

1 and 2 Samuel

ORIENTING DATA FOR 1 AND 2 SAMUEL

- **Content:** the transition from the last judge, Samuel, to the first king, Saul; the rise and reign of David
- **Historical coverage:** from Samuel's birth (ca. 1100 B.C.) to the end of David's kingship (970 B.C.)
- **Emphases:** the beginning of kingship in Israel; the concern over kingship and covenant loyalty; the ark of the covenant as representing God's presence; the choice of Jerusalem as "the City of David"; the Davidic covenant with its messianic overtones; David's adultery and its consequences

OVERVIEW OF 1 AND 2 SAMUEL

The books of Samuel and Kings together form a continuous history of the Israelite monarchy from the time of Samuel to its demise in 587/6 B.C. It is important as you read them to remember that in the Hebrew Bible they belong to the Former Prophets. Like the books of the Latter Prophets, these books present God's perspective on the history of his people; although they concentrate on Israel's kings, prophets play an important role as well.

The book of Samuel tells the story from the beginnings of kingship to the declining years of David's reign. The story centers on three key people: *Samuel*, the last of the judges and the prophet who anoints the first two kings; *Saul*, Israel's first king; and *David*, Israel's most important king. The book itself is in four basic parts, related to these three men.

Part 1 is about Samuel alone (1 Sam 1–7). Essential here are the birth, call, and early career of Samuel (1:1–4:1a) and the loss and return of the ark of the covenant (4:1b–7:1), followed eventually by a great victory over the Philistines (7:2–14).

In part 2 (1 Sam 8–15), Samuel and Saul overlap. Two matters are essential here: (1) Yahweh's affirmations of and warnings about the monarchy (chs. 8–12; cf. Deut 17:14–20) and (2) the beginning of Saul's reign and Yahweh's rejection of him as king (1 Sam 13–15).

In part 3 (1 Sam 16–31), Saul and David overlap. Its essential story is told at the beginning and the end: the anointing of David to replace Saul as king (16:1–13) and the death of Saul and his heir apparent, Jonathan (ch. 31). Thus it is all about David's rise and Saul's decline, as well as Saul's constant pursuit of David in order to kill the upstart rival to his dynasty.

Part 4 (2 Samuel) concentrates on David—although concern over Saul continues (chs. 1–4; 9; 21)—while Nathan (chs. 7, 12) and Gad (ch. 24) now don the prophetic mantle of Samuel.

ca. *circa*, about, approximately

Chapters 1–9 set out the basic story of David’s reign, the most significant part of which is the covenant in chapter 7 that establishes David’s dynasty “forever” (vv. 15–16). Chapters 10–20 narrate David’s sin with Bathsheba that becomes a catalyst to expose the internal weaknesses in David’s family and the tenuous nature of the united kingdom. Chapters 21–24 are a kind of reflective appendix to the story of David.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 1 AND 2 SAMUEL

The book of Samuel is full of many intriguing and riveting individual stories. But this very fact, which makes reading Samuel so interesting, can also cause you to miss some significant things with regard to the bigger picture of the story of Israel. To read Samuel well, you need to be aware of a few of these, especially some Deuteronomic themes that pervade the whole.

The history itself takes place roughly over the eleventh century B.C., a time when no superpower is a major player in Palestine (see “Specific Advice for Reading Joshua,” p. 65). Thus the time was ripe for a strong local power to arise and subdue the others, which was precisely what David did (see 2 Sam 8). The major obstacle to such a program came not from the Canaanites but from the Philistines, whom you first meet in the book of Judges (Shamgar, Samson). They were sea peoples who had settled on the Mediterranean coast and held sway over the coastal area (and often further inland) from their five major cities (Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron). It is their influence that pushes the Israelite tribes toward the unification and protection afforded by the monarchy, and it is their presence that lies behind so much of the story of the book of Samuel, until David defeats them “in the course of time” (2 Sam 8:1).

