led by God to anoint an individual who possessed exceptional height (cf. [10:23](#)).

But before Samuel could uncork the horn and pour oil on Eliab’s head, the Lord ended his silence. First, he informed Samuel that Eliab had been rejected as Israel’s next king. Then, in a particularly memorable statement the Lord uttered one of the most important statements in all of Scripture regarding divine concerns and human capacities. God first affirmed his fundamental “otherness”: “the LORD does not look at the things man looks at” (v. [7](#)). Neither the Lord’s considerations nor his abilities are the same as those of humans; whereas “man looks at the outward appearance” (lit., “the eyes”), “the LORD looks at the heart.” The Lord alone has the capacity to observe and judge a person’s “heart” (Hb. *lēb*), that is, one’s thoughts, emotions, and intents. On God’s scales these matters outweigh all other aspects of a human life.

The firstborn having been rejected, “Jesse called Abinadab” (v. [8](#)), his second born ([17:13](#)), “and had him pass in front of Samuel.” But he, like his younger brother “Shammah” (v. [9](#)), was “not chosen.” In fact, though four additional sons of Jesse passed in front of Samuel for possible anointing, the Lord had “not chosen these” (v. [10](#)) either.

[16:11–13a](#) The prophet’s experience seemed to contradict his revelation, and it resulted in a perplexing situation. On the one hand, the Lord revealed that he had chosen a son of Jesse to be king (v. [1](#)); on the other hand, he had rejected every son paraded before Samuel. In an effort to resolve the confusion, Samuel asked Jesse if he had any other sons. As it turned out, Jesse’s “smallest” (Hb. *haqqāṭān*; NIV, “youngest”) son had been excluded from the event; he was out “tending the sheep” (v. [11](#)).

Jesse’s description of the omitted son—David—as “smallest” places him in strong contrast to the rejected king. Since the Lord had just told Samuel not to consider “his height” (v. [7](#)), the prophet was predisposed to interpret this description positively and perhaps as an indicator that the small shepherd would indeed be the Lord’s anointed. With urgency he requested that Jesse’s remaining son be brought in.

When David was brought in from the field, his favorable physical traits were immediately obvious: he was first of all “ruddy” (v. [10](#); Hb *’admônî*), either possessing red-tinted hair or a bronze complexion; he possessed “a fine appearance” (lit., “beauty of eyes”); and he was “handsome.” However—especially in light of v. [7](#)—these physical assets were no proof that David was God’s choice; at best they were irrelevant. What mattered was the young man’s heart, and only God could judge that. The Lord removed all suspense from the situation with his word to Samuel: “Anoint him; he is the one.”

Obediently, Samuel opened the “horn of oil” (v. [12](#)) and decanted its contents on David’s head before his brothers and the elders of Bethlehem. The shapeless, invasive fluid used in the ceremony served fittingly as a symbol of the mystical presence of God. As the oil worked its way into the individual’s hair and pores, it symbolized the divine presence entering into the one being anointed.

When David, the youngest of the sons in Jesse’s family (cf. [1 Chr 2:13–15](#)), was selected as the Lord’s anointed, he joined a venerable crowd of Torah patriarchs selected by God in a way that confounded social norms. Other men who were not firstborn but who were selected by the Lord over their more socially powerful older brothers include Seth, Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Ephraim, Moses, and perhaps Abraham. It seems that the biblical record deliberately creates the impression that Yahweh prefers to use disenfranchised members of society—earlier in 1 Samuel the barren woman Hannah and the child Samuel—to do his most significant work (cf. [Mark 10:31](#); [1 Cor 1:27](#)).

(2) The Lord’s Spirit Comes Upon David Powerfully [16:13b](#)

[16:13b](#) In David’s case more than mere symbolism was present in the anointing ceremony: “The Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power” (v. [12](#)), even as had been the case previously with Saul (cf. [10:10](#)). What is more, it stayed with him “from that day on”; this made David’s anointing superior to Saul’s (cf. v. [14](#)). The coming of the Spirit, an event that was primarily spiritual in nature, had major implications for the political future of Israel; after this event the political landscape of Israel would be forever different.

3. The Lord Blesses David, the Courtier, But Frustrates Saul

This section provides an early indication of the magnitude of the Lord’s blessings on David’s life. David, newly empowered by the Lord’s Spirit, is called into service at Saul’s royal court in Gibeah. In this his situation is not unlike that of the youthful Samuel, who in a former day also served faithfully at the power center of the troubled anointed leader he would someday succeed.

The young man David soon proved to be both a blessing and a threat to his royal master, Saul. On the one hand, David was the only Israelite capable of delivering Saul from spiritual oppression and Israel from an intimidating Philistine giant. On the other hand, David’s success so intimidated Saul that the king found it necessary to try to kill Israel’s brightest young hero. When his own weapon twice failed to find its mark, Saul sought the help of his firstborn son, his youngest daughter, and even the Philistines. However, because of the Lord’s gracious hand of protection, every attempt failed: David was rescued at every turn, sometimes by the very ones Saul enlisted to kill him.

The theme of the section, repeated on four occasions ([16:18](#); [18:12](#), [14](#), [28](#)), is “the LORD was with David.” Truly it was the Lord’s presence in David’s life (cf. [16:13](#)) that preserved and prospered him during this time of personal crisis. When the section ends, David has married into the royal family, established a covenant with the heir-apparent to Saul’s throne, and become Israel’s favorite and most successful military leader.

