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THE SINS OF KINGS SAUL AND DAVID IN THE CONTEXT OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN HAMARTIOLOGY

SUMMARY

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Contents

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Keywords: sin, king, ancient Near East, Israel, Saul, David, repentance, psalm

Summary:

The elders of Israel asked for a king "like other nations" (1 *Samuel* 8: 5) to become "like other nations" (1 *Samuel 8:20*), and God gave them Saul, whose name means "The requested one". In this context, we may wonder what the other peoples of the ancient Near East were like and how they viewed the major themes that pervade the biblical narratives of Israel's first two kings: monarchy, the relationship between gods and king, the relationship between sin and its consequences. We have a lot of materials from the ancient Near East[1], such as royal inscriptions, chronographic texts, historical-literary texts, carved in stone or inscribed on clay tablets, which can shed more light on the historical literature of the Old Testament.

The structural analysis of books 1 and 2 Samuel reveals a structure, in which the sins of kings Saul and David are arranged symmetrically in the narrative architecture. Saul's sins (1 *Samuel* 1:15) occupies a central place in 1 Samuel, dividing the life of this character in a rising period and a decay culminating in suicide. Similarly, David's sins (2 *Samuel* 11-12) at the core of the book 2 Samuel, are dividing his life in a time of rising and a time of suffering the consequences of his sin. The narrative of the succession to the throne, the hypothesis of L. Rost[2] is rather a narrative of sin and its consequences in David's life, which corresponds to the narrative of sin and its consequences in Saul's life.[3] Although David's sins (adultery and murder) seem as serious or even more serious than Saul's sins (disobedience to the word of the prophet), yet David is forgiven by God, while Saul and his descendants are removed from the

[1] James B. PRITCHARD (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1969; Martti NISSINEN, *Prophets and prophecy in the ancient Near East*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2003; Benjamin R. FOSTER, *Before de Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, CDL Press, Maryland, 2005; *Gândirea asiro-babiloniană în texte*, studiu introductiv de Constantin DANIEL, trad. Athanase NEGOIȚĂ, Ed. Ştiinţifică, Bucureşti, 1975; *Gândirea feniciană în texte,* studiu introductiv de Constantin DANIEL, trad. Athanase NEGOIȚĂ, Ed. Ştiinţifică, Bucureşti, 1975; *Gândirea egipteană antică în texte*, trad. Constantin DANIEL, Ed. Ştiinţifică, Bucureşti, 1974.

[2] Leonhard ROST, *The Succession to the Throne of David*, Almond, Sheffield, 1982.

[3] Peter J. LEITHART, *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1&2 Samuel*, Canon Press, Moscow, 2003, p. 31.

throne. In this paper we try to find why God rejected King Saul and forgave King David, although David's sins seem more serious in the eyes of contemporary readers.[4]

Other questions from which this paper starts have also received contradictory or unclear answers in the literature. Why are famine and epidemics considered punishments against the people because of the sins of kings? Why are the sins of the two kings, set in the context of extremely bloody wars, considered such serious sins, but the wars themselves, which could easily be categorized as genocide, are not incriminated in any way by biblical authors? Where does the language of violence in many pages of the Old Testament come from?[5] Religious fundamentalists abuse the language of violence in sacred texts, using it in the current political struggle. For example, some political and military leaders of the Israeli settlers see in Palestinians incarnations of the Amalekites with whom King Saul waged a war of extermination.[6] It is important to look at these reasons in their historical context, in order to limit their applicability.

We believe that answers to such difficult problems can only be found through a cultural-historical commentary on the biblical text, using a comparative methodology, rather than a strictly exegetical approach. The comparative approach attempted in this paper highlights the explicit and implicit controversy of monotheistic biblical authors with the polytheistic and pantheistic religions of the ancient Near East.

Although the exegetical works of the biblical texts discussed here abound in foreign literature[7] and Romanian[8], such a comparative approach to these texts in the context of the

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[4] David M. GUNN, *The Fate of King Saul*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1980.

[5] Jan ASSMANN, *Monoteismul și limbajul violenței*, trad. M.-M. Anghelescu, Editura Tact, Cluj-Napoca, 2012.