The book of Samuel, therefore, is especially the story of transitions—from the periodic, partial rule of judges to an institutionalized, hereditary monarchy; from a king who looks like the typical Near Eastern king (warned about by Samuel as a prophet, 1 Sam 8:10–18) to one who is loyal to Yahweh; from no central place where God’s Name dwells to a new center in Jerusalem. All of this is marvelously told—with wit, irony, suspense, wordplays—but above all with an eye to what God is doing with and among his people, even as he gives them a king.

One of the central (Deuteronomic) concerns of the book, evident in the structure itself, is the true worship of God at the place of his dwelling (his presence). This theme begins with a prophecy against the house of Eli because they “scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling” (1 Sam 2:29). Then chapters 4–7 focus on the ark of the covenant, whose capture meant “the glory has departed from Israel” (4:22). Later, a central feature of David’s reign is his bringing the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6), where he desires to build a temple for it, but is forbidden (ch. 7). And the book ends with David’s building an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah (24:18–25), which the intended reader would know is the precise place where the temple will eventually stand.

Linked to this is another theme that is a central feature of the narrative, namely, the tension between monarchy and covenant loyalty. You will see how this is set up near the beginning—in the contrasting sentiments between Samuel and the people in 1 Samuel 8–12. As the story proceeds, you are regularly reminded that even divinely appointed kings can, and do, act like other kings (as warned about in Deut 17:14–20). Yet David’s essential loyalty to Yahweh lies at the heart of the story, and God covenants with him that his dynasty will endure forever (2 Sam 7)—a covenant that becomes a central feature in much of the rest of God’s story.

Note how this tension lies at the heart of the contrasting stories of Saul and David (1 Sam 16–31). At issue in the end for our narrator is not *whether* Israel has a king, but *what kind of king* they will have. Key to this is whether the king will both be *faithful* to Yahweh and display Yahweh’s *character*, since whatever else is true about Israel’s king, he is to be the earthly representative of Yahweh’s own kingship over Israel. Thus, even though Saul is anointed by Samuel and appears to begin well, there are deep flaws in his character, many of which are already subtly present at the beginning. At the end he is rejected because he thinks like any other king—that he is above the law and can act autonomously. Moreover, the prophetic tradition in Israel, represented by Samuel and Nathan, serves as a constant reminder that kings were *not* autonomous. Israel may indeed have rejected theocracy (the direct rule by God) for monarchy (1 Sam 8), but the role of her king was to mediate Yahweh’s rule in Israel and thus to *lead God’s people in obedience* to Yahweh.

A similar ambivalence pervades the story of David’s reign as well (2 Sam 5–20). The fact that David’s *kingly* exploits are merely summarized in 2 Samuel 8 while the story of his *sin* and the evil it let loose in the kingdom is narrated in considerable detail (chs. 10–20) should get our attention! Thus the narrator reminds us in various ways of David’s genuine loyalty to Yahweh, not least by his placing the two great poems of David’s devotion and praise to the Lord (22:1–23:7) as the centerpiece of his summarizing appendix (chs. 21–24). Yet this picture of “the man of faith” (21:15–17; 23:13–17) is set in the context of “the man of weakness” (24:1–17)—but who, when confronted with his sin, repents by means of prayer and sacrifice.

You will also want to watch for two parts of a subplot from Genesis (see “Specific Advice for Reading Genesis, p. 26) that mark this story as well: (1) the barren-woman motif that begins the story of Samuel (echoed in a variety of ways in Luke 1) and (2) God’s choice of the “lesser” to fulfill his covenant purposes (David the shepherd boy).

There is one other important matter to keep in mind as you read, which leads to how this narrative fits into the metanarrative of the biblical story. In the ancient Near East the king was considered both the embodiment of his people (that is, he stood in for them at all times as their representative) and the representative of the deity for the people (cf. Ps 2:7, where the Davidic king is called “God’s Son”). This is why Samuel and Kings tell the story of Israel almost exclusively as the story of their kings—and why the king speaks for the people in the Psalter. But this also explains why kingship was such a frightening prospect in Israel. At the same time, however, the role of David in the biblical story is affirmed, for in the end it is David’s greater Son who comes as the true *embodiment* of Israel while also, as the true Son of God, *representing* God to Israel. This is why Jesus’ kingship plays such an important role in the New Testament telling of his story¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 82–85.