

1st and 2nd Samuel - An Introduction



The books of Samuel were originally written as one coherent story, but due to the length of the work, they are separated into two books in our modern Bible.

After the nation of Israel was rescued from slavery in Egypt and made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai, they eventually came into the promised land. There, Israel was supposed to be faithful to God and obey the covenant commands, but the book of Judges shows how Israel failed big time. It was a time of moral chaos that showed Israel's need for wise, faithful leaders. The books of Samuel provide an answer to that need.

The story focuses on three main characters: Samuel, Saul, and David. These three were important leaders whose actions would transition Israel from a group of tribes ruled by judges into a unified kingdom ruled by King David in Jerusalem.

The books have a fascinating design that weaves the stories of these three characters together through four parts (1 Sam 1-7 and 8-31). Samuel is a key leader and prophet through the first section of the book (1 Sam 1-7) is told in two movements: his rise to power and some huge failures (1 Sam 8-15), followed by his downfall and tragic death (1 Sam 16-31). The drama of Saul's demise is matched by David's own exciting rise to power (1 Sam 16-31). David's story is also told in two movements. He first rides the wave of success (2 Sam 1-9), followed by his own tragic failure and the slow self-destruction of his family and kingdom (2 Sam 10-20). All this is concluded by an epilogue (2 Sam 21-24) that reflects back on the whole story.

1 Samuel 1-7: Hannah and the Rise of Samuel

Part one picks up from the chaos shown in the book of Judges. We are introduced to the touching story of a woman named Hannah who is grieved because she has never been able to have children. By God's grace, she finally has a son, Samuel, and in joy she sings an amazing poem in chapter 2. She sings about

how God opposes the proud and exalts the humble, how, despite human evil, God is working out his purposes, and how God will one day raise up an anointed king for his people. Hannah's poem has been placed at the beginning to introduce themes that we will see throughout the story.

Hannah's son Samuel grows up to become a great prophet and leader for the people of Israel as the Philistines rise to power as their enemy (1 Sam 4-7). In a crucial battle, the Israelites become arrogant, and rather than praying, they trot out the ark of the covenant as a kind of magical trophy that will grant them victory in battle. Because of their pridefulness and presumption, God allows Israel to lose the battle, and the ark is stolen. The Philistines take the ark and place it in the temple of their god, Dagon. The God of Israel responds by thoroughly defeating the Philistines and their idols without an army, by sending plagues on them. At this, the Philistines send the ark back to Israel. The point is clear—God is not Israel's trophy, and he opposes pride among both the Philistines and the Israelites. Israel is to remain humble and obedient if they want to experience his covenant blessing.

1 Samuel 8-31: The Downfall of Saul and Rise of David

We continue right on into the next large section (1 Sam 8-31), in which the Israelites go to Samuel and demand a king "just like all the other nations have." Samuel is rightfully angry at this, and he goes to consult God, who responds by saying that, though their motivations are wrong, if it is a king they want, it will be a king they get. From there, we are introduced to Saul.

Saul is a tragic figure who is full of promise, tall, and good looking. He seems like a great candidate for a king, but he has deep character flaws. He's dishonest, lacks integrity, and is unable to acknowledge his mistakes. These traits become his downfall. While he wins some battles, his flaws run so deep that he disqualifies himself by blatantly disobeying God's commands (1 Sam 13 and 15).

The now aging Samuel confronts both Saul and Israel. He had warned the people that they would only benefit from a king who was humble and faithful to God, or else their kings would bring ruin. He then turns to Saul and informs him that God is going to raise up a new king to replace him (1 Sam 15).

So Saul's downfall begins as God works behind the scenes to raise up this new king, an insignificant shepherd boy named David. He is the least likely candidate to be king, but through the famous story of David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17), we are shown that God's choice of David is not based on his status but rather his radical and humble trust in the God of Israel. This story embodies themes in Hannah's poem—the proud Saul and Goliath are brought low while the humble David is exalted.

In 1 Samuel 18-31, we watch Saul slowly descend into madness while David rises to power. David works for Saul as a general, winning all his battles and gaining all the fame. Saul quickly becomes jealous and starts hunting David down in order to kill him. David, however, has done nothing wrong and simply runs away and waits. This shows his true character. Despite multiple opportunities to kill Saul, he doesn't. Instead, he trusts that despite Saul's evil, God will raise up a king for his people. Many of David's poems in the book of Psalms are linked to this very period of his life (Ps. 18, 52, 54, 57, 59, and 63). This section ends with Saul, having failed to find and kill David, coming to a grisly death himself after losing a battle with the Philistines.