[6] Jeffrey GOLDBERG, *Among the settlers: Will they destroy Israel*, The New Yorker, 24 mai 2004, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/31/among-the-settlers

[7] Robert B. CHISHOLM, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2013; Paul BORGMAN, *David, Saul, and God: Rediscovering an Ancient Story*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008; ZIMRAN, Yicsa, „The Lord Has Rejected You as King Over Israel": Saul's Deposal from the Throne, *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, vol. 14, 2014; GARSIEL, Moshe, "The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach", în: *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 1993.

[8] Alexandru ISVORANU, „Samuel și începuturile regalității la poporul evreu," în: *BCD* 5, 2005; Alexandru MIHĂILĂ, „The Holy War Ideology as an Agent for Self-Identity in the So-Called Deuteronomistic History: The Case of 1 Sam 15," în: *ST* 2 (2011), pp. 7-17; Alexandru MIHĂILĂ „Principiul teocratic. Câteva analize ale 1 Rg 8-11", în: *AFTOUB V* (2005), pp. 115 -147; Alexandru MIHĂILĂ, „Recensământul păcătos? Despre 2 Regi 24:1", în: *Ziarul Lumina*, 31 octombrie 2011; Stelian PAȘCA-TUȘA, „S-a căit David înaintea poporului pentru desfrânare și omucidere?" în: *CB* 2 (2009), pp. 42-61.

ancient Near Eastern hamartiology is less common in the international literature[9] and is missing in Romanian theology.

In recent decades, literary criticism has led to the highlighting of the literary structures and themes of biblical texts in their canonical form. Literary criticism starts from the premise that the significance of the final form of a biblical text does not depend only on the analysis and retrieval of alleged sources and previous editions. The long process by which the current text was compiled cannot be reconstructed, except in the form of hypotheses that are difficult to verify. The analysis of the text will begin with the whole rather than the parts. Authors such as David A. Dorsey[10], Robert Alter[11], Moshe Garsiel[12], JP Fokkelman[13], Peter J. Leithardt[14] showed the structural unity of the first two books of Samuel (Samuel) and how this symmetrical structure highlights certain theological ideas.

Two main representatives of traditional biblical research who have adopted aspects of the literary approach in solving the mystery of the characters Saul and David are David Gunn and Walter Brueggemann. Reading the text as a unitary literary creation, Gunn finds that God's jealousy made Saul a pawn of destiny, a doomed king, while, on the other hand, an arbitrary and inexplicable divine favouritism makes David a lucky man. For his part, Brueggemann finds David's character so contradictory that it makes God seem incomprehensible in his choices.[15] Gunn believes that Yahweh favours David and persecutes Saul. In Gunn's view, Saul is the victim of Yahweh's resentment, resentment aroused by the insult of choosing a human king. All this, of course, puts God in a very bad light. If we are to condemn Saul for his jealous

[9] J. H. WALTON, V. H. MATTHEWS, M. W. CHAVALAS, *Comentariu cultural-istoric al Vechiului Testament*, trad. Silviu Tatu, Luca Creţan, Romana Cuculea, Casa Cărţii, Oradea, 2014; John H. WALTON, J. Harvey WALTON, *The Lost World of The Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanite*s, InterVarsity Press, Illinois; J.H. PRICE, *Chastised Rulers in the Ancient Near East*, The Ohio State University, 2015; Edward R. DALGLISH, *Psalm Fifty-One in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Patternism*, Brill, Leiden, 1962.

[10] David A. DORSEY, *The literary structure of the Old Testament: A commentary on Genesis – Malachi*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2004.

[11] Robert ALTER, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, Norton & Company, New York, 1999.

[12] Moshe GARSIEL, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels*, Revivim, Ramat-Gan, 1985.

[13] J.P. FOKKELMAN, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, 4 vol.*, Van Gorcum, Assen, 1981.

[14] Peter J. LEITHART, *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1&2 Samuel*, Canon Press, Moscow, 2003.

