

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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1 Samuel

Strong leadership can make people feel safe when nearby countries are not friendly. During the prophet Samuel's time, Israel dealt with threats outside the nation and problems within the nation. The judges only gave temporary security. Israel wanted a king. The book of 1 Samuel tells how Israel changed from a group of tribes to a united kingdom. Saul was Israel's first king, but he did not remain loyal to God. Then God chose David as king. God's saving plan for Israel and the world became clearer.

Setting

Israel's prophet and leader Moses predicted that the people of Israel would ask for a king to rule over them ([Deuteronomy 17:14–20](#)). God outlined the requirements for a king ([Deuteronomy 17:15](#)). But he also warned about the common problems with human kings. A king might desire many horses, numerous wives, and large amounts of gold and silver ([Deuteronomy 17:16–17](#)). To reduce these tendencies, God instructed that each king of Israel must study God's law ([Deuteronomy 17:18–20](#)).

During the time of the judges, Israel's tribes were not united (see [Judges 17–21](#)). By the prophet Samuel's time, Israel wanted a king to unite the nation and protect it from threats inside and outside the nation.

Gideon, who judged Israel about one hundred years before Samuel, acted much like a king. But he refused to start a family line of kings ([Judges 8:22–23](#)). He gathered gold and used it to create a religious idol (statue of a false god) ([Judges 8:24–27](#)). He took many wives, and named one of his sons "Abimelech," meaning "my father is king" ([Judges 8:30,31](#)). Gideon acted like the kind of king God did not want Israel to have.

A monarchy (a government led by one person) would give a limited human more control than the judges had. The book of 1 Samuel describes the problems with Israel's first king, Saul. It begins to show God's plan to establish an eternal kingdom through the family line of David.

Summary

In [1 Samuel 1-7](#), Samuel becomes a judge and prophet of God. Samuel was born to a woman named Hannah dedicated to God. She had been unable to have children before ([1:1-23](#)). Samuel was a Levite (from the tribe of Levi). As a young child, he trained in the tabernacle under Eli the priest ([1 Chronicles 6:33-34](#); [1:24-3:18](#)). Though probably trained to be a tabernacle assistant, Samuel became a prophet with an increasing reputation ([3:19-4:1a](#)). Being absent from the story, he was not yet prominent in Israel's national life when the Philistines troubled the Israelites and captured the ark of the covenant ([4:1-7:2](#)). In chapter [7](#), Samuel appears again and calls Israel to reject sin (repent). As a judge, he drives out the Philistine opponents.

Samuel led as a Levite, prophet, and judge, influencing all areas of public life. However, his sons were not fit to succeed him ([8:1-3](#)). So Israel asked Samuel to appoint a king like other nations had. Samuel strongly opposed this request ([8:10-21](#)).

But the Lord told him to anoint Saul as king (chapters [9-10](#)). In his goodbye speech, Samuel reminded the Israelites of God's power and care (chapter [12](#)). He wanted them to understand their mistake in asking for a king instead of trusting the Lord.

At first, Saul was a good king. He defeated the nearby Ammonites and saved Jabesh-gilead from destruction (chapter [11](#)). However, Saul soon showed through his refusal to obey God that he was not fit to be Israel's king (chapters [13, 15](#)). In contrast, Saul's noble son Jonathan seemed like an ideal successor ([14:1-52](#)). But Jonathan did not succeed Saul because God had different plans (chapters [16-31](#)). God told Samuel to anoint David in secret as Saul's successor while Saul was still king ([16:1-13](#)).

Saul and David first had a good relationship, partly because of David's musical talent ([16:14-23](#)). However, David's victory over the Philistine Goliath made Saul jealous ([17:1-58](#); [18:6-16](#)). Saul saw David as a threat to his rule and tried to remove him. He married David into his family to create more chances to harm him ([18:17-29](#)). Saul also attacked David directly ([19:1-10](#)). Saul killed anyone who helped David (chapters [21-22](#)). Despite all this, Saul could not defeat David.

Saul and Jonathan died in a battle against the Philistines ([31:1-6](#)). This allowed David to start his rule, but he encountered more challenges (see [2 Samuel 1:1-5:5](#)).

