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1 SAMUEL

THEME

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Author and Title

The Hebrew title “Samuel” refers to Samuel as the key figure in 1–2 Samuel, the one who established the monarchy in Israel by anointing first Saul and then David; Samuel was the kingmaker in the history of ancient Israel. In the Hebrew Bible, the first and second books of Samuel are counted among the “Former Prophets” (Joshua–2 Kings). The Greek translation, the Septuagint, divides Samuel and Kings into the four “Books of Kingdoms”; thus 1–2 Samuel are 1–2 Kingdoms. In the Latin Vulgate and Douay Bible they are called 1–2 Kings.

The author or authors of 1–2 Samuel are not known. [First Chronicles 29:29–30](#) implies that Samuel (or perhaps his disciples) left written records, but because his death is mentioned in [1 Samuel 25](#), he could not have written most of Samuel.

Date

First and Second Samuel seem to have been composed and edited in several stages. The “Story of the Ark of God” ([1 Sam. 4:1–7:1](#)) could have originated very early—even from a pre-Davidic period, since [2 Samuel 6](#) is not foreshadowed in the ark narrative and the name of the town where the ark remained is different in the two narratives.

This “Story of the Ark” was embedded in a larger unit, the “Story of Samuel” ([1 Sam. 1:1–7:17](#)). It is possible that this story, and the following transitional chapter on the “Rights of the King” ([1 Sam. 8:11–18](#)), came from the earlier time of Samuel’s ministry, while the “Story of Saul” ([1 Samuel 9–15](#)) originated during a later time of Samuel’s era.

Sections such as the “Story of Saul and David” ([1 Samuel 16–31](#)) and the “Story of King David” ([2 Samuel 1–20](#)) must have been composed later, during King David’s time, or within a generation or two after David. [First Samuel 27:6](#) states, “Therefore Ziklag has belonged to the kings of Judah to this day.” The final editing of 1–2 Samuel, except perhaps for some minor adjustments, must have been done during the late tenth century B.C., i.e., the early period of the reign of Rehoboam, king of Judah alone. Before that period the writer would have said “kings of Israel.” Furthermore, the

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Ziklag area was captured by Egypt during Shishak's campaign in 925 B.C. The period within a generation or two after the death of the founder of a dynasty is certainly a reasonable time for an official historian to write his history. There is no reason to think that many generations must have passed before the history of David was written down.

Theme

The central theme of the books of Samuel is God's exercising of his cosmic kingship by inaugurating a Davidic dynasty ("house") in Israel (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89), not a Saulide one (1 Sam. 13:13–14; 15:28), and by electing the holy city Zion (Jerusalem; 2 Samuel 6; Psalm 132) as the place where David's successor will establish the temple ("house") for the worship of the divine King Yahweh (see 2 Sam. 24:18). The Davidic "covenant" (2 Samuel 7; Ps. 89:3) entitled Matthew to put David at the center of the genealogical history of the divine plan of salvation (Matt. 1:1).

Events of 1–2 Samuel Referenced in the Psalms

1 Samuel	Incident	Psalm
19:11	David's house surrounded	59
21:10–11	David seized by Achish	56
21:12–22:1	David escapes from Achish (called Abimelech in Psalm 34 title)	34
22:1 (possibly also 24:3)	David in cave	57; 142
22:9–19	Doeg the Edomite	52
23:14–15 (possibly)	Desert of Judah	63
23:19	David betrayed by Ziphites	54
2 Samuel	Incident	Psalm
8:1–14	Victory over Transjordan	60

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chs. 11–12	Against house of Uriah	51
chs. 15–17	Absalom's revolt	3
chs. 15–17 (possibly)	Desert of Judah	63
ch. 22	Victory over all enemies	18

