Introduction to1 & 2 Samuel

**SUMMARY**

First Samuel continues where Judges left off. The book of Ruth comes between them in English Bibles, but not in the Hebrew Bible. Chapters 1-3 present the birth, call, and early ministry of Samuel. Chapters 4-7 relate the "adventures" of the ark of the covenant as it falls into Philistine hands. Chapter 8 is a transitional chapter describing the people's demand for a king. Samuel and Saul interact in chapters 9-15. First Samuel comes to a close with a long section recounting the power struggles between Saul and David in chapters 16-31.

Second Samuel continues the story of King David begun in 1 Samuel, including his military victories, centralization of the cult in the new capital of Jerusalem, and God's promise of an eternal dynasty. David's human failings--as a person, as a father, and as a king--as well as God's judgment and grace, complete this portrait of Israel's greatest king.

**SO WHAT?**

The lives of Samuel, Saul, and David, presented so graphically with all the faults of the human condition, can serve as mirrors of our own humanity. Seeing how God works in and through these people can help us discern the activity of God in our own relationships with the Lord and with others.

**WHO WROTE IT?**

Ancient tradition identifies Samuel as the author of the first twenty-four chapters of 1 Samuel and asserts that the rest of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel were completed by Nathan and Gad. Today, many scholars believe that 1 and 2 Samuel are part of the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH) and that various older traditions have been gathered together and edited by a nameless exilic editor or editors.

**WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?**

The final event recorded in Kings occurred in 561 B.C.E. Since the return from Babylon (538 B.C.E.) is not recorded, one assumes that 1 Samuel reached its final form sometime between these two dates (561 and 538). It was written during the Babylonian exile as part of the Deuteronomistic History, though the older traditions that comprise much of the narrative are considerably earlier than this.

**WHAT'S IT ABOUT?**

First Samuel recounts stories of Samuel, Saul, and David as they struggle with themselves, among each other, and with God, as Israel is transformed from a loose confederation of tribes led by the judges such as Gideon and Deborah to a nation ruled by a king.

Second Samuel recounts the long reign of David, beginning with his becoming king over Judah and Israel, followed by his brilliant military success and consolidation of the kingdom, and concluding with his failures as a human, a father, and a king.

**HOW DO I READ IT?**

First and Second Samuel look like a history of the new institution of kingship in Israel. While important historical information is presented, some of it is at odds with the presentation found in 1 Chronicles. Both Chronicles and Samuel should be read as *theological*, rather than *historical*, presentations of the early years of the monarchy. Samuel is part of a larger narrative (the Deuteronomistic History) designed to demonstrate the reasons for the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722/721 B.C.E. and Judah's exile to Babylon in 587/586 B.C.E.

**Background**

In the latter half of the eleventh century B.C.E., the major geopolitical powers in Egypt and Mesopotamia (that is, Assyria and Babylon) were preoccupied with their own internal troubles. As a result, the various peoples of Syro-Palestine vied for power among themselves. In response to military threats posed by the Philistines in the west (1 Samuel 4-7; 13-14; 17; 23; 31; 2 Samuel 5) and the Ammonites in the east (1 Samuel 11; 2 Samuel 10-12), the twelve tribes of Israel began a process of cooperation that eventually led to the anointing of Saul as king.

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**Outline: 1 Samuel**

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**I. Samuel (1 Samuel 1:1-7:17)**  
First Samuel begins with the rise of Samuel the prophet and the fall of the house of Eli the priest. Sandwiched between these narratives is a rollicking account of the journeys of the ark of the covenant as it is captured by the Philistines and eventually makes its way back to the Israelites.

**A. The Rise of Samuel the Prophet (1:1-4:1a)  
B. The Adventures of the Ark (4:1b-7:1)  
C. Samuel the Judge (7:2-17)**

**II. Samuel and Saul (8:1-12:25)**  
These five episodes alternate between negative and positive portrayals of kingship. The people want a king like all the other nations, but Samuel is theologically opposed.

