

The King's Banquets: Sacrificial Partition and Ritual Practice in 1Sam 9 and 1Sam 28

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Abstract. This paper investigates the narratives in 1 Sam 9 and 1 Sam 28 in light of the broader background of the sacrificial context in the first book of Samuel. Specifically, this study shows how the episodes, united by the scene of a banquet and the sharing of the sacred meal, constitute the parts of a defined symbolic system that, in its outcomes, can describe, define, and direct the relationships between those participating in the ritual and the deity. Through the example of Saul's banquets, first with Samuel and then a necromancer in the village of En Dor, the text of 1Sam defines a precise hierarchy between cultic practice and the nascent monarchy in Israel.

Keywords: Hebrew Bible; Banquets; Books of Samuel; Saul; Sacrifice; Sacred Meal.

[esp] Los banquetes del rey: La partición del sacrificio y la práctica ritual en 1Sam 9 y 1Sam 28

Resumen. Este artículo investiga las narraciones de 1 Sam 9 y 1 Sam 28 a la luz del trasfondo más amplio del contexto sacrificial en el primer libro de Samuel. En concreto, este estudio muestra cómo los episodios, unidos por la escena de un banquete y el reparto de la comida sagrada, constituyen las partes de un sistema simbólico definido que, en sus resultados, es capaz de describir, definir y dirigir las relaciones entre los participantes en el ritual y la deidad. A través del ejemplo de los banquetes de Saúl, primero con Samuel y luego con una nigromante en la aldea de En Dor, el texto de 1Sam define una jerarquía precisa entre la práctica cultural y la monarquía naciente en Israel.

Palabras clave: Biblia hebrea; Banquetes; Libros de Samuel; Saúl; Sacrificio; Comida sagrada.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. The Special Portion. The Sacrifices of Shiloh and the Birth of Samuel. 3. Portions of the Sin. The Sons of Eli. 4. A Sacrificial Banquet for the New King. 1Sam 9. 5. The King's Last Banquet. Saul and the Necromancer of En Dor. 6. Conclusion. 7. Bibliography.

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1. Introduction²

The episodes of the anointing in 1Sam 9 and the visit to a necromancer in the village of En Dor in 1Sam 28 constitute Saul's first and last meeting with the prophet Samuel and draw a narrative framework around the life of the first king of Israel³. These narratives represent the extremes of the descending parabola that will give the life of this character the typical characteristics of a tragedy⁴. This study aims to investigate the episodes of 1Sam 9 and 1Sam 28 in light of the broader background of the sacrificial context in the first book of Samuel. I will show how ritual practice is narratively constructed as a defined system capable of directing the positive or negative outcomes of the narrated event.

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² All the translations from Hebrew in this study are mine.

³ The placement in chapter 28 has been debated among scholars. Already in the nineteenth century, Budde (1902, 175; 1980, 235), on the basis of the geographical indications, pointed out that vv. 3-25 must have originally had a different location. According to the scholar, the correct place of the narrative should have been after chapters 29-30 of the same book, just before Saul's death. This question was also followed up in later commentaries, which considered the problem differently (McCarter 1980, 422-23; Caquot, de Robert 1994, 335). In contrast, Fokkelman (1981, 548) argues on the basis of literary criteria that ch. 28 is the correct location for the episode.

⁴ Humphreys 1978, 18-27; Exum 1996, 20-25; Nicholson, 2009.

2. The special portion. The sacrifices of Shiloh and the birth of Samuel

The first book of Samuel develops its narrative dynamic through a complex network of sacrifices and ritual practices early as the first chapter⁵. The book opens with the introduction of Elkanah, an Ephraimite man with two wives, one of whom, Hannah, is barren (1Sam 1:2). As every year, Elkanah and his family were intent on “going up” (על) to the sanctuary of Shiloh to worship and offer to Yhwh the annual sacrifice (v. 3)⁶. After introducing the main characters and the spatial context of the narrative, the actual narration begins (vv. 4-11)⁷:

⁴ Now, it happened one day that Elkanah offering the sacrifice (זבח) gave his wife Peninnah and all her sons and daughters portions (⁵ מנת). But to Hannah he gave a double portion⁸, for he loved Hannah. But Yhwh had closed her womb. ⁶ And her rival used to provoke her, causing her sorrow, because Yhwh had closed her womb. ⁷ And so it happened every year, whenever she went up to the house of Yhwh, it was wont to afflict her, and she wept, and would not eat (⁸ אכל). And Elkanah her husband said unto her, “Hannah, why do you cry? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not better for you than ten sons?” ⁹ And Hannah arose after she had eaten at Shiloh and after she had drunk. Eli the priest sat in the chair at the doorpost of the temple (היכל) of Yhwh. ¹⁰ And she was bitter in spirit, and prayed to Yhwh, and wept desperately. ¹¹ And she made a vow, saying, “Yhwh of hosts, if you will look upon the humiliation of your servant, if you will remember and not forget your servant and give her a male child, I will give him to Yhwh for as long as he lives. And the razor shall not pass over his head”⁹.

After the scene of a misunderstanding between Eli and Hannah related to the woman’s low-voiced prayer (vv. 12-18), the text continues (vv. 19-20):

¹⁹ Early in the morning they woke up and worshipped Yhwh, and then they took the way back and came to their home in Ramah. And Elkanah met his wife, and Yhwh remembered her. ²⁰ And at the due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of Yhwh”.

The motif of the barren woman who bears a child through divine intervention is a well-known literary pattern in biblical literature¹⁰. Noticeably, the narrative of 1Sam 1 takes place in a context in which the ritual element prevails and is systematically described in its dynamics: (a) journey to the sanctuary; (b) sacrificial offering; (c) division of the meat among the sacrificing members; (d) overnight stay at the sanctuary. In addition to the correct sequence, which this point on becomes narratively a model of proper ritual practice in sacrifices involving a shared meal, the system of sacrificial partitioning is interesting¹¹. The physical conformation of the sacrificed animal – once the part reserved to the priests and the divinity is excluded – allows to establish a certain hierarchy linked to the cuts of meat that will be consumed by the sacrificers¹². Therefore, at the same time, the sacrifice creates, on the one hand, thanks to the unity of the animal from which the meat comes, unity among the participants and, on the other hand, a hierarchical scale among them according to the portions they receive. In the text of 1Sam 1, the division of the portions is handled by the *pater familias*, who, through the distribution, seem to express his favour. The special portion is reserved for Hannah, the most beloved wife who will later receive divine favour (v. 5). Moreover, the text also suggests a value of participating in the sacrificial meal. Hannah, who experiences on herself the distance of Yhwh, who “closed her womb”, refuses to take part in the communion meal and does not want to eat¹³. However, she will be convinced by her husband to take part in the banquet (vv. 8-9). After eating and after Hannah’s vow, the family concludes the cycle of ritual actions and stays overnight near (or perhaps inside?) the sanctuary.

The next morning the family returns home to Ramah (v. 19), and, the text says, Yhwh remembers Hannah’s vow. “In due time”, the woman conceives and gives birth to a son to whom she will give the name Samuel (v. 20)¹⁴.

With a leap in time, in a single verse, the narrator transports the reader a year later, directly to the time when Elkanah’s family organizes a new pilgrimage to Shiloh (v. 21). Nevertheless, Hannah and Samuel did not take part in the trip. The reason Hannah posits lies in the fact that the child is not yet weaned (v. 22). Despite her

⁵ The sacrificial system in the first book of Samuel has been the subject of analysis in Grottanelli 1998, 207-258.

⁶ Has been argued about how the pilgrimage and the context of 1Sam 1 suggest an annual harvest-related festival. See Ackerman 2008, 145-146.

⁷ This transition from the preparatory phase to the actual narrative can be defined on the basis of syntactic criteria of biblical Hebrew. See Niccacci 1990, 37-41.

⁸ The translation from Hebrew here is difficult. Problems arise from the unusual Hebrew wording that literally means “a portion [for the?] face” (מנה אהת אפים), and has bewildered commentators. I consider the proposal of Alter (1999, 4) convincing, who, in the wake of several commentators, translates “double portion” based on the doubling ending of the word אפים (face).

⁹ All translations from Hebrew are mine.

¹⁰ Specifically, the text of 1Sam 1 picks up some elements of the main stories of miraculous pregnancy and put Hannah in some “elite biblical company”. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, Rachel, the wife of Jacob, and the unnamed mother of Samson are presented as barren women. On this topic, see Bodner 2009, 12. See also Williams 1980, 107-119.