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

The purpose of the book of 1 Samuel is to highlight two major events: first, *the establishment of the monarchy in Israel* (chs. 8–12); and second, *the preparation of David to sit on the royal throne after Saul* (chs. 16–31). Saul was rejected by the Lord in favor of David (chs. 15–16) even though, humanly speaking, he stayed on the throne until his death at Mount Gilboa (ch. 31). Later, in 2 Samuel 7, God promises David and his house an eternal dynasty. In these two central events the role of the prophet Samuel was very important because he had anointed first Saul, then David, as king over the covenant people. The book of 1 Samuel establishes the principle that the king in Israel is to be subject to the word of God as conveyed through his prophets. In other words, obedience to the word of God is the necessary condition for a king to be acceptable to the God of Israel. This is what Jesus the Messiah-King did in his life of obedience to God the Father, even up to “death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). First and Second Samuel deal with a transitional period in the history of ancient Israel—the transition first from the priest Eli to the judge Samuel, then from the judge Samuel to the king Saul, and then from Saul to David, who founded the dynasty that would last as long as the kingdom of Judah. The prophet Samuel thus functions as the link between the judgeship and the kingship. The kingdom of Saul was transitional in a further sense: it was more than a loose confederation that gathered together when there was a common threat, but it was not a period of strong central rule such as existed later. The story of the rise of David in the [second half of 1 Samuel](#) prepares for the full-scale kingship of David in 2 Samuel.

1 Samuel Key Themes

The themes of 1 Samuel are the kingship of God, his providential guidance, and his sovereign will and power.

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1. *God's kingship.* God is the King of the universe; no human king can assume kingship except as a deputy of the divine King. God has been enthroned as King from eternity. This view is expressed in the Bible as early as [Exodus 15:18](#): "The LORD will reign forever and ever."

The first occurrence of the word "king" in 1–2 Samuel is in the Song of Hannah ([1 Sam. 2:10](#)). Though the Lord is not explicitly described as King here, it is implied in the statement that he is the One who judges "the ends of the earth" (cf. [Ps. 96:10](#)). In this verse Hannah expresses her conviction that this King, the Lord, is the One who gives power to his human deputy (the "king") and lifts up the "power of his anointed."

According to Genesis, all human beings were created as "royal" figures in the *image of God*. Hence, humans are deputies who rule and control other creatures for the sake of the King of the universe. So when God allowed the people of Israel to have a human king ([1 Sam. 8:6–9](#)), he gave them a king only as God's earthly vice-regent or deputy, who is responsible to the Lord for his actions and subject to his commands (see esp. [1 Sam. 12:14](#); [2 Sam. 12:9](#)).

The Lord's holy sovereignty is expressed also in his title "the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim" ([1 Sam. 4:4](#)). As in other places in the Bible, he is clearly seen as controlling events not only in Israel, the land of his covenant people, but outside Israel too, especially in Philistia ([1 Sam. 4:1–6:21](#); [23:27](#); [29:4](#); see also [Amos 9:7](#)).

2. *God's providential guidance.* [Romans 8:28](#) summarizes well what the author of 1 Samuel meant to convey to his readers: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." God is certainly the One who providentially and individually guided the lives of chosen individuals such as Hannah, Samuel, and David; even the life of Saul was in God's providential care (see [1 Sam. 9:16](#)). The course of life is different for each individual, but the same God, not "Fate," consistently and graciously guides one's life. Though it is often not recognized by his human agents, God's timing is always perfect (see [1 Samuel 9](#) and the end of [1 Samuel 23](#)), for he is the Lord of history.

God's saving plan is fulfilled in the ongoing day-to-day lives of human beings. For example, Hannah's difficult relationship with Peninnah leads to the birth of Samuel ([1 Samuel 1](#)); Saul's donkey-searching journey leads to the encounter with the prophet Samuel ([1 Samuel 9](#)); David's chore of bringing food to his brothers enables him to see Goliath ([1 Samuel 17](#)). Ordinary situations are the most meaningful in human life, and it is in these that God "works for good."

