

John Woodhouse, 1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader. Preaching the Word series. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008)

Old Testament narrative presents Christian interpreters and preachers with unique opportunities and challenges, particularly those who want to be *Christian* in their use of the OT. John Woodhouse's new commentary on 1 Samuel aims to address these issues, with people in Christian ministry (especially preachers) in mind.

For Woodhouse, 1 Samuel is a book about leadership, and this theme governs his understanding of the book, both in terms of its structure and its details. Accordingly, his commentary falls into three parts: (1) Samuel: The Leader God Provided, covering Chapters 1–7; (2) Saul: The Leader the People Asked for, covering Chapters 8–15; (3) David: The Leader “According to God’s Own Heart”, covering Chapters 16–31. So too, many of the points of ‘application’ relate to questions of leadership. This is not, however, his only concern, as is particularly evident in his consistently Christocentric approach to the text (more on this shortly).

The book opens with a general orientation to his method, in which he identifies three primary convictions: ‘*the richness of the Bible’s message is heard when attention is given to the particular details of the text under consideration*’; ‘*the key to understanding the significance of any text of the Bible lies in seeing the text in question in its context*’, and; ‘*the proper purpose of Biblical exposition is not simply to find relevant lessons for life from the texts before us but to proclaim Christ*’ (13–14, italics in original). He goes on to say ‘Each of these expositions therefore aims to show, by attention to detail and attention to context, how these Scriptures point us to our Lord Jesus Christ and the truth and grace that are to be found in him.’ (14) While I agree with the sentiment of the last, I have serious reservations about the way this cashes out in Woodhouse’s expository practice. But again, more on that later.

Having established his basic orientation, he moves straight to exposition of 1 Samuel 1. There is no focused discussion of matters of ‘introduction’, a puzzling omission in my view (and one nowhere justified in the commentary). Now, any decent commentary will orient readers to questions of date and authorship and (I would say more importantly) historical, cultural and canonical context, so perhaps he expects readers to look elsewhere for these matters. Nonetheless, those historical and contextual issues are precisely what shape the message and purpose of the book. So some discussion of them would be useful to help preachers ‘frame’ their theological and ethical reflections on the texts. He does a little of that (about 1 page worth) in his opening section and on a few occasions through the commentary; but something more (and more systematic) than that is needed, I believe. This is not just because I’m an OT guy, but because a crucial step in bringing the text into the ‘now’ is immersing ourselves, becoming saturated, in the ‘then’. That involves having a sympathetic awareness of (amongst other things) the social, cultural and economic conditions of ‘then’. This absence is reflected in the discussions of particular texts in the rest of the book which tend not to engage with the political and social background and implications of the text. I’ll identify some more concerns I have with the book in a moment, but first, let me move onto more positive observations.

As he states in his preface, Woodhouse aims to attend to the details of the text; in that he is largely successful. He seeks to lead us to engage with the text as we have it, rather than being unduly concerned with putative original sources and their reconstruction or apologetic concerns for the

historicity of the material. This is not because he is afraid of such questions, but is the result of his commitment to the text as authoritative Scripture, and therefore the focus of our exposition. As such he seeks to deal with the literary features of the text, the way it presents the unfolding story of God's dealings with Israel in this key transitional period, and what it says to us. Nor is he afraid to engage with the theology of the text and how it relates to the theology of Scripture as a whole. That, as he rightly sees, is an outgrowth of our commitment to Scripture as God's unitary word, and our understanding that all texts need to be understood in their (literary and historical and *canonical*) context. This seems to be something of a refreshing trend in recent evangelical commentaries and is, in my view, to be warmly welcomed.