¹¹ Bianchi 2015 showed how the legal texts of the Bible provide for a complex system that regulates sacrificial entitlements in the various acts of worship.

¹² Grottanelli 1999, 52.

¹³ On communion sacrifices and their significance, see De Vaux 1964, 406.

¹⁴ The question of the meaning of the name “Samuel” (שמואל) is a matter of debate among scholars. For an overview of the main positions, see Herzberg 2003, 24-25.

mother's attempt to push back the moment of separation from her first child¹⁵, the time came when Hannah had to fulfil her vow. The consecration of Samuel takes place at the sanctuary of Shiloh in the presence of the priest Eli and again, the scene is staged in a sacrificial context (vv. 24-28). Requested, conceived, and consecrated in a sacrificial context Samuel obtains the sacred legitimacy that will lead him to the leadership of Israel.

3. Portions of the Sin. The Sons of Eli

Consecrated to God, Samuel fulfils his role as Eli's assistant at the Shiloh sanctuary. In his office, he is flanked by Eli's sons, who are also priests like their father and who assist pilgrims in ritual practices. Already from the introduction (1Sam 2:12), the reader is warned of the attitude of the two sons of Eli: they were perverse men¹⁶. Note that this "perversion" is related to sinful sacrificial behavior and, more specifically, to sinful sharing of the portions of the sacrificial meal¹⁷. The text emphasizes how the sons of Eli are guilty of a double sin. On the one hand, they sin against the people, appropriating the sacrificial portions that were due to the sacrificer. On the other hand, they sinned against God, appropriating the fat that, according to the sacrificial rules, belonged to the divinity (vv. 13-16)¹⁸. The behavior of Eli's sons is a counterpoint to Samuel's ascent, narrated by a series of statements that relate his maturation in faith and his growing favor in God's eyes (v. 26)¹⁹.

If Samuel, by his righteous behavior, gains God's favor, deviant behavior toward ritual will lead the sons of Eli to an inexorable end. The first warning comes from the voice of their father Eli, who warns, "If the man sins against Yhwh, who will be able to intercede for him?" (v. 25). Who will be able to intercede against corrupted ritual behavior? Eli's two sons don't seem to be listening, and the announcement of their death will detas eb by a "man of God" (איש אלהים) (vv. 27-36), who will point out that the condemnation of the two priests is based on cultic sins against God and the people (v. 29). The prophecy will be inexorably fulfilled, and the sons of Eli will die at the hands of the Philistines (1Sam 4:11)²⁰. Just as 1Sam 1 made a connection between proper ritual practice, portion sharing, and divine favor, the text of 1Sam 2:12-36 reiterates the same concept. Incorrect ritual practice compromises the fate of those who illegitimately partake of the banquet.

4. A Sacrificial Banquet for the New King. 1Sam 9

In the chapter recounting Saul's anointing, the sacrificial principles placed in 1Sam 1-4 are applied again.

Samuel is now old, and his sons should succeed him as Judges over Israel. However, the text at this point informs the reader that the behavior of Samuel's sons is not in line with their father's. In fact, they "did not walk in his footsteps, because they deviated after gain, accepted gifts, and twisted the law" (1Sam 8:3). This information recalls to the reader's mind the behavior and fate of Eli's sons and provides the basis for the people's demand for a king²¹.

Leaving aside here the judgment on the monarchical institution conveyed by the first book of Samuel²², for this study, it is important that, following the text, the act of validating the new king takes place in the sacrificial form.

The narrative of 1Sam 9 begins with Saul, a young boy from a wealthy family of the tribe of Benjamin, presented with the typical traits of a fairy-tale hero²³. The opening formula of the chapter "there was a man..." (1Sam 9:1) recalls from the outset the story of Elkanah (1Sam 1:1), which began with the same words²⁴. From the very first words, the text suggests to the reader a connection between Samuel's fate and that of Saul²⁵.

The plot begins with the loss of two asses belonging to Saul's father. Saul sets out with a servant to search for the lost animals but, after a long wander, decides to abandon the quest and return home (1 Sam 9:1-5). Spurred on by the servant, he agrees to continue the quest and head to a town where, the servant says, lives a man of God (איש אלהים) who will be able to help them (vv. 6-10). Arriving at a well outside the town gates, Saul

¹⁵ Bodner 2009, 23.