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Later, in [2 Samuel 7](#), God uses King David's earnest desire to build a house for the Lord to indwell as an occasion to further his plan of salvation by choosing David's line to be that of the Messiah-King who would sit on the throne of David forever. In [2 Samuel 7:16](#) God says to David, "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever." In other words, Yahweh, King of the universe, promises David that he will establish David's house (i.e., his dynasty) as eternal. Thus, this promise to, or "covenant" with (see [Ps. 89:3](#)), David was a turning point in the outworking of God's saving purposes.

3. *God's sovereign will and power.* As Hannah phrases it, God is the all-knowing God, "a God of knowledge" ([1 Sam. 2:3b](#)), and he chooses or rejects people according to his absolute sovereign will and purpose. From a human perspective it sometimes looks as though God has changed his mind, but God "will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret" ([1 Sam. 15:29](#)). To be sure, the Lord as the sovereign deity may change his way of dealing with individuals according to his plan and purpose. But his decision is always just and right; at the same time, he is merciful and gracious to sinful human beings.

Therefore, obedience to God's word is of prime importance in human life. First and Second Samuel provide many examples of the importance of listening to the word of God. The boy Samuel listens to the word of God ([1 Samuel 3](#)), but Saul fails here, rejecting God's commandment ([1 Samuel 13; 15](#)). David fights bravely with Goliath for the honor of Yahweh's name ([1 Samuel 17](#)) but later fails to keep the commandments, committing adultery and murder ([2 Samuel 11](#)). God gives David a second chance by sending the prophet Nathan ([2 Samuel 12](#)), while Saul is finally refused a chance to repent ([1 Samuel 15](#)). Only God's grace upholds human beings, who are sinful in nature, before the holy God.

"Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?" ([1 Sam. 6:20](#))—these words of the men of Beth-shemesh well express human reality, though their understanding of God's "holiness" was not adequate (see [Leviticus 19](#)). Only the God-given way of approaching him through sacrifice can prepare sinful human beings to come closer to the holy God.

God spontaneously reveals his will in words, and his word through the prophets determines events. But not every detail is revealed to the eyes of human beings (e.g., [1 Sam. 3:1–21; 9:15–21; 16:1–13](#)). Believers can only wait on God, who will do his will according to his own purpose.

For fighting God's battle against his enemies, Jonathan ([1 Sam. 14:6](#)) and David ([1 Sam. 17:45–47](#)) called on God's power. God uses human urges and enthusiasms for his

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honor—often in a way that seems to defy common sense. God is the One who works wonders and uses even his enemies (Philistine kings, Achish, etc.) to fulfill his plan and purpose. Thus, humanly impossible agendas become divinely possible, encouraging believers to put their faith in the One who is sovereign over the entire creation.

The story of 1–2 Samuel begins with Samuel and ends with David, framing the problematic figure of Saul. These three are certainly central figures in the history of the kingdom of God. Their lives illustrate many biblical themes. In God’s dealings with Saul and David, one might see God’s justice and his mercy, respectively; according to the NT, both qualities find their ultimate expression in the person of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross.

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2 Samuel Key Themes

The themes of 1 Samuel (namely, God’s kingship, providential guidance, and sovereign will and power) are related to the themes of 2 Samuel (namely, the Davidic covenant and messianic promise): the sovereign God, who has guided David’s life, elects David as his deputy to represent his kingship by his eternal covenant. David thus becomes the prototype of the future Messiah, Jesus Christ.

1. *Davidic covenant*. For the Davidic covenant, see note on [2 Samuel 7:1–29](#).
2. *Messianic promise*. [Second Samuel 7](#) is a turning point in the history of salvation; it clearly advances the messianic hope in the Abrahamic covenant. True, Saul was also anointed by Yahweh. David in fact called Saul “the LORD’s anointed” (e.g., [1 Sam. 24:6](#)) until the end. Yet God chose David, the youngest and forgotten son of Jesse, to establish a dynasty. David was used for God’s eternal plan of salvation, not because he was perfect and ideal from a human viewpoint, but because the Lord was “with him” and David found favor in God’s sight.