**A. Israel Demands a King (8:1-22)  
B. Saul Becomes King (9:1-10:16)  
C. Saul Chosen by Lot (10:17-27a)  
D. Saul Defeats the Ammonites (10:27b-11:15)  
E. Samuel's Farewell Address (12:1-25)**

**III. Saul and David (13:1-31:13)**  
This long concluding division of 1 Samuel relates the gradual demise of Saul and the steady rise of David, his successor.

**A. God Rejects Saul as King (13:1-15:35)  
B. Introduction to David (16:1-17:58)  
C. David and Jonathan (18:1-4)  
D. Saul Becomes Jealous of David (18:5-16)  
E. David Marries Michal (18:17-30)  
F. Saul Pursues David (19:1-28:2)  
G. Saul's Last Days (28:3-31:13)**

**Outline: 2 Samuel**

**I. David Becomes King of Judah (2 Samuel 1:1-3:5)**  
The first major section of 2 Samuel describes how David became king over the southern tribe of Judah.

A. David Laments the Deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:1-27)  
B. David Anointed King of Judah (2 Samuel 2:1-11)  
C. David Defeats the House of Saul (2 Sam. 2:12-3:1)  
D. Sons Born to David in Hebron (2 Samuel 3:2-5) 

**II. David Becomes King of Israel (2 Samuel 3:6-5:16)**  
David's accession to the throne of Israel follows the same pattern as his accession to Judah's throne.

A. The Murder of Abner (2 Samuel 3:6-39)   
B. The Murder of Ishbaal (2 Samuel 4:1-12)   
C. David Anointed King of Israel (2 Samuel 5:1-5)   
D. David Captures Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6-12)   
E. Children Born to David in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:13-16) 

**III. David Consolidates the Kingdom (2 Samuel 5:17-8:18)**  
These chapters present David's efforts to consolidate his kingdom. Military success against the surrounding peoples (5:17-25; 8:1-14) frames David's cultic activity in bringing the ark to Jerusalem and prayer (6:1-23; 7:18-29), which, in turn, encloses the all-important promise of a Davidic dynasty (7:1-17).

A. David Defeats the Philistines (2 Samuel 5:17-25)   
B. David Brings Ark to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:1-23) .  
C. God's Covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:1-29)   
D. David Expands the Empire (2 Samuel 8:1-14)   
E. David's Administrators (2 Samuel 8:15-18) 

**IV. David's Court (2 Samuel 9:1-20:26)**  
These chapters (and 1 Kings 1-2) are either an extended narrative describing the struggle for who will succeed David on the throne or, as most think now, an extended narrative describing the consequences of David's sin with Bathsheba.

A. David's Loyalty to Jonathan (2 Samuel 9:1-13)   
B. War with the Ammonites and the Arameans (2 Samuel 10:1-12:31)  
C. Like Father, Like Son (2 Samuel 13:1-14:33)   
D. Absalom Rebels (2 Samuel 15:1-19:43)   
E. Sheba Rebels against David (2 Samuel 20:1-22)   
F. David's Administrators (2 Samuel 20:23-26) 

**V. Epilogue (2 Samuel 21:1-24:25)**  
The final four chapters of 2 Samuel comprise an epilogue or appendix that gathers together several traditions, arranging them in a concentric fashion: (A) a narrative of national disaster, (B) tales of David's warriors, (C) a poem, (C') a poem, (B') tales of David's warriors, (A') a narrative of national disaster.

A. Narrative of National Disaster (2 Samuel 21:1-14)   
B. David's Warriors (2 Samuel 21:15-22)   
C. David's Song of Praise (2 Samuel 22:1-51)   
D. David's Last Words (2 Samuel 23:1-7)   
E. David's Warriors (2 Samuel 23:8-39)   
F. David's Census (2 Samuel 24:1-25) 

**Introductory Issues:**

• **The book of Samuel as history.** Samuel looks like history, but as one reads through it, it becomes obvious that it is very different than the history we are accustomed to reading. Accounts in Chronicles and other biblical sources are sometimes presented differently in Samuel, and are often flatly contradicted. Even within the books of Samuel there are discrepancies and contradictions. This difficult issue is somewhat eased by the recognition that no biblical book is written with contemporary canons of history. Rather than disparage the biblical author's supposed failure to conform to *our*ideas of history, we should try to determine the theological motivation in presenting these stories this way.