¹⁶ The term the text uses here is בני בליעל. This expression has received several interpretations from scholars. However, a general consensus lies in tracing the word's etymology to nuances pertaining to the realm of death. For an overview of the main interpretations of the expression, see Emerton 2013, 109-11.

¹⁷ Grottanelli 1998, 215.

¹⁸ Several prescriptions in the legal sections emphasize that the fat of the animal was to be reserved for the deity. Misappropriation is punishable by death. Cf. Lev 3:17; 7:25.

¹⁹ On this point see Brueggemann 2005, 34-35. Expressions describing the growing favor Samuel gained in Yhwh's eyes are in 1Sam 2:11,21,26; 3:19.

²⁰ Campbell 2003, 51-52.

²¹ See Brueggemann 2005, 73. Although the failure of the sons of Samuel is reminiscent of that of the sons of Eli (1 Sam 2:12-17), the outrage of the sons of Samuel is related to the administration of justice and not to the distortion of cult.

²² This issue was recently discussed in Kipfer, Hutton 2021.

²³ Since the studies of Gressmann (1910), several scholars have recognized in the episode of the anointing of Saul in 1Sam 9 patterns and narrative modes analogous to those of the fairy tale. See Edelman 1988, 44-58; Couffignal 1998, 3-20; Auld 2011, 102.

²⁴ On this opening formula see Leuchter 2007.

²⁵ Balzaretto 2020.

and his servant encounter some girls who have come out for water and from whom they ask for information about “the seer” (v. 11). When asked by the two travellers, the girls respond:

¹² There is. There it is in front of you. Hurry now, because today he is coming to town because today there is a sacrifice (זבח) for the people on the high place (¹³ במה) The moment you enter the city, you will find him, before he goes up (על) to the high place to eat (אכל). For he will not eat the people until he comes. He is to bless the sacrifice (זבח), and afterward, the guests may eat. And now go up (עלו) because you will find him immediately.

On close reading, the girls’ language echoes the vocabulary the reader had already encountered in the sacrificial scene at the sanctuary of Shiloh. Just as Elkanah “went up” (על) to sacrifice (זבח) and eat (אכל), so Saul and his servant must “go up” (על) for a sacrifice (זבח) that the guests will eat (אכל). A difference in the two episodes consists in the place where the sacrifice will take place, even though in both cases, it is a sacred place: the first is in a “temple” (היכל), the second in a “high place” (במה), which distinctly indicates a cultic area²⁶.

Having obtained the information requested, the two travellers hurry in the direction indicated where the meeting with Samuel takes place. Through a flashback, the narrator informs the reader that Samuel had been informed by God of Saul’s arrival. The search for the asses is thus placed in a larger context in which God moves the threads of the plot by leading Saul to Samuel²⁷. Thus, thanks to this flashback, the reader knows why Samuel recognizes Saul. On the contrary, Saul does not recognize Samuel and, in an ironic scene, will ask the prophet if he knows the way to the house of the “seer”. After revealing his identity, Samuel uses allusive tones in his response, which are not immediately grasped by Saul but that can be understood by the reader, who possesses a higher degree of knowledge thanks to the flashback. The prophet invites the Benjaminite to participate in a sacrificial meal, using some of the typical vocabulary already encountered up to this point (v. 19):

¹⁹ Samuel answered Saul, “I am the seer. Go ahead (עלה) of me to the high place (במה). Today the two of you will eat (אכל) with me.

What awaits Saul, then, is a communal meal in a sacrificial context officiated by Samuel, a legitimate cultic operator who enjoys Yhwh’s utmost favor.

In the next scene, the reader is transported directly to the entrance of the hall where the banquet will take place (vv. 22-24):

²² And Samuel took Saul and his servant and brought them into the hall (לשכה) and assigned them the place at the head of the guests, who were thirty in number. ²³ And Samuel said to the cook, “Give me the portion (מנה) which I had given you, saying «set it aside»”. ²⁴ And the cook took the thigh with the fat tail/what was on it²⁸, and set it before Saul, and said, “Behold, that which is left is set before you. Eat it (אכל), for it is for this circumstance that it was kept for you, when it was said «I invited the people»”. That day Saul ate (אכל) with Samuel.