[15] Walter BRUEGGEMANN, *David's Truth: In Israel's Imagination and Memory*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1985, pp. 41-43.

persecution of David, Gunn asks, how much more is Yahweh to be condemned for his jealous persecution of Saul![16] Gunn seems to suggest the image of a God capricious: "The thematic statement is plain. Good and evil come from God. He makes smooth the path of some; the path of others he strews with obstacles. He has his favourites; he has his victims. The reasons, if reasons exist, lie hidden in the obscurity of God's own being. Saul is one of God's victims."[17]

A closer analysis of the 1-2 Samuel structure will lead us to other conclusions. Saul and David are mirrored by the narrative architecture chosen by the biblical author precisely to highlight the contrast between the attitudes of the two kings in the face of sin: Saul apologizes, David repents. This subtle difference explains their different destinies.

The literary critic Robert Polzin finds in the text a negative image of King David, a character explicitly condemned, implicitly and consistently by the writer. That would be a rhetorical tour de force if Polzin's right, form the text resulting the image of a king so often tyrannical - an example to Israel about the negative consequences of the monarchy.[18] Polzin suggests a final writer who insists on a subtle but consistent undermining of King David 's positive image in order to remove exiled Israel from centuries-old glorification.

Yair Zakovitch has called attention to mirror-image stories—instances in which one story reflects another, often with some type of reversal which is a technique of characterization for a character in a structurally or thematically similar story.[19] The new literary exegesis appeals to the comparison of characters, narrative structures and specific terms. We believe that the intention of the author 1-2 Kings is to compare kings Saul and David by the way he structured the narrative material, in order to highlight certain essential similarities and differences. We also believe that these similarities and differences will be better highlighted by the framing of the sins of the two kings in the context of the ancient Near East.

Many texts from the ancient Near East have retained the deeds, conquests, and greatness of kings. Several genres, such as hymns, epic poems, narratives and letters, pay tribute to these ancient rulers and relatively them their gods. In general, the writing of most of these texts, at least in Mesopotamia, took place under the guidance of the royal court. For this reason, Mesopotamian kings are rarely criticized. In fact, the involvement of the royal court in

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[16] David M. GUNN, *The Fate of King Saul*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1980, p. 128

[17] David M. GUNN, *The Fate of King Saul*, pp. 110–111

[18] Robert POLZIN, *David and the Deuteronomist Part Three: 2 Samuel*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1993, pp. 55–56.

[19] Yair ZAKOVITCH, „Mirror-Image Story – An Additional Criterion for the Evaluation of Characters in Biblical Narrative", în: *Tarbiz* 54, n. 2, 1985, pp. 165–76.

the production of literature is certainly a major factor that differentiates Mesopotamian literature from biblical literature. The writers responsible for the Hebrew Bible had no problem criticizing its kings, because they did not necessarily write under the supervision of the royal court. However, even the texts produced by the royal court could criticize the king, as can be seen in the example of the plague deliverance of the Hittite king Mursilis.[20]

The ancients believed that kings held a position that gave their actions great importance to the gods. For this reason, various disasters and misfortunes have been attributed to the sins of some kings. These leaders, identified as sources of disaster, belong to the concept of *Unheilsherrscher*[21]. Güterbock (1934) identified the literary character of the *Unheilsherrscher* type in his study of Babylonian and Hittite historical-literary texts. In particular, he labeled Naram Sin as the model of a chastised ruler.[22] Evans took Güterbock's observations in a comparative analysis of Jeroboam and Naram Sin.[23] In 1994, Arnold wrote about the Weidner Chronicle, partly in response to Evans and partly in response to the newly discovered parts of that text.[24] Although not the focus of their study, Tadmor, Landsberger and Parpola examines the relationship between Sargon, Sennacherib and Esarhaddon in analyzing text about the sin of Sargon, making several critical remarks.[25] First, Sargon's death on the battlefield, along with the lack of a proper burial, would have led the Assyrians to believe that it was Sargon's sin that led to his unhappy end. Sargon's sin is supposed to be consistent with that of Naram Sin: not consulting the prophet before battle. This aspect is reminiscent of the sins of King Saul, who does not exactly follow the prophetic instructions received from Samuel. In 2015, JH Price undertook extensive research on chastised rulers in the ancient Near

[20] J. B. PRITCHARD (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, pp. 394-396.

[21] J.H. PRICE, *Chastised Rulers in the Ancient Near East*, The Ohio State University, Ohio, 2015, p. 13.