• **Chronology.** The chronology of the books of Samuel is a major problem. In general, only approximate dates can be given: the events recorded in Samuel span approximately 100 years; the capture of the ark is usually placed in the middle of the eleventh century B.C.E.; Saul reigned as king from 1020-1000 B.C.E.; and David reigned from 1000-960 B.C.E.

• **Doublets.** Samuel has an unusual number of "doublets," instances where the same story seems to be told twice, sometimes in different circumstances or with conflicting results:

* two announcements of the end of the house of Eli (1 Samuel 2:31-36; 3:11-14)
* Saul named king three times (1 Samuel 9:26-10:1; 10:17-24; 11:15)
* Saul is rejected as king twice (1 Samuel 13:8-14; 15:1-35) yet reigns till he dies
* David introduced to Saul at court and in the battlefield (1 Samuel 16:14-23; 17:51-58)
* Goliath killed by David...*and*by Elhanan (1 Samuel 17:49; 2 Samuel 21:19)
* David and Jonathan make three separate covenants (1 Samuel 18:3; 20:16; 23:18)
* David seeks asylum with Achish of Gath (1 Samuel 21:10-15; 27:1-4)
* David is betrayed by the Ziphites (1 Samuel 23:19; 26:1)
* David's refusal to kill Saul (1 Samuel 24:1-7; 26:7-12)
* Saul falls on his sword *and*is slain by an Amalekite (1 Samuel 31:4; 2 Samuel 1:10)
* Absalom has three sons *and*no son (2 Samuel 14:27; 18:18)

The following are in 2 Samuel:

* Goliath killed by David…*and*by Elhanan (1 Samuel 17:49; 2 Samuel 21:19)
* Saul falls on his sword *and*is slain by an Amalekite (1 Samuel 31:4; 2 Samuel 1:10)
* Absalom has three sons *and*no son (2 Samuel 14:27; 18:18)

• **The Philistines.** Throughout the books of Samuel, Israel's greatest threat came from the Philistines, a people from islands in the Aegean Sea who settled along the southern coast of Canaan after being repelled by Ramses III in a series of sea battles in the Nile Delta (1190 B.C.E.). There, they occupied some of the region's richest land and controlled the lucrative coastal trade route. The Philistines' military success is directly attributable to their monopoly in the manufacture and use of iron weapons (1 Samuel 13:19-23). In the absence of any written records, the probably pejorative biblical account of the Philistines becomes determinative. In the Bible, the Philistines are depicted as warlike, rather coarse, and uncircumcised; they worshiped Dagon as their national god in addition to other Canaanite deities such as Atargatis and Baal-zebub. Politically, they were organized as a federation under five "Serens" (Greek, *tyrannoi*, "tyrants"), who ruled in their five major cities (Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza). The Greek historian Herodotus named the whole area "Palestine" after the Greek form of their name (*palestina*, 450 B.C.E.).

• **Why are there two books of Samuel?** Originally the books of Samuel were a single work. The Masoretic notes at the end of 2 Samuel give a total of 1,506 verses for both books and indicate that 1 Samuel 28:24 is the middle verse of the book (singular in Hebrew). Samuel was divided into two books when it was translated into Greek. The Greek translation actually includes the books of Kings as well, as indicated by the entitling of Samuel-Kings as *1-4 Basileiai* (1-4 Kingdoms/Reigns). This larger context is crucial and must be kept in mind at all times.

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**Theological Issues:**

• **The ark.** The significance of the ark of the covenant varies in the different Old Testament traditions. Here in Samuel, the Deuteronomic tradition is somewhat different from that in Kings (see the notes there), because the Deuteronomists are here incorporating earlier traditions (1 Samuel 4:2-7:2). This rather fanciful story relates the capture of the ark by the Philistines and its "adventures" in Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron, where various plagues befall its captors including the vanquishing of Dagon, their national god (chapters 4-5). Upon its return, the people of Beth-Shemesh learned of the ark's holy power; looking inside violated its holiness and resulted in their death (chapter 6). Following its transfer to Kiriath-Jearim (6:21-7:2), it remained in obscurity until David, realizing the powerful symbolism it held for the tribes, moved it to his new capital and sanctuary in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6).

