

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

First and Second Samuel tell the story of a crucial century early in Israel's life. After introducing Samuel himself, they relate how Saul became king and failed as king, and how David became king and also then went through crises. The story takes the Israelites from being a loose collection of clans living in homesteads, villages, and small townships to being a state with a capital and a central government, with a king whose son will succeed him and with prophets who support him and/or confront him. The Israelites share a relationship with their God who lives among them. At the beginning of the story he is living above the "covenant chest" (the "ark") in a sanctuary at Shiloh; by the end of the story the sanctuary has come to be located in the capital city and their king is planning to build a temple there. At the beginning of the story they are under pressure from the Philistines to the west and north; at the end of the story they are in control of an area corresponding to the modern bounds of Israel and Palestine along with much of what is now Jordan and Syria. These epoch-making developments take place over a period of a few decades, the reign of two kings, maybe from about 1070 BC to about 970 BC. The focus of the story does not lie simply on these developments but on the human and family processes and events associated with them – the family origins of the first prophet, Samuel, the conflicts between the first

king, Saul, and his apparent rival, and the family conflicts of this rival, David, when he becomes the second king.

Three related theological paradoxes emerge from this process and constitute central features of the theology of Samuel. Yahweh is ambivalent about the introduction of a monarchy that made this development possible. Events involve Yahweh's activity and also human initiative. And both the first two kings whom Yahweh chose were religiously and morally ambiguous characters.

Whereas First and Second Samuel appear as two books in modern Hebrew and English Bibles, the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Batra* 14b) refers to Samuel as one book, and it is one book in Hebrew manuscripts, including the Masoretic Text. First Samuel is a coherent unit with a proper beginning (Samuel's birth) and a meaningful end (Saul's death), "but when read together with 2 Samuel these elements increasingly appear in retrospect to have been a tragic episode en route to something else."¹ If one were to attach a single name to the entire work as its subject, it would be David.² This volume thus studies "Samuel" as a whole; the context should make clear when Samuel refers to the book and when it refers to the prophet Samuel. The division between Samuel and Kings is slightly odd, since it is 1 Kings 1–2 that brings the David story to an end. Kings thus leads seamlessly on from Samuel, and the Septuagint is onto something when it describes Samuel-Kings as the "Four Books of Reigns." But 2 Samuel does come to a conclusion of its own, and 1 Kings

¹ Stephen B. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 46.

² A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1–2; Robert Alter's title for his study is *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999).

1–2 is the beginning of Solomon’s story as well as the end of David’s.

Like most of the Scriptures, Samuel is anonymous, and we can only make informed guesses about the process whereby it came into being.

- The Talmud (*Baba Batra* 15a) goes on to name Samuel as the book’s author, but it then qualifies that statement by adding that Gad and Nathan completed the work after Samuel’s death. Samuel is indeed a key figure in the book, as the person who anoints first Saul and then David. There is hard information in the book that would need to go back to the time of David and Solomon, and one can imagine that people in that time would be interested in having an account of how the monarchy came into being and how David and Solomon came to the throne.³ Scholarly theories have inferred that from that time there were indeed accounts of Samuel, of the adventures of the covenant chest, of the rise of David, and of the story of David’s family that was background to Solomon’s succeeding him, accounts that were incorporated into the book as we have it.
- The nearest thing within Samuel to a concrete clue about its origin lies in its references to things that remain true “now” or

³ See, for example, David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Moshe Garsiel, “The Book of Samuel: Its Composition, Structure and Significance as a Historiographical Source,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 10/5 (2010); Andrew Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East*, Writings from the Ancient World 4 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2015), 161–248; Lester L. Grabbe, “Mighty Men of Israel: 1–2 Samuel and Historicity,” in W. Dietrich, ed., *The Books of Samuel: Stories–History–Reception History*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 84 (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 83–104.

“today” (1 Sam 5:5; 6:18; 9:9; 27:6; 30:25; 2 Sam 4:3; 6:8; 18:18), but they do not indicate when “now” or “today” is, except in one reference to the kings of Judah (1 Sam 27:6). This note, then, comes from a time following the split between Ephraim and Judah after Solomon’s day, and before the end of the Judahite monarchy in 587. Theologians with a “prophetic” outlook in the time of Isaiah or Jeremiah might have generated a version of the story of the monarchy that incorporated those earlier materials.⁴ In Jewish thinking, Samuel is part of “The Former Prophets,” while an influential scholarly theory links a first edition of the narrative as a whole with the time of King Josiah, the late seventh century.⁵

- The next nearest thing to a clue is the narrative’s raising the question of who will succeed David and build the temple, but not answering the question, and leaving David’s story hanging in midair. Other points of connection suggest that Samuel is written in a way that makes links with what will follow in Kings. The Septuagint’s seeing Samuel and Kings as the four books of Reigns coheres with the possibility of seeing Samuel and Kings as a two-part work telling the story of the monarchic period as a whole from its beginnings to its caesura in 587 BC. Perhaps the books originally belonged

⁴ See, for example, Antony F. Campbell, *Of Prophets and Kings: A Late Ninth-Century Document (1 Samuel 1–2 Kings 10)*, CBQ Monograph Series 17 (Washington, DC: CBA, 1986); P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, AB 8 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 18–23 – he emphasizes the northern background of the story.