The banquet scene is described in several details. First, the banquet is held in a “hall” (לשכה), a term used especially to refer to the interior rooms of the Temple in Jerusalem²⁹. Furthermore, the future king of Israel and the servant – who represents his “house” here – are given a place of honour among the guests³⁰. Besides the place, the portion that Saul receives is also different from others. To the future king is reserved the “thigh with the fat tail”, the best piece par excellence, usually reserved only to Yhwh and his priests³¹. In addition the reference to such a special part of the animal in the context of a shared sacrificial meal is important³². As in the case of Hannah, the special portion becomes a sign of a special destiny connected to divine favour.

After having eaten the meal together with Samuel, Saul is invited to stay for the night on an unspecified rooftop (v. 25), to be discharged the next morning by Samuel, who will tell him the will of God (vv. 26-27).

In addition to textual references, the entire ritual practice around sacrifice in 1Sam 9 occurs following the same dynamic already experienced at Shiloh: both texts describe rituals in a consecrated place; (a) both take place in the context of a public festival; (b) both involve a sacrifice under the supervision of priests, and a (c)

²⁶ Fried, 2002.

²⁷ Fokkelman 1993, 362.

²⁸ The Hebrew text here presents issues. In the consonantal text, we have a form that could mean “that which is above”. As early as the end of the nineteenth century, Skinner (1896) noted the grammatical aporias involved in such a prepositional composition and suggested replacing it with “fat tail”. Rabbinic tradition also discussed the term (see, e.g. *b. Avodah Zarah* 25a:16; *y. Megillah* 17a:1). However, for the purposes of this study, the traditional “what was on it” interpretation is not particularly problematic. Moreover, lexically, the term “fat tail” appears in sacrificial contexts in close connection with the term “thigh”, as in the banquet of 1Sam 9 (cf. Ex. 29:22,27; Lev 8:25-26; 9:19-21). See also Klein 1983, 83.

²⁹ Cf. 1 Chr 9:26; Ezek 40:17,45; 42:1ff; Neh 10:38ff. Once (Jer 36:12), the term refers to the court scribe’s chamber within the royal palace. Following McCarter (1980, 61), the text here would allude to “a room in the temple where sacrificial meals were eaten”.

³⁰ Balzaretto 2020, 139, suggests that the number thirty is related to military symbolism based on the correspondence with King David’s “thirty” (2 Sam 23:13,23,24).

³¹ The tail with its fat is remembered as a part reserved for the deity in several rituals (cf. Lev 3:9; 7:3; 8:25; 9:19). The thigh, on the other hand, is part of the parts reserved for the priests (cf., e.g. Ex 29:22, 27; Lev 7:32; 10:14; Num 6:20; 18:18). Moreover, in the same way, that this portion of the animal must be elevated (רים) to be reserved for Aaron and his sons in the priestly consecration ritual (Ex 29:27), in the same way, the cook preparing the sacrifice for Saul will elevate (רים) the portion specially kept for him (1Sam 9:24)

³² McCarter 1980, 186.

division of meat is highly significant; and both texts (d) involve an overnight stay near the site of the sacrifice by the one who took part in the meal.

5. The King's Last Banquet. Saul and the Necromancer of En Dor

If Saul's career as Israel's first king begins with a sacrificial banquet, another banquet will sanction his tragic end. The narrator sets the stage by providing the reader with three essential elements for understanding the following plot³³. Samuel is now dead; Saul had banished necromancers and diviners from the land (v. 3); a battle against the Philistines is underway (v. 4).

After having tried in vain to consult Yhwh through dreams and prophets (v. 6), Saul – frightened by the advance of the enemies – decides to contravene his own order and, after having disguised himself, to go to the village of En Dor³⁴, a village in the enemy territory³⁵. According to his servants, in that village dwells a necromancer able to evoke Samuel from the world of the dead (v.7). Through the consultation of the prophet, Saul hopes to obtain some solution to his military problems, but the meeting with Samuel, evoked by the witch without any particular problem, will be only the umpteenth confirmation of the inevitable judgment of death on the king of Israel.

