
1 & 2 SAMUEL

Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel

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6316 Peake Road

Macon, Georgia 31210-3960

1-800-747-3016

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Printed in the United States of America.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ANSI Z39.48–1984 (alk. paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cartledge, Tony W.

1 & 2 Samuel / Tony Cartledge

p. cm. — (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, 7)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-57312-064-2

I. Bible. O.T. Samuel—Commentaries. I. Title: 1 and 2 Samuel.

II. Title: First and Second Samuel. III. Title. IV. Series.

BS1325.3 .C375 2001

222'.4077—dc21

Library of Congress Control Number: 2001049158



SMYTH & HELWYS BIBLE COMMENTARY

1 & 2 SAMUEL

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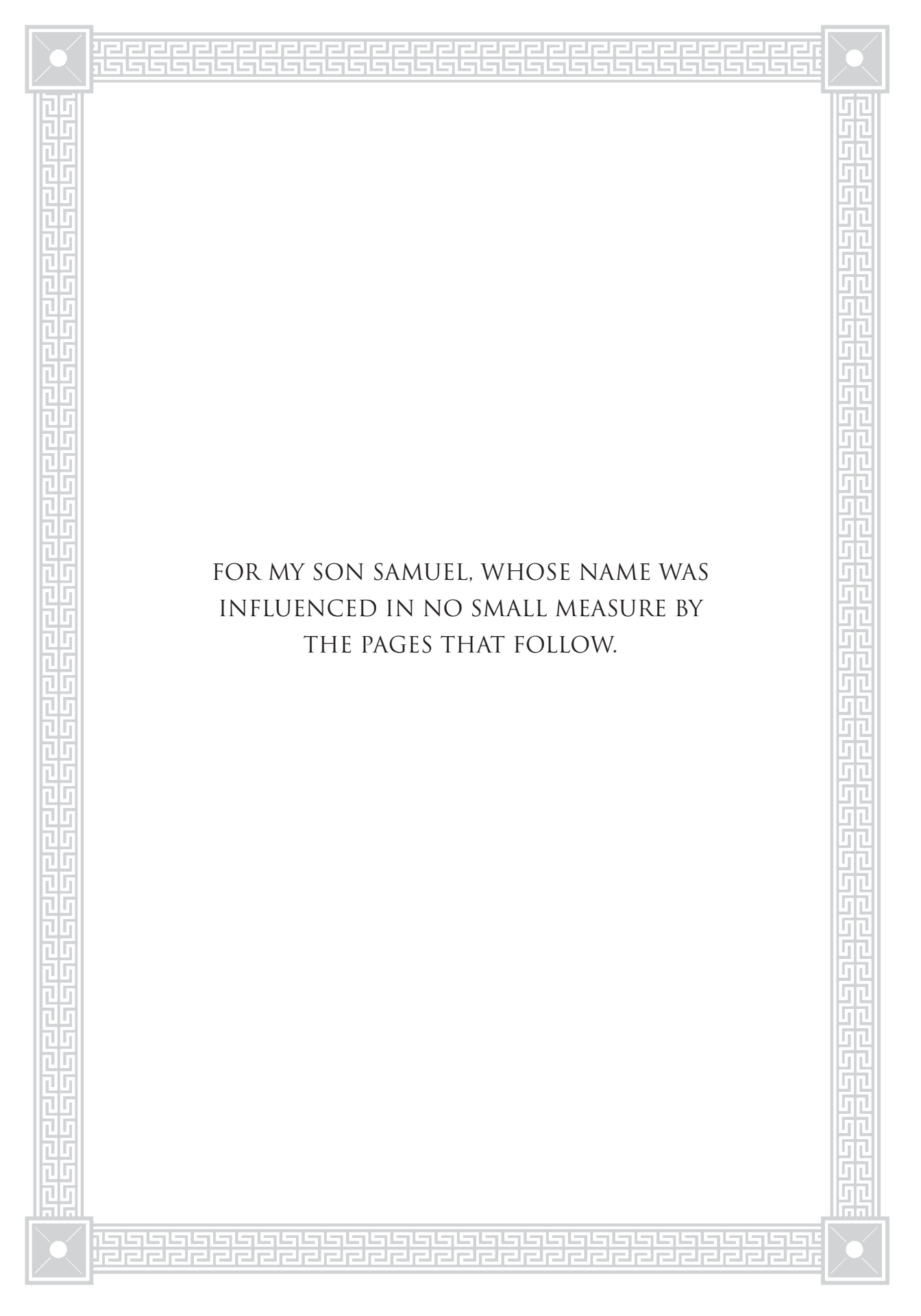
ADVANCE PRAISE

Tony Cartledge has produced a commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel that is readable by any interested and educated person, with or without theological training. The commentary is informed by, but not bound to the results of critical scholarship. It does not hide from problematic texts, but judges them by the later revelation in Jesus. It is a worthy addition to the series.

—Paul L. Redditt, Ph. D.
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Georgetown College

The new Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, *1 & 2 Samuel*, is a refreshing and engaging study of the stories of a crucial time in the life of the ancestors of our faith, the early days of kingship in ancient Israel. Out of these stories arose Israel's concept of Messiah, a deliverer who would restore for the people a golden age of glory. Tony Cartledge combines an outstanding scholarly treatment of a text that comes from a very different time and place in the history of humankind with insightful applications to the twenty-first-century world. *1 & 2 Samuel* is an excellent companion volume to its Bible Commentary Series predecessor, *1 & 2 Kings*. It is one of the most thorough and readable treatments of these often-neglected books that I have read to date, and it will be a necessary addition to libraries and studies and a valuable classroom tool.

—Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford
Associate Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages,
McAfee School of Theology
Managing Editor, Review and Expositor



FOR MY SON SAMUEL, WHOSE NAME WAS
INFLUENCED IN NO SMALL MEASURE BY
THE PAGES THAT FOLLOW.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS COMMENTARY

Books of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament are generally abbreviated in the Sidebars, parenthetical references, and notes according to the following system.

The Old Testament

Genesis	Gen
Exodus	Exod
Leviticus	Lev
Numbers	Num
Deuteronomy	Deut
Joshua	Josh
Judges	Judg
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Samuel	1–2 Sam
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kgs
1–2 Chronicles	1–2 Chr
Ezra	Ezra
Nehemiah	Neh
Esther	Esth
Job	Job
Psalms (Psalms)	Ps (Pss)
Proverbs	Prov
Ecclesiastes	Eccl
or Qoheleth	Qoh
Song of Solomon	Song
or Song of Songs	Song
or Canticles	Cant
Isaiah	Isa
Jeremiah	Jer
Lamentations	Lam
Ezekiel	Ezek
Daniel	Dan
Hosea	Hos
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obadiah	Obad
Jonah	Jonah
Micah	Mic

Abbreviations

Nahum	Nah
Habakkuk	Hab
Zephaniah	Zeph
Haggai	Hag
Zechariah	Zech
Malachi	Mal

The Apocrypha

1–2 Esdras	1–2 Esdr
Tobit	Tob
Judith	Jdt
Additions to Esther	Add Esth
Wisdom of Solomon	Wis
Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach	Sir
Baruch	Bar
Epistle (or Letter) of Jeremiah	Ep Jer
Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three	Pr Azar
Daniel and Susanna	Sus
Daniel, Bel, and the Dragon	Bel
Prayer of Manasseh	Pr Man
1–2 Maccabees	1–2 Macc

The New Testament

Matthew	Matt
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Romans	Rom
1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Cor
Galatians	Gal
Ephesians	Eph
Philippians	Phil
Colossians	Col
1–2 Thessalonians	1–2 Thess
1–2 Timothy	1–2 Tim
Titus	Titus
Philemon	Phlm
Hebrews	Heb
James	Jas
1–2 Peter	1–2 Pet
1–2–3 John	1–2–3 John
Jude	Jude
Revelation	Rev

Other commonly used abbreviations include:

BC	Before Christ
(also commonly referred to as BCE = Before the Common Era)	
AD	<i>Anno Domini</i> (“in the year of the Lord”)
(also commonly referred to as CE = the Common Era)	
v.	verse
vv.	verses
C.	century
c.	<i>circa</i> (around “that time”)
cf.	<i>confer</i> (compare)
ch.	chapter
chs.	chapters
d.	died
ed.	edition or edited by or editor
eds.	editors
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> (for example)
et al.	<i>et alii</i> (and others)
f./ff.	and the following one(s)
gen. ed.	general editor
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> (in the same place)
i.e.	<i>id est</i> (that is)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
lit.	literally
n.d.	no date
rev. and exp. ed.	revised and expanded edition
sg.	singular
trans.	translated by or translator(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)

Additional written works cited by abbreviations include:

AB	Anchor Bible
AN	Ark Narrative
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i>
Ant.	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BBC	Broadman Bible Commentary
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
BI	<i>Biblical Illustrator</i>
BRev	<i>Bible Review</i>
BWANT	Beitrage zur Wissenschaft vom Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beiträge zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Communicators Commentary
Civ.	<i>Civitas = City of God</i>
DH	Deuteronomistic History
Dtr	Deuteronomist
4QSam ^a	Dead Sea Scroll fragment of Samuel from Cave 4
HDR	History of David's Rise
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible</i>
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
JHNES	Johns Hopkins Near Eastern Studies
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint = Greek Translation of Hebrew Bible
MDB	<i>Mercer Dictionary of the Bible</i>
MT	Masoretic Text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
OTL	Old Testament Library
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SN	Succession Narrative
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TEV	Today's English Version
TNK	Tanak = Hebrew Bible
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The publisher's gracious invitation to tackle a volume on 1 and 2 Samuel for the new *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series was a welcome opportunity.

My love of the Hebrew Scriptures runs deep, and the rich narrative of the Deuteronomistic History remains fresh with every reading. The characters of Samuel and Saul, David and Jonathan, Abigail and Bathsheba, Solomon and his brothers reveal the same flashes of nobility, the same lapses into cowardice, the same persistent ambiguities that still endow (or afflict) the human family. The time spent with them has been joyful labor.

The commentary that follows is based on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which is the source of most citations of Scripture. Where quotations vary from the NRSV, they reflect my own translation.

I am grateful to my immediate editor, Sam Balentine, and to the two assistant editors, Jeff Rogers and Ken Hoglund, who read and re-read the manuscript behind this book. Their many helpful suggestions are in no way responsible for any shortcomings that blemish the work. I am grateful for the careful work by the Smyth & Helwys production team: Lex Horton, Keith Gammons, Kelley Land, Erin Smith, and Jim Burt. Thanks also to Heidi J. Hornik for her art commentary.

This volume owes much to Ken Vandergriff, a far better Old Testament scholar than I, who provided invaluable assistance in the research and development of various aspects of the book, especially in the boxed materials. Alison Bailey, my able assistant, provided ongoing encouragement and cheerful support, especially in preparing the indexes. They have both earned my deep gratitude.

My wife Jan has been remarkably patient with me during the many hours and days stolen from our family time for the sake of this project. For this, and for the many other ways she supports, enriches, and blesses my life, I am forever indebted.

Tony W. Cartledge

SERIES PREFACE

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is a visually stimulating and user-friendly series that is as close to multimedia in print as possible. Written by accomplished scholars with all students of Scripture in mind, the primary goal of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is to make available serious, credible biblical scholarship in an accessible and less intimidating format.

Far too many Bible commentaries fall short of bridging the gap between the insights of biblical scholars and the needs of students of God's written word. In an unprecedented way, the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* brings insightful commentary to bear on the lives of contemporary Christians. Using a multimedia format, the volumes employ a stunning array of art, photographs, maps, and drawings to illustrate the truths of the Bible for a visual generation of believers.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is built upon the idea that meaningful Bible study can occur when the insights of contemporary biblical scholars blend with sensitivity to the needs of lifelong students of Scripture. Some persons within local faith communities, however, struggle with potentially informative biblical scholarship for several reasons. Oftentimes, such scholarship is cast in technical language easily grasped by other scholars, but not by the general reader. For example, lengthy, technical discussions on every detail of a particular scriptural text can hinder the quest for a clear grasp of the whole. Also, the format for presenting scholarly insights has often been confusing to the general reader, rendering the work less than helpful. Unfortunately, responses to the hurdles of reading extensive commentaries have led some publishers to produce works for a general readership that merely skim the surface of the rich resources of biblical scholarship. This commentary series incorporates works of fine art in an accurate and scholarly manner, yet the format remains "user-friendly." An important facet is the presentation and explanation of images of art, which interpret the biblical material or illustrate how the biblical material has been understood and interpreted in the past. A visual generation of believers deserves a commentary series that contains not only the all-important textual commentary on Scripture, but images, photographs, maps, works of fine art, and drawings that bring the text to life.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* makes serious, credible biblical scholarship more accessible to a wider audience. Writers and editors alike present information in ways that encourage readers to gain a better understanding of the Bible. The editorial board has worked to develop a format that is useful and usable, informative and pleasing to the eye. Our writers are reputable scholars who participate in the community of faith and sense a calling to communicate the results of their scholarship to their faith community.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* addresses Christians and the larger church. While both respect for and sensitivity to the needs and contributions of other faith communities are reflected in the work of the series authors, the authors speak primarily to Christians. Thus the reader can note a confessional tone throughout the volumes. No particular “confession of faith” guides the authors, and diverse perspectives are observed in the various volumes. Each writer, though, brings to the biblical text the best scholarly tools available and expresses the results of their studies in commentary and visuals that assist readers seeking a word from the Lord for the church.