(1) The Lord Oppresses Saul and Uses David to Bring Deliverance [16:14-23](#)

[16:14–20](#) David’s new status before the Lord stood in sharp contrast to Saul’s. When the Lord rejected Saul as king ([15:23](#), [26](#); [16:1](#)), “the Spirit of the LORD had departed from” (v. [14](#)) him as well. Saul had lost the empowering reality behind the anointing that had marked his selection for divine service earlier (cf. [10:1](#), [10](#)). But Saul’s condition now was far worse than being without the Lord’s Spirit, for “an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.” The Hebrew word translated “evil” (Hb. *rā‘ā*) has a wide range of meanings from “misery” to “moral perverseness.” Thus, it is possible—and perhaps preferable—to interpret the text not to mean that the Lord sent a morally corrupt demon but rather another sort of supernatural being—an angel of judgment (cf. [2 Kgs 19:35](#))—against Saul that caused him to experience constant misery.

Saul’s tortured state was not an accident of nature, nor was it essentially a medical condition. It was a supernatural assault by a being sent at the Lord’s command, and it was brought on by Saul’s disobedience.

The astounding declaration by the writer in vv. [14–15](#) reflects a worldview that bears further examination. God, the Creator of the universe, had issued a series of behavioral decrees applicable to all humanity, but especially to Israel, and these were revealed supremely in the Torah. The Torah was a path of life, and obedience to the Torah resulted in life and blessing. To disobey Torah requirements was to leave the path of life and enter into the realm of judgment and death. Through his repeated disobedience to the Torah requirements Saul had entered into a living, personal judgment that God brought against him. This punishment was carried out by a divinely created agent of judgment, “an evil [or “troubling”] spirit from the LORD.”

This is the only time in the Old Testament that an individual is noted as being tormented by a troubling/evil spirit. Evidence that the writer considered Saul’s condition to be unusual is provided by the fact that the verb that describes Saul’s condition (Hb. *bā‘at*) is used nowhere else in a narrative framework clause in the Torah or Former Prophets; furthermore, the combination of grammatical and lexical features in this clause is rated as the most abnormal in the narrative framework of 1, 2 Samuel.

Though Saul was the one being troubled by the spirit, the writer portrays him as being inert in dealing with it. It was “Saul’s attendants” (v. [15](#)), not Saul himself, who correctly diagnosed his condition; it also was they who suggested an effective treatment for helping him “feel better” (v. [16](#)). Their remedy was one known in Israelite circles to have power in the spiritual world (cf. [2 Kgs 3:15](#)), the playing of harp music. By listening to harp music “when the [troubling]/evil spirit comes” (v. [16](#)), Saul “will feel better.”

The suggestion seemed reasonable to Saul, and he immediately ordered a search for “someone who plays well” (v. [17](#)). But even before a search party could be organized, an unnamed royal servant suggested that they seek “a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the harp” (v. [18](#)). This individual—David—had numerous other qualifications that befit a person who would serve as a royal aide. Militarily, “he is a brave man and a warrior”; socially, “he speaks well”; physically, he “is a fine-looking man”; and spiritually, “the LORD is with him.” The mention of this last trait puts David in company with Isaac, Joseph, Joshua, and Samuel (cf. [Gen 26:28](#); [39:2–3](#), [21](#), [23](#); [Josh 6:27](#); [1 Sam 3:19](#)).

On that recommendation Saul sent a message to Jesse ordering him to deliver his son over to the royal court. Dutifully, Jesse complied. The food that he sent—“a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine and a young goat” (v. [20](#))—probably was meant to serve as David’s provisions since there was as yet no formal taxation system to support people serving in the nation’s political and military establishment.

[16:21–23](#) David came to Saul at Gibeah and “entered his service” (lit., “stood before his face”), and it was not long before the king “loved [*’āhab*] him greatly” (“liked him very much”). So impressed was Saul with this well-recommended shepherd that he decided to make David a permanent member of his court. Saul assigned him a coveted role as “one of his armor bearers.” In this position David was kept close to the king and was thus able to respond immediately “whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul” (v. [23](#)). Gordon cites Qumranic evidence to suggest that David’s songs were accompanied by singing as well. Though David’s musical efforts were effective in providing relief for Saul, the writer understood that David’s success was due to the fact that the Spirit of the Lord was with him in power (vv. [13](#), [18](#)).

David’s soothing remedy for Saul’s malady was simple yet effective. The Hebrew verb forms in v. [23](#) suggest that Saul was attacked numerous times by the tormenting spirit; Scripture records two such additional instances ([18:10](#); [19:9](#)), and likely there were others.

The three concluding verses of chap. [16](#) depict David’s first encounter with the one who would soon devote his life to trying to kill him. The verses play an important role in the larger scheme of 1, 2 Samuel, for they serve as the first evidence that David was a loyal, trustworthy servant of Saul who used his abilities to benefit the king. In spite of Saul’s repeated efforts to kill David, Israel’s next king made absolutely no efforts to bring down Saul’s dynasty. In fact, David performed feats in Saul’s behalf that no one else could, and the king initially appreciated David’s efforts. Any deterioration in the relationship between Saul and David would not be David’s fault.