

Knowledge, Information and Power in the 'Biblical' Sense

The story of King Saul

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By setting the story of Saul in 1 Samuel within its ancient literary context – Egypt and Mesopotamia – and by deploying and reshaping Foucault's panopticism, now as 'panaudiscism', this article offers a reading of King Saul in a way that pays attention to ears and hearing, to the oral and the aural. In this light, Saul fate is tied in all too closely with his ability to hear, or not.

Among the monuments of ancient Egypt there is a statue of pharaoh Sesostri III, erected in Northern Nubia to commemorate his conquest of those lands. This statue features an unusual face. In sharp distinction with a long tradition that presents royal figures with their faces universally beautiful and frozen in the serenity of the hereafter, Sesostri III is represented as anxious and sleepless, with heavy-lidded eyes sunk in hollows beneath them and creases at both corners of his mouth¹. As if this were not enough, there is a second feature, even more striking than the first one: his face is decorated with enormous ears, springing up like antennae. According to some Egyptologists, the huge ears, specific to many other statues of 12th Dynasty pharaohs, are endowed with the symbolic function 'to signify the king's capacity to hear his subjects' petitions' (Parkinson 1999, 66, 69). This may be true, but at the same time we should not miss the possibility of some connection between the huge protruding ears and the weird, sleepless faces of those monarchs who lived in a hard and restless time.

The founder of the dynasty, Amenemhet I, may give us a clue to the reason. He wrote a guide for his heir, directing him how to rule in the proper way. Amidst an endless sequence of instructions to the monarch to stay ever alert, even in his sleep, we may find something of an explanation for this obsessive idea: 'success will elude him who ignores what he should know' (Lichtheim 1973, 137). Information here is being defined as the core of royal power, and it is hardly the information of the king's subjects' petitions that matters most.

Fifteen centuries later the Greek writer, Xenophon of Athens, wrote a partly fictional biography of Cyrus the Great, called *Cyropaedia*, or *The Education of Cyrus*. In order to convey the basic principles which a perfect ruler should follow, he makes use of the then popular proverb: 'The king has many eyes and many ears'; a phrase that touches on the same idea that knowledge, or information, is the basis of political success. It is the 'many' of the ideal king's ears that the sculptors of 12th Dynasty Egypt sought to convey by the iconic representation of just one pair of big ears. Apart of everything noted thus far, this is a physical deformation which renders an 'animal' dimension to the royal figure; the ability to be animal and human at the same time signified a king's belonging to the realm of the divine.

¹ On the representation of the 12th Dynasty pharaohs see Smith (1981, 185-186) and Hayes (1990, 75-176, 197-199).

As far as the less symbolic realm of social politics is concerned we may turn for an example of a well-tuned mechanism of royal information management to Ancient Assyria, especially during Assurbanipal's reign. Loyalty oaths to the king had been a common practice there (on loyalty oaths in Neo-Assyria see Parpola and Watanabe 1988, 63-64; Thompson 1964). It means that all of the citizens ritually took upon themselves the obligation to 'open the ear' of the king. In order to 'protect the kingship', they should instantly report any overheard 'improper, unsuitable or unseemly' word hostile to the monarch (Wiseman 1958, 500); the same was true of 'malicious whispers' or those who 'spread rumours' (73-82). Such a flow of information practically turned Assurbanipal into the man with the biggest ears in his kingdom. Symptomatically, biblical Hebrew rendered the meaning of the phrase, usually translated in English as 'to reveal' or 'to disclose' to someone (a piece of information), by the words 'to open, or to unclothe the ear' of someone, usually the king.

Remembering Xenophon, who in fact lived only three centuries after Assurbanipal's time, here is his way to describe the practical implications of the 'many eyes and ears' proverb: 'People are everywhere afraid to say anything to the discredit of the king, just as if he himself were listening; or to do anything to harm him, just as if he were present' (Xenophon 1953, 337). Such a description of royal omnipresence begs for a comparison with Foucault's work on the prison and 'panopticism' as a chief police strategy in 18th-century France, as well as with everything we know of secret services and the 'pan-agents' system in totalitarian states. Royal panopticism therefore is neither a Western, nor a modern invention; it seems to have been always present within the centralised state; an inherent feature of political power if not of civilization itself, at least as far as kingship is considered to be 'the very basis of civilization' (Frankfort 1978, 3) in the ancient Near East.

Still there is some difference between Foucault's research and the investigation of ancient documents. Foucault speaks of 'panopticism' only, and not of 'panaudicism'. As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned at least, we may say that hearing is not less important than seeing; the principle of ocular domination is at least rivalled by the principle of audio domination. Among possible reasons, we should enlist the fact that the Hebrew God is always to be listened to and never seen. Audicism therefore is situated at the core of the numinous experience in ancient Israel; it is the foremost way of having contact with the divine. The Hebrew verb *glh* (*gala*), which the English translation renders in these situations as *reveal* (the truth to someone), has the literal meaning of *uncover* and *remove*, implying the metaphorical idea of *discover*. *To uncover someone's ears* therefore meant *to make someone discover a certain piece of knowledge*. The same verb, *glh*, is used in stories which have to do with prophets and prophetic insight. In the case of Balaam, the Aramean *nabi* who blessed instead of cursed Israel in Numbers 22, the verb signifies the long-awaited moment of Balaam's revelation of God's presence: 'Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel of the Lord...' It may have been the task of Assurbanipal's royal servants to 'open the king's ear' but it is none other than Yahweh who is the greatest 'opener' of human ears (also of human eyes and wombs) in the Hebrew Bible.