[22] Hans Gustav GÜTERBOCK, „Die historische Tradition und ihre literarische Gestaltung bei Babyloniern und Hethitern bis 1200 (Erster Teil: Babylonier)", în: *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 1934, pp. 1–91.

[23] Carl EVANS, „Naram-Sin and Jeroboam: The Archetypal Unheilsherrscher in Mesopotamian and Biblical Historiography", în: *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. William Hallo, James Moyer, and Leo Perdue, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 1983, pp. 97–125.

[24] Bill T. ARNOLD, „The Weidner Chronicle and the Idea of History in Israel and Mesopotamia", în: *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard, James Hoffmeier, David Baker, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 1994, pp. 129–148.

[25] Hayim TADMOR, Benno LANDSBERGER, Simo PARPOLA, „The Sin of Sargon and Sennacherib's Last Will", în: *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* III (1), 1989, pp. 3–51.

East and Israel.[26] Probably the most informative syntheses about the hamartiology of the ancient Near East belong to the French historian Jean Bottéro.[27]

The first part of the paper includes two chapters, in which the two main themes of the thesis are analyzed from a comparative perspective: monarchy and sin. In the first chapter (1.1.1), we write a brief history of the monarchy in the ancient Near East and Egypt, focusing especially on some civilizations of great cultural and religious significance: Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian. The complex relations between gods and kings are analyzed in this chapter, as well as how religion is used propagandistically to legitimize political and military power. In 1.1.2, we will focus on the internal and external causes that led to the establishment of the monarchy in Israel and on the first two kings, Saul and David, who are thus framed in the broader historical context (1.1.2.1 and 1.1.2.2).

The second chapter (1.2) deals with the theme of sin in two subchapters that correspond to the comparative approach of this paper: sin in the ancient Near East (1.2.1) and sin in Israel (1.2.2). Any sin is first and foremost a mistake made against the god or gods. The people of that time represented their gods as the source and guarantee of all the rules of conduct imposed on humans. Whatever they were, they were of equal importance, not from the seriousness of the consequences of social life, but from their value as expressions of the divine will.[28] Starting from this common cultural background, we will better observe the main differences between the Mesopotamian and Israelite views on the issue of sin. The similarities and differences between the two cultural and religious visions will be highlighted throughout this paper.

In the second part of the paper, the sins of the first two kings of Israel will be mirrored, placing their deeds in the broader context of the ancient Near East. The structural analysis of books 1 and 2 Samuel, undertaken in chapter 2.1, reveals a chiastic structure, in which the sins of kings Saul and David are arranged symmetrically in the narrative architecture.

The sins of King Saul in 1 Samuel 13 and 1 Samuel 15 are discussed in Chapter 2.2. Chapter 2.3 analyzes the sins of King David: adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah (2 Samuel 11-12). The approach is more comparative and cultural-historical

[26] J.H. PRICE, *Chastised Rulers in the Ancient Near East*, The Ohio State University, Ohio, 2015.

[27] J. BOTTÉRO, *Iniţiere în Orientul Antic: de la Sumer la Biblie*, trad. M. Stan, Ed. Corint, Bucureşti, 2012.

[28] J. BOTTÉRO, *Iniţiere în Orientul Antic: de la Sumer la Biblie*, trad. M. Stan, Ed. Corint, Bucureşti, 2012, p. 257.

than exegetical, with the particular aim of framing biblical facts in a broader historical context and finding parallels in the texts of the ancient Near East that speak of the sins of other kings.

Chapter 2.4 will be devoted to a comparison between Psalm 50 and other Mesopotamian prayers of repentance. The reading of Psalm 50 in the broader context of penitential prayers in the ancient Near East highlights both the common cultural background, visible especially at the structural and thematic level, and the differences by which the biblical author argues with a certain polytheistic religious vision. From his analysis of Mesopotamian prayers of repentance, Edward R. Dalglish extracted some defining characteristics for this type of literature: the sin committed is not known; there is a consciousness of sin in general; it is admitted that divine punishment is deserved; the sin was committed unconsciously, so it is not known exactly what sin the punished man is for; it is not clear which god was offended; all mankind is sinful, so the case of the penitent must not be treated as unique.[29] These psalms were spoken especially in times of sickness, considered a punishment for sin. No one knew for sure what sin he had committed and what god he had upset. David confesses that he knows his sin: "I know my iniquity, and my sin is before me forever" (*Ps* 50: 4), which is a big difference from the repeated confession in the *Invocation to any god*: "The sins that I have I committed I don't know them"[30]. This ignorance of one's own sins is rather reminiscent of Saul, who also proves to be a king "as in other nations" (1 Samuel *8:* 5), as required by the elders of the people.