⁵ See, for example, Richard D. Nelson, *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 18 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); P. Kyle McCarter, “The Books of Samuel,” in Steven L. McKenzie and M. Patrick Graham, ed., *The History of Israel’s Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth*, JSOTSup 182 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 260–80.

together like Exodus–Leviticus–Numbers, and like them they were subdivided for convenience, as Samuel itself was subdivided later. Samuel, then, more or less as we have it belongs in the time after 587 BC.⁶

- There is more than average difference between the versions of Samuel in MT, in the Septuagint, and in the fragmentary manuscripts among the Qumran scrolls.⁷ The marginal notes in modern translations indicate that they often follow these other versions of the book; I have usually stayed with MT. The existence of these slightly different versions indicates that Jewish teachers were still working on the book in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, perhaps in different contexts in Judah, Egypt, and Babylon. Indeed, as an aspect of scholarly inclination to ask whether the First Testament as a whole largely comes from the Second Temple era, it has been suggested that this period was the key one in which Samuel came into existence.⁸

Different groups of modern scholars are more inclined to focus on one or other of these periods as fundamental to an

⁶ According to traditional critical theories, it then forms part of the Deuteronomistic History: on which see, for example, Cynthia Edenburg and Juha Pakkala, ed., *Is Samuel Among the Deuteronomists? Current Views on the Place of Samuel in a Deuteronomistic History*, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 16 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2013).

⁷ See, for example, Philippe Hugo and Adrian Schenker, ed., *Archaeology of the Books of Samuel: The Entangling of the Textual and Literary History*, VTSup 132 (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Philippe Hugo, “1–2 Kingdoms (1–2 Samuel),” in *The T&T Clark Companion to the Septuagint*, ed. James K. Aitken (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 127–46; Frank Moore Cross et al., *Qumran Cave 4.XII: 1–2 Samuel*, Discoveries in the Judaean Desert 17 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Ariel Feldman, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Rewriting Samuel and Kings: Texts and Commentary*, BZAW 469 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015).

⁸ See, for example, John Van Seters, *The Biblical Saga of King David* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009).

understanding of the book, and I will occasionally draw attention to the way the story might have come home in different periods. My own hunch regarding the process is that the second of the four stages above is the key one; the crucial creative work on the book happened in Jerusalem sometime during the divided monarchy. With any narrative, it can be worth asking what is the key question it seeks to answer, and a key question in Samuel might then be, “How did we come to have kings, anyway?” The vagaries of the Judahite monarchy could make this a natural question. More specifically the question might be, “Who was this David, who continues to be so important to us?” David’s significance as the first great king, as the recipient of Yahweh’s promise, and as the benchmark by which Judahite monarchs are measured in Kings, would also make this question natural.

An understanding of Shakespeare’s plays (for instance) benefits from a knowledge of the period in which they were written, yet they make sense, stand, and speak independently of such knowledge. Likewise, the Samuel narrative makes sense, stands, and speaks independently of our being sure which period it comes from. Like other works from the ancient world such as the Iliad, it needs to be understood against the broad historical background of its culture, but within that broad context, more insight emerges from reading it in its own right as a narrative than from focusing on questions about precise historical background.

While the book does not reveal its author’s identity, then, we can infer what kind of person it was. He or she

- had research access to state records and existent accounts of events in the time of Samuel, Saul and David;
- had the skill and education to write a work of some length – in other words, he or she was a scribe, and someone who would be at home in the circles of the “wise”;

- was gifted with the literary ability to paint a creative portrait of events, to imagine conversations that people had, and to work out what they would be thinking;
- had a prophetic sensitivity to what Yahweh was doing in this sequence of events and to what Yahweh thought of events as they developed;
- knew that Yahweh was at work in them but also knew that he mostly works behind the scenes through or despite the actions of human beings;
- had a prophetic perspective in emphasizing faithfulness, proper government, commitment, and truthfulness (*ṣədāqâ, mišpāt, ḥesed, ’emet/’ēmûnâ*) and the need for kings to heed prophets;
- affirmed a commitment to the worship of Yahweh in the sanctuaries and eventually in the temple in Jerusalem but did not work with a specifically priestly perspective;
- was broad-minded, confident, and fearless in painting a portrait of people such as Eli, Samuel, Saul, David, and Joab;
- yet was then confident enough to leave the story’s audience to come to their own assessment of these individuals in their complexity;
- emphasized the role of significant women, beginning with Hannah, almost ending with Rizpah, and including Abigail, Michal, Bathsheba, Tamar, and the smart woman in 2 Samuel 14;⁹
- and was fervently pro-Israel over against nations such as Moab and Ammon, but open-minded in relation to foreigners such as Uriah and Araunah.