• **Blueprint for kingship**. First Samuel 8:10-18 warns against the people's choice of a king, who will be more interested in royal autocracy than in the Deuteronomistic blueprint (Deuternomy 17:14-20; see 1 Samuel 12:3). That blueprint may provide the "rights and duties of the kingship" that Samuel presented to the people (1 Samuel 10:25).

• **Canaanite religion.** The indigenous religion of the Canaanites was a constant threat to the Israelites. In Samuel the following were especially troublesome:

* Baal/baals ("lord"): the chief god of the Canaanites, essentially a fertility god (1 Sam. 7:4; 12:10; 2 Sam. 5:20-21)
* Dagon: the fish/grain god of the Philistines (11 times in 1 Samuel 5:2-7)
* Astartes: a Canaanite fertility goddess (1 Samuel 7:3, 4; 12:10; 31:10). In Hebrew, this name is deliberately misspelled "Ashtoreth" by using the vowels of the Hebrew word for "shame."
* mediums (28:3)
* animism: the worship of inanimate objects, such as stones (6:14, 18; 20:19; 2 Samuel 20:8), trees (10:3; 14:2; 22:6; 31:13), and high places (9:12-14; 10:5; 22:6; 2 Samuel 1:19, 25)

• **Ephod.** This word designates different objects in the Old Testament. In the Priestly materials it refers to the High Priest's ornate, distinctive liturgical garment (Exodus 28:6-14). In Samuel, however, it is a short tunic worn as a priestly vestment (1 Samuel 2:28; 14:3; 22:18; 2 Samuel 6:14). In 1 Samuel 23:6-10 and 30:7-8, the "ephod" seems to be a cultic object used to obtain oracles, though these texts are probably corruptions of the word "ark" (*aron*).

• **Hannah's song as theological prologue.** Despite all the twists and turns of its long literary history, 1 and 2 Samuel are theologically structured as three cycles of stories, each based upon a key figure in the institution of the monarchy in Israel: Samuel (1 Samuel 1-12), Saul (1 Samuel 13-31), and David (2 Samuel 1-20). These cycles, relating the rise of kingship, are framed by magnificent psalms of praise or thanksgiving, one from Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10) and two from David (2 Samuel 22:1-23:7). At the heart of each is a theological statement concerning God's justice in humbling the proud and exalting the humble (1 Samuel 2:5-8; 2 Samuel 22:26-28). Thus, Saul, brought down by God, becomes the illustration of what kingship should not be; David, raised by God from obscurity to unparalleled wealth and power, becomes the model of what kingship, dependent upon God's grace, should look like; and Samuel becomes God's prophetic mediator, the one who acts on God's behalf to usher in the monarchy demanded by the people, while, at the same time, keeping the truth that God is ultimately Israel's king.

• **Nazirites.** Samuel is dedicated as a Nazirite (*nazar*in Hebrew means "to dedicate") from birth (1 Samuel 1:11, 22). Nazirites, according to Numbers 6:1-21, observed certain principles, such as refusing to cut their hair, drink wine, come in contact with a corpse, and eat religiously inappropriate food.

• **Repentance.** The books of Samuel have been interpreted as providing three models of repentance as seen in the portraits of Samuel, Saul, and David.

* In 1 Samuel 3, *Samuel*condemned the wicked priests at Shiloh. Following the return of the ark of the covenant, he called upon the people to turn away from the gods of Canaan and turn back to God. Following their confession and repentance at Mizpah, God responded by granting them victory and peace (7:2-14).
* In 1 Samuel 15, *Saul*provides a negative example of repentance. Though he says the words "I have sinned" (vv. 24, 30), he offers excuses, becomes defensive, and reveals his insincerity.
* After being confronted by Nathan (2 Samuel 12:7), *David* repents in the same words as the people and Saul, "I have sinned" (12:13), but without Saul's excuses, becoming an exemplary illustration of repentance.