Chapter 2.5 will examine two other sins of kings Saul and David and their consequences in the lives of the people, looking for parallels in ancient Near Eastern literature that shed light on the biblical text. The last four chapters of the second book of Samuel (2 *R* 21-24) is a conclusion books about the first two kings of Israel. These biblical texts also have a chiastic structure, in which the sins of Saul (2 *Samuel* 21: 1-14) and David (2 *Samuel* 24: 1-25) are arranged symmetrically around a poetic center.[31]

In the last part of the paper, three meanings of the biblical texts approached will be decanted: the polemical meaning, the political meaning and the poetic meaning. In chapter 3.1 will be analyzed three polemical meanings of the history of the two kings. Even if they take on classical Mesopotamian themes, the biblical authors argue with the dominant

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[29] Edward R. DALGLISH, *Psalm Fifty-One in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Patternism*, Brill, Leiden, 1962, pp. 26-27.

[30] *Gândirea asiro-babiloniană în texte*, studiu introductiv de C. DANIEL, trad. A. NEGOIȚĂ , pp. 214-217.

[31] Peter J. LEITHART, *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1&2 Samuel,* Canon Press, Moscow, 2003, p. 187. David A. DORSEY, *The literary structure of the Old Testament: A commentary on Genesis – Malachi*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2004, p. 135.

religious vision in the ancient Near East, desecrating the cosmos, the institution of royalty, and Mesopotamian magical ritualism. Chapter 3.2 will contain a synthesis of the perspective of anarchism on 1 Samuel 8 and on the state in general. Although it is a less known political doctrine, anarchism makes us look at the biblical text from a new perspective, which raises many questions relevant to modern times. In chapter 3.3, starting from the arrangement of the poetic texts in the narrative architecture of 1-2 Samuel, we discover that the poetic discourse has an eschatological content, with strong messianic notes.[32], as Father Ioan Chirilă observed in connection with other poetic discourses inserted in the narratives of the Old Testament. At this point the modern structural analysis of the biblical text meets with the spiritual interpretation of Scripture, specific to the Orthodox Church.

In the ancient Near East, it was believed that royalty came down from heaven. The kings thus justified their position in front of their subjects by myths that stated that the social order has its roots in eternal principles of justice, dictated by the gods.[33] People were not considered equal before the law, but were divided into highly differentiated social classes. The king and the priesthood had a social position that clearly separated them from the people. In Babylonian society there were three classes of people: completely free, half free and slaves.

Among the Semitic peoples, the king was not considered a god, as in the case of Pharaonic Egypt, but a representative of the gods who did their will. The whole activity of the king was inspired by the gods: the interpretation of predictions, the consultation of oracles was rather imposed on the king, for any violation of the divine will could be fatal.[34]

The wars of the kings of the ancient Near East were seen as a continuation of the struggle between order and chaos in cosmology.[35] The king's military activities were considered part of a cosmic battle against chaos. Military violence was not only morally tolerable, but even a moral imperative for the king[36]. This ethical vision is also found in the case of Israel. In David's hymn of thanksgiving for delivering from his enemies (2 *Samuel* 22), God descends to bring order to chaos (scatter the clouds, part the waters to reveal

[32] Ioan CHIRILĂ, „Structura literar eshatologică a Vechiului Testament. Analiza macrostructurală", în *Studia Universitatis „Babeș-Bolyai" - Theologia Orthodoxa,* nr. 2/2010, p. 11.

[33] Yuval Noah HARARI, *Sapiens. Scurtă istorie a omenirii,* trad. Adrian Șerban, Polirom, Iași, 2017, p.137.

[34] S. MOSCATI, *Vechi imperii ale orientului*, p. 9.

[35] The god Marduk conquers the primordial waters, represented by the goddess Tiamat, as the poem Enuma Eliș shows us.

[36] Carly L. CROUCH, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East,* Walter de Gruyter, New York, 2009, p. 194.

the foundations of the world) and help the king defeat his enemies. From this perspective, cosmic and military actions are part of the same program of fighting chaos and establishing order. Of course, that religious phraseology trying to justify wars in the name of divine only legitimize very material concerns.[37] A modern parallel would be the way in which American foreign policy legitimizes wars by the idea that God uses the United States to promote freedom in the world.[38] According to US propaganda, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq was the last step in the providential march of freedom.[39]

In Israel, the monarchy is viewed differently than in the case of other neighbouring peoples. The king does not belong to the realm of the divine. The only text in the Pentateuch that regulated the monarchy in Israel is found in *Deuteronomy* 17: 14-20, and it does not prescribe the debts of the subjects to the king, but the debts of the king to God. Obviously, the author's view of royalty is negative (1 *Samuel* 8: 11-18), the monarchy being equivalent to compulsory military service, royal taxes, and unanswered demands. The request of a king is tantamount to rejecting God (1 *Samuel* 8: 6-9), the true king of Israel.

The world of the Mesopotamian gods was conceived and organized according to the model of the monarchical power that ruled at that time. The people of that time represented their gods as the source of all the rules of conduct imposed on humans. Whatever they were, they were of equal importance, not in the gravity of the consequences of social life, but in their value as expressions of the divine will. Those who, in violation of them, rebelled against the gods, opposed or disregarded them, were to be punished by those gods, just as monarchical power sanctioned those who did not respect the rules of common life. Diseases and misfortunes that appeared in one's life were considered punishments sent by the gods to punish sins committed against them. In such a representation of sin and its punishment, one did not start *a priori,* from the mistake itself, but *a posteriori,* from the illness and misfortune that occurred, interpreted as a punishment sent by the gods, considering that they must have had a reason, that is, a sin that the person must have committed.[40] It was not known exactly what sin he had committed, so long lists of sins were read, thus increasing the chances of the person

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[37] Jean DESHAYES, *Civilizaţiile vechiului Orient*, vol. 1, trad. C. Tănăsescu, Ed. Meridiane, Bucureşti, 1976, p. 156.

[38] David FOGLESONG, *The American Mission and the 'Evil Empire': The Crusade for a 'Free Russia' since 1881*, CUP, 2007; William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-60*, CUP, 2009.

[39] About using the Exodus as war propaganda: Bruce FEILER, *America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story*, William Morrow, 2009.

[40] J. BOTTÉRO, *Iniţiere în Orientul Antic: de la Sumer la Biblie*, p. 258.

affected by the misfortune referring to the sin committed and acknowledging it. No one knew for sure what sin he had committed and what god he had upset.

In this context, the God of Israel is an exception saving. God makes a covenant with His people, Israel, a covenant that has the structure of a vassal treaty of the ancient Near East. In this Treaty, God clearly expresses his will, stating laws that the Israelites must observe that he might provide and guarantee their possession on p education promised. Unlike the Mesopotamians, who did not know which god was wrong and what angered him, the Israelites knew very well that they sinned only against Yahweh by breaking the covenant with Him. If the Mesopotamians thought of sin only when they were struck by tribulation, interpreted as a divine punishment, the Israelites had a much clearer conscience of sin. If they did not keep one of the divine commandments, they could anticipate the punishment that would follow.

In this paper we have compared the attitudes of the two kings to the sins revealed by the two prophets, Samuel and Nathan. The two kings put in front of their own sins show two opposite attitudes: Saul exonerates himself, David repents.

Saul justifies himself, blaming the people, just as Adam blamed the woman, and the woman blamed the serpent (*Genesis* 3: 10-13). The first king of Israel repeats the mistakes of the first people: he does not listen to the word of God, he does not repent and he blames others. With the help of the parable, the prophet Nathan succeeded in making David change his perspective on his deeds by seeing them for a moment through the eyes of the Lord. The fact that he sincerely confesses his sins, without trying to exonerate himself or accuse anyone else, distinguishes David from Saul (1 *Samuel* 13: 11-12; 1 *Samuel* 15: 13-25). This sincere confession, the depth of which is especially evident in *Ps* 50, attracts the immediate forgiveness of the Lord. However, the consequences of sin will be extremely severe.