Author

The title "Samuel" refers to Samuel's key role in Israel's shift to a kingdom, not because he wrote the book. Samuel might have written parts of 1 Samuel. But he could not have written any part of 2 Samuel, since [1 Samuel 25:1](#) records his death. The final editor of 1 Samuel remains unknown.

Composition

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book. The translators of the Septuagint (the ancient Greek Old Testament) divided it into two books called 1 and 2 Kingdoms. Later, Hebrew tradition also divided the book but kept the name "Samuel," as do most English versions.

Some scholars believe that they created 1-2 Samuel (also 1-2 Kings, originally one book) from various sources during or after the Israelites went into exile in Babylon (586–538 BC). It is probable that they used multiple sources in 1-2 Samuel. For example, Samuel, Nathan, and Gad all recorded events from David's life ([1 Chronicles 29:29](#)). The author of 1-2 Samuel would have used this information. However, the book might have been nearly complete during or shortly after Solomon's rule (971–931 BC).

Shortly after Judah's exile to Babylon, the books of 1 and 2 Samuel became part of a larger collection that also includes Joshua, Judges, and 1 and 2 Kings. This section of Scripture traces Israel's sacred history. It begins with blessing, as they conquer the land. It ends with judgment, as they lose the land. It explains to an audience in exile how their great tragedy happened.

Manuscripts

The Greek Old Testament, also called the Septuagint (from the 200s BC), has many differences from the Hebrew version of 1-2 Samuel. The Hebrew text that most Bibles use today is called the Masoretic Text. It was copied around AD 1000. The Dead Sea Scrolls (from about 250–50 BC) contain Hebrew texts of Samuel. These sometimes agree with the Greek Septuagint, sometimes with the Masoretic Text, and sometimes have their own readings. Because of this, Bibles often include notes in 1-2 Samuel. These may say, “Hebrew lacks...” or “Greek reads...” Such notes appear more often in Samuel than in most other Old Testament books. Even so, only a few of these differences change the meaning in important ways.

Meaning and Message

The focus on kinship in 1 Samuel first appears in Hannah's prayer (see [2:10](#)). The idea of Israel having a king dates back to God's promise to Abraham and Sarah ([Genesis 17:6, 16](#)). God did not require or prohibit a monarchy. But he outlined the behaviors Israel's kings must avoid (see [Deuteronomy 17:14–20](#)).

During the time of the judges, Israel's spiritual and national state became much worse. This decline reaches a terrible high point in [Judges 17–21](#). The book of Judges suggests that Israel needed a king to help fix this decline. Israel's biggest threat was not the Philistines or other nearby enemies. Israel itself was the problem, violating the covenant (special agreement) with God. Israel needed a king to protect the covenant. This was at risk under the government structure before Israel was ruled by kings.

The king had to manage the covenant requirements ([Deuteronomy 17:18–20](#)). The prophet had to explain its rules. Because of this, the prophet Samuel was fierce in defending the authority God gave him over kings. Samuel anointed Israel's first two kings ([1 Samuel 10:1; 16:13](#)). He also had to correct the king when he violated covenant rules ([13:8–15; 15:10–33](#)).

Saul lacked the character and integrity to lead Israel into a successful monarchy that honored God. God did not destine Saul to fail. He had control over his choices. God wanted him to be a good king and provided everything needed for that. God even changed Saul's will and gave him his Holy Spirit. However, God does not force acting right, holy living, or obeying. God offers his grace, but people must choose to obey.

Even in the difficult time of the judges and the start of kings in Israel, God's control over history was clear:

1. A woman who could not have children gave birth to Samuel. He helped Israel move into the time of kings (chapter [1](#)).
2. The Philistines won a great victory, but God turned it into defeat without human help (chapters [4–6](#)).
3. The king the people asked for became God's chosen king (chapters [8–10](#)).

4. God later rejected this king because he was unfaithful (chapters [13, 15](#)).

5. The youngest son of an unknown family, a man who followed God's heart, was chosen as Israel's future king (chapter [16](#)).

David's rule over Israel endured, unlike Saul's. One of those descended from David later became the king of the whole world. Jesus is the final family member to inherit David's throne ([John 7:42; Revelation 5:5; 11:15](#)). He continues his ancestor's virtues but does not show his flaws. Jesus is the world's perfect and eternal shepherd and king.