The scene and context of the necromancer's ritual are described without much detail. The text informs the reader that Saul and his servants arrived at the woman's house at night (v. 8). While the darkness certainly helped Saul hide from his enemies, the reference to the night, which also returns in v. 20 and v. 25, seems to be no accident. As scholars have shown, the darkness of night seems to be the most appropriate time for a necromantic ritual and the most appropriate backdrop for those living in the realm of the dead³⁶. The story proceeds by getting right to the point. Saul asks the woman to summon a spirit for him (v. 8b). Verse 9 reports, not without irony, the concern of the necromancer who, precisely because of Saul's decree, is afraid to exercise her magic for fear of dying. In the next verse, the irony continues. Saul contravenes a precise imperative of Yhwh, sanctioned also by the apodictic formulations of Leviticus (19:31; 20:6), by swearing in the name of Yhwh that nothing will happen to the woman (v.10).

Saul's words – which the woman has not yet recognized – convince the necromancer to perform the evocation, and, at this point, the king informs the woman that he wishes to contact Samuel (v. 11). The actual ritual is not described at all. The scene describes only the fright of the necromancer who, through Samuel's vision, recognizes Saul (v. 12)³⁷. but, after the king assures himself that the spirit is truly Samuel (v. 14), a dialogue between the two begins. Samuel responds to Saul by confirming his fears: Yhwh has abandoned the king and delivered the kingdom into David's hands (vv. 16-17). Even more terrible, Samuel makes a prophecy of death for Saul and his sons that will occur at the hands of the Philistines (v. 18).

Disconsolate by the prophet's verdict, Saul takes part, albeit unwillingly, in a banquet specially prepared for him by the necromancer (vv. 20-25):

²⁰Instantly, Saul fell to the ground, lying long, filled with terror at Samuel's words. He was without strength because he had eaten nothing all that day and all that night. ²¹ Then the woman approached Saul and, seeing him distraught, said to him, "Behold, your servant has heard your voice. I have put my life in danger to hear the word you have spoken to me. ²² Now you also listen to the voice of your handmaid. I will place a piece of bread (פת לחם) before you. Eat. And you will have energy because you will go your way". ²³ But he refused and said, "I will not eat" (לא אכל). But his servants and the woman compelled him. And he listened to their voice and got up from the ground and sat on the bed (²⁴ מטה). The woman had a lamb of the barn (עגל מרבק) in the house, and she hurried and sacrificed (זבחה) it. Then she took flour and kneaded it and baked him unleavened loaves. ²⁵ She put everything before Saul and his servants. They ate, then got up and left that same night.

The description of the banquet, though very essential but contains several references to the other sacrificial banquet scenes analyzed thus far.

When compared to the proper ritual dynamics and hierarchical partitions of portions in 1Sam 1 and 1Sam 9, the necromancer's banquet is performed in an inverted manner³⁸.

(a) The "ascent" to a sacred place (sanctuary or a cultic area on a high place) is replaced by the home of a practitioner of forbidden magic. Also, the general context is reversed. The public pilgrimage of

³³ Alter 1981, 77.

³⁴ Glock (1968, 128-138) shows how common in ancient Israel was the practice of waiting for positive divination vaticums before going into battle against an enemy army.

³⁵ The exact location of Endor remains uncertain. Most scholars tend to locate the village with the site of Khirbet Safsafeh or with Tell el Ajjul, both located in the plain of Esdraelon in Philistine territory. See Zori, 1952; Edelman 1993

³⁶ Hoffner (1967, 393) showed how several ancestor summoning rituals during the 2nd millennium were performed at night. see also Lewis 1989, 115. Even the biblical text knows the connection between darkness and the realm of the dead. Cf. Job 17:13; Ps 88:13; 143:3.

³⁷ It is not clear how Samuel's vision allows the woman to recognize Saul. See Herzberg 2003, 273

³⁸ Kent (2011, 149-151) offered a comparative general scheme of 1Sam 9:1-10:8 and 1Sam 28.

