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First Samuel
Scripture: 1 Samuel
Code: MSB09

Title

First and Second Samuel were considered as one book in the earliest Hebrew manuscript, and were later divided into the two books by the translators of the Greek version, the Septuagint (LXX), a division followed by the Latin Vulgate (Vg.), English translations, and modern Hebrew Bibles. The earliest Hebrew manuscripts entitled the one book “Samuel” after the man God used to establish the kingship in Israel. Later Hebrew texts and the English versions call the divided book “1 and 2 Samuel.” The LXX designated them “The First and Second Books of Kingdoms” and the Vg., “First and Second Kings,” with our 1 and 2 Kings being “Third and Fourth Kings.”

Author and Date

Jewish tradition ascribed the writing of “Samuel” to Samuel himself or to Samuel, Nathan, and Gad (based on 1 Chr. 29:29). But Samuel cannot be the writer because his death is recorded in 1 Sam. 25:1, before the events associated with David’s reign even took place. Further, Nathan and Gad were prophets of the Lord during David’s lifetime and would not have been alive when the book of Samuel was written. Though the written records of these 3 prophets could have been used for information in the writing of 1 and 2 Samuel, the human author of these books is unknown. The work comes to the reader as an anonymous writing, i.e., the human author speaks for the Lord and gives the divine interpretation of the events narrated.

The books of Samuel contain no clear indication of the date of composition. That the author wrote after the division of the kingdom between Israel and Judah in 931 B.C. is clear, due to the many references to Israel and Judah as distinct entities (1 Sam. 11:8; 17:52; 18:16; 2 Sam. 5:5; 11:11; 12:8; 19:42–43; 24:1, 9). Also, the statement concerning Ziklag’s belonging “to the kings of Judah to this day” in 1 Sam. 27:6 gives clear evidence of a post-Solomonic date of writing. There is no such clarity concerning how late the date of writing could be. However, 1 and 2 Samuel are included in the Former Prophets in the Hebrew canon, along with Joshua, Judges, and 1 and 2 Kings. If the Former Prophets were composed as a unit, then Samuel would have been written during the Babylonian captivity (ca. 560–540 B.C.), since 2 Kings concludes during the exile (2 Kin. 25:27–30). However, since Samuel has a different literary style than Kings, it was most likely penned before the Exile during the period of the divided kingdom (ca. 931–722B.C.) and later made an integral part of the Former Prophets.

Background and Setting

The majority of the action recorded in 1 and 2 Samuel took place in and around the central highlands in the land of Israel. The nation of Israel was largely concentrated in an area that ran about 90 mi. from the hill country of Ephraim in the N (1 Sam. 1:1; 9:4) to the hill country of Judah in the S (Josh. 20:7; 21:11) and between 15 to 35 mi. E to W. This central spine ranges in height from 1,500 ft. to 3,300 ft. above sea level. The major cities of 1 and 2 Samuel are to be found in these central highlands: Shiloh, the residence of Eli and the tabernacle; Ramah, the hometown of Samuel; Gibeah, the headquarters of Saul; Bethlehem, the birthplace of David; Hebron, David's capital when he ruled over Judah; and Jerusalem, the ultimate "city of David."

The events of 1 and 2 Samuel took place between the years ca. 1105 B.C., the birth of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:1–28), to ca. 971 B.C., the last words of David (2 Sam. 23:1–7). Thus, the books span about 135 years of history. During those years, Israel was transformed from a loosely knit group of tribes under "judges" to a united nation under the reign of a centralized monarchy. They look primarily at Samuel (ca. 1105–1030 B.C.), Saul who reigned ca. 1052–1011 B.C., and David who was king of the united monarchy ca. 1011–971B.C.

Historical and Theological Themes

As 1 Samuel begins, Israel was at a low point spiritually. The priesthood was corrupt (1 Sam. 2:12–17, 22–26), the ark of the covenant was not at the tabernacle (1 Sam. 4:3–7:2), idolatry was practiced (1 Sam. 7:3, 4), and the judges were dishonest (1 Sam. 8:2, 3). Through the influence of godly Samuel (1 Sam. 12:23) and David (1 Sam. 13:14), these conditions were reversed. Second Samuel concludes with the anger of the Lord being withdrawn from Israel (2 Sam. 24:25).

During the years narrated in 1 and 2 Samuel, the great empires of the ancient world were in a state of weakness. Neither Egypt nor the Mesopotamian powers, Babylon and Assyria, were threats to Israel at that time. The two nations most hostile to the Israelites were the Philistines (1 Sam. 4; 7; 13, 14; 17; 23; 31; 2 Sam. 5) to the W and the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11; 2 Sam. 10–12) to the E. The major contingent of the Philistines had migrated from the Aegean Islands and Asia Minor in the 12th century B.C. After being denied access to Egypt, they settled among other preexisting Philistines along the Mediterranean coast of Palestine. The Philistines controlled the use of iron, which gave them a decided military and economic advantage over Israel (1 Sam. 13:19–22). The Ammonites were descendants of Lot (Gen. 19:38) who lived on the Transjordan Plateau. David conquered the Philistines (2 Sam. 8:1) and mi. mile/miles the Ammonites (2 Sam. 12:29–31), along with other nations that surrounded Israel (2 Sam. 8:2–14).

There are four predominant theological themes in 1 and 2 Samuel. The first is the Davidic Covenant. The books are literarily framed by two references to the “anointed” king in the prayer of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:10) and the song of David (2 Sam. 22:51). This is a reference to the Messiah, the King who will triumph over the nations who are opposed to God (see Gen. 49:8–12; Num. 24:7–9, 17–19). According to the Lord’s promise, this Messiah will come through the line of David and establish David’s throne forever (2 Sam. 7:12–16). The events of David’s life recorded in Samuel foreshadow the actions of David’s greater Son (i.e., Christ) in the future.

