

Surveying the Text: Samuel

Douglas Wilson

Christ Church - Moscow, ID

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INTRODUCTION:

Treating our two books of Samuel as one book, we find it to be repository of some truly great Bible stories. But more than this, it represents the tale of three very complex characters—Samuel, Saul, and David. And behind all of that, not to mention underneath, we see the promises and mercies of the steadfast God. One of the central things we see here is the way of God with man—and the attempted ways of man with God.

THE TEXT:

“Now there was a certain man of Ramathaimzophim, of mount Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephrathite: And he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah: and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children” (1 Sam. 1:1-2).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

These are the introductory words to the book of Samuel. We know the book as two books, 1 and 2 Samuel, but originally they were just one together. The division was introduced by those who translated the Hebrew version into the Greek. We will therefore find our way around with references to 1 and 2 Samuel, but other than that, we will be treating them as one book. In addition, there are some good arguments for treating the first two chapters of 1 Kings as an original part of the book of Samuel.

Who wrote this book? The best answer is probably a three-fold answer—Samuel, Nathan, and Gad (1 Chron. 29:29; cf. 1 Sam. 10:25). Samuel probably died during the period when David was on the run in the wilderness, and so could not have written a significant part of the book.

The story begins, as so many prophetic tales do, with the introduction of a barren woman who is used by God to provide His people a great deliverance. We are introduced first to Elkanah, Samuel’s father, a man who was an Ephrathite (v. 1). In the second verse, we meet his two wives. His barren and well-loved wife is mentioned first, and her name is Hannah. The other wife is named Peninnah (v. 2). And so the stage is set. How does God work?

SOME BACKGROUND?:

The Philistines were invaders from Crete. They had established a beachhead on the coastal plains on the eastern end of the Mediterranean, and they were almost certainly the reason why the people had begun to clamor for a king. It was necessary, they said, for purposes of national security.

The accession of David to the throne occurred somewhere between the years 1010 and 1000 B.C. The events of this book took place over the course of about a century and a half. We had about 40 years of Philistine oppression, about 30 years as Samuel grew older, and then Saul and David each ruled about 40 years. This gives us the approximate dates of 1115-965 B.C.

Because the decentralized system of the judges allowed for more than one judge functioning at a time, Samson and Samuel were probably contemporaries. The rule of Samson likely filled about 20 years between the battles of Aphek (1 Sam. 4) and Ebenezer (1 Sam. 7).

THREE GREAT PLOTS POINTS:

The best way to approach this is to recognize that the overall theme is one of *transition*—from the period of the judges to the time of the monarchy. In tracking with this, there are three great sections that mark the historical changes that were underway. Those sections are 1 Sam. 7, 1 Sam. 12, and 2 Sam. 7.

There are seven basic sections in this book. Consider them this way: 1. Birth and Rule of Samuel (1 Sam. 1-7); 2. Saul's Reign and Failure (1 Sam. 8-15); 3. David the Courtier (1 Sam. 16-20); 4. David the Fugitive (1 Sam. 21-31); 5. David the King (2 Sam. 1-8); 6. David's Fall (2 Sam. 9-20); and 7. David's Final Years and Solomon's Rise (2 Sam. 21-1 Kings 2).

And (always) remember the ancient literary device called the chiasm (see Dorsey).

A Samuel succeeds the elderly Eli and rules (1 Sam. 1-7)

B Saul fails (1 Sam. 8-15)

C David's rise under Saul (1 Sam. 16-20)

D *The Hinge*: God reverses the fortunes of Saul and David (1 Sam. 21-31)

C' David's rise under God (2 Sam. 1-8)

B' David fails (2 Sam. 9-20)

A' Solomon succeeds the elderly David and rules (2 Sam. 21-1 Kings 2)

CHURCH AND STATE:

In the period of the judges, the people of Israel were governed by magistrates who were also prophets. In the transition to the monarchy that Samuel objected to, the new constitution separated the office of magistrate from the office of prophet. Samuel was willing to go along with this, provided the king heeded the words of the prophets. This is precisely what Saul wound up not doing, and what David, a man after God's own heart, was willing to do. It is also worth noting that this division was not watertight—David himself (a king) had the prophetic gift (2 Sam. 23:1), and even Saul had it for a time, much to everyone's astonishment (1 Sam. 10:11).

In the literature on this book, it is common to see commentators describe this as a transition from a theocracy to a monarchy, but this is not what it was supposed to be at all. There was a separation of branches of their civil order, but there was no thought of any of those branches operating in what we would call a “secular” way. All was to continue under the authority of God. Theocracies are inescapable. Every society has an ultimate authority; every society has a god of their system. Christians must therefore want the God of the society they live to be the true and living God. How could we possibly want anything else?

RISING AND FALLING:

This book is rich with instruction—showing us how God in His providence causes human societies to navigate transitions. These transitions are often brought about by sin and failure, and yet God is not stumped by anything. God draws straight with crooked lines. Is there a word for us here? Of course—all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for instruction. We see that the turmoil that Israel was in is comparable in many ways to the turmoil of our own times, and the lack of faithfulness in the Church. Eli does not restrain his sons, and Hannah laments her barrenness.

What does God *do* in situations like that? He always provides a Deliverer.



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