The figure closest to God among mortals is the king. Although not ranking as a deity, as, for example, the ancient Egyptian pharaoh, the Israelite king is still anointed and is thereby God's chosen, or *mashiah*. The king, on the other hand, is The Man; he 'provided a metaphor for the way others were to conduct their lives' (Baines 1991, 128). The fundamental function of his presence is to listen – both to the words of God and the words of those people who might 'uncover' his ears. Being a king is directly dependent on the ability to have very big ears well tuned and widely uncovered for the incessant flow of information coming from heaven and earth. With this idea in mind, let us now turn to the story of the first Israelite king – Saul, or Shaul ben Kish, the Benjaminite.

The narrative of Saul's kingship in *1 Samuel* may be called a tale of royalty, loyalty and information management. Among biblical scholars, Saul is popular as 'the closest approximation of a tragic character in the Hebrew Bible'. The purpose of my text from now on is to disclose (as briefly as

possible) that the ability to have your ear open, or proper information management, is what designs the narrative fate of almost every character in this story.

Saul is an exemplum of those kings whom Stuart Lasine calls ‘kings who do not know what they need to know and are therefore helpless’; this makes him ‘the most vulnerable and exposed of biblical kings’ (Lasine 2001, 80 and 35)². Starting with the very beginning of his career, he proves himself unable to find his father’s lost asses; for a long time he neither knows nor wills to behave like a monarch; at the face of Goliath’s threat, he is not knowledgeable concerning any way to handle the situation. When obsessed by the evil spirit of God, Shaul attends to seemingly friendly advice that brings into the palace his worst ever nightmare – David. At least two of his children lie to him on a regular basis, and what is most important: shortly after his ascension to the throne, God ceases communicating with him. It is clear that the etymology of his name – *sought, or requested by God* – holds an ironic nuance; in only a few years, Saul manages to turn into the king who most eagerly strives after contact with God (turning even to necromancy), and is most consistently refused the opening of his ears to the divine. In one of the rare cases in which he does receive some information, it is presented post factum and causes one of the most absurd actions in his life – the assassination of several hundred innocent people and animals, eighty five priests of Yahweh included, at the small town of Nob. As if to crown everything told so far, Saul is refused knowledge in the most ‘biblical’ of ways. The story of his life is narrated through twenty two chapters, and there is not a single woman mentioned as being ‘known’ by the monarch – in sharp contrast with David, and especially Solomon, who ascends the throne immediately after him.

Among the priests slain is Ahimelech. His name clearly says *brother of the king*; ironically again, it is exactly his lack of knowledge about what is happening at court that causes his death. Living only twenty five miles away in Hebron, he never heard that the prominent slayer of Goliath, the honoured captain of the royal army, the king’s son-in-law David, had turned into Saul’s adversary and into a threat to the state. ‘Thy servant knows nothing of all this, small or great’ (22:15) is not an appropriate answer to the accusation that neither he, nor any of the priests, have uncovered the king’s ear concerning David’s arrival in Nob.

Unlike Ahimelech, Doeg the Edomite is the only one who seems to act as a loyal royal servant. Among a bunch of Israelites, he alone dares open Saul’s ear concerning the meeting between David and Ahimelech. Doeg himself has had his own ear uncovered by God, thus turning him into an ear-witness of their meeting. Doeg should have been ‘all ears’ in order to overhear a conversation so secret and held in privacy. The only problem about the information he shared with the king is the fact of its temporal inadequacy; instead of being praised by the biblical text, Doeg symbolically dies: he thoroughly disappears from the story once the priests are slain, though only to appear in later commentary as a ‘skulking Edomite’ (McCarter 1980, 349), an ‘eavesdropper’ (Edelman 1991, 66), even a ‘diabolos’ in Josephus’ report (Josephus 1930, 6.12.78).

We should not neglect mentioning, though briefly, Jonathan and Michal. After David appeared at the court, Jonathan had his ears and his heart closed to the persuasions and advices of his royal father. Both Jonathan and Michal lie to Saul in order to protect David’s life. It looks as if the entire world, Saul’s own family in the first place, has allied against the opening of his ears. Or, at least, that is the vision of the king himself. His hearing is not only imperfectly tuned to information but also distorted by the paranoid delusion that everyone around withholds information from him: ‘...all of you have conspired against me. No one discloses to me when my son makes a league with the son of Jesse, none of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me...’ (22:8).

² My text owes much to Lasine’s book, in which the idea of ‘royal information management’ is deployed and analysed at length.

‘Once again’ – as Robert Alter says – ‘Saul’s problem, which is also the symptom of his paranoia, is that he feels essential knowledge is denied to him’ (Alter 1999, 137). Narrated in this way, the story of Saul becomes be a tale of ears-not-opened, of information rejected or improperly managed, of failed kingship – if it were not for another character, another king: David. David is everything Saul was not or could not be. The story is unambiguously structured in terms of an antithesis of characters, in the likeness of a fairy tale. David is the king ‘who knows everything a king should know’ in order to manage properly the politics of relations with other people and with God. Most interestingly, he speaks very rarely – unlike many of the characters around him, who seem obsessed with the practice of uncovering his ear. As it seems, ancient art has abstained from representing a vital feature of regality: the king who has very big ears and a very small mouth at the same time.

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