A second theme is the sovereignty of God, clearly seen in these books. One example is the birth of Samuel in response to Hannah’s prayer (1 Sam. 9:17; 16:12, 13). Also, in relation to David, it is particularly evident that nothing can frustrate God’s plan to have him rule over Israel (1 Sam. 24:20).

Third, the work of the Holy Spirit in empowering men for divinely appointed tasks is evident. The Spirit of the Lord came upon both Saul and David after their anointing as king (1 Sam. 10:10; 16:13). The power of the Holy Spirit brought forth prophecy (1 Sam. 10:6) and victory in battle (1 Sam. 11:6).

Fourth, the books of Samuel demonstrate the personal and national effects of sin. The sins of Eli and his sons resulted in their deaths (1 Sam. 2:12–17, 22–25; 3:10–14; 4:17, 18). The lack of reverence for the ark of the covenant led to the death of a number of Israelites (1 Sam. 6:19; 2 Sam. 6:6, 7). Saul’s disobedience resulted in the Lord’s judgment, and he was rejected as king over Israel (1 Sam. 13:9, 13, 14; 15:8, 9, 20–23). Although David was forgiven for his sin of adultery and murder after his confession (2 Sam. 12:13), he still suffered the inevitable and devastating consequences of his sin (2 Sam. 12:14).

Interpretive Challenges

The books of Samuel contain a number of interpretive issues that have been widely discussed:

1) Which of the ancient mss. is closest to the original autograph? The standard Hebrew (Masoretic) text has been relatively poorly preserved, and the LXX often differs from it. Thus, the exact reading of the original autograph of the text is in places hard to determine (see 1 Sam. 13:1). The NKJV uses the Masoretic text with significant variant readings in the marginal notes. The Masoretic text will be assumed to represent the original text unless there is a grammatical or contextual impossibility. This accounts for many of the numerical discrepancies.

2) Is Samuel ambivalent to the establishment of the human kingship in Israel? It is claimed that while 1 Sam. 9–11 presents a positive view of the kingship, 1 Sam. 8 and 12 are strongly anti-monarchial. It is preferable, however, to see the book as presenting a balanced perspective of the human kingship. While the desire of Israel for a king was acceptable (Deut. 17:15), their reason for wanting a king showed a lack of faith in the Lord.

3) How does one explain the bizarre behavior of the prophets? It is commonly held that 1 and 2 Samuel present the prophets as ecstatic speakers with bizarre behavior just likethe pagan prophets of the other nations. But there is nothing in the text which is inconsistent with seeing the prophets as communicators of divine revelation, at times prophesying with musical accompaniment.

4) How did the Holy Spirit minister before Pentecost? The ministry of the Holy Spirit in 1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 11:16; 16:13, 14; 19:20, 23; 2 Sam. 23:2 was not describing salvation in the NT sense, but an empowering by the Lord for His service (see also Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). 5) What was the identity of the “distressing spirit from the Lord”? Is it a personal being, i.e., a demon, or a spirit of discontent created by God in the heart (cf. Judg. 9:23)? Traditionally, it has been viewed as a demon.

6) How didSamuel appear in 1 Sam. 28:3-5? It seems bestto understand the appearance of Samuel as the Lord allowing the dead Samuel to speak with Saul.

7) What is the identity of David’s seed in 2 Sam. 7:12–15? It is usually taken as Solomon. However, the NT refers the words to Jesus, God’s Son in Heb. 1:5.

Outline

I. Samuel: Prophet and Judge to Israel (1:1–7:17)

A. Samuel the Prophet (1:1–4:1a)

1. The birth of Samuel (1:1–28)

2. The prayer of Hannah (2:1–10)

3. The growth of Samuel (2:11–26)

4. The oracle against Eli’s house (2:27–36)

5. The Word of the Lord through Samuel (3:1–4:1a)

B. Samuel the Judge (4:1b–7:17)

1. The saga of the ark (4:1b–7:1)

2. Israel’s victory over the Philistines and the judgeship of Samuel (7:2–17)

II. Saul: First King Over Israel (8:1–15:35)

A. The Rise of Saul to the Kingship (8:1–12:25)

1. The demand of Israel for a king (8:1–22)

2. The process of Saul becoming king (9:1–11:13)

3. The exhortation of Samuel to Israel concerning the king (11:14–12:25)

B. The Decline of Saul in the Kingship (13:1–15:35)

1. The rebuke of Saul (13:1–15)

2. The wars of Saul (13:16–14:52)

3. The rejection of Saul (15:1–35)

III. David and Saul: Transfer of the Kingship in Israel (16:1–31:13)

A. The Introduction of David (16:1–17:58)

1. The anointing of David (16:1–13)

2. David in the court of Saul (16:14–23)

3. David, the warrior of the Lord (17:1–58)

B. David Driven from the Court of Saul (18:1–20:42)

1. The anger and fear of Saul toward David (18:1–30)

2. The defense of David by Jonathan and Michal (19:1–20:42)

C. David’s Flight from Saul’s Pursuit (21:1–28:2)

1. Saul’s killing of the priests at Nob (21:1–22:23)

2. Saul’s life spared twice by David (23:1–26:25)

3. David’s despair and Philistine refuge (27:1–28:2)

D. The Death of Saul (28:3–31:13)

1. Saul’s final night (28:3–25)

2. David’s dismissal by the Philistines (29:1–11)

3. David’s destruction of the Amalekites (30:1–31)

4. Saul’s final day (31:1–13)

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