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Power, Authority, Politics: Forget Machiavelli, it's all in the Book of Samuel...!

Abstract:

Any educated woman or man would be familiar with the name Machiavelli and we see quite commonly the use of the term Machiavellian – usually in a pejorative sense. But, I suspect, that his most famous book (not the best) *The Prince* has actually been read by few. Perhaps even fewer have read the book(s) of Samuel (cover to cover...?) and those who have read it most likely paid attention to its spiritual messages and are enamored with the figure of David so central in and to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Few will have read it as a fundamental text to understand politics.

But Holmes and Halbertal, from whom I take inspiration, were right on target in characterizing the Book of Samuel as *The Beginning of Politics*. (Princeton University Press, 2019). I owe them a huge debt of gratitude. However, the somewhat iconoclastic ideas I shall present today should not be attributed to them. To them I owe a reading of Samuel as politics, but the lessons I draw are somewhat and at times quite different.

Machiavelli's *The Prince* is in some measure a Manual for holding power. A "how to do it". Its realism can be shocking (though as we shall see not as shocking as Samuel) and it is at best amoral and at worst outright immoral. No surprise the Catholic Church hated it when it was published and possibly till this day. This is one huge difference from Samuel which whilst showing some of the ugliest features of Power does not shy away from passing severe moral judgment.

But there are other and no less significant differences between the two texts.

First, Samuel, to my taste the supreme literary achievement in the Narrative (story telling) parts of the so called Old Testament, is not overtly about politics. But precisely because it is embedded in a story of Power and Politics (and not instructions for a hypothetical Prince with a few examples from here and there) plumbs deeper into the human condition of individuals ensnared (!) by power and collectivities enamored perhaps not with power but with the powerful. It is Politics as Lived that gives the text its profundity unmatched – I dare to say – by Machiavelli. In the towering, complex and at time contradictory figure of King David – spiritually sublime but capable of unspeakable evil – we have not a hypothetical but a real “Prince” struggling to combat enemies from without and within (within his people and his soul). The temptations of power, money, honor, and sexual lust were not invented today. And of course, all of this intertwined with the evergreen complexities of deciding what is for Caesar and what is for God.

Second its breadth is impressive and far exceeds that of Machiavelli. As we shall see it starts with Nation building – with insights which are surprisingly contemporary. It continues with ascent to power and regime transition and it is unequalled in plumbing the dangers and even corrupting effects of power – no less contemporary(!) When it comes to ascent and consolidation The King (David) can give a lesson or two to The Prince. That being so, The Prince is a Manual of Instructions. Samuel is primarily a sober and dark reflection about power.

Finally, if this lecture prompts you to read or re-read The Prince, you will be struck by its boldness and oftentimes profundity. But to my taste it is somewhat dated even at times stale. Samuel like other great narrative classics (think Medea) is fresh. It could have been written yesterday.

Reading Samuel as Politics requires some hard stomachs. In particular some may be shocked by this side of David. But it is worth remembering: One of the distinguishing features of the Old Testament is that practically all its principal protagonists from Eve and Adam, through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and even Moses are flawed human

beings and the Hebrew Bible does not shy away from showing such, warts and all. But in Samuel we also have one exquisite spiritual message, that all are capable of redemption and in this respect we cannot and should not topple David from his throne.