The idea of the eternal throne and dynasty was not a product of postexilic idealism as is sometimes claimed. Such a concept was already current in the second millennium B.C. in Canaan as *mlk ‘ilm* (Ugaritic, “the king of eternity” or “king of the world”) and was prominent among the Assyrians during the eighth century B.C., as can be seen in the Assyrian records. Thus, the prophecies in [Isaiah 7–9](#) reflect the ideal of preexilic times.

Text

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The Hebrew Masoretic text (MT) of 1–2 Samuel is notorious for its difficulties. Furthermore, Samuel and Jeremiah are the two OT books where the ancient Greek translations and the Hebrew are notably different in many places. Many scholars and translations too readily reject the MT in favor of the Greek, saying that the Greek text makes more sense and reflects the more original Hebrew text. They hold that the MT must have been corrupted into its present form through a series of scribal errors, and they try to “correct” these “corrupted” texts on the basis of the Greek texts. In fact, the Hebrew texts of Samuel from about 50 to 25 B.C. found among the Dead Sea Scrolls give support for some readings in the Greek text tradition. But the alleged similarity between the Greek texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls has been overemphasized.

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One of the reasons for the difficulty of the Hebrew text of Samuel is that Samuel was written in the manner of an oral narrative—written, i.e., to be heard. Some of the repetitions are more typical of poetry than of prose. Also, at places the spelling seems to have followed the actual pronunciation instead of the “standard” Hebrew, as can be clearly seen when one compares [2 Samuel 22](#) and [Psalm 18](#) in Hebrew. The MT of 1–2 Samuel is not easy. Yet if one carefully examines it with a thorough knowledge of the grammar and style of the language, in most cases the MT as it stands appears to be good, and the ESV translation has therefore followed the MT in most (but not all) places.

History of Salvation Summary

The period of the Judges shows the serious problems Israel had, both in its leadership and among the people as a whole. The books of Samuel show God’s continued care for his people, in raising up for them a king whose job was to be their champion, representative, and example. Saul, by his disobedience to God’s messenger, proves to be an unsuitable king. David, on the other hand, in spite of his moral failures, is God’s choice to be the beginning of an enduring dynasty, from which the ultimate Ruler, who will lead Israel in bringing blessing to all the nations, will arise. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the [Overview of the Bible](#). See also [History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ](#).)

Literary Features

The primary genre of 1 Samuel is hero story. The author did not choose the common method of OT historians in giving coverage to a broad span of people and events but instead focused primarily on three heroic leaders whose stories are elaborated at length: Samuel, Saul, and David. Three other characters are sufficiently prominent in the narrative for their stories to be mini-hero stories: Hannah, Eli, and Jonathan.

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Within the species of hero story, the story of Saul is the only undisputed and fully elaborated literary tragedy in the Bible. The story of David and Goliath is the prototypical battle story in the Bible. The phase of David's life when he is the archetypal man on the run fits the narrative pattern of a fugitive story. Hannah's song of gratitude (1 Sam. 2:1–10) is a lyric poem in the specific form of a praise psalm, and Samuel's last words to the nation (1 Samuel 12) fit the genre of the farewell discourse.

The first third of 1 Samuel pits the decline of Eli and his sons against the rise of Samuel, so that readers should picture these chapters in the form of an X (Eli's decline occurring simultaneously with Samuel's ascent). The remainder of the book is likewise an extended X in which the decline of Saul is played against the rise of David. In this phase of the story, the stories of Saul and David are intertwined, as readers are kept up to date on the tragic decline of Saul and the life of the king-in-waiting as a fugitive.

First Samuel is a book of personalities, so paying close attention to characterization is important. Similarly, the book is rich in universal, recognizable human experience, with the result that building bridges between the world of the text and one's own experiences is an inviting approach to the book. Even though this book does not cover the vast spans of Israelite history that the other OT historical chronicles cover, it provides in-depth analyses of what makes for good and bad leadership. What is true for leaders, moreover, is true for all individuals in their choices for or against God. A leading literary purpose of the book is to embody universal human experience as the means of teaching moral and spiritual lessons for all people at all times.

