

Published in Association of Jewish Libraries Reviews, November/December, 2017, p. 13.

Halbertal, Moshe & Stephen Holmes. *The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. 211 pp. \$27.95.(9780691174624). Also available as an eBook.

The authors consider the Biblical book of Samuel to be the greatest Hebrew book ever written. While they are far from denying it is a rich book with many themes, they focus on it as “a profound work of political thought.” If this strikes some readers as odd, given that it is a narrative rather than a formal philosophical work, all one need do is recall Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War to realize how an historical narrative can be a vehicle for political analysis. Halbertal (Hebrew University) and Holmes (New York University) point out that the Book of Samuel relates the establishment of a continuous Hebrew government as opposed to the episodic governing described in the Book of Judges. They convincingly demonstrate that the anonymous author of the Book of Samuel offers a wide range of penetrating political insights (e.g. the temptation of those holding political power to make political power an end in itself rather than a means to implement a program or objectives, the tendency of political power to attract disinformation). This is a superb study of a superb book.

Shmuel Ben-Gad, Gelman Library, George Washington University