

# I. Getting Our Bearings in Samuel

## Introduction

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are full of the sorts of ingredients that make great movies. There are kings and queens, adventurers, prophets, insignificant people who make good, adulterers, warriors, failed parents, people with deep psychological impairment, as well as individuals going about ordinary life who find themselves inadvertently swept up into events that shape the destiny of a nation and of all humanity. We find such elements as intrigue, incest, murder and mayhem, lust and shame, children pitted against parents, women struggling with infertility, and war with all its valour and brutality.

We might find it hard wading through books such as Leviticus and Numbers, but these two books of Samuel rarely let up in their excitement and their exploration and analysis of human character. This gripping narrative engages and excites us as readers, it is a real blockbuster. The result is that these two books have rightly won a significant place deep in the memories of God's ancient

Jewish people as well as Christians. These are books that delight and inspire.

The period covered by the books of Samuel is one of enormous transition and change. At the beginning of 1 Samuel we find Israel in the position of being a loose tribal federation of largely agrarian peoples facing both internal pressure because everyone was doing ‘what was right in their own eyes’ (Judg. 17:6; 21:25 ESV) and also facing significant external military pressure (e.g. 1 Sam. 4–7; 11; 13–14) as well as internal religious threat (1 Sam. 1–3). However, when we arrive at the final page of 2 Samuel we find a reasonably settled monarchy under David characterised by relative internal cohesion and benefitting from external success against its oppressors.

These books, however, are not simply great stories or chronicles of the transition from the period of the judges to that of the kings. They are profoundly theological works with a deep theocentric focus. They tell the story of God the King negotiating and overseeing the future of His people in the midst of His people who are tarred with the same brush as their spiritual ancestors, Adam and Eve, and who are therefore constantly at risk of supplanting God’s kingship with their own. Because these books focus on such deep theological matters, they exercise enormous influence on Christian faith. They raise issues of messiahship and the Davidic kingship. They give us some of the key titles by which we know Jesus our Lord and they form the backdrop for many New Testament themes and presentations of Jesus.

For all these reasons and more, it is very important that the books of Samuel are heard and explained in Christian pulpits and explored in Bible study groups. That said, it

is also important that the task of bringing their message to God's people is undertaken with due care, so that we who do the task may have no need to be ashamed as we rightly handle the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

The focus of the pages which comprise this first part of this book is therefore multifaceted. First, we will need to briefly get our bearings in terms of some of the more technical background issues that affect interpretation of the book. Second, we will need to ponder more deeply why the effort of preaching and teaching these two books is important and worthwhile. Third, particularly in view of the size of these books, we will need to consider the best way of approaching them as potential teachers and preachers. In the subsequent parts, which will stretch into a second volume, we will work our way through the whole of 1 and 2 Samuel and suggest ways in which it might be preached and taught. At the end of each volume suggestions are made as to further resources that might be useful in undertaking this task.

## What Are We Dealing With?

### *Name and Origin*

The attachment of Samuel's name to the books of Samuel appears to be because of his prominent role in the early chapters of 1 Samuel and possibly from the fact that from early times (e.g. the Talmud) he was also considered to be the author (probably based on 1 Chron. 29:29, which talks about 'the records of Samuel the seer'), with chapters subsequent to his death considered to be the work of the prophets Nathan and Gad (see also 1 Chron. 29:29).

Like many other parts of the Old Testament, the text of Samuel itself makes no suggestions regarding authorship

and it is not possible with any certainty to give a date when the books reached the form in which we have them now. That said, there are indications that various sources such as those mentioned above were used to compile the books and there is no reason why these and others (e.g. the Book of Jashar; 2 Sam. 1:18) may not have been contemporaneous to the events themselves.

No matter how these sources came together and were shaped into their final form, there are strong indications that the books as we have them are considerably shaped by the theological interests of the Torah, and the overall presentation of Israel's history that stretches from Joshua to the end of the books of Kings.

The books of Samuel were originally not two books but one. They were probably first divided into two for the practical reason of accommodating standard scroll size when the Greek-speaking Jewish community translated them into Greek.<sup>1</sup> Since the Greek translation of the Old Testament was the major Old Testament for Christians, it was inevitable that they followed this division even though the Jews themselves did not make the division until the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

Dividing the books where they did was probably motivated by the death of the major figure of Saul. That said, it is not an entirely helpful place, in that it not only separates the two accounts of the death of Saul, but also results in the division of David's rise to power which begins in 1 Samuel 16 but does not reach its climax until 2 Samuel 5. Nevertheless, given the logic behind it and the fact that the readers in

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1. The resulting division was 1 and 2 Kingdoms or 1 and 2 Reigns (i.e. Samuel), followed by 3 and 4 Kingdoms/Reigns (i.e. 1 and 2 Kings which, like Samuel, was originally one book).

our congregations have received it this way, it may very well shape the way in which we break the book up into blocks for the purposes of preaching and teaching.

### *Literature*

The books of Samuel are therefore fundamentally one book and ought to be treated this way.<sup>2</sup> Whatever its origin and its sources, this book was written by an author who wished to convey a particular message and to accomplish a particular purpose. In the process of doing this he draws on various sources and brings them together using a whole host of literary devices and storytelling skill through which he carefully constructed this large and entrancing work that is full of history and God but also theology, pathos, humour, and things which are both beautiful and fearful. The art and skill of this author is such that it is also rightfully recognised as a classic work of literature.

This then is the first way in which we must approach Samuel. We must read it as literature and as story. In other words, we observe its literary dimensions, catching its drama, watching out for, and being drawn in by the author's literary skill and technique. For this reason, let me encourage you if you haven't done so already, to sit down and read it all the way through. Even better, since it was undoubtedly written to be listened to rather than read or read aloud instead of reading silently, start the process of being a preacher and teacher of God's Word by listening to it read aloud in large slabs. Why not get hold of a copy

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2. From this point on, the singular 'Samuel' will not only be used to refer to the person of Samuel but also the two books as a whole. This language is not only a convenient shorthand but also acknowledges that they were originally one work and should be considered together as this.