Second Samuel is the prose epic of David, telling the story of a nation led by a heroic leader. It is at the same time a hero story in which the protagonist, while not wholly idealized, is nonetheless a largely exemplary and representative character who embodies the struggles and ideals of his society. While the story does not possess the single linear sequence of literary tragedy, nonetheless at one point it meets the essential tragic criterion of locating the source of the hero's subsequent downfall in a single tragic choice. Readers should picture David's life as portrayed in 2 Samuel as a pyramid in which the trajectory is wholly positive until the Bathsheba/Uriah debacle, after which David's life goes into comparative decline as the tragic consequences work themselves out. Two threads of action make up the story of David's heroic life: the public life of a king and the personal life of a family man.

The literary technique of realism permeates the book as the storyteller refuses to ignore either the good or the bad aspects of the characters. As with 1 Samuel, the story rings true to human experience. The dramatic impulse to present the actual words and dialogues of characters is continuous.

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The Setting of 1 Samuel

c. 1050 B.C.

The book of 1 Samuel is set in Israel during the time of transition between the period of the judges and the period of the monarchy. It opens with Samuel's birth and then describes his role as judge over Israel. When the people ask for a king, the Lord instructs Samuel to anoint Saul as Israel's first king.



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1 Samuel Outline

- I. The Story of Samuel (1:1–7:17)
 - A. Rise of Samuel as prophet (1:1–4:1a)
 - 1. Birth and dedication of Samuel (1:1–28)
 - 2. Hannah's song (2:1–10)
 - 3. Samuel, and Eli's two sons (2:11–36)
 - 4. Call of Samuel as a prophet (3:1–4:1a)
 - B. Story of the ark of God (4:1b–7:1)
 - 1. Capture of the ark (4:1b–22)
 - 2. The ark in Philistia (5:1–12)
 - 3. Return of the ark (6:1–7:1)
 - C. Judgeship of Samuel (7:2–17)
- II. Transition to the Monarchy (8:1–22)
- III. The Story of Saul (9:1–15:35)
 - A. Saul made king (9:1–11:15)
 - 1. Saul's meeting with Samuel (9:1–27)
 - 2. Anointing of Saul and his election (10:1–27)
 - 3. Making Saul king (11:1–15)
 - B. Samuel's address to Israel (12:1–25)
 - C. Reign of Saul (13:1–15:35)
 - 1. Saul and the Philistines—first rejection of Saul (13:1–23)
 - 2. Saul and Jonathan (14:1–52)
 - 3. Saul and the Amalekites—second rejection of Saul (15:1–35)
- IV. The Story of Saul and David (16:1–31:13)
 - A. Introduction of David (16:1–23)
 - 1. Anointing of David (16:1–13)
 - 2. David at Saul's court (16:14–23)
 - B. David and Goliath: battle at the Valley of Elah (17:1–54)

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- C. Saul, Jonathan, and David ([17:55–18:5](#))
- D. Saul becomes David's enemy ([18:6–30](#))
- E. Saul's attempts to kill David ([19:1–20:42](#))
- F. David's escapes from Saul ([21:1–26:25](#))
 - 1. David's escapes ([21:1–23:29](#))
 - 2. David spares Saul at Engedi ([24:1–25:1](#))
 - 3. David marries Abigail ([25:2–44](#))
 - 4. David spares Saul at the hill of Hachilah ([26:1–25](#))
- G. David in Philistia ([27:1–30:31](#))
 - 1. David and Achish ([27:1–12](#))
 - 2. The Philistines gather for war ([28:1–2](#))
 - 3. The medium of En-dor ([28:3–25](#))
 - 4. The Philistine rulers reject David ([29:1–11](#))
 - 5. Amalekite raid on Ziklag and David's victory ([30:1–31](#))
- H. Deaths of Saul and Jonathan ([31:1–13](#))¹

¹ Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 485-490). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.