The result is, at times, some excellent insights into the text and its significance for our understanding of God and the world. Let me note some instances chosen somewhat at random. In discussing Hannah's story (1 Samuel 1), he notes that Yahweh chooses a 'nobody' as the means of his saving work, which is both characteristic of Yahweh's action and a pattern that resonates for us as Christians (pp.21-22). He also notes the way that Hannah's song (1 Samuel 2) echoes the language and imagery of Exodus, thus tying God's deliverance of her from her affliction to God's deliverance of Israel from theirs—both in the exodus and in their future history (p.30). He identifies similar echoes of exodus in the 'hardening' of Eli's sons later in the chapter, in light of the contempt they showed for the God-given means of dealing with sin (p.59). He notes further resonances with the exodus narrative in his discussion of the Ark narrative (1 Samuel 4–6), in which he nicely notes the ambiguity of *kabod* (glory/heaviness) in the narrative (pp.85–122). There are many other fine observations in the commentary: he notes the multiple ironies in the people's request for a king in 1 Samuel 8 (139–151); he makes some good points in relation to the women drawing water and Saul's arrival in Ramah in 1 Samuel 9 (p.159) and on the contrast between prince (*nagid*) and king (*melek*) in 1 Samuel 9:15-16 (p.162); he nicely contrasts the wisdom of Abigail and the God-denying folly of Nabal in 1 Samuel 25 (pp.471–484) and shows the desperate ironies of Saul's turning to a necromancer in 1 Samuel 28 and the tragedy of his death in chapter 31 (507–518; 543–554). There is, in short, much of value to glean from Woodhouse's commentary on 1 Samuel.

As I hinted at earlier, there are also a number of flaws in the work. Some are relatively minor—more irritations than flaws—of which I'll mention two. References are found in endnotes in the back of the book rather than footnotes. This is a pet hate of mine; I like checking the details of argument and citations and dislike having to keep flicking backwards and forwards to chase them down. Also, the text of the ESV is reproduced piecemeal through the commentary, a practice I find irritating and wasteful. I have a number of Bibles and if I want to look up the text, I'm quite capable of doing so; the only reason for including translations of the text are if the particular wording is important, or the author has made their own translation of the original. These may be editorial decisions rather than the author's; nonetheless they do, in my view, detract from the book. Other flaws are more substantial and are the result of the author's perspective, and to them I now turn.

The first is Woodhouse's failure to adequately address issues of the cultural, political and economic dimensions of the text. This is a flaw throughout the commentary, but I will note a few instances from his comments on the early chapters. In relation to Hannah's story he fails to note the crass insensitivity of Elkanah's 'consolation' of Hannah—indeed, he specifically rejects the idea, seeing his words as 'understanding and kind' (29, noting his comments in endnote 9, rejecting Goldingay's criticism of Elkanah's words). Given the social context of an ancient patriarchal (and agrarian) society, a woman's social standing was determined by whether or not she had children (especially sons). Elkanah's words of comfort—and Woodhouse's reading of them—fail to deal with the shame of barrenness in ancient Israel. In relation to chapter 2, while he notes the injustice of Hophni and Phinehas' extortionate treatment of worshippers (pp.55–56), he doesn't discuss the *social* implications of their actions, especially for the vulnerable. Similarly, in his treatment of Saul's failure in 1 Samuel 15, he doesn't

discuss the difficult military and political position in which Saul found himself. Saul had the job of ensuring that an army levied of volunteers, used to defending their own kin and property, fought an enemy outside the borders of the land so that God could enact God's vengeance on them for an ancient (and perhaps persistent) wrong. In enacting *herem* against the Amalekites, Yahweh ensured that the Israelite army gained nothing from their dangerous and costly efforts. Saul is faced with real social and problems in controlling his army, especially in light of his previous difficulties. To allow them to bring the animals for sacrifice at least meant they got to join in a worship barbecue after the battle; for him to bring back Agag, as a living 'trophy of war' would also bolster his standing in the eyes of Israel. Far from diminishing Saul's sin, such social and political analysis accents his failure: there are real matters of political expedience overwhelming commitment to Yahweh and Yahweh's purposes at work in this narrative, something Woodhouse misses. Similar gaps are evident elsewhere in his commentary. This is, I suspect, a result of his relative disinterest in the social, cultural, political and economic background of the text—and, for that matter, its social, cultural, political and economic implications for us.