⁹ Cf. Susan M. Pigott, “Wives, Witches and Wise Women: Prophetic Heralds of Kingship in 1 and 2 Samuel,” *Review and Expositor* 99 (2002): 145–73.

If one wanted a figure to whom one might attach the work in one's imagination, then it might be Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14–20).

While Samuel opens in a way that could constitute an absolute beginning (it compares with the beginning to Ruth), it can be seen as continuing from Joshua and Judges, which link forward to it. Broadly it is thus part of the much longer story that runs from Joshua to Kings (the “Former Prophets”) or from Deuteronomy to Kings (the “Deuteronomistic History”) or from Genesis to Kings (the “First History”). In Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah (the “Second History”), Chronicles then retells the story from the end of Saul's life onwards in an account of David that focuses on his preparations for the building of the temple and reflects its context in the Second Temple period. Samuel, then, forms part of Israel's story from its origins to the end of the monarchy, and in relating the story of the monarchy's origins, it has an important place in that narrative.

To understand the working of the sequence of scrolls from Genesis to Kings, an illuminating model is a sequence of television series. As Series Eight in the sequence that runs from Genesis to Kings, Samuel picks up issues left unresolved in Series Seven, tells its own story, and closes with unresolved questions that make the audience continue into Series Nine.

Like many television series and movies, Samuel is not simply history, but neither is it historical fiction. It is dramatized, visionary history, not chronological, objective history. While it concerns itself with things that happened, it uses imagination to discern what sort of thing people could appropriately have said, felt, and thought, and what will help the audience understand the significance of what was happening.

In the First Testament, there are works that are close to chronological history (e.g., parts of 2 Kings) and works that are close

to fiction (e.g., Jonah), and scholarly views on Samuel's historical value vary. Whereas figures in Kings such as Omri and Hezekiah feature in other Middle Eastern documents, we have no mention of Saul or David, though an inscription from Tel Dan does refer to "the house of David." The book covers a period when Assyria and Egypt were in decline, which could make David freer to assert himself in the region than would have been possible at some other times. Other peoples such as the Aramaeans, the Ammonites, and the Philistines were doing the same. In this sense, David's story is historically plausible. But intensive scholarly research over two centuries has not generated progress in agreement on Samuel's historical value. It surely never will. There are scholars who believe that the narrative is simply factual and scholars who believe it is pure fiction. While my working assumption is that it is something in between, I do not know which pole it is nearer to. On one hand, I assume that people such as Hannah, Eli, Saul, David, Abigail, Mephiboshet, and Bathsheba indeed lived in Israel in the eleventh and tenth centuries and lived the kind of lives that Samuel relates. In this sense they are like people such as Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, and Gedaliah in 2 Kings. While the Christian description of Joshua to Nehemiah as "The Historical Books" may give readers a narrow or thin perspective, it is not totally inappropriate.¹⁰ But in telling these people's stories, Samuel uses the techniques of the story of Jonah in imagining their lives, thinking, and conversations. It sits between Homer and Herodotus as a work that relates a historical story in an imaginative way.

Studying the Samuel narrative is then again comparable with studying Shakespeare's "historical" plays. One can investigate

¹⁰ See further Rachele Gilmour, *Representing the Past: A Literary Analysis of Narrative Historiography in the Book of Samuel*, VTSup 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

their sources and the historical events to which they refer, and/or study the plays themselves and their theology or ethics or ideology. The forms of study have different aims. In this volume we are concerned with “the plays.” Actually, “you wouldn’t go to *Macbeth* to learn about the history of Scotland – you go to it to learn what a man feels like after he has gained a kingdom and lost his soul.”¹¹

Samuel has a further parallel with (post)modern drama. It is quite common for individual episodes in a television series to jump forward and backward, and to make such jumps within an episode. So it is with Samuel. First Samuel 13–15 comprises two accounts of Yahweh’s decision to terminate Saul’s reign or not allow him to be the beginning of a dynasty. These accounts directly follow on his accession as king and they are but the beginning of an account of his reign. They function to tell the auditors where the story is going. But their message is not presupposed by the chapters that follow, which tell the auditors how Saul’s story eventually reached this denouement. Samuel’s own story constitutes a series of snapshots from his birth, his summons maybe twenty years later, his challenge to turn to Yahweh another twenty years later, and his old age (though he then takes fifteen chapters to die). In David’s story, the sequence of material in 2 Samuel 2–10 is as much thematic as chronological, though 2 Samuel 11–20 follows a more connected chronological sequence. The closing chapters, 2 Samuel 21–24, then comprise a collection of songs of praise, lists, and stories from different periods, to bring the book to an end. Thus the order of the book is often dramatic rather than chronological.