1Sam 1 and the city festival in 1Sam 9 is contrasted with a private and secret context in 1Sam 28, possible only by the favour of night. (b) The sacrificial offering of a consecrated animal is replaced by a sacrificial banquet prepared by a necromancer. Interesting in this context is the type of meat the necromancer prepares. The necromancer offers Saul the meat of a “lamb of the barn” (עגל מרבק) and unleavened bread³⁹. The term מרבק appears four times in the biblical text⁴⁰, including once in a context that in many ways resembles that of the En Dor banquet. Amos 6:4, in the context of a critique of Samaria’s upper class⁴¹, states, “Those who are lying on beds (מטה) of ivory and reclining on their couches eat the lambs of the lamb (עגל) in the stall (מרבק)”. The distinctive elements evoked by the banquet described by Amos are the same as those of Saul’s meal: the presence of a member of the upper class and the same kind of lamb (עגל מרבק) eaten in both cases on the bed (מטה).⁴² Moreover, the presence of the term מרזה (hapax legomenon in the Hebrew Bible) in Amos 6:7 has led scholars to argue that Amos denounces a specific type of ritual banquet related to death and the worship of deities other than Yhwh⁴³. The preparation of the necromancer, therefore, constitutes a banquet with desecrating overtones and narrative references to the most profanatory in the eyes of the divinity. (c) Unlike other banquets, the meat division takes place without considering the parts due to the divinity and the hierarchical division among the participants. Given the absence of a hierarchy of portions, the king of Israel eats the same portion as his servants. He is no longer the king. The absence of a special portion points to the absence of divine favour⁴⁴. The distance experienced by the now dethroned king from divinity is also sanctioned by his refusal to eat (v. 23), which recalls Hannah’s refusal in 1Sam 1:7. This time, however, unlike for Elkanah’s wife, there are no special portions for the king to sanction his favourable fate. (d) Finally, there is no overnight stay, but everything takes place on the same night of the sacrifice. Through this last clarification, the narrator constructs a ritual practice overturned from beginning to end when compared to the correct one experienced in 1Sam 1 and 1Sam 9.

Subversion of proper ritual is considered unforgivable by the deity and refers the reader to the desecrating practice of the sons of Eli. When the necromancer offers Saul “a piece of bread” (פת להם), there is a reference to the prophetic denunciation in 1Sam 2:36 where the man of God declares that Eli’s house will be begging for “a piece of bread” (פת להם). Note that the very presence of a “man of God” creates a connection between the sons of Eli and Saul. Just as a “man of God” (איש אלהים) predicts the death of Eli’s sons (1Sam 2,27), that of being a “man of God” is the first characteristic that the text proposes of Samuel (cf. 1Sam 9,6). As in the case of Eli’s sons, the words of the man of God are fulfilled in both cases by the death of the unfortunates at the hands of the Philistines (cf. 1Sam 4:11 and 1Sam 31:4).

6. Conclusion

The first book of Samuel narratively constructs a coherent system of sacrifices. On the one hand, proper ritual practice can distribute authority and prestige to those favoured in the ritual by the hierarchy of divisions (1Sam 1 and 1Sam 9). On the other hand, impropriety in ritual actions is understood as irreparable in the eyes of the deity and thus leads to a certain end (1Sam 2 and 1Sam 28). This system, present in the narrative dynamics of the tales, is constructed with intertextual references between the tales that, by presenting common contexts, guide the reader in his or her evaluation and justify the outcomes of the plot. The Banquets of Saul shows how the fate of Israel’s first king is tied to the results of his correct approach to the ritual sphere. When the correct practice is respected, the connection with the divine generates favourable outcomes. On the contrary, the subversion of this dynamic interrupts the relationship with the sacred and triggers nefarious outcomes. The first book of Samuel links the fate of the monarchy, inaugurated with a sacrifice, by the ability of the kings to maintain a correct behaviour towards God and the sacred practice. On the contrary, as Eli reminds his sons in 1 Sam 2:25, in case of error, there will be no one capable of interceding.

³⁹ Bodner (2009, 303) considers this meal a “pale parody of a Passover celebration”.

⁴⁰ In addition to 1Sam 28:24, מרבק also appears in Jer 46:21; Am 6:4; Mal 4:2.

⁴¹ Dijkstra 2014, 178.

⁴² For a detailed discussion of מרזה in Amos and abundant critical bibliography, I refer to McLaughlin 2001, 94-107.

⁴³ See Eidevall 2017, 173-174. The rites and rituals that were practiced during חורם were either funerary, aimed at commemorating the dead, or rituals associated with living people. In any case, the banquet was associated with syncretistic practices and, in the environment of the ancient Levant, was connected with the worship of various deities. For a recent discussion and bibliography, see Dvorjetski 2016. The ritual aspect of the חורם in Am 6:7 is also highlighted in McLaughlin 2001, 101.

⁴⁴ Catastini (2015, 141-143) points out that the tale contains several narrative elements that emphasize how Saul no longer has the necessary royal legitimacy.

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