To accomplish this goal, writers in this series have drawn from numerous streams in the rich tradition of biblical interpretation. The basic focus is the biblical text itself, and considerable attention is given to the wording and structure of texts. Each particular text, however, is also considered in the light of the entire canon of Christian Scriptures. Beyond this, attention is given to the cultural context of the biblical writings. Information from archaeology, ancient history, geography, comparative literature, history of religions, politics, sociology, and even economics is used to illuminate the culture of the people who produced the Bible. In addition, the writers have drawn from the history of interpretation, not only as it is found in traditional commentary on the Bible but also in literature, theater, church history, and the visual arts. Finally, the *Commentary* on Scripture is joined with *Connections* to the world of the contemporary church. Here again, the writers draw on scholarship in many fields as well as relevant issues in the popular culture.

This wealth of information might easily overwhelm a reader if not presented in a “user-friendly” format. Thus the heavier discussions of detail and the treatments of other helpful topics are presented in special-interest boxes, or Sidebars, clearly connected to the passages under discussion so as not to interrupt the flow of the basic interpretation. The result is a commentary on Scripture that

focuses on the theological significance of a text while also offering the reader a rich array of additional information related to the text and its interpretation.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource is a distinctive feature of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*.

Combining credible biblical scholarship, user-friendly study features, and sensitivity to the needs of a visually oriented generation of believers creates a unique and unprecedented type of commentary series. With insight from many of today's finest biblical scholars and a stunning visual format, it is our hope that the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* will be a welcome addition to the personal libraries of all students of Scripture.

The Editors

HOW TO USE THIS COMMENTARY

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is written by accomplished biblical scholars with a wide array of readers in mind. Whether engaged in the study of Scripture in a church setting or in a college or seminary classroom, all students of the Bible will find a number of useful features throughout the commentary that are helpful for interpreting the Bible.

Basic Design of the Volumes

Each volume features an Introduction to a particular book of the Bible, providing a brief guide to information that is necessary for reading and interpreting the text: the historical setting, literary design, and theological significance. Each Introduction also includes a comprehensive outline of the particular book under study.

Each chapter of the commentary investigates the text according to logical divisions in a particular book of the Bible. Sometimes these divisions follow the traditional chapter segmentation, while at other times the textual units consist of sections of chapters or portions of more than one chapter. The divisions reflect the literary structure of a book and offer a guide for selecting passages that are useful in preaching and teaching.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource also allows unprecedented flexibility and freedom for the reader. Carry the text version to locations you most enjoy doing research while knowing that the CD offers a portable alternative for travel from the office, church, classroom, and your home.

Commentary and Connections

As each chapter explores a textual unit, the discussion centers around two basic sections: *Commentary* and *Connections*. The analysis of a passage, including the details of its language, the history reflected in the text, and the literary forms found in the text, are the main focus

of the *Commentary* section. The primary concern of the *Commentary* section is to explore the theological issues presented by the Scripture passage. *Connections* presents potential applications of the insights provided in the *Commentary* section. The *Connections* portion of each chapter considers what issues are relevant for teaching and suggests useful methods and resources. *Connections* also identifies themes suitable for sermon planning and suggests helpful approaches for preaching on the Scripture text.

Sidebars

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* provides a unique hyper-link format that quickly guides the reader to additional insights. Since other more technical or supplementary information is vital for understanding a text and its implications, the volumes feature distinctive Sidebars, or special-interest boxes, that provide a wealth of information on such matters as:

- Historical information (such as chronological charts, lists of kings or rulers, maps, descriptions of monetary systems, descriptions of special groups, descriptions of archaeological sites or geographical settings).
- Graphic outlines of literary structure (including such items as poetry, chiasm, repetition, epistolary form).
- Definition or brief discussions of technical or theological terms and issues.
- Insightful quotations that are not integrated into the running text but are relevant to the passage under discussion.
- Notes on the history of interpretation (Augustine on the Good Samaritan, Luther on James, Stendahl on Romans, etc.).
- Line drawings, photographs, and other illustrations relevant for understanding the historical context or interpretive significance of the text.
- Presentation and discussion of works of fine art that have interpreted a Scripture passage.

Each Sidebar is printed in color and is referenced at the appropriate place in the *Commentary* or *Connections* section with a color-coded title that directs the reader to the relevant Sidebar. In addition, helpful icons appear in the Sidebars, which provide the reader with visual cues to the type of material that is explained in each Sidebar. Throughout the commentary, these four distinct hyperlinks provide useful links in an easily recognizable design.

ΑΩ

Alpha & Omega Language

This icon identifies the information as a language-based tool that offers further exploration of the Scripture selection. This could include syntactical information, word studies, popular or additional uses of the word(s) in question, additional contexts in which the term appears, and the history of the term's translation. All non-English terms are transliterated into the appropriate English characters.



Culture/Context

This icon introduces further comment on contextual or cultural details that shed light on the Scripture selection. Describing the place and time to which a Scripture passage refers is often vital to the task of biblical interpretation. Sidebar items introduced with this icon could include geographical, historical, political, social, topographical, or economic information. Here, the reader may find an excerpt of an ancient text or inscription that sheds light on the text. Or one may find a description of some element of ancient religion such as Baalism in Canaan or the Hero cult in the Mystery Religions of the Greco-Roman world.



Interpretation

Sidebars that appear under this icon serve a general interpretive function in terms of both historical and contemporary renderings. Under this heading, the reader might find a selection from classic or contemporary literature that illuminates the Scripture text or a significant quotation from a famous sermon that addresses the passage. Insights are drawn from various sources, including literature, worship, theater, church history, and sociology.



Additional Resources Study

Here, the reader finds a convenient list of useful resources for further investigation of the selected Scripture text, including books, journals, websites, special collections, organizations, and societies. Specialized discussions of works not often associated with biblical studies may also appear here.

Additional Features

Each volume also includes a basic Bibliography on the biblical book under study. Other bibliographies on selected issues are often included that point the reader to other helpful resources.

Notes at the end of each chapter provide full documentation of sources used and contain additional discussions of related matters.

Abbreviations used in each volume are explained in a list of abbreviations found after the Table of Contents.

Readers of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* can regularly visit the Internet support site for news, information, updates, and enhancements to the series at <www.helwys.com/commentary>.

Several thorough indexes enable the reader to locate information quickly. These indexes include:

- An *Index of Sidebars* groups content from the special-interest boxes by category (maps, fine art, photographs, drawings, etc.).
- An *Index of Scriptures* lists citations to particular biblical texts.
- An *Index of Topics* lists alphabetically the major subjects, names, topics, and locations referenced or discussed in the volume.
- An *Index of Modern Authors* organizes contemporary authors whose works are cited in the volume.

INTRODUCTION

The religious and literary heritage of both Christians and Jews is greatly indebted to the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, for they describe events that are central to both faiths, preserving traditions that influence the remainder of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles.

In these two books that once were one, we watch the life of Samuel, from cradle to grave and even beyond. Given by God to a faithful and prayerful woman, Samuel became prophet and priest, maker and advisor of kings. Here we find Saul, the tall lad who took the crown reluctantly but then found himself consumed by the desire to retain it. In these books we meet darkly powerful heroes such as Joab and Abner, along with sinister enemies, from the Philistine giant Goliath to the Israelite prince Absalom. There is palace intrigue and internal revolt, romance and rape, hope and loss, and hope again.

Towering above all others who haunt the ancient tome is David: innocent musician, valiant warrior, creative king—a man after God's own heart with a dark spot on his soul. Other historical books in the Hebrew Bible reveal the many ways in which Israel tried to find its way back to the life it knew—or thought it knew—under David. Every book of Hebrew prophecy reflects or interprets the Davidic covenant, its aftermath, and its future. The Psalms relive the highs and the lows of Israel's life, often with reference to David. Even the Christian Scriptures are built on the foundation of these books of Samuel, as they speak of fulfilled prophecy and a messianic Son of David.

There are many questions to ask as we approach this strategic slice of the biblical record. How do the books of Samuel fit into their context within the canon of Scripture? How did these traditions come to be written and shaped into their present form? Where do the events related here fit into the larger picture of Israelite and ancient Near Eastern history? As words of Scripture, held by believers to be inspired by God, how do these books impact our theology and practice as we seek to follow the same God whose calling so influenced the lives of Samuel and Saul and David? The following paragraphs provide a brief introduction to our present understanding of these issues.

CANONICAL CONTEXT

Jewish readers divide the Hebrew Scriptures (for Christians, the “Old Testament”) into three parts, collectively referred to by the acronym TNK or *Tanakh*: the *Torah* (Law), the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and the *Ketubim* (Writings). [The *Tanakh*] The

The *Tanakh*

AQ The word *Tanakh* (or *Tanak*) is an acronym for *T*orah, *N*evi'im, and *K*ethuvim, the three major sections of the Hebrew Bible. *Torah*, a familiar term, designates the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The section called *Nevi'im*, a word that means “prophets,” includes some books, which are primarily historical, that include characters or events that came to be regarded as prophetic (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings). These are often called the “Former Prophets.” The writings of the literary prophets fall into the category of “Latter Prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi).

The final section, called the *Kethuvim*, which means “writings,” contains an amalgam of miscellaneous writings ranging from poetry to wisdom literature to hero stories and historical archives (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, The Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1–2 Chronicles).

Since the Hebrew Bible is arranged according to this system, the books follow a different order than in Christian Bibles: Genesis is still first, but many other books are found in divergent places, and 1–2 Chronicles appear as the last books of the Hebrew Bible.

Nevi'im are further subdivided into the “Former Prophets” (historical books with continuing impact) and the “Latter Prophets” (mostly first-person accounts of the literary prophets).

The books of Samuel fall into the category of “Former Prophets,” and there are prophets to be found there: the anonymous “man of God” (1 Sam 2:27-36), Samuel himself (1 Sam 3; 8:10-18; 9:6-10:8; among others), Gad (1 Sam 22:5; 2 Sam 24:13-14), and Nathan (2 Sam 7; 12). Even Saul’s brief forays among ecstatic holy men led to a proverb connecting him with the prophets (1 Sam 10:9-13; 19:22-24), and David himself was called a prophet in later traditions (2 Chr 29:25).

From the perspective of historical criticism, the books of Samuel cannot be understood apart from some appreciation for their setting within a larger block of text commonly known as the Deuteronomistic History. [Historical Criticism] [Deuteronomistic History] This significant section of the Hebrew Bible (equivalent to the “Former Prophets”: Joshua through 2 Kings, with the exception of Ruth) is written or edited so that it reflects a firm footing within the theological presuppositions of the book of Deuteronomy.

Thus themes such as the importance of obeying the Deuteronomic law and avoiding apostasy are predominant, as is the rigid system of expected rewards or punishments for those who do or do not adhere to the law.

Historical Criticism

There are several branches of biblical criticism (textual, historical, literary, and canonical, for example). In each case, the word “criticism” is used with its original meaning (from the Greek verb *krinō*), which is “to judge” or “to discern” in making evaluations. Thus the word “criticism” does not imply caustic disparagement of the text, but careful discrimination in its study.

Historical criticism recognizes that each individual part of the Scripture arose in a particular historical setting, and it may have been combined with other traditions and edited within other historical settings. Historical criticism seeks to discover not only the original setting of a text but also the literary history of its development and final incorporation into the canon.

Deuteronomistic History



Since the publication of Martin Noth's *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* in 1943, many biblical scholars have adopted his view that Joshua to Kings (with the exception of Ruth) forms a unified literary work. Noth argued that this history was promulgated in the exilic period to explain why the people of God, who had been promised possession of the promised land and a Davidic kingship *forever*, were now deprived of both. In Noth's view, there was a single author of the Deuteronomistic History (DH), whom he called "the Deuteronomist" (Dtr).

This editor is seen more as a compiler than a writer, incorporating earlier traditions—both oral and written—into his work. The Deuteronomist's creativity is seen in his skillful editing of narratives covering Israel's history from the 13th century BC settlement in Palestine to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC in order to justify his interpretation of the exile.

Noth's concept, though widely adopted, has been challenged on several grounds. For example, Noth argued that the DH had a negative purpose only: to show the history of unfaithfulness that led to the exile of Israel. Subsequent scholars see a more positive purpose. Hans Walter Wolff, for example, sees an implication of hope in the repetition of the word *shub* ("to return" or "to repent"; see Deut 4:25-31; 20:1-10; 1 Sam 7:3; 1 Kgs 8:33, 35, 47, 48; 2 Kgs 17:13; 23:25). As God had restored the

ancestors when they "returned" to faithfulness, perhaps God would do the same for the exiles if they did the same. Likewise, Gerhard von Rad found in God's covenant with David (2 Sam 7) and its frequent reiteration in the books of Kings the implication that God would not utterly forsake his people (1 Kgs 8:20, 25; 9:5; 11:5, 13, 32, 36; 15:4; 2 Kgs 2:4; 8:19; 19:34; 20:6).

Noth held that the DH was the work of a single author who publicized his work shortly after 560 BC (the date of the release of King Jehoiachin from the Babylonian prison, which is the last date mentioned in the DH), but before 538 BC (the date of Cyrus' edict ending the exile, an event not mentioned in the DH). Many scholars now argue for at least two editions of the DH, belonging to the preexilic and exilic periods.

For further reading, consult Terence E. Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983); Steven L. McKenzie, "Deuteronomistic History," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1992; and the discussion of Walter Brueggemann and Hans Walter Wolff in *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, 2d ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982). An English translation of Noth's original work is available as *The Deuteronomistic History*, 2d ed., JSOT Supplement Series No. 15 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991).

These principles are illustrated abundantly in the books of Samuel: Saul is blessed and successful so long as he remains open to the spirit of God (1 Sam 11) but is afflicted with an evil spirit when he disobeys Samuel's strict command (1 Sam 15; 16:14). As Saul falls, obedient David experiences a rapid rise to power, replete with evidence of divine blessing (see especially 2 Sam 7). Following his adulterous and murderous behavior in the Bathsheba/Uriah affair, however, David's personal and political life are beset by one calamity after another (2 Sam 12–21).

The surprising thing about 1 and 2 Samuel is that the Deuteronomistic hand is so subdued, especially as compared to the preceding book of Judges and the following books of 1 and 2 Kings. The Judges sagas employ a standardized vocabulary and are carefully organized in a series of cycles in which Israel repeatedly falls into apostasy and judgment before repenting and experiencing deliverance through the agency of a divinely appointed "judge" (see [Israel's "Judges"]). The editorial shaping of the

material and the inclusion of characteristic interpretive comments are unmistakable.

In the books of 1 and 2 Kings, the editors' influence is particularly evident in the evaluative comments given to the reigns of both Israelite and Judean kings. These pass judgment in no uncertain terms as to whether the king in question did good or evil in terms of obedience to the Deuteronomistic law (e. g., 2 Kgs 3:1-3; 8:16-18).

Apparently, the length and the focus of the underlying source materials in Samuel were such that the editors saw little need for additional interpretive comment. Thus the editors' influence, with a few exceptions, appears to be limited to the selection and arrangement of their primary sources.

LITERARY DEVELOPMENT

1. *Authorship and development.* An ancient tradition preserved in 1 Chronicles holds that Samuel was the primary author of the scroll that bears his name, with supplementary information about the period following his death being supplied by the prophets Nathan and Gad (see 1 Chr 29:29-30). [1 Chronicles 29:29-30]

Careful study, however, has provided abundant evidence that the issue of authorship is much more complicated. There are, for example, many duplicate and sometimes variant traditions regarding similar events, especially in 1 Samuel. For example, Eli is twice warned that his priestly dynasty will fall (1 Sam 2:27-36; 3:11-14). Likewise, when the issue of kingship is broached, one account is highly antagonistic (7:1-8:22), while another approaches kingship as a means of divine deliverance (9-11). There are two accounts of Saul's public acclamation as king (10:17-24; 11:15) and two stories of his rejection (13:14; 15:23). David is introduced to Saul and becomes his personal musician and close aide in 16:14-23, but in the very next chapter the young man who offers to combat Goliath is unknown to Saul. When David flees from Saul, he is twice betrayed by the Ziphites (23:19-28; 26:1-5). And, on two occasions, he has the opportunity to kill Saul, but refrains (24:1-22; 26:6-25). Saul's death is also related in two versions (1 Sam 31; 2 Sam 1).

1 Chronicles 29:29-30



Now the acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the records of the seer Samuel, and in the records of the prophet Nathan, and in the records of the seer Gad, with accounts of all his rule and his might and of the events that befell him and Israel and all the kingdoms of the earth.

Some scholars have attempted to assign these dual traditions to the J (Yahwistic) and E (Elohistic) sources commonly known from

Pentateuchal studies. Others have spoken of an early (promonarchical) and late (antimonarchical) source. There appear, however, to be even more sources involved. Some of these appear to be brief, such as Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1-10), a poem that shows signs of great antiquity. Other traditions may have been excerpted from longer sources, such as a presumed compilation of traditions about the ark of the covenant (the "Ark Narrative" [AN], 1 Sam 4-6; 2 Sam 6).

Scholars are largely agreed on the preexistence of at least two considerably longer units that can be regarded as cohesive narratives with their own distinguishing characteristics. The first of these is often called the "History of David's Rise" (HDR). This unit begins with 1 Samuel 16:14 and continues through 2 Samuel 5:10, though some commentators contend that it continues through 2 Samuel 6. The second large unit details the intra-family struggle to determine who would succeed King David on the throne. Generally dubbed "The Succession Narrative" [SN], it extends from 2 Samuel 9-20, where it is interrupted by a series of appendices (2 Sam 21-24), then continues in 1 Kings 1-2.

These and other traditions were collected and adapted over a period of time that may have stretched for many years. Some scholars assign various rescensions of the book to a series of Deuteronomistic editors who sequentially added historical, prophetic, and legal perspectives to the work. Others perceive this complex tracing of tradition as more imaginative than substantive. Many scholars locate the Deuteronomistic editors within prophetic circles of the northern kingdom, for the principles espoused have much in common with northern literary prophets, such as Hosea. Most agree that the Succession Narrative (which has more of a southern perspective) seems to have been inserted as a whole after the remaining corpus had already reached its final form.

The extensive debate concerning the development of these books reveals how difficult it is to reach definite conclusions, and this commentary will attempt to stay in touch with differing aspects of the debate rather than espousing any particular view. Any of the approaches suggested should be seen as guidelines for thinking, not categorical truths.

What does seem clear is that 1 and 2 Samuel were not written down by one person at one time. The books are a carefully edited composite of earlier oral and written traditions. Though some source materials may have been composed during the monarchical period, the final form of 1 and 2 Samuel was almost certainly

shaped during the exile as a part of the larger Deuteronomistic corpus.

2. *Canonical shaping.* The books of Samuel began as a single volume. The division of the Samuel scroll into 1 and 2 Samuel originated with the Septuagint (LXX), which labeled the resulting books as “1 and 2 Kingdoms” or “1 and 2 Reigns” (with 1 and 2 Kings being called “3 and 4 Kingdoms/Reigns”). The division was not incorporated into the Hebrew Bible until the fifteenth century AD.

The distinction of Samuel from the preceding and following books, however, is much earlier. Scholars have long questioned why the account of David’s death in 1 Kings 1–2 was separated from the books of Samuel. The life of every other main character in the books of Samuel is resolved by death, and one would expect that a work so devoted to the life of David would conclude with his death as well. Yet the account of David’s final days and his muddled choice of a successor is found in 1 Kings 1–2.

Perhaps it was thought that these chapters belonged more to the account of Solomon’s reign since the story of his accession to the throne is closely intertwined with the account of David’s demise. Since both Samuel and Kings probably reached their final form within the larger Deuteronomistic history at about the same time, the editors had no reason to think that readers of Samuel would be left hanging.

3. *Parallels.* Readers familiar with the Hebrew Bible know that many of the traditions found in 1 and 2 Samuel are duplicated in the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, but with important differences. [Samuel and the Chronicler] The differences grow in part from the apparent use of some variant source materials and in part from the differing perspective of the editors. The Deuteronomists found it important to paint a full portrait of Israel’s life, preserving both positive and negative information. This is most evident in the life of David. His human foibles are disheartening, but illustrative of the editors’ tendentious ambitions.

The Deuteronomists speak glowingly of David as a man after God’s own heart and one to whom God promised an everlasting dynasty, but they are also candid about less flattering features of David’s personality. They do not hesitate to recount David’s sin in the Bathsheba/Uriah affair and the damage it inflicted on his personal life and public rule. The Chronicler, however, writing during the postexilic period, seems to treat David’s life and rule as an icon

Samuel and the Chronicler



Any intensive study of the books of Samuel must consider the comparative contribution of the books of Chronicles. The DH is the older record, probably reaching its final form around 550 BC. Although there is wide disagreement concerning a precise date, the Chronicler's history seems to have emerged some two to three centuries later, during the postexilic period.

While the Deuteronomist(s) addressed a people in exile and sought to explain their predicament, the Chronicler's audience was a restored but politically insignificant postexilic Jewish community. Having neither king nor national independence, it had restructured itself as a religious community. One aim of the Chronicler was to show the continuity of the postexilic religious institutions with those of the formative period. By so doing, he explained the relevance of those institutions for his generation and legitimized them by linking them to their origins in the authoritative past.

Thus the Chronicler retained only that information from 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings that suited his purpose. For example, most of Saul's story is omitted by the Chronicler (1 Chr 9:35–10:14); only his death is recounted. It is clear that the writer was familiar with the larger story, however, as revealed by his summary evaluation of Saul's reign, which refers to Saul's unfaithfulness and his consultation of a medium instead of Yahweh (1 Chr 10:13–14).

The Chronicler also omits the DH's narrative about Samuel, as well as the inauguration of the monarchy, choosing instead to focus on David, who was Yahweh's chosen king and Israel's ideal king. The Chronicler rearranges some of the material in 1–2 Samuel, and omits most of the Succession Narrative (2 Sam 9–20; 1 Kgs 1–2), thus eliminating any mention of the moral and ethical debacles in David's personal life. He then adds a considerable amount of material related to David's provision for Israel's religious institutions. Although the DH knows David as a "man after God's own heart," it also reveals the dark places in David's persona. In the Chronicles, however, David's sins are absent, and he lives up to his reputation as the ideal king. David is Israel's great warrior and founder of Israel's religious institutions, a model for imitation in faith and practice.

for imitation. David is portrayed as the founder of many important institutions that had come to the fore in the postexilic community, and the ongoing legitimacy of these religious institutions was tied to Israel's memories of the consummate king. Thus the Chronicler's version of the story is so pro-Davidic that the hero's faults are glossed over.

4. *Text.* The Hebrew text of 1–2 Samuel has been poorly preserved. The oldest complete text of the Hebrew Bible is called the Masoretic Text (MT), based on a family of manuscripts prepared and annotated by Jewish scholars called "Masoretes." These scholars were committed to preserving the text, explaining discrepancies, and adding vowel points and accent marks to show how the text was pronounced during their lifetime.

Unfortunately, the text of 1–2 Samuel seems to have suffered greatly in the process of transmission. Many passages are very difficult to read; others are impossible. In these cases, the text must be

reconstructed with help from other ancient documents. The most important of these is the Septuagint (LXX), an early translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (probably third century BC). The LXX was preserved in different circles and was constantly undergoing revision, so some versions are more helpful than others. The most valuable of the Greek texts for our purposes is a major uncial (written in capital letters only) preserved in the Vatican and designated as LXX^B. [Ancient Manuscripts] It appears to be less affected by revision and thus closer to the earliest Greek translation.

A second comparative document of great importance is a Samuel scroll discovered among the ancient texts recovered from the caves of Khirbet Qumran, commonly called the “Dead Sea Scrolls.” [The

Dead Sea Scrolls

 Discovered in Qumran in 1947, the most famous leather rolls are the Dead Sea Scrolls. The previous medium used by the Egyptians and the Classical Mediterranean world was the papyrus roll. Egyptians used the leather roll as early as the 24th century BC. The leather roll has been the medium of choice for the Jewish tradition despite that they are thicker and have a more awkward form than papyrus. The Dead Sea Scrolls are very accessible to the public through its international sponsor, Project Judaica Foundation

Dead Sea Scrolls, 3rd century BC–AD 86. Leather rolls. Qumran. (Credit: Scott Nash)



Dead Sea Scrolls] Three of these scrolls contain portions of Samuel. Two are fragmentary and offer little substantive information, but another (4QSam^a) contains parts from 47 of the 57 original columns. This text probably dates to the first century BC, making it more than a thousand years older than the MT. Surprisingly, 4QSam^a lies closer to the Hebrew text underlying the LXX than to the MT. This has necessitated a reevaluation of the relationship between the MT, LXX, and the ancient documents upon which they were based.

After the exile, some Jews remained in Babylon, while others returned to Palestine, and yet others settled in Egypt and other places. Following Frank Moore Cross, many scholars accept a view that the texts preserved in these different locales diverged over time so that there developed Babylonian, Palestinian, Egyptian, and perhaps other “text types” of the Hebrew text. The Palestinian or Egyptian text types may have been the exemplar for the LXX, while the Babylonian text type could underlie today’s MT. The work of the Chronicler also seems to reflect a dependence on a text type that

has more in common with the LXX and 4QSam^a than with the MT.

Since the LXX may reflect readings from a Hebrew original that is older than the MT, some writers, notably Kyle McCarter, tend to favor the LXX reading to the MT. Other ancient sources, such as the Aramaic Targums and the Syriac translation, are sometimes helpful, but the LXX and 4QSam^a are both essential for any careful interpretation of 1 and 2 Samuel.

Maximalist and Minimalist Interpretations of Biblical History



Scholarly views on the historical credibility of the Old Testament range from “maximalist” to “minimalist.”

Minimalist scholars, heirs of the Alt-Noth school of interpretation, argue that scientific historiography cannot simply accept the Old Testament at face value, and consequently they are not confident of the historical trustworthiness of the biblical narratives.

The maximalists, rising mainly from the Albright–Bright circle, believe that the Old Testament documents are more trustworthy. While acknowledging various discrepancies and problems, these scholars presume that the historical narratives of the Old Testament may be used to reconstruct the history of ancient Israel.

Minimalists argue that the biblical accounts were often written long after the actual events—often centuries later—resulting in their diminished value as historical

witnesses. In their view, such documents must always reflect the bias of the author or editor—the self-identity or self-understanding of Israel in the time of the narrative’s final composition—rather than the time of the events. Thus the purpose of the narratives was entirely theological, not historiographical, giving reliable evidence only for what was believed during the period in which it was written.

Positions on subjects such as this are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however. Maximalists may agree with the date of the final product, as well as the didactic aims of the editors, while also insisting that earlier and historically valid sources were used in the composition. Thus, maximalists may admit the possibility of bias in the biblical narrative, but believe that modern critical methods of interpretation can identify earlier strata of tradition in a text and separate it out from later elements of bias, thus allowing the interpreter to reconstruct a more accurate picture of historical events.

Historical Setting

Many of the events in 1–2 Samuel are so miraculous that some consider them mythical. Some scholars presume that the biblical accounts offer valid historical data, while others doubt the historicity even of such characters as David. [Maximalist and Minimalist Interpretations of Biblical History]

In regard to the period encompassed by the books of Samuel, minimalists see the Saul–David–Solomon narratives as mythic legends, representing later Israel’s need to couch her national origins in terms of a golden age with heroic ancestors. Thus David, an innocent shepherd, is transformed by the storytellers into a conquering national hero. In contrast, maximalists believe that these biblical narratives preserve genuine factual memories, while acknowledging that the actual events may have been obscured by the long process of telling and retelling the stories before they achieved their final written form.

Some minimalists are unconvinced that the united monarchy described in 1–2 Samuel and 1 Kings 1–11 ever existed. As evidence, they insist that archaeologists have failed to uncover any epigraphic (ancient written sources) evidence from the period of the united monarchy. This silence seems quite strange if, as the Old Testament tells it, Israel’s empire under David and Solomon stretched from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates.

The recent publication of an Aramaic inscription from Tell Dan threatens this view, however. The discoverers, Avraham Biran and



J. Naveh, contend that the inscription contains a series of letters that should be translated as “House of David” (*bytdwd*). Maximalists have championed this inscription as a historical validation of the united monarchy. Some minimalists have challenged the authenticity of the find, while others have proposed different translations, reading *bytdwd* as a place name or proposing that *dwd* was the name of a god worshiped in Dan or perhaps the name of some public official whose house was in Dan.

This writer takes the position that a historical basis underlies the books of 1–2 Samuel, while acknowledging that “what really happened” may be irretrievably buried beneath centuries of literary accretions. In any case, there is no question that the stories involved take place within a certain historical context. The period described in 1–2 Samuel covers just over a century, beginning with Samuel’s

birth (probably in the 1070s BC) and ending just before David’s death, often dated at 961 BC. This was a fortuitous time for the growth and development of small states in the Levant, as both Egypt and Mesopotamia, the traditional power brokers of the region, were experiencing periods of internal unrest and external weakness.

Egypt had claimed a measure of control over Palestine for nearly four hundred years, but a period of profligate spending on monumental buildings left the economy in a shambles, and a series of ineffective leaders was unable to right the country’s financial affairs or to deal with the waves of sea peoples who were invading the northeastern coast. As the Tanite Dynasty took over the ship of state in 1065 BC, Egypt was foundering on the shoals of internal dissent and incapable of retaining control of the eastern lands it once held.

The Mesopotamians were also limited during this period. Tiglath-Pileser I (1116–1078 BC) led a brief Assyrian resurgence, but his descendants were less effective and unable to maintain control over the western territories he had gained. Neither Assyria nor Babylonia would have much influence on affairs in Palestine for another two hundred years.

The absence of the traditional superpowers from the fray did not leave the playing field without obstacles for Israel. Smaller kingdoms and strong tribal groups arose to fill the vacuum. [The Tenth Century Playing Field] The Israelite people themselves lived as interlopers in a land that was already occupied by a heterogenous group of peoples generally referred to as Canaanites, whose power base was centered in fortified city-states such as Hazor, Taanach, Acco, and Megiddo. The Jebusites who controlled Jerusalem can be thought of as a subset of the Canaanite peoples. Weaker tribal units such as the Gibeonites also occupied significant tracts of arable land.

Eastern tribal units or nations, such as the Ammonites (Judg 11:1-40; 1 Sam 11) and Moabites (Judg 3:12-30, with whom were associated the Midianites, Judg 6–7), had grown strong and sought to expand into surrounding territories. From the north, the Aramean states around Damascus worked to extend their influence, leading to armed conflict with the emerging state of Israel (2 Sam 8:3-12; 10:6-19).

The Israelite nation faced its strongest competition from the west, however, as the same sea peoples who had proven so distracting to Egypt traveled north along the Mediterranean coast and settled in a broad, fertile area just to the west of Judah, the southernmost territory occupied by the Israelites. The biblical name for this powerful people is “Philistines.” With their power focused in a tight cluster of five cooperating city-states, the military minded and technologically advanced Philistines gradually pushed further and further eastward from their coastal power base, leading to a series of bloody and largely successful conflicts with Israel (Judg 3:31; 13:1-15:20; 1 Sam 4-6). Their advance drove a wedge between the northern and southern tribes of Israel, as Philistine military domination extended all the way to Beth-shan, hard by the Jordan River. First Samuel 7:7-14 suggests that Samuel led Israel to a short period of respite from the Philistines, but Saul found them still occupying much of the hill country when he took office (1 Sam 13:1–14:46). Only through David’s leadership was Israel able to force the Philistines back into the coastal plain (1 Sam 17; 23:1-5; 28-31; 2 Sam 5:17-25; 8:1).

Israel's lack of a central government and standing military left the people vulnerable to well-organized enemies such as the Philistines, whose monarchical system supported the development of superior armaments and a powerful standing army. Thus political and military factors led to a natural evolution of Israel's emerging identity. Perceptive elements of the population pressed for the development of a centralized government, headed by a king "like the other nations" (1 Sam 8:5, 20). Those who supported the theocratic ideal that functioned during the period of the judges opposed such a move, while others saw the development of kingship not as a threat to divine authority, but as a gift of God. The negative and positive examples set by Saul and David reveal that both groups had legitimate fears and hopes.

This historical milieu of contrasting forces became the crucible in which Israel was forged, not as a people, but as a political entity. Through this experience, Israel was challenged to trust that Yahweh was sufficient to see them through the period of crisis and into the hopeful future beyond.

Historiography in the Ancient Near East



Historians of the ancient world worked on the basis of differing assumptions than modern Western history writers. Modern historians rely on confirmable details from comparative materials to assure factual accuracy. Therefore, modern history writing includes no place for miraculous events or acts of God because they cannot be empirically confirmed. Revisionists may continue to use history as a guise for promoting particular agendas, but typical modern historians seek to approach history objectively, without letting personal bias influence their account of what has happened in the past.

Biblical historians seem to have been far less concerned with factual details and chronological sequences than modern writers. When writing was still a novelty and literacy the province of a privileged few, history was compiled from oral traditions drawn from tribal lore or etymological place names rather than comparative documents. Great credence was given to oral traditions, even when different strands of tradition preserved accounts of the past in variant ways. Rather than harmonizing disagreements or choosing one version over the other, historians sometimes incorporated both traditions into their writing.

Biblical historians, like their counterparts in other ancient lands, commonly interjected the miraculous as an explanation for significant events. Indeed, the concept of a history that did not include acts of God would have made little sense to biblical historians, who wrote from a consistently theological perspective.

The historians of ancient Israel, furthermore, carried all of their subjective beliefs into their work, because they wrote to promote a particular theological point of view. Their interest in writing and their historical judgments are clearly slanted in Israel's favor and toward the ideal of obedience to Yahweh. Other nations appear most often as unrighteous enemies of Israel, or find mention in the background of Israel's activities. Kings of Israel are judged, not by their military, economic, or cultural achievements, but by their faithfulness to the law as the historians understood it.

Readers who are cognizant of the different perspectives underlying ancient and modern history writing are better prepared to confront the truth embodied in the biblical text without feeling threatened if it does not hold to the same standards of historical precision that are common to the modern world.

Interpretation: Reading the Text as Story and as History

Ancient historical narratives such as 1 and 2 Samuel are patently tendentious yet also purport to record Israel's history. [Historiography in the Ancient Near East] Individual stories and the text as a whole are literary creations, yet both grow out of a very real historical situation. Thus the interpreter must approach the texts on at least two levels: as *story* and as *history*. The preceding section has dealt with some of the historical issues and limitations associated with 1 and 2 Samuel. Depending on one's approach, the reader will put more or less trust in the historical veracity of the materials but must make some attempt to understand the text, at least within its historical context.

The story element of the narratives is the level on which the reader meets the text. A student of archaeology or ancient Near Eastern history might doubt the factual basis of a particular passage, in all or in part. Nevertheless, the narrative communicates its intended lesson through the medium of the story with little concern for the historical skepticism of future readers.

Thus, while the commentary that follows will make some effort to make the reader aware of historical issues—at least where something substantive can be said—the interpretation of the text will be based on the story *as it is presented*. For example, many scholars have questioned the historical roots of the David and Goliath story (1 Sam 17). Other persons besides David were credited with the same or similar feats (see 2 Sam 21:19; 1 Chr 20:5). Some may assign it purely legendary status. Yet the importance of the story to Israel and the way it is employed in the narrative is largely independent of such consideration. The commentary will give a brief synopsis of historical questions and will make use of pertinent insights gained from archaeological and historical studies. The primary focus, however, will be on understanding the narrative as the storyteller tells it, tracing the ways in which the traditions have impacted Israel's faith and life, and searching for meaning that may speak to the modern world as well.

Theological Significance

Several themes are prominent in the books of Samuel. Foremost among them is the traditional Deuteronomistic mantra that blessings follow the righteous, while punishment awaits the wicked. [The Deuteronomistic Dichotomy] Eli's family loses control of the priesthood because his sons were evil and he did not control them (1 Sam 2:27-36; 3:10-14). Samuel attempted to appoint his own sons as judges over Israel, but they were also wicked, leading to the elders'

The Deuteronomistic Dichotomy



The cutting edge of Deuteronomistic theology is amply illustrated by these quotations from Deuteronomy 28:1-3, 15-16, each of which introduce a long series of specific blessings or curses:

If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the LORD your God:

Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. . . .

But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you:

Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. . .

rejection of Samuel's leadership in favor of a king, an innovation that was regarded in 1 Samuel 8 as a great evil. Saul's rise and fall were tied to his adherence to and abandonment of the law (as revealed to him by Samuel; see for example 1 Sam 15:17-19). Likewise, David's fortunes rose as he followed Yahweh, but sank quickly after the Bathsheba affair (2 Sam 12). Thus the Deuteronomistic dichotomy of blessing for obedience and punishment for sin pervades the book.

Something else enters the picture, however, something that hints of gospel. David commits crimes that are worthy of death, but he does not die. His sin is transferred to another, who dies in his place (2 Sam 12:13-14). David's sin is egregious, but God does not cut him off. His rule will be diminished, but his dynasty remains intact. He suffers from private and public shame, but still Yahweh gives him victory over his enemies, including those from his own house. Thus there is an element of grace that occasionally bubbles through the Deuteronomistic porridge of crime and punishment. Even in sin, even in darkness, there is hope. There is a future.

In the books of Samuel, Israel is constantly in crisis: the crisis of kingship, the crisis of the Philistine threat, the crisis of the lost ark, the crisis of faulty leadership. Yet, in times of crisis, lessons for life emerge. The loss of the ark becomes a lesson in trusting Yahweh's power. The failures of Saul become a lesson for David. The failures of David speak to future generations.

Individuals also face times of crisis. Young Samuel hears the voice of God. Young David hears the taunts of Goliath. A more mature David is caught between Saul and the Philistines. A much older David flees from the insurgency led by his own son. In these times of crisis, faith emerges. Samuel answers God's call. David trusts in Yahweh's sufficiency. Israel in exile and all readers hence learn from

these examples that God can still be trusted. Faith can emerge in the midst of crisis so that no day is dark enough to eclipse the light of God's future.

Outline

Students of 1–2 Samuel rarely perceive the structure of the book in identical ways. The following outline is one way of looking at the text and will serve as the organizing principle for the remainder of the book:

- I. Samuel: Prophet, Priest, and Maker of Kings (1 Sam 1:1–12:25)
 - A. The Rise of Samuel (1:1–4:1a)
 1. Hannah's Vow and Samuel's Birth (1:1-20)
 2. Samuel's Dedication and Hannah's Song (1:21–2:11)
 - a. Hannah's gift to God (1:21–28; 2:11)
 - b. Hannah's song of praise (2:1-10)
 3. Eli's Failure and Samuel's Favor (2:12-26)
 - a. Eli's worthless sons (2:12-17, 22-25)
 - b. Hannah's worthy son (2:18-21, 26)
 4. Eli's Fall and Samuel's Call (2:27–4:1a)
 - a. The Man of God (2:27-36)
 - b. The Boy of God (3:1–4:1a)
 - B. The Ark of God (4:1b–7:1)
 1. Philistine Victories and the Loss of the Ark (4:1b-22)
 - a. Losing the battle (4:1b-11)
 - b. Losing the "glory" (4:12-22)
 2. The Hand of God and the Hands of Dagon (5:1-12)
 3. The Return of the Ark and a Mixed Reception (6:1–7:1)
 - a. The Philistines return the ark (6:1-12)
 - b. The Israelites rejoice and mourn (6:13–7:1)
 - C. Israel Repents and the Philistines Fall (7:2-17)
 1. Samuel calls Israel to repent at Mizpah (7:2-6)
 2. Renascent Israel routs the Philistines (7:7-14)
 3. Samuel's circuit: the final judge (7:15-17)
 - D. The Question of Kingship (8:1–12:25)
 1. The People's Request and Samuel's Warning (8:1-22)
 - a. Samuel's sons are wanting (8:1-3)
 - b. Israel's elders want a king (8:4-6a)
 - c. Samuel sounds a warning (8:6b-18)
 - d. A king like other nations (8:19-22)
 2. Saul's Search and a Secret Anointing (9:1–10:16)
 - a. Saul in search of his father's donkeys (9:1-4)

- b. Saul in search of a seer (9:5-14)
 - c. Samuel's unexpected reception (9:15-24)
 - d. A secret anointing and special signs (9:25–10:8)
 - e. Saul becomes a new man (10:9-16)
 - 3. A Public Proclamation and Immediate Danger (10:17-27a)
 - a. At Mizpah, Samuel proclaims Saul king (10:17-26)
 - b. Internal unrest and the Ammonite threat (10:27a)
 - 4. Saul's First Victory and the Kingship Confirmed (10:27b – 11:15)
 - a. The need for deliverance (10:27b – 11:4)
 - b. Farmer Saul becomes a warrior and leader (11:5 -11)
 - c. At Gilgal, Saul's kingship reconfirmed (11:12-15)
 - 5. Samuel's Soliloquy (12:1-25)
 - a. Samuel's faithful leadership (12:1-5)
 - b. Israel's faithless record (12:6-25)
- II. Saul: The Tragic Hero and Warrior King (1 Sam 13:1–31:13)
- A. Saul's Fall from Grace (13:1–15:35)
 - 1. Crossed Boundaries and a Cross Priest (13:1-22)
 - a. Saul musters Israel and offers a sacrifice (13:1-9)
 - b. Samuel confronts Saul and predicts his doom (13:10-15)
 - c. Saul's poor army and the Philistines' advantage (13:16-22)
 - 2. A Courageous Son and His Rash Father (13:23–14:52)
 - a. Jonathan's risky initiative and a victory to remember (13:23–14:23)
 - b. Saul's rash oath and a confrontation to forget (14:24-46)
 - c. A short salute to Saul's rule (14:47-52)
 - 3. Saul's Rebellion and Samuel's Regret (15:1-35)
 - a. Samuel's order and Saul's response (15:1-9)
 - b. Saul's explanation and Samuel's sermon (15:10-23)
 - c. Saul repents but loses his kingdom (15:24-35)
 - B. David's Rise to Prominence (16:1–17:58)
 - 1. Young David, the Anointed (16:1-13)
 - 2. Sweet David, the Musician (16:14-23)
 - 3. Shepherd Boy David, the Giant-Killer (17:1-58)
 - a. Goliath's challenge (17:1-11)
 - b. David's appearance (17:12-30)
 - c. David and Saul (17:31-40)
 - d. David and Goliath (17:41-51a)
 - e. Reprise, David and Saul (17:51b -58)
 - C. A Struggle for Survival (18:1–31:13)
 - 1. David in Danger—In Saul's Court (18:1–20:42)
 - a. David's fame and Saul's jealousy (18:1-19)

- b. A failed trap and greater fear (18:20-30)
 - c. Attempted murder and a daring escape (19:1-24)
 - d. Jonathan's love and David's departure (20:1-42)
 - 2. David in Danger—On the Run (21:1–26:25)
 - a. David and the priests of Nob (21:1-9)
 - b. David travels, and the priests pay (21:10–22:23)
 - (1) David: at Gath, Adullam, and Moab (21:10–22:5)
 - (2) The priests: at Gibeah and Nob (22:6-23)
 - c. Saul hunts David, and the tables are turned (23:1–24:22)
 - (1) The rescue of and betrayal of Keilah (23:1-14)
 - (2) From Ziph to Maon and a close call (23:15-28)
 - (3) Confrontation at En-gedi (24:1-22)
 - d. Nabal's folly and David's prize (25:1-44)
 - (1) Samuel's death (25:1)
 - (2) David's new wife (25:2-42)
 - (3) Wedding notices (25:43-44)
 - e. Saul keeps hunting, and David keeps winning (26:1-25)
 - 3. David in Danger—Among the Philistines (27:1–31:13)
 - a. Achish's protection and David's deception (27:1–28:2)
 - b. Saul's distress and Samuel's ghost (28:3-25)
 - c. Philistine aid and Amalekite trouble (29:1–30:31)
 - d. Saul's last battle and an honorable death (31:1-13)
- III. David: King of All Israel (2 Sam 1:1–24:25)
- A. David's Rise from Hebron to Jerusalem (1:1–5:10)
 - 1. David Mourns for Saul and Jonathan (1:1-27)
 - a. Killing the bearer of bad news (1:1-16)
 - b. Lamenting the loss of a friend and his father (1:17-27)
 - 2. A New King Who Respects the Old (2:1-7)
 - a. David becomes king in Hebron (2:1-4a)
 - b. David wins new friends (2:4b-7)
 - 3. A Rival King and His Fierce General (2:8-32)
 - a. Abner makes Ishbaal king over Israel (2:8-11)
 - b. The battle at the pool of Gibeon (2:12-17)
 - c. Abner retreats, and Asahel dies (2:18-32)
 - 4. Life and Death (3:1-39)
 - a. David grows strong—and prolific (3:1-5)
 - b. David parlays with Abner in peace (3:6-21)
 - c. Joab settles a grudge, and David plays politics (3:22-39)
 - 5. Ishbaal Dies, but David Is Innocent (4:1-12)
 - 6. David: King of All Israel (5:1-16)
 - a. Anointed by the elders (5:1-5)
 - b. Ensnared in his capital (5:6-16)

- B. The Consolidation of the Kingdom (5:17–10:19)
 - 1. David Defeats the Philistines (5:17-25)
 - 2. The City of David and the City of God (6:1-23)
 - a. An aborted attempt to return the ark (6:1-11)
 - b. A successful return and an angry wife (6:12-23)
 - 3. A House for God and a House for David (7:1-29)
 - a. David's desire and God's desire (7:1-17)
 - b. David's grateful prayer (7:18-29)
 - 4. The Establishment of the Empire (8:1-18)
 - a. David defeats his enemies (8:1-14)
 - b. David's delegation of duties (8:15-18)
 - 5. David Shows Loyalty to Saul's House (9:1-13)
 - 6. David Shows Loyalty—and a Sword—to Ammon (10:1-19)
 - a. David's diplomacy and Hanun's mistake (10:1-5)
 - b. David defeats the Ammonites and Aramaeans (10:6-19)
- C. David's War Within (11:1–12:31)
 - 1. David Commits Adultery (11:1-27)
 - 2. Nathan Confronts the King (12:1-15a)
 - 3. A Death, a Birth, and a Victory (12:15b-31)
- D. David's Troublesome Children (13:1–18:33)
 - 1. Rape, Revenge, and Exile (13:1-39)
 - a. Amnon rapes his sister Tamar (13:1-22)
 - b. Brother Absalom gets revenge (13:23-39)
 - 2. Joab's Love for Father and Son (14:1-33)
 - a. The woman of Tekoa tells a story (14:1-20)
 - b. Absalom returns to Jerusalem (14:21-24)
 - c. Absalom returns to the palace (14:25-33)
 - 3. Absalom's Rebellion (15:1–19:8)
 - a. A false vow and a threatening conspiracy (15:1-12)
 - b. David's retreat from Jerusalem (15:13–16:14)
 - c. Absalom's triumph (16:15–17:23)
 - d. David's victory and grief (17:24–19:8a)
- E. David Diminished and a Discontented Nation (19:8b–20:26)
 - 1. David Returns to Jerusalem, but Not in Triumph (19:8b-43)
 - a. The royal vacuum (19:8b-10)
 - b. David reaffirmed by Judah (19:11-40)
 - c. Israel claims David, too (19:41-43)
 - 2. David Deals with Internal Dissent (20:1-26)
 - a. Sheba's revolt (20:1-3)
 - b. Joab and Amasa (20:4-13)
 - c. Sheba's end: the wise woman of Abel (20:14-22)
 - d. The roll of the faithful (20:23-26)
- F. David Remembered (21:1–24:25)

1. David Deals with a Famine and the Philistines (21:1-22)
 - a. The slaughter of the Saulides (21:1-14)
 - b. The exploits of David's men (21:15-22)
2. David's Psalm of Praise (22:1-51)
3. David's Last Words (23:1-7)
4. David's Mighty Men (23:8-39)
5. David's Mistake and God's Judgment (24:1-25)

The Samuel Narratives in Literature

The narratives in the books of Samuel have proved to be “classics” in the sense that they frame the human condition in such a profound way that generations of listeners and readers have found their own foibles, questions, and aspirations mirrored in the story. As popular imagination is drawn to such stories, they are told and retold, updated, deciphered, wondered over, and altered in various ways. The David story in particular, with its themes of greatness and tragedy, of virtue and shame, of war and peace, of family scandal and political intrigue, has inspired numerous retellings.

Any retelling is also a remaking of the story, as each reader filters the biblical material through his or her own presuppositions, concerns, and perceptions. The story becomes a lens through which the reader's own concerns are focused, an opportunity for articulating present concerns. Novelists, poets, and playwrights have exploited a rich variety of themes from the Samuel materials.

In the pre-Renaissance period, David appeared in literature as a *type*—a pattern or prototype that foreshadows a later reality. David appears most often as a type of Christ, as the archetypal penitent, and as the model king.

Several of the early church fathers (including Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine) spoke of David as a type of Christ. For example, Augustine argued that “David first reigned in the earthly Jerusalem as a shadow of that which was to come.”¹

During the Middle Ages, David was most commonly seen as a penitent sinner. His piety was magnified, and the overtly sexual features of his sin were diminished. Some medieval descriptions of David's penitence were extreme. The fifteenth century writer William Caxton asserted that David had himself buried up to his waist, remaining “tyl he felte the wormes crepe in his flesshe. This was a great penaunce and a token of grete repentaunce.”

The typology of David as a model king is also found in numerous illustrated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, where his coronation is frequently depicted. Some note that elements of the

King Arthur legend reflect influence from David's story: Early in his life, Arthur slew the giant of Mont St. Michel; he was known as a brilliant king who was crippled by sin (though not adultery); he endured and overcame the rebellion of his own son (Mordred); and he was eventually restored by God's grace. In David's story as well as Arthur's, both medieval and modern readers better comprehend how human frailty can diminish even the best of political leaders.

In the political struggles of seventeenth century England, the Davidic archetype was used by both sides in the Puritan–Royalist conflict. Andrew Marvell supported Oliver Cromwell's legitimacy by depicting him as the good Davidic king, while John Dryden supported Stuart rule by appealing to the same Davidic model.

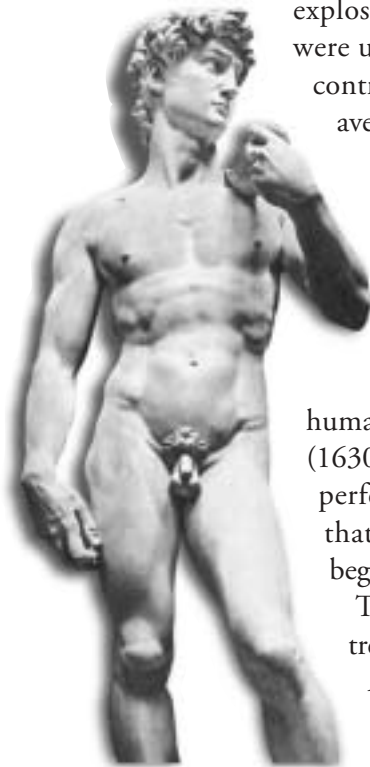
The Renaissance and post-Renaissance periods witnessed an explosion of literature based on the Samuel narratives. Many were uninspired paraphrases of the biblical narrative but still contributed to a movement away from typology toward new avenues of interpretation.

The rise of humanism in art and literature during the late Middle Ages focused attention on the human physical form and on human nature as worthy of study and admiration. The sculpture of these periods, notably the Davids of Donatello, Verocchio, and Michelangelo, celebrated his physical prowess and beauty. [Michelangelo's *David*] Literature also celebrated the human David. In Michael Drayton's poem *David and Goliath* (1630), for example, David's physical form gives "true lawes to perfect Symmetry" (l. 72). David's handsomeness was such that the bees and wasps "have with his beauties often bin beguild," thinking they have seen roses or lilies (ll. 61-66).

The twentieth century has produced several distinguished treatments of the Samuel materials. D. H. Lawrence's play *David* (1926) treated the transitioning fortunes of Saul and David (1 Sam 15–20). Passionately religious, but not at all an orthodox Christian, Lawrence believed that

Christianity's greatness had passed and, as he wrote in his 1923 essay "Books," "a new venture towards God" must be started. In *David*, Jonathan is the character who embodies that new venture.

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), although telling the story of a disintegrating southern family in the mid-1800s, drew inspiration from the



Michelangelo's *David*

The most famous image in our world of the figure of David is this colossal sculpture by Michelangelo. The contemplative David sees Goliath in the distance and concentrates on the action about to happen. The strain of this event is seen only in the muscles of his neck and his knitted brow. His body is depicted in the relaxed position known as contrapposto that was used in 5th century Classic Greek sculpture.

Michelangelo (1475–1564). *David*. 1502-04. Marble. 14'1". Museo di Accademia del Disegno, Florence, Italy. (Credit: Planet Art)

David–Amnon–Absalom episode. It is considered by many to be “the great southern novel.” The main characters—Thomas Sutpen, the family patriarch and dynasty-builder, and his two sons, Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon—are modeled after David, Amnon, and Absalom. Henry kills Charles to prevent Bon’s marriage to Henry’s sister, Judith. Since Bon is part African American, Faulkner has introduced miscegenation into the biblical story of incest and thereby directed attention to that most characteristic southern plague, racism.

Alan Paton also drew inspiration from the David–Absalom story for his renowned novel of South Africa, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948). Central character Stephen Kumalo has a son named Absalom who rejects his family, commits murder, and eventually is hanged. The story presents the anguished Kumalo’s efforts to find his son, during which he has a moving encounter with the father of one of Absalom’s victims.

Literary theorists of the late twentieth century have become sensitive to the role ideology plays in shaping texts. Biblical scholars, using the tool of ideological criticism, have investigated how pro-David, anti-Saul ideology shaped the biblical presentation in the books of Samuel. East German novelist Stefan Heym has used his novel *The King David Report* (1973) to argue that one-party, highly centralized states—such as that of both David and East Germany—tend to produce revisionist histories that promote the ruling regime.

At least two inferences may be drawn from this brief survey of the Samuel narratives in literature and from the many other references in the following commentary. The materials are uncommonly rich in suggestive themes, and readers continually “remake” the biblical stories to address modern-day concerns.

The use of the Samuel narratives in literature is far more voluminous than could be treated here. The best resources for studying this material are: David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); and Raymond-Jean Frontain and Jan Wojcik, eds., *The David Myth in Western Literature* (Purdue University Press, 1980).

NOTE

1. Augustine, *Civ.* XVII. 14.

1 SAMUEL

HANNAH'S VOW AND SAMUEL'S BIRTH

1:1-20

Part One: Samuel—Prophet, Priest, and Maker of Kings, 1 Samuel 1:1–12:25

This commentary treats the text of 1 and 2 Samuel in three sections, each based on the main character who is, at least overtly, in control. As the book begins, the priest Eli serves as an obvious foil for *Samuel*, who is the true power in chapters 1–12. Samuel's presence is felt beyond that point, but in chapter 12 he officially gives over leadership to *Saul*. Saul's rule extends until his death in 1 Samuel 31, even though David emerges as a much more popular character. Second Samuel begins with a reminder of Saul's death and the account of *David's* rapid rise to kingship, and David remains the focal character for the remainder of the book.

Many scholars have analyzed the early chapters of Samuel in great detail, with divergent results. Most will agree that there are subsources present, such as “the biography of Samuel” (chs. 1–3) and “the history of the ark” (chs. 4–6), but opinions vary when it comes to the shape of the larger structure. Some literary analysts see a tight unit in chapters 1–7, while others see the first twelve or fifteen chapters as a cohesive whole.

The account of Samuel's rise to prominence in Israel (1:1–4:1a) is a carefully wrought narrative. It contains elements of history and biography, and the story of Samuel's birth is similar to an annunciation type scene, but the author's main concern is to offer a *theological history*. Likewise, the stories surrounding the ark of God (4:1b–7:2) are more concerned with God's demonstration of his power through the ark than with its appearance or location. The question of kingship, first raised in 8:1–12:25, is not so much about Israel's first human king, but about the nation's rejection of God as king.

As every other part of the Deuteronomistic History, these stories are unashamedly tendentious. This is no “politically correct” document, but a one-sided attempt to show that God is the only true king and that obeying God is the only wise course. Those who accept God's rule and follow his way will prosper, while those who rebuff God's claims will fall. This is the overall theme of 1 and 2 Samuel, told in a

myriad of minor plots that hammer home the authors' primary concern: *God is king; it is best to obey!*

COMMENTARY

Most of 1 and 2 Samuel is written in a freely flowing narrative style; the first chapter is no exception. In a literary sense, the chapter falls rather neatly into two parts, as vv. 1-20 recount the circumstances leading up to Samuel's birth and vv. 21-28 describe the events that

Birth Stories



Some of the most important characters in Israel's history are introduced through an "annunciation type scene," and some scholars use this term to describe the account of Samuel's birth. However, in a true annunciation type scene, the birth of a child is predicted through an impressive encounter with God, usually mediated by an angel. For example, three divine representatives appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre and predicted the birth of Isaac (Gen 18:1-15). Similarly, a single "man of God" majestically appeared to Manoah's unnamed wife—and later to Manoah—to foretell Samson's birth and to give instructions about his upbringing (Judg 13:2-23).

The point of an annunciation story is to emphasize the importance of the child who is about to be born: Isaac, Samson, John, Jesus. While Samuel is no doubt a significant person, the story of his birth lacks the visionary quality of most typical annunciation scenes. There is no angel to announce the birth. Rather, Hannah approaches God through prayer and the making of a vow. Nor does the word of assurance come through an impressive supernatural messenger, but through an old and deaf priest named Eli.

follow. Thematically, the chapter has four movements, detailing Hannah's need (vv. 1-8), Hannah's bargain with God (vv. 9-18), God's answer (vv. 19-20), and Hannah's fulfillment of her promise (vv. 21-28).

The purpose of this chapter is to relay the story of Samuel's birth in such a way as to emphasize the magnitude of Samuel's personage and the significant role he will play in Hebrew history. [Birth Stories] Several characteristics of the story underscore Samuel's importance, beginning with his introduction at the very beginning of the book. Other emphatic elements include the similarity of this story to earlier narratives about patriarchal wives who had difficulty becoming pregnant, the extensive attention paid to Samuel's mother Hannah, and the insistence that Samuel was born as a result of Hannah's vow and God's response. Though Hannah's vow involves a conversation with God and Eli offers an ambiguous semi-oracle in response, it is Hannah who shows the initiative.

1. *One Man and Two Women.* There once was a man, so the Bible says—a certain man from the village of Ramathaim, of the Zuphite family who lived in the hill country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah. (see [Map of Central Hill Country]) While this typical introduction leads the reader to believe that this story is about a man, it is not. The story is about a woman who will soon give birth to a son who becomes the focus of the story. Elkanah is only in the story because this woman is his wife. Or, to be more specific, she is one of his two wives. (see [Was It Bigamy?])

Central Hill Country



Map of Central Hill Country

ΑΩ Elkanah's home is called Ramathaim (the "double-height") only in v. 1. The LXX calls it *harmathaim*, and it is clearly in Ephraim, probably equivalent to the New Testament town of Arimathea (Matt 27:57). Elsewhere, Elkanah is said to have lived in Ramah (v. 19; 2:11), probably the Benjaminite town of er-Ram, later cited as Samuel's home (7:17; 8:4; 15:34; etc.). This may reflect multiple source traditions that are not fully harmonized by the narrator.

The woman's name was Hannah, and "Hannah" means "grace," but the woman's difficult life betrayed her pleasant name. We are told that Hannah was the most miserable of women; her rival wife had several children, but Hannah had none.

Elkanah had married Hannah for love, so the rabbis say, and our text insists that his love persisted even though she was thought to be barren (v. 5). According to the law, Elkanah could have divorced Hannah on grounds of infertility, but he did not choose to do so. Still, in the ancient world it was every man's duty and desire to beget male children. Sons were needed to perpetuate his family name, to inherit his land, and to carry on his business. As a result, the greatest thing his wife could do for him was to bear at least one son, and preferably more. By the same token, the worst thing she could do was fail. **[Divorce]**

For women of the ancient world, then, one's honor and reputation were measured by the number of sons produced. Ancient Israelites seem never to have considered that the male partner might be infertile, and they certainly had no idea that the gender of a child

Was It Bigamy?



Monogamy seems to have predominated in ancient Israel, but the taking of a second wife was acceptable under certain circumstances, such as the first wife's failure to produce children. For example, Abraham took Hagar when Sarah was past child-bearing age (Gen 16:1-6), with unhappy results. Jacob married two women as a result of his uncle Laban's manipulations (Gen 29:15-35), but also had children by his wives' "handmaids" when Rachel and Leah experienced periods of infertility (Gen 30:1-13).

Divorce



Rules concerning divorce were quite lax in the ancient world (for men, at least). According to Deut 24:1, a man could divorce his wife if for any reason he found her objectionable. Some rabbis (such as Hillel) interpreted this very loosely, while others insisted that only adultery constituted sufficient grounds (Shammai). In a culture that prized the production of sons over all other female virtues, childlessness may have been a common cause for divorce.

is actually determined by the father's genetic contribution of an X or Y chromosome. Laying the "blame" for childlessness on the woman alone was an unjust and unfortunate fact of life for women in Hannah's world. The reality of these factors serves only to augment Hannah's impressive accomplishments. Her resourceful

Multiple Marriages



Elkanah's secondary marriage to Peninnah is different from the arrangement that Abraham and Sarah entered into with Hagar (Gen 16). There, Hagar, who was a servant, actually served as a surrogate mother for Sarah. The intent was for Sarah to adopt Hagar's child from birth and raise him as her own (Gen 16:2). Once she became pregnant, however, Hagar no longer wished to be used in this way, and much unhappiness ensued (cf. Gen 29–30).

There is no hint of this surrogate arrangement, however, in the story of Elkanah's dual marriage. Peninnah is never described as a servant, and her children are clearly *her* children, not Hannah's. Indeed, this fact lies at the heart of Hannah's grief. Both Hannah and Peninnah have full status as wives and full claim to their own children. The triangular relationship, however, also brought with it a full measure of strife.

approach to obtaining God's help in overcoming her barrenness—and her faithfulness to the promise involved—makes Hannah one of the great heroines of the Old Testament.

There came a day when Elkanah accepted Hannah's infertility, but not his own. The text does not reveal the circumstances surrounding Elkanah's decision to pursue other options for having children, though there are many possibilities. Perhaps Elkanah was growing older or experiencing pressure from parents or friends. The rabbis claim that Hannah herself suggested that he marry another. In any case, Elkanah did in fact take a second wife, whose name was Peninnah. [Multiple Marriages] Some interpreters think her name meant "luxuriant hair," while others argue for something like "ruby," "pearl," or even "prolific." The narrator is silent concerning Peninnah's motivation for entering this

complicated marriage that was no more fair to her than it was to Hannah. The marriage is an accomplished fact when the story begins.

In one sense, Elkanah's second marriage was successful. Peninnah did in fact produce children, including sons. Yet Hannah remained his first and favorite wife, even though she was no longer the most important wife. The text suggests that Peninnah salvaged her wounded self-esteem by criticizing her rival at every opportunity, adding substantially to Hannah's misery.

2. *A Sad Celebration.* Family tensions grew so severe that even the annual fall festival at Shiloh brought Hannah no joy, but only increased her grief. The fall festival was a celebrative time when pilgrims gathered at Shiloh to pay their tithes from the harvest and to offer sacrifices of thanks to "Yahweh of Hosts." [Yahweh of Hosts] This divine title is significant, for the motif of God as a warrior who does battle on Israel's behalf appears frequently in 1 and 2 Samuel.

In the course of worship, it was customary that part of the thanksgiving offering be burned on the altar as an offering to

Yahweh of Hosts

ΑΩ This ancient divine title appears here for the first time in the Bible, the first of five times in 1 Samuel. “Yahweh of Hosts” conjures the mental image of a militaristic God standing at the head of a mighty army composed of the hosts of heaven (angels). “Yahweh” is regarded as the personal name for God in the Hebrew Bible. The only real clue to its meaning is found in Exodus 3:13-16, which seems to tie its origin to the Hebrew verb of being, *hāyah*. (“I am that I am” is *ehyeh asher ehyeh*.) The original Hebrew text was written without vowel points, so we cannot be certain how the divine name *yhwh* was vocalized. Some scholars are content to call it the “Tetragrammaton” for its four letters, while others see it as a war cry (like *yahoo!*). The most common conjecture is that *yhwh* should be read as *yahweh*, the causative verb form of *hyh* (“He who causes to be”). Some writers regard the compound title “Yahweh of Hosts” as a borrowed term from Canaanite worship, for “He who creates the (heavenly) armies” was an early epithet for Baal. Although the word for “hosts” (*šebā’ôt*) is normally used to describe an army, a few translators read it as an abstract plural intended to intensify the divine majesty, resulting in “the LORD Almighty” (NIV).

Yahweh and that a part of it be kept by the priests to provide for their support, but most of it was returned to the family. The law required that all sacrifices be consumed within two days, so the festival was a time of major feasting and much joy. **[Sacrificial Meals]**

But there was little joy for Hannah (v. 8), who seemed to have felt alienated by her infertility and isolated by her grief. Specifically, there was something about Elkanah’s carving of the sacrificial meal that exacerbated the conflict and added to Hannah’s sorrow. Unfortunately, a clear understanding of Elkanah’s actions falls victim to an obscure Hebrew text. It is apparent that Elkanah would first give a number of portions to Peninnah—one for herself, and

Sacrificial Meals



By the time Israel’s sacrificial system was fully codified, sacrifices could be offered only in Jerusalem (Deut 12:13-14); but in early times, sacrifices could be offered at family altars or local shrines, such as the temple at Shiloh.

“Burnt offerings” were completely burned on the altar. Though sometimes having expiatory significance (Lev 9:7; 14:20; Job 1:5; 42:8), the burnt offering more commonly played a role in petitions (1 Sam 13:12), public worship (Num 28–29), votive or voluntary offerings (Lev 22:18), and rites of purification (Lev 12:6, 8; 16:24).

The most common sacrifice was called the *šēlamîm* offering, translated variously as “peace offering,” “communion offering,” or the like. These offerings, which could be offered corporately or individually, functioned to establish or to maintain good relations with God. Although the text uses a generic term for sacrifice, the circumstances of 1 Samuel 1 suggest that Elkanah offered

a *šēlamîm* offering, for it was commonly given in the payment of votive and freewill offerings. First Samuel 1:21 specifically connects at least one of Elkanah’s annual trips to the payment of his vows.

With *šēlamîm* offerings, the blood, the visceral fat, and the fat tail of the sheep were burned on the altar to God, since blood and fat were thought to be life-giving (Lev 3:16-17; 7:22-26; 17:11, 14). The priest was given a forequarter as his rightful portion (Lev 7:28-34; 10:14-15), and the worshiper was allowed to keep the rest. Portions returned to the worshiper were to be eaten within two days, with the remainder to be burned on the third day (Lev 7:16-17; 22:18-23).

For a concise description of other Israelite sacrifices, see Tony W. Cartledge, “Sacrifice,” *MDB*, eds. Roger A. Bullard, Joel F. Drinkard Jr., Walter Harrelson, and Edgar V. McKnight (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 783-84.

Interpreting *ʿappāyîmn*

ΑΩ The singular form of the word is *ʿaph*, and it can carry the extended sense of “face” or “brow” (Gen 3:19). In Hebrew, paired facial characteristics (eyes, ears, nostrils) conventionally appear in the dual form. Some scholars through the years have suggested that the text is corrupt and have offered other readings based on conjectured textual emendations. Samuel R. Driver suggested “he used to give one portion, *howbeit* he loved Hannah,” but this proposal is weak because the text clearly suggests that Elkanah showed some favoritism to Hannah. Taking a view similar to the Targums (ancient Aramaic translations), others have proposed “one *choice* portion,” assuming that *ʿappāyîmn* is somehow related to *pîmâ*, “fat.” Kyle McCarter conjectures a corruption from the word *kʿpîm*, which means “proportionate to,” suggesting that Elkanah gave Hannah one portion that was as great as Peninnah’s portions combined, thus inciting Peninnah’s rancor.

Such linguistic feats are unnecessary, however. The received text makes sense if we simply regard “a portion of two faces” as a means of emphasizing greater quantity: either “enough for two” or “double size.”

It is instructive to compare Deut 21:15-17, a legal regulation directed to a man who had two wives, whose oldest son was descended of the less favored wife. The law required him to honor the oldest son as firstborn (even if he preferred a son of his favorite wife) by designating a double portion of the inheritance to him. In this text, the words “double portion” are derived from the Hebrew *pîšʿenayîm*, “a mouth of two.” The word for mouth, like the term for face, could bear the connotation of a part or portion; thus “a mouth of two” is a “double portion.”

Samuel R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Book of Samuel*, (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913).

P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel* (AB 8; Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 52.

one for each of her children (v. 4). What he gave to Hannah, however, is less certain.

A literal reading of the MT reads: “And to Hannah he gave one portion of two faces, because it was Hannah he loved, and Yahweh had closed up her womb.” This awkward reading derives from the word *ʿappāyîmn*, which appears to be a dual form of the word for “nostril” or “nose.” [Interpreting *ʿappāyîmn*] In this context, it appears that *ʿappāyîmn* suggests “one portion of two faces” (or even “noses”), implying a larger portion than normal, perhaps even a “double portion” (as NRSV). It was Elkanah’s small way of expressing a special measure of love to Hannah. Unfortunately, his efforts were lost on Hannah and enraged her rival Peninnah.

Reference to the legal requirements of Deuteronomy 21:15-17 (see [Eating and Drinking]) assists us in translating the text and also points to an ironic aspect of the story. The law insists that Elkanah favor Peninnah’s son, as firstborn, by designating a double portion of the inheritance to him, but in the ceremonial moment of their sacrificial meal, Elkanah gives a double portion to Hannah, who has no sons at all.

This painful distribution of the sacrificial meal was not a singular incident, but “went on year after year” (v. 7). Peninnah’s persistent

taunting would upset heartbroken Hannah so deeply that she could not even eat the food that Elkanah provided in such abundance. Hannah's grief was obvious, but her husband was unable to comfort her. The storyteller takes delight in describing Elkanah's obtuseness by suggesting that his solicitation was limited to bumbling questions, such as "Hannah, why are you weeping? Hannah, why don't you eat? Hannah, why are you so downhearted? *Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?*" (v. 8). Hannah's silence shouts.

3. *A Desperate Bargain.* The narrator uses a variety of Hebrew expressions to describe and to underscore Hannah's misery. She was provoked severely and irritated by her rival (v. 6) so that she wept and would not eat (v. 7). She was brokenhearted (v. 8), miserable (lit., "afflicted," v. 11), and sorrowful in spirit (NRSV: "deeply troubled," v. 15). [Utilizing Affliction] There came a day, however, when Hannah had absorbed all of the misery she could take. She left while the others were eating and drinking, and ran in tears to the very door of the temple in *Shiloh*. [Shiloh] "*In bitterness of soul,*" the narrator says (v. 10), Hannah wept much and poured out her heart to the LORD—and she offered to make a desperate bargain with God.

Utilizing Affliction



There may be a theological motive behind this literary device of piling up synonyms for "affliction." The DH probably reached its final form during the Babylonian exile, the darkest days of Hebrew history. The exiled Israelites were brokenhearted, miserable, and afflicted in Babylon, where they wept for the loss of Zion (Ps 137:1).

Deut 26:7 recalls how the Israelites were saved from their affliction under the Egyptians because they called out to Yahweh, while Deut 28:3 predicts even greater afflictions if Israel should fail to remain obedient.

Demonstrating how brokenhearted Hannah turned to Yahweh and found deliverance would effectively serve the authors' apologetic purpose of urging Israel to return to God and cry out for salvation.

Shiloh

AQ The ruins of Shiloh are usually associated with the modern village of Khirbet Seilun, a site located in the hill country of Ephraim, 18–20 miles north-northeast of Jerusalem. Although it enjoyed a brief fluorescence as an established cultic center in late pre-monarchic times, archaeological studies suggest that it was not a very important city either before or after that period.

The temple in Shiloh may have been a temporary affair, a sturdy tent surrounded by a courtyard, bearing an altar for sacrifices. The term "house of Yahweh" (*bêt yhw*, 1:7) could refer either to a tent-shrine or a permanent temple, and 2 Sam 7:6 insists that the ark of God never resided in a permanent structure prior to Solomon's temple (see also Pss 78:60 and 132:7). However, the Shiloh temple is called the "temple of Yahweh" (*hêkal yhw*) in 1 Sam 1:9 and 3:3. This term is ordinarily used of a permanent sanctuary. If the Shiloh temple was a tent, it may have been similar to these modern Bedouin homes.





1 Samuel 1:10—Hannah’s prayer was a bitter but hopeful cry for help.

Julius Schnoor von Carolsfeld. *Hannah’s Prayer*. 19th century. Woodcut. *Das Buch der Bücher in Bildern*. (Credit: Dover Pictorial Archive Series)

Hannah is described throughout as a pious woman, and one last resort often favored by the downtrodden and desperate was the making of a sacred vow to Yahweh. Hannah boldly asked the LORD to supply her greatest need—and she promised with all her heart that if only God would grant her prayer, she would give to him the most precious thing she had. Hannah did not yet have this most precious possession—this she asked for, and this she promised to return. [Vows]

“O LORD God Almighty,” she prayed, “if you will only look upon

your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head” (v. 11). Hannah’s promise that “no razor will ever be used on his head” has led many writers to assume that Hannah’s son would be a nazirite, but this goes beyond the evidence. [Was Samuel a Nazirite?] Whether Hannah intended for Samuel to be known as a nazirite is secondary to her obvious desire that the child be marked as one who was dedicated to God.

Vows



Vow-making in the Old Testament, as well as in the entire ancient Near East, was not equivalent to the modern, Western notion of vows. Modern readers think of a vow as a sacred and unconditional promise, but in the Old Testament (and the ancient Near East as a whole), vows were always *conditional promises* made at the initiative of the worshiper. Vows were one of the few means by which any person could approach God directly without the medium of a priest or public ceremony, though vows were often made (and always paid) in the public arena.

Vows were sometimes made as a matter of course (such as Elkanah’s annual vows in 1 Sam 1:21), but the most memorable vows arose in times of distress. The Old Testament often refers to vow-making and has extensive regulations for the practice (Lev 27; Num 6; 30), but it

contains the text of only five narrative vows: those made by Jacob (Gen 28:20-22), Israel (Num 21:2), Jephthah (Judg 11:30-31), Hannah (1 Sam 1:11), and Absalom (2 Sam 15:8).

Vow accounts are always prayers, and they follow a typical pattern: “If you will do thus and so for me, then I will do thus and so for you.” By making the vow, the worshiper enters into a binding relationship with God, calling upon him for a certain blessing and promising specific actions or gifts in return. This gives added force to the distressed person’s petition, who has now done everything possible in search of divine favor.

For more information on vows, see Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); or “Vows,” *ISBE*. Ed. G.W. Bromiley. 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979-1988), 4: 998-99.

The formalized vow in v.11 is, of course, the narrator's depiction of Hannah's vow. With only a little imagination, one might envision Hannah standing at the temple door and praying in more lengthy and more heated fashion: "Oh God, please give me a son. That's all I want from you, all I will ever ask from you. I've been your faithful servant all my life, but I think you have forgotten me. Oh God, remember me! Oh, God, have mercy on my misery! Oh God, don't forget me! Oh God, please just grant me a son! One son. That's all I ask. God, give me a son—just for a while—and I will give him back to you. I will dedicate him to your service. I will see to it that he never cuts his hair, so that all will know he is dedicated to you. Oh God, don't forget me! Oh God, have mercy! Oh God. . . ."

When the aged priest Eli finally took notice of Hannah, he assumed that she was intoxicated. [Eli] The text does not tell us if Hannah expected to meet the priest or if her prayer was intended for God's ears only. Indeed, the narrator tells us that Eli's faculties were so impaired that he could not hear what Hannah said. Something about her appearance or her actions led Eli to conclude that she was besotted, like so many others who used the feast as an excuse for excess.

Eli's first response was less than pastoral: "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine!" (v. 14). Hannah, however, would not be so easily dismissed. Her persistence

Was Samuel a Nazirite?



Persons making a nazirite vow in its classic form were bound by three conditions. For a specified period of time, they pledged that they would not cut their hair or shave their beard, imbibe any alcoholic beverage, or become "unclean" by touching the dead (see Num 6). All three prohibitions may not have been required in early periods, however.

While scholars traditionally have seen the nazirite vow as an unconditional, pious pledge to God, after the order of a modern monastic vow, nazirite vows could be just as conditional as any other (see Cartledge, "Were Nazirite Vows Unconditional?" *CBQ* 51 [Jul 1989]: 409-22; and in a less technical treatment, "The Nazirites," *BI* 19 [Oct-Dec 1992]: 54-58).

Our understanding of early nazirites is uncertain, and the institution certainly evolved with the passing of time. According to the MT, Hannah promised only that Samuel would never cut his hair (1:21). Later nazirites pledged to abstain from cutting their hair, drinking wine, or touching the dead, but only for a limited time. Samuel's commitment included fewer conditions, but a life-long commitment.

McCarter uses evidence from the Septuagint (an ancient Greek translation) and 4QSam^a (one of the Dead Sea Scrolls) to argue that v. 11 originally included a prohibition against wine and strong drink and that v. 22 specifically used the word "nazirite." These variant readings could reflect later attempts to harmonize the vow with typical nazirite practice, however, so the argument is inconclusive. It is more likely that the nazirite elements would be added to the text than that a later editor would delete them, so the MT is preferred.

P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel* (AB 8; Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 49-50, 53.

Eli



We know little about Eli's descent or how it is that he came to be priest at Shiloh. The Old Testament does not mention anything about his ancestry other than one reference in 2:27-28, which connects him to the line of Aaron. In competing, though much later, traditions, Josephus assigns Eli to the Aaronide family of Ithamar (*Ant.* 5.11.5),

while 2 Esdras puts him in the rival house of Eleazar (1:2-3). Ithamar and Eleazar were two of Aaron's sons (Exod 28:1).

The writers of 1 Samuel are less concerned with Eli's rise than with his fall (along with other Aaronides), and the ultimate ascension of the Zadokite priesthood. Eli's bumbling interaction with Hannah sets the stage for a more extensive description of his incompetence in later chapters.

Blessing or Oracle?

At different times in Israel's history, prophetic and priestly functions seemed to overlap. The pronouncing of a divine oracle about the future is generally thought of as a prophetic task, while the expression of a hopeful blessing is more in the purview of the priests (Num 6:22-27). Samuel, Eli's successor, was widely regarded as a "seer" who made authoritative predictions about the future. This seems to assign to Samuel a *dual* role, however, rather than an *expanded* one. For example, Samuel honored Saul at a sacrificial feast (1 Sam 9:22-24) but took him out of the hearing of others before declaring the word of God to him (1 Sam 9:27).

Some persons became so large in Israel's memory that their spoken blessings were accorded the power of fulfillment, as though they had been oracles of God (Isaac, Gen 27:1-40; Joseph, Gen 49:1-28). Eli, however, does not share this powerful persona. The text presents him as a doddering old priest who recognizes when God speaks to others (1 Sam 3:8) but must receive the word of God from traveling prophets (1 Sam 2:28-36) or even his own apprentice (1 Sam 3:10-18). The reader, then, should recognize Eli's comforting words to Hannah as a wish for God's blessing, rather than an oracular assurance of divine intervention.

was as strong as her grief. "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time" (vv. 15-16). "Worthless woman" is, literally, "a daughter of Belial." The Hebrew word *Belial* means "worthlessness," but it was also regarded as a proper name, later attributed to Satan (2 Cor 6:15). Although Eli had not used the term, Hannah assumed that he had judged her as a wicked woman, perhaps even a follower of other gods. Pious Hannah's sharp and somewhat presumptuous response led Eli to understand that she was a righteous woman, inebriated only by her grief.

When Eli realized the truth of Hannah's pain, he responded as best he could. He could not claim to have the word of the LORD, for "the word of the LORD was rare in those days" (1 Sam 3:1). He could not make the woman a promise, but he made her a wish. Very carefully he said, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant you the petition you have asked of him." When Eli said this, he used a verb form that can be interpreted in either of two ways. He probably intended to say "*May* God grant your wish," but Hannah could have understood his words to mean "God *will* grant your wish." Some scholars assume that Israelite priests often responded to worshipers' prayers with a prophetic "oracle," thought to be a word from God about the future. Thus, some interpreters refer to Eli's response as an oracle. His words, however, seem to be a simple blessing, though the obliqueness of his language allows for variant interpretations. [Blessing or Oracle?]

Samuel's Name

AQ Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to explain Hannah's comment about Samuel's name. Since the word for "asked" and the name "Saul" are the same (*šā'ûl*), many commentators have assumed that an ancient legend about Saul's name has become confused with the Samuel traditions. This is unnecessary speculation, however.

Hannah *asked for* Samuel by a vow, with the result that God *heard* her prayer and answered her. Old Aramaic and Punic votive texts found on ancient stele (commemorative markers) often ended with a characteristic line: *kšm' q'*, "because he heard his voice." The votive inscriptions were commissioned and erected as a testimony to the deity because the postulant had made a vow to the god and was *heard* (*šm'*). When the *qal* passive participle of the Hebrew

verb "to hear" (*šāmû'*) is combined with the common divine appellative, *'ēl*, the resulting combination (*šāmû'ēl*) could easily contract to form *šāmû'ēl*, the Hebrew form of the name "Samuel," meaning "heard of God." The first vowel would shorten when it became the antepenult (second from the last syllable), and the conjunction of the two gutturals would naturally elide into a single consonant (the letters *ʿ* [*ayin*] and *ʔ* [*aleph*] were not voiced).

In the light of grammatical evidence and the extrabiblical texts which routinely connect divine "hearing" with the fulfillment of votive requests, this proposal seems quite reasonable, and it obviates at least one rationale for attributing Samuel's birth story to Saul.

Tony W. Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, JSOT Supplement Series, 147 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), ch. 3.

Whatever his intention, Eli's words became a remarkable gift to Hannah, a heartening assurance that God had heard her prayer, an audible wish that all her dreams would come true. The combination of her own fervent prayer and the old priest's blessing was such that Hannah seems to have experienced a resurgence of *hope*. She believed that God's final word had not yet been spoken.

Hannah's renewed sense of hope brought about a remarkable change in her demeanor. The text says, "Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast" (v. 18). For the exegete, it is essential to notice that Hannah's prayer had not yet been answered. Indeed, Hannah had no positive assurance that it *would* be answered. But she had a newly found hope, and she believed that God had heard her plea. Hannah had placed her future squarely in God's hands, and her heart was at peace.

We can only imagine Elkanah's surprise when Hannah dried her tears, ate her supper, and smiled once again. The text implies that there was a new joy in Hannah's smile, and perhaps a new spark in her sexual relationship with Elkanah. In short order, the narrator declares that God did "remember" Hannah, who in her prayer had described herself as a forgotten handmaid. She quickly conceived, and in due time she gave birth to a son. The narrator has so skillfully built the level of suspense that when the child is born, it is almost anticlimactic. The real focus of the narrative is on Hannah's vow and her resultant sense of peace; the final appearance of Samuel serves as a denouement to the first episode (his birth) and as a transition leading to the second (his dedication).

The reader is surprised when Hannah gives the child his name, for it would have been more culturally acceptable for Elkanah, as the father, to choose the name. Hannah called her son Samuel—

šēmû'ēl—saying, “because I asked the LORD for him”(1:20). [Samuel's Name] Hannah had asked, and the LORD had heard. *Šēmû'ēl* means “heard by God.” By this significant name, young Samuel's life would always be linked to his mother's vow.

CONNECTIONS

Hannah's story teaches important lessons about trust and hope. Hannah, like all people, experienced periods of deep disappointment in life. Hannah lived in a culture that defined the value of women by their fecundity, but she had no children after many years of marriage. Like other women of her day, Hannah had looked forward to bearing children and enjoying a satisfying marriage, but this “normal” woman's role had been denied to her, and her dreams remained unfulfilled. As a result, for many years Hannah led a miserable life.

Hannah was not ashamed to mourn her childlessness nor the loss of her husband's full attention. This willingness to confront her troubles and to vent her feelings was a sign of Hannah's healthy emotional life. Yet, Hannah's determination not to be defeated by the circumstances and the obstacles of life also speaks of her strong spiritual sense.

Even as Hannah grieved over her misfortune, there came a day when she determined that she would not spend the rest of her life this way. While worshiping at the temple, Hannah came to an understanding with God. She would turn it over to him. If God granted her a son, she would give him back to God and be satisfied to visit him in his new home. If God did not grant her prayer, then she would accept this fact with the peace of knowing that she had done all she could. Hannah's experience, then, witnesses to the centrality of *hope* and *trust* in the life of believers.

Hope is a powerful force. Frederick Buechner attested the power of hopeful wishing when he wrote:

Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on.
Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it.¹

Through hope and trust in God, expressed in a place of sanctuary, Hannah found inner peace even before her prayers were answered positively. She learned to entrust to God those things that were beyond her control. The implication of the text is that she would have remained at peace even if her request had not been granted,

because she knew that she had done all she could in her relationship with Elkanah and with God.

Hannah's experience speaks to modern believers who may also become despondent about things over which they have no control. Hannah's desire to pray at the temple speaks to the value of a community of faith, a sacred space in which we may draw near to God. Hannah's audacious vow demonstrates how it is possible for one whose stomach has been filled with gall to once again experience hunger for life and joy—even if circumstances do not change.

Hannah hoped for a child, but her trust was in God. Her willingness to make a vow before God demonstrates her belief in Yahweh's power, but even more it reveals her faith in *a God who cares*. Hannah's approach to God was couched in great humility. She carefully referred to herself as the LORD's *maidservant*, but she was a maidservant made bold by her distress and by her conviction that she served a God who cared as much for maidservants as for anyone else.

Hannah is described as a person who was not only trusting, but *trustworthy*. She was willing to make a commitment to God that most people would never consider, and she was the kind of woman who could be trusted to keep her word. This will become even more evident in 1:21-28.

When the circumstances of life bring more misery than joy, believers are faced with several options. They can give up on the future and resign themselves to a life of misery. They can give up on God and decide "to go it alone." Or they can decide to hold on to faith, hold on to hope, and in doing so hold on to God. Hannah's story testifies to one woman's willingness to hold on—whatever the cost—and to God's faithfulness in caring for his own, even for those who are disappointed by life and rejected by society.

Personal Connections

Despite the differences in modern and ancient cultures, women of today face many of the same obstacles Hannah faced. Modern society has allowed women to pursue a greater variety of roles, and contemporary women are appreciated for more than the children they produce. Yet barriers still remain. The "glass ceiling" is firmly in place in many corporations, and certain roles (such as pastoral ministry) remain an almost exclusively male domain. What lesson does Hannah's story suggest for those who can hardly see their goals for the obstacles in between?

Hannah's vow, in effect, was a bargain with God. She made a special request and offered special promises in return. Does Hannah's

Dealing with Reality



One bitterly cold day a rabbi and his disciples were huddled around a fire.

One of the disciples, echoing his master's teachings, said, "On a freezing day like this I know exactly what to do!"

"What?" asked the others.

"Keep warm! And if that isn't possible, I still know what to do."

"What?"

"Freeze."

Anthony de Mello comments: "Present Reality cannot *really* be rejected or accepted. To run away from it is like running away from your feet. To accept it is like kissing your lips. All you need to do is see, understand, and be at rest."

Some aspects of reality can be changed, and should be changed. Other realities, such as the death of a loved one, must be accepted. Living at peace involves both the challenge of action and the call to acceptance, along with the wisdom to know which is appropriate.

Anthony de Mello, *Taking Flight* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 32.

success imply that all believers should approach God in a similar fashion? Notice that the practice of vow-making in the Old Testament leaves God free to respond either positively or negatively—the believer is obligated only if God grants the petition.

Many persons, both male and female, live under difficult circumstances or with unfulfilled goals. With sufficient determination or ingenuity, many obstacles can be overcome, while other difficulties may be life-long companions. How does one tell the difference and live at peace? [Dealing with Reality]

NOTE

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 96.