The story of Israel's first two kings, who are mirrored by the chiastic structure of the biblical text of 1-2 Samuel, is above all a story of kingship failure.[41] This negative outlook is reflected in the biblical authors' tendency to criticize the Israelite kings. In the Deuteronomistic History, 32 kings of Israel and 40 kings of Judah are said to have committed ugly deeds before the eyes of the Lord.[42] The biblical authors explain Israel's victories and defeats as the result of fidelity and infidelity to Yahweh, respectively. The destruction of the kingdom of Israel by the

[41] David A. DORSEY, *The literary structure of the Old Testament: A commentary on Genesis – Malachi*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2004, p. 135.

[42] J.H. PRICE, *Chastised Rulers in the Ancient Near East*, The Ohio State University, 2015, p. 154.

Assyrians (721 BC) and the kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians (586 BC) is Yahweh's punishment for covenant infidelity.

Biblical authors have criticized their kings to an unprecedented extent in ancient Near Eastern literature. Sinful and godly kings, criticized in Mesopotamia, were especially kings belonging to conquered peoples. It was the propagandistic perspective of the conqueror on the defeated, which he could say was abandoned by the gods because of his many sins. Biblical authors have criticized even the most important kings, such as David. King David's punishment for adultery is a unique case in the literature of the ancient Near East. Another unique fact is that the king's punishment is changed as a result of confessing sins. Unlike the Mesopotamian exorcist liturgies, those endless lists of sins whose recitation had a magical character, King David's confession is of a shocking simplicity: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel *12:12*).

Neither ritual nor sacrifice brings reconciliation with God (*Ps* 50: 17-18). This was understood by David and not by Saul (1 *Samuel* 15: 22-23). And in the case of the sin of counting the people, the Lord has mercy on the people and stops the plague before receiving the sacrifice. This is a fact that stands out in the religious context of the ancient Near East, where the wrath of the god subsided only after receiving the sacrifice.

In the ancient Near East, the instructions given by the king to perform a certain military activity usually included ritual procedures. The deity was supposed to urge military action for her temple to benefit from the prey to be taken, so it was difficult to distinguish between obedience and sacrifice. Obedience, in most cases, would have resulted in sacrifices to the divinity. It is easy to see why Saul confused obedience with sacrifice.[43] The emphasis here shifts from the outward sacrifice to the inward sacrifice of the will in the act of submission. This principle contradicts the religious view typical of the Ancient Near East, in which man's purpose was to provide food to the gods through sacrifices. In return for these sacrifices, the gods provided protection for the people. In the covenant-based biblical model, people served God, but He did not need that service. God only wanted to keep the Covenant. Saul's actions suggest that he is still thinking in a foreign religious setting dominated by magic. In this sense, Saul is a king "as in all other nations" (1 *Samuel* 8: 5), as the elders of Israel demanded.

Finally, we can answer the question from which this work started: why did God reject King Saul and forgive King David? In the light of what we have researched, we can answer

[43] J. H. WALTON, V. H. MATTHEWS, M. W. CHAVALAS, *Comentariu cultural-istoric al Vechiului Testament*, p. 327.

that Saul is rejected because he represents the religious vision of the peoples of the ancient Near East, while David is forgiven because he represents the theological vision of Israel. The two kings are paralleled by the schist structure of 1-2 Samuel, precisely to emphasize the controversy of Israeli theologians with the religious vision of other peoples. Even monarchs are seen as a foreign institution or the essential genius and nature of Israel, as it appears from 1 Samuel 8.

The comparative approach attempted in this paper highlights the explicit and implicit controversy of biblical authors with the religions of the ancient Near East. Even if they take on classical Mesopotamian themes, the biblical authors use these themes in a polemical way to desecrate the cosmos, royalty, and magical ritualism, and to promote the monotheism that clearly distinguishes between the transcendent God and the world.

The comparative work undertaken here is not exhaustive, being limited precisely by the vastness of the literature belonging to the ancient Near East. A better study of this literature could shed light on certain more obscure biblical texts by placing them in the broader historical context. As a new direction of research, at least for the Romanian theological space, this comparative method could be applied to several essential texts of the Old Testament.

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