Further, several writers, directors, and producers of a television series may contribute different episodes. The Samuel scroll brings

¹¹ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 64; cf. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture*, 92.

together material of various kinds from various origins, with less concern for smoothness than normally obtains in television. The material includes:

- An account of Samuel's origins (1 Sam 1–4:1a).
- Within it, Hannah's thanksgiving in 2:1–10 stands out as a separable unit.
- A narrative about the covenant chest (4:1b–7:1).
- An account of how Saul came to be king (7:2–12:25).
- More positive and more negative accounts of the idea of having a king.¹²
- A narrative about how Samuel rejected Saul (13:1–16:13).
- Two stories about Yahweh's dismissal of Saul, which opens the way for David.
- A substantial narrative about how David comes to succeed Saul (1 Sam 16:14–2 Sam 4:12). It includes several examples of where two stories go over the same ground: two about David's introduction to Saul (16:14–23; 17:1–40), two about the Ziphites betraying David to Saul (23:19–28; 26:1–5), and two about David refraining from killing Saul when he has the chance (24:1–22[2–23]; 26:6–25).
- An account of David's actually becoming king and his success as king (2 Sam 5:1–10:19).
- A substantial narrative about the great failures of David's life and the consequences regarding the question of who will succeed him (11:1–20:25).
- Some closing footnotes to David's story (21:1–24:25).

¹² See Marsha White, "'The History of Saul's Rise': Saulide State Propaganda in 1 Samuel 1–14," in Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley, ed., *A Wise and Discerning Mind: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*, Brown Judaic Studies (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2020), 271–92.

While the broad structure and plot of the work is clear, it does not provide explicit markers of a structure, so any structure of the kind just outlined comes in part from the imagination of the reader; other commentators lay it out differently.¹³

There are many ways to do Old or New Testament theology, as is revealed by a glance at the volumes in the series to which this volume belongs and its companion series on the New Testament. Different approaches allow different insights to emerge from the text. Samuel is a narrative book, which makes for a distinctive approach to doing theology and has distinctive implications for reflection on its theological significance. This fact is more obvious since the “literary turn” in the Humanities during the last decades of the twentieth century, which affected biblical studies and issued in a number of illuminating studies of Samuel.¹⁴ These literary studies have especially worked with the regular focuses of literary study, particularly the human characters; in this volume we work more with the theological implications of the narrative.

The characteristics of Samuel’s theological approach as a narrative need not be unique to a narrative book, but they come out particularly clearly in a narrative book.

- It focuses more on something that God did do, once, than on general statements about what God always does. It thus invites readers to live in a world in which God did this thing once.
- Yet it also speaks about things that God and people recurrently do. It thus invites people to live in a world in which these things recur.

¹³ See the survey in Michael Avioz, “The Literary Structure of the Books of Samuel: Setting the Stage for a Coherent Reading,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 16 (2017): 8–33.

¹⁴ See David G. Firth, “Some Reflections on Current Narrative Research on the Book of Samuel,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 10 (2019): 3–31.

- It can incorporate statements that stand in tension with each other. God relented; God does not relent.
- It can thus leave irresolvable enigmas unresolved: What is the relationship between God's grace and human commitment to God?
- It can tell its readers the facts without necessarily telling them how to interpret them.
- It can leave questions open. Did God forgive David for his affair with Bathsheba and his having Uriah killed?

In discussing Samuel's theology, one might proceed by writing chapters on its understanding of God, of Israel, of prophecy, of monarchy, and so on, or one might proceed by writing a chapter-by-chapter theological exposition of the text. I have done something in between, in dividing the book into six parts, working through the parts one by one, and looking from a theological perspective at topics as they arise. Sometimes these topics are explicitly theological (e.g., God, his activity in the world, and his relationships with people). Sometimes they are more general (e.g., family or monarchy), and the chapters consider their significance in the context of human life lived before God.

Doing such theological study can then seek to confine itself to teasing out the theological implications of the Scriptures themselves, or it can allow for evaluating their theology in light of convictions one brings to them. My focus lies on the first of these alternatives. Where the theology of the text goes against my convictions or convictions that are common in my culture, I seek to let the text confront them.