If the first is a problem of what is absent from his commentary, my second concern relates to what is prominently present in it, namely his particular Christocentric reading of Samuel in light of the overarching theme of leadership. He is clear from the outset that his aim is to 'preach Christ', not just useful life lessons (p.14). This is both a strength and the greatest weakness of his method and what it produces. The result is that much of the particularity of the text is swamped, despite his concern to deal with the text in its details. Coupled with his focus on the theme of 'leadership', this impoverishes the 'Christ-orientation' of preaching, in part because he already knows (he thinks) what it means for it to be about Christ, or centred on him, rather than allowing the messiness of the text to shape the key ideas and ask how *they* relate to Christ. Indeed, I would suggest that books like Samuel are too rich, complex and polyvalent to be captured (controlled, even domesticated?) by one particular theme. Rather, there are a number of themes, plots lines, characters and so on (dominated, of course, by Yahweh, the chief character of OT narrative, and Yahweh's sovereign purposes) which are held together by the overarching *narrative* lines of the book. That, of course, is a different way of conceptualising (*sic*) the unity of Samuel (or the OT for that matter); but it's one that works better than an attempt to find a conceptual centre of a book (focusing, as that does, on the propositional content of the story, rather than the story itself—an odd thing to do in light of the genre of the book).

Furthermore, while he draws some interesting connections between 1 Samuel and Jesus, he habitually jumps ahead too rapidly, both to Jesus and to us, without first navigating the text as a whole. This is partly because he breaks the text into digestible preachable 'chunks' rather than larger coherent narrative or rhetorical units. Some may like that approach to theological reflection on and application of OT texts, in which case no problem; but I'm not a fan, as it atomises the text and, in my view, means we easily miss the larger rhetorical structures and purposes of the account. Indeed, some of his 'Jesus links' seem glib and facile to me, amounting almost to an expository conjuring trick, pulling Jesus from a hat, so to speak (see, for instance, pp.61, 83). Let me note a couple of instances of this. In his discussion of 1 Samuel 8 Woodhouse (esp. p.151) notes the concern with the 'justice of the king' and seeks to link that with Jesus' kingship—a good and important move. However, he does it by way of the idea of justification, linking it to Paul's exposition of the gospel in Romans. Taking a more canonically oriented approach, however, would lead us naturally to the just rule of Jesus and the Christian understanding of power and justice via Deuteronomy 17, Psalm 72, Isaiah 11 and 61 and Luke 4, rather than to 'justification' via Pilate and Paul. It also relates to his treatment of the stories as, in the end, a source of 'propositional truths' meaning that he looks for some propositional content of the story (or associated with it) and then seeks to apply that proposition to us. That, coupled with his Christocentric (rather than Christotropic) reading leads to the 'Jesus from a hat' phenomenon that so plagues the book. A particularly odd instance of that is the way that he links the story of David and Goliath with the gospel of Jesus, so that 'its gripping excitement has become the gripping excitement of the gospel of Jesus, the son of David' (p.326). This is, perhaps, forced on him by his division of this artfully told story

into four separate 'preaching chunks', resulting in the loss of the dynamism of the text and the generation of artificial connections between isolated sections of the story, the gospel and us. This is a pervasive flaw in his commentary, found even in those sections where he does good exegetical work (see his comments on 1 Samuel 20, 21, 28, 29, 30 and 31).

There is much more that I could say, both in praise and criticism of this book. Woodhouse does some fine work on the text and does prompt us to think carefully about how to connect the 'then' of OT narrative to the 'now' of Christian life and faith, and to do so in light of the climax of God's story in Jesus. I would much rather he did it otherwise; the fact that he does it at all is, however, a great service to those of us who seek to preach the OT as *Christian Scripture*.

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