The book of 1 Samuel contains some of the most intricately told stories in the Bible, and the characters are portrayed very realistically. The author puts them forward as character studies, so that you may find yourself in them. In Saul's story, we see a warning. It's crucial that we reflect on our own character flaws and how they harm us as well as others. We can see how we need to humble ourselves and, with God's help, deal with our dark sides. David is presented as an example of patience and trust in God's timing in our lives. As he was being chased by Saul, David had every reason to think God had abandoned him, but he didn't. In fact, his story encourages us to trust that, despite human evil, God is working out his purpose to oppose the proud and exalt the humble.

2 Samuel 1-20: God's Covenant With King David (and David's Failure)

The second book of Samuel picks up after Saul's death, and David surprises everyone by composing a long poem lamenting the death of the man who tried to murder him. Once again, the author shows David's humility and compassion. He is a man who grieves the death of even his enemies.

David goes on to experience a season of success and divine blessing. The Israelite tribes all come to David and ask him to unify the tribes as their king. He accepts, and the first thing he does as king is go to Jerusalem, conquer it, establish it as Israel's capital city, and rename it Zion. From there, David continues to win many battles and expand Israel's territory.

After David had made Jerusalem the political capital of Israel, he also wanted to make it their religious capital, so he had the ark of the covenant moved into the city (2 Sam 6). David then tells God that if Israel now has a permanent home, God's presence should also have a place to inhabit, so he asks if he can build a new temple for him. However, God says to David, "Thanks for the thought, but actually I'm going to build you a house—a dynasty."

Now, this is a key chapter for understanding the storyline of the entire Bible. God makes a promise to David that, from his royal line, there will come a future king who will build God's temple on Earth and set up an eternal kingdom. It's this messianic promise to David that gets developed more in the book of Psalms (Ps. 2, 72, 132, and 145) and in the prophets, especially Zechariah. It's this king that is connected to God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 12). The future messianic Kingdom will be how God brings blessing to all nations.

This is a high point for David. And, sadly, it's right here in the midst of God's blessing that things go terribly wrong. David makes a fatal mistake—not fatal for him, that is, but for a man named Uriah, one of David's prized soldiers. From his rooftop, David sees Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, bathing. David finds her, sleeps with her, and gets her pregnant. Then, he tries to cover it all up by having Uriah assassinated and marrying her as soon as she's widowed.

When David is confronted by the prophet Nathan, he immediately owns up to what he's done. He's broken and repents, asking God to forgive him. And God does forgive, but he doesn't erase the consequences of David's decisions. As a result of his horrible choices, David's family starts to fall apart, making this section a tragic story much like Saul's.

David's sons end up reliving their father's mistakes, but in even worse ways. Amnon sexually abuses his sister Tamar, and when their brother Absalom finds out, he has Amnon assassinated (2 Sam 13).

So, for a second time, David is forced to run from his own home and hide in the wilderness, except this time he's not innocent. The rebellion ends when David's son is murdered (2 Sam 18), and this breaks David's heart. Once again, he laments over those who tried to kill him. David's last days find him back on his throne but as a broken man, wounded by the sad consequences of his sin.

2 Samuel 21-24: Epilogue and the Hope for a Greater David

The books of Samuel conclude in chapters 21-24 with a well-crafted epilogue. The stories are out of chronological order because they've been given a symmetrical literary design. The outer pair of stories (2 Sam 21a and 24) come from earlier in David's reign and compare the failures of Saul (2 Sam 21a) and David (2 Sam 24), as well as how they hurt others through their bad decisions.

The next pair of stories (2 Sam 21b and 23b) are about David and his band of "mighty men" fighting the Philistines. What's interesting is that both sections have a story of David's weakness in battle. In contrast to the stories of the heroic, victorious David, here we see a vulnerable David who is dependent on others for help.

The center of the epilogue has two poems that act like memoirs as David reflects on his life (2 Sam 22). He remembers times when God graciously rescued him from danger and sees this as an expression of God's covenant promise, not just to him but to all the world. Both of the poems reflect back on the hope for the future messiah who will build an eternal Kingdom.

David's concluding poems also connect back to Hannah's song that opened the book of 1 Samuel. These poems, at the beginning and end and in 2 Samuel 7 in the center of the book, bring together all the key themes and ideas. Despite Saul and David's evil, God has been at work carrying out his purposes. God opposed their arrogance time after time, and when David humbled himself, he was exalted. By the book's conclusion, the future hope of the final poems reaches far beyond David himself, looking to the future messiah who will bring God's Kingdom and blessing to all nations.

Image credit: Samuel Anointing David, oil on canvas by John Singleton Copley, 1780. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut.