

The Old Testament: Part Eight - First and Second Samuel

The Books of Samuel derived its name from the prophet Samuel whose lifetime saw the end of the period of the Judges and the beginning of Israel's kingship.

The story. Samuel, who is opposed to Israel having her own king, is told by God to let the people have their wish, so he anoints Saul as Israel's first king. Saul is portrayed as a tragic figure. He does not want to be king. While out looking for his father's donkeys, Samuel comes upon Saul and tells him that God wants him to be king. Initially, Saul does very well winning several great victories over Israel's enemies. Then he 'blows it' by choosing his own way over God's way. Samuel tells Saul that due to his disobedience, God has rejected him as king. He is succeeded by a young shepherd called David. Saul becomes obsessed with jealousy and hatred for David who has treated him with reverence and respect. After Saul commits suicide, David goes on to become Israel's greatest king. But he is no saint. His sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the order to kill her husband have serious consequences for David bringing strife and division to his family and nation.

Commentary. For a fuller commentary on these books, see on our parish website my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Articles 23-28. Nearly all of 1-2 Samuel is worth reading. If you wish to read the abridged version, I suggest the following passages beginning with 1 Samuel.

FIRST BOOK OF SAMUEL – Samuel, Saul and David

Chapters 1-3: Hannah's longing for a child; birth and call of Samuel. As we begin this period in Israel's history, she is threatened from within and without. Internally, the people have left the ways of God and turned to the gods of the Canaanites. Externally, Israel's neighbors, the Philistines, are much more powerful militarily. Israel is politically weak and economically disadvantaged. She is waiting for something good to happen. Who would say hope for Israel's future would come from herself and a barren woman?

1:9-12 is a beautiful example of a woman pouring out her heart to God. If God will answer her prayer for a son, she promises to dedicate him to the Lord, a promise she fulfills in 1:24-28. Hannah's song of praise for her son in 2:1-10 reminds us of Mary's Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55).

3:1-18: Call and commissioning of Samuel. Samuel initially does not *recognize* God's voice calling him because he is not yet "familiar with the Lord." But with Elizabeth's help, he becomes attuned to God's call. (Sometimes we too need the help of others to discern God's call in our lives.) Gradually, Samuel develops into a great spiritual leader for Israel. Speaking of him, 3:20 says: "*Samuel grew up, and the Lord was with him, not permitting any word of his to be without effect. Thus all of Israel from Dan to Beersheba came to know that Samuel was an accredited prophet of the Lord.*"

In chapters 4, 5 and 6, Samuel disappears from the story. The author may have wanted to dissociate Samuel from the reverses Israel is experiencing in her battle against the Philistines.

Chapters 8-17: Institution of the monarchy and Saul's rejection as king. In its introduction to the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, the *Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition* states: "*Throughout most of its history, Israel remained ambivalent about monarchy. One of the distinguishing characteristics of its literature is the fact that it preserves both strands of thinking: pro-monarchy and anti-monarchy. By mingling negative with positive overtones, the writers prepare the reader for the negative assessment of the whole institution of the monarchy presented in the books of Kings, and for the more immediate downfall of Israel's first king, Saul*" (p.116).

8:11-22. Samuel warns the people of the heavy price they must pay for choosing to have a human king. But the people refuse to be persuaded. They want a king to rule over them just *like* other nations.

Chapter 9: Looking for donkeys, Saul finds a kingdom. Many folk stories depict their hero as someone in search of something that is lost but ends up with a much better find. Saul seeks out Samuel's help in finding his donkeys, and in his quest ends up with a crown.

Chapters 9-10 present Saul in a positive light with God using well his natural abilities. Saul could have been an outstanding king. The act of anointing (10:1) is a sign that the person has been chosen and called by God.

Chapter 13: Rejection of Saul as King. Before going into battle, sacrifice must be offered to the Lord to seek his blessing. The sacrifice can only be offered by a priest. Saul waits for seven days for Samuel to

arrive. When he doesn't, Saul offers the sacrifice. Immediately after doing so, Samuel arrives and berates Saul for disobeying the Lord. Not only that, but he tells Saul that God has rejected him as king and has chosen to replace him with someone 'after his own heart' (13:14). Most of us would feel Saul was treated very unfairly. After all, he waited for Samuel for seven days and then went ahead and prayed before going into battle. What's so bad about that? In his book *People of the Bible*, Anthony Giles writes: "As we read the story of David in 1 and 2 Samuel, we should keep in mind the familiar dictum that 'history is written from the point of view of winners.' This more than anything else accounts for David's 'good press' and Saul's 'bad press.' Saul has come down to us as a tragic, even detestable figure, while David is everyone's favorite biblical hero. Saul erred in judgment and God deposed him. David sinned grievously and managed to return to God's favor. Wherein lies the difference? More than likely only in the simple human prejudice which glorifies the memory of those who are successful and vilifies those who can't get things done. In biblical literature as in art, the portrait of David has come down to us with the positive features exaggerated and the negative features hidden or ignored" (p. 49).

We can also say, the rejection of Saul reflects the anti-monarchy tradition.

Chapter 15. In verses 1-5, we come to another very troubling text similar to what we encountered in Joshua. Saul is ordered to attack King Amalek. He is not only to defeat him but to also destroy every man, woman and child when the battle is over. As we saw in the last article on Joshua and Judges, this order is called the 'ban of destruction.' (See my last article for an explanation of this heinous order.) The story is told as a second example of Saul's disobedience and, hence, his rejection as king. In 15:22, Samuel declares that 'obedience is better than sacrifice.'

Even though Saul asks for forgiveness, he is rejected as Israel's king. Saul will continue as king, but his fate is sealed from here on. Neither Samuel nor God will recognize his kingship. We are not sure why Saul's plea for forgiveness is not accepted; perhaps it is not sincere. Despite his outright rejection of Saul, Samuel grieves over God's renunciation of Saul (15:35).

Chapter 16: Enter David.

When Samuel goes to the house of Jesse (son of Ruth) in search of a successor to Saul, no one has David in mind—he is just a young shepherd. But God, who frequently chooses the unlikely one, says to Samuel: "Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the

appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart" (v.7). Samuel anoints David as Israel's new king. But no television cameras were present. No one, including Saul, knows that Samuel has created some unknown young shepherd as Israel's king.

Chapter 17: David and Goliath. Here we come to one of the best known and best loved stories in the Bible. Everyone in Israel, including the soldiers, is terrified of Goliath (v.10). David steps forward and asks Saul to allow him to fight Goliath (v.32). We know the rest of the story.

The *theological* message of the story is that God is in charge and is the one who can be trusted to win Israel's battles even against incredible odds. In his commentary on the Books of Samuel, Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann writes: "The purpose of David's victory is not simply to save Israel or to defeat the Philistines. The purpose is the glorification of God in the eyes of the world. The intent of the encounter is to make clear yet again that God 'saves' not with the conventions of human warfare but in God's own inscrutable ways" (p.132).

Chapter 18: Saul's jealousy of David. After defeating Goliath, David becomes a military hero. The women from his hometown and from *all* the cities come out to sing the praises of David.

*"Saul has slain his thousands
and David his ten thousands."* (v.7)

Even though the women's chant is intended as praise for Saul as well as David, Saul is not secure enough to join in the celebration. He starts to see David as a huge threat and becomes intensely jealous of him. Verses 10-30 relate various attempts by Saul to get rid of David. None of them are successful, for the Lord is with him in all of his enterprises (v.14). Despite all efforts to get rid of David, "all of Israel and Judah love him" (v.16).

Chapters 19-31: Saul's persecution of David. The main focus of the rest of 1 Samuel is Saul's persecution of David. 19:9 states: "an evil spirit came upon Saul."

19:1-17. Saul's son, Jonathan, and his wife, Michal, save David from Saul's plot to kill him. We might say the deeper story here is the contest between "the relentless will of God and the diseased will of Saul" (Brueggemann). God's will is that David replaces Saul. Saul's desire is to destroy the one he perceives as his greatest threat. In verses 18-24, we see God's spirit at work in a very tangible way to protect David.

Chapter 20 highlights the beautiful friendship between Saul's son, Jonathan, and David.

Chapter 24: David spares Saul's life. David could have killed the one who is constantly seeking to kill him. But out of respect for the Lord, David spares Saul's life. The chapter also has a moving conversation between David and Saul. At the end of the chapter, one would think Saul would stop his murderous pursuit of David, but he doesn't. In chapter 27, we find David in exile amongst the Philistines.

1 Samuel ends with the story of the tragic death of Saul and his sons (ch.31).

SECOND BOOK OF SAMUEL – Rise and Fall of David

While there is no real break in the story as we move into the second book of Samuel, the following is one way to divide the 24 chapters of this book:

David's successes (chapters 1-10):

- David becomes King of Judah
- David becomes King of Israel
- David conquers the surrounding nations

David's struggles (chapters 11-24):

- David's sin with Bathsheba
- Turmoil in David's family
- National rebellion against David
- Latter years of David's rule

1:17-24. David's moving lament for Saul and Jonathan.

Chapter 5: David becomes King of Israel. Earlier, Samuel had anointed David as Saul's successor but did not 'send out an email' on what he had done until much later when David actually becomes king. One of David's first actions is to make Jerusalem (also called Zion) his capital. In chapter 5, he brings the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the Ten Commandments, to Jerusalem amidst great ceremony.

Chapter 7: Nathan's prophecy. 2 Samuel 7 is regarded as one of the most important texts in the Old Testament. Commenting on this text, the *Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition* states: "God's promise to David of an eternal dynasty becomes the basis for Israel's expectation of a Messiah after the Davidic dynasty abruptly comes to an end with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The New Testament sees Nathan's prophecy fulfilled in Jesus, the Son of David."

This text climaxes the story of David's rise to power and prepares the way for the future that will be shaped largely by David's dynasty" (p.120).

When David settles in his new palace in Jerusalem, he calls in the prophet Nathan and informs him of his desire to build a beautiful house for the Ark, for God. But that night, God informs Nathan that it is not his wish to be housed. God will not be domesticated. God also informs Nathan of his desire to make David's royal throne one that will last forever (v.16).

A comment on the word 'forever': In one sense, it may have meant "a very long time." David's line of kings lasts four hundred years, a timespan that amply fulfills the prophecy. But "forever" can also be taken to be literally true when we focus on Jesus as the Son of David, whose reign knows no end. Once David's dynasty ends in 586 B.C., devout Jews continue to treasure the divine promises made to David, confident that God will eventually fulfill them in a very special son of David whom they call the Messiah. So rather than David building a house for God's Ark of the Covenant, God has a much bigger plan—one that involves building a house—a dynasty—for David, one that will last forever.

7:18-29 is David's beautiful prayer of thanksgiving on hearing of God's plan for him and his descendants.

Chapter 8. The focus of this chapter is the expansion of David's empire (vv 1-14) and the development of David's bureaucracy (vv 15-18). Because the Lord is with him (v.14), David defeats all his enemies. He also rules Israel with justice (v.15). David is presented as the ideal king. Verse 15 states: "David reigned over all Israel, judging and administering justice to all his people."

Chapters 11-12: David's sins and is confronted by the prophet Nathan. "From the roof David saw a woman bathing who was very beautiful" (v.2).

It has been said that "idle hands are the devil's playpen." We have also heard the saying that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

While his generals are out fighting his battles, David has idle time on his hands. One evening, he notices the beautiful Bathsheba bathing. He lusts after her and allows his lust to break three of the Ten Commandments: 1) coveting another man's wife, 2) adultery, and 3) murder to cover up his sin. Furthermore, the way David treats Uriah, one of his most faithful soldiers, has been particularly bad (16:6-

24). After taking Bathsheba as his wife, “...*the Lord was displeased with what David had done.*” (ch 16:27)

Chapter 17. The prophet Nathan confronts David by means of a parable (vv 1-7). The parable is a heart-rending story about a rich man who abused his power. As David listens to the story, he becomes outraged at the great injustice done. Nathan delivers the punchline when he tells David: “*You are that man!*” (12:7). True to form, David recognizes his sin and repents. Psalm 51 is regarded as David’s act of contrition. Though David has repented for his sin, he will also pay a price for it: the child conceived will die and rebellion will begin within his own household.

“*A time to weep and a time to refrain from weeping.*” (Eccl 3:4)

Verses 15-25. We have observed David’s greatness in the noble way he treated Saul. Now we witness his fall from grace, his feet of clay. In these verses, we see another picture of David’s greatness. We may think that he might not have wanted the child that Bathsheba conceived as a result of her relations with him. Quite the contrary, he wants the child very much—fasting, praying, sleeping in sackcloth and interceding to God for the child with all his heart. But once David finds out that it is not God’s will for the child to live, David stops his prayer and fasting. In his commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, Walter Brueggemann writes: “*Painful as is his grief, David moves quickly from the feeble realm of death to the vitality of life. He dresses, he worships, and he eats (v.20). He resumes life. His advisers did not expect his great grief earlier, nor did they expect him to shake off the grief so soon (v.1).*”

Verses 24-25—Solomon is conceived. Bathsheba’s conception of Solomon, David’s successor, is another example of God “writing straight with crooked lines.” Who would ever say that the future king would come from a union brought on by lust and adultery? God’s ways surely are not our ways (Is. 55:8).

Bathsheba is one of five women mentioned in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. The inclusion of rather imperfect women and men in Jesus’ genealogy shows that in his incarnation, Jesus embraced both the wounded, sinful part of our human nature as well as our noble traits.