• **Reversal of fortune.** In line with Hannah's articulation of the theme that "The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts" (1 Samuel 2:7), Samuel is peppered with passages of unexpected reversals of fortune at the hand of the Lord:

* The priests of the house of Eli are brought down while the young boy Samuel is raised to be a prophet (3:11-4:1).
* Saul was a Benjaminite, from Israel's smallest tribe, yet he became king (9:21; 10:1).
* As king, however, Saul is rejected by God (13:13-14; 15:22-23).
* David, youngest son of Jesse (16:10-11) and, as Saul's son-in-law, inferior in rank to Saul's son Jonathan, is chosen king (2 Samuel 2:1-4).
* As king, however, David is punished for his adultery and murder (2 Samuel 12:7-14) and loses power to his son Absalom (2 Samuel 15-17).Absalom, in turn, dies, returning David to power and grief over his loss (chapter 18).

Not even David is free from the working out of Yahweh's reversal of fortune. The end of his reign is one of increasing strife in his family and a loss of political control. For the Deuteronomistic editors such lessons were applicable to those that had sat on the thrones of Israel and Judah, as well, and ultimately explained God's sending of Assyria against the north and Babylon against the south.

• **The role of prophecy.** The books of Samuel present the prophets as those who announce God's word and reveal the divine will. This is seen in the major prophetic speeches that carry the plot by occurring at crucial moments in the narrative. In 1 Samuel:

* the announcement of the fall of the house of Eli by "a man of God" (1 Samuel 2:27-36)
* God announces the fall of the house of Eli to Samuel (1 Samuel 3:11-14)
* Philistine "prophets" advise their leaders how to return the ark to Israel (1 Samuel 6:2-9)
* Samuel's interpretation of Israel's demand for a king (1 Samuel 8:7-18)
* Samuel is directed to anoint God's choice as king (1 Samuel 9:15-16)
* Samuel's address prior to Saul being chosen king by lot (1 Samuel 10:17-19)
* Samuel's farewell speech at the beginning of the monarchy (1 Samuel 12:6-17, 20-25)
* Samuel's rejection of Saul (1 Samuel 15:10-11; 17-31)
* David speaks the word of the Lord to Goliath (1 Samuel 17:45-47)
* Gad's warning to David (1 Samuel 22:5)

• **Seven.** There are many significant "sevens" in Samuel: Hannah refers to herself as a mother of seven (1 Samuel 2:5); the ark of the covenant is in Philistia seven months (6:1); Saul obediently waits for Samuel seven days before disobeying (10:8; 13:8); seventy men are killed at Beth-Shemesh (10:27); elders of Jabesh ask for seven days of respite before surrendering (11:3); seven of Jesse's sons pass before Samuel before David is chosen (16:10); Jabesh-Gilead fasts for seven days at the death of Saul (31:13); David rules Judah in Hebron seven years and six months (2 Samuel 2:11; 5:5); and seven of Saul's sons are executed (21:6, 9).

• **Three.** The number three is unusually prominent in Samuel, appearing more than forty-five times, often symbolizing totality, wholeness, or completeness as in other biblical settings. The most important in this regard are: Hannah gives birth to three sons after being barren (1 Samuel 2:21); the three men who meet Saul after his anointing come with three kids and three loaves (10:3); David hides three days (20:5, 19); Jonathan shoots three arrows as a signal (20:20); David bows to Jonathan three times (20:41); an Egyptian brought to David had not eaten for three days and three nights (30:12); three of Saul's four sons die (31:2; see 1 Chronicles 8:33); the "Three" champions in David's troops (2 Samuel 23); the famine lasts three years (21:1; 24:13); God offers David three choices, each with a duration of three--years, months, days (24:12-13).

• **Dynastic Oracle.** The theological climax of the Deuteronomistic History is found in Nathan's oracle to David (2 Samuel 7). God refuses David's request to build a "house" (a temple) for the Lord by promising to build a "house" (a dynasty) for David--in effect, promising that there will always be an heir of David on Israel's throne. Later, the unconditional nature of the promise to David (and by extension the temple and even Jerusalem) was challenged by the prophets (especially Jeremiah 7; 20). After the exile, the promise began to be applied to a coming "son of David," the "Messiah." For Christians, this coming Messiah is Jesus the "Christ" (Greek for "Messiah").

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