

Book of 1 Samuel Explained

Title: The books of Samuel were originally one book in the Hebrew Canon.

The single volume of Samuel was divided into two by the translators of the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, who viewed Samuel and Kings together as the “Books of the Kingdoms.”

The Book of Kings of the Hebrew Scriptures was likewise divided into two books, and the four books then constituted the “Books of the Kingdoms.”

Accordingly, 1 and 2 Samuel were called the First and Second Books of the Kingdoms in the Septuagint, and 1 and 2 Kings were termed the Third and Fourth Books of the Kingdoms.

When the Old Testament was translated into the Latin Vulgate, the term “Books of the Kingdoms” was dropped and the present division of both Samuel and Kings became standard for the Western church.

The books of Samuel bear the name of the principal character of its first portion.

Authorship - Date: The authorship of the two books of Samuel is unknown.

According to Jewish tradition, Samuel had written the earlier portions of 1 Samuel, and his work had been supported by the prophets Nathan and Gad (1 Chron. 29:29).

Because (1 Samuel 27:6), indicates that the division of the kingdom had already taken place, the final edited form of the two books must have taken place after the death of Solomon in 931 B.C.

Whatever the origin of the earlier material, apparently, some prophet, probably from Judah, put it into its final form early in the days of the divided monarchy.

But Samuel cannot be the writer because his death is recorded (in 1 Samuel 25:1), before the events associated with David’s reign even took place.

Further, Nathan and Gad were prophets of the LORD during David’s lifetime and would not have been alive when the book of Samuel was written.

Though the written records of these 3 prophets could have been used for information (in the writing of 1 and 2 Samuel), the human author of these books is unknown.

The work comes to the reader as an anonymous writing, i.e., the human author speaks for the LORD and gives the divine interpretation of the events narrated.

The books of Samuel contain no clear indication of the date of composition.

That the author wrote after the division of the kingdom between Israel and Judah in 931 B.C. is clear, due to the many references to Israel and Judah as distinct entities (1 Sam. 11:8; 17:52; 18:16; 2 Sam. 5:5; 11:11; 12:8; 19:42-43; 24:1, 9).

Also, the statement concerning Ziklag's belonging "to the kings of Judah to this day" (in 1 Sam. 27:6), gives clear evidence of a post-Solomonic date of writing.

There is no such clarity concerning how late the date of writing could be.

However, 1 and 2 Samuel are included in the Former Prophets in the Hebrew canon, along with Joshua, Judges, and 1 and 2 Kings.

If the Former Prophets were composed as a unit, then Samuel would have been written during the Babylonian captivity (560-540 B.C.), since 2 Kings concludes during the exile (2 Kings 25:27-30).

However, since Samuel has a different literary style than Kings, it was most likely penned before the Exile during the period of the divided kingdom (931-722 B.C.) and later made an integral part of the Former Prophets.

The books of Samuel have more than biographical and historical interest.

The central theme of the books traces God's gracious and overruling sovereignty in the sad state of affairs in Israel at the end of the period of judges by His providential selection of righteous men (i.e., Samuel and David), who would weld the nation into an instrument of His will and a people for Himself.

Despite Israel's rejection of God as King, He would prove faithful and eventually see to the appointment of a godly king, David.

With this one He would enter into an everlasting covenant that would affect the destiny of both Israel and all the world.

For through David would come Israel's King *par excellence*, Israel's Messiah and the Savior of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Background – Setting: The majority of the action recorded (in 1 and 2 Samuel), took place in and around the central highlands in the land of Israel.

The nation of Israel was largely concentrated in an area that ran about 90 miles from the hill country of Ephraim in the north (1 Sam. 1:1; 9:4), to the hill country of Judah in the south (Joshua 20:7; 21:11), and between 15 to 35 miles east to west.

This central spine ranges in height from 1,500 feet to 3,300 feet above sea level.

The major cities of 1 and 2 Samuel are to be found in these central highlands: Shiloh, the residence of Eli and the tabernacle; Ramah, the hometown of Samuel; Gibeah, the headquarters of Saul; Bethlehem, the birthplace of David; Hebron, David's capital when he ruled over Judah; and Jerusalem, the ultimate "city of David."

The events of 1 and 2 Samuel took place between the years 1105 B.C., the birth of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:1-28), to 971 B.C., the last words of David (2 Samuel 23:1-7).

Thus, the books span about 135 years of history.

During those years, Israel was transformed from a loosely knit group of tribes under "judges" to a united nation under the reign of a centralized monarchy.

They look primarily at Samuel (1105-1030 B.C.), Saul who reigned (in 1052-1011 B.C.), and David who was king of the united monarchy (1011-971 B.C.).

Historical – Theological: The narrative in 1 Samuel is centered around Israel's last judge, Samuel, who also served the LORD as priest and prophet.

The books of Samuel go on to sketch Israel's cry for a king and the resultant selection of Saul as its first king.

The failure of Saul, and the growing contest between Saul and David which was resolved with the establishment of the Davidic Kingdom.

The period covers nearly a century of Israelite history (1064 – 971 B.C.), tracing the fortunes of Israel from the depths of apostasy and political fragmentation in the closing era of the judges up to the growing triumphs of the united monarchy.

In God's providence, the possibility for Israel's increasing grandeur lay in the collapse of the power of Egypt during its Twentieth and Twenty-first dynasties, the disappearance of the once-mighty Hittite Empire by the onset of the twelfth century B.C., and the declining strength of the Assyrian and Babylonian nations in Mesopotamia.

Events in Israel for the next several centuries would also be affected by the presence of numerous small but active Aramean kingdoms on Israel's northern boundaries.

Even Israel's clamor for a king was somewhat conditioned by the regal fashion of the age.

As 1 Samuel begins, Israel was at a low point spiritually.

The priesthood was corrupt (1 Samuel 2:12-17; 22-26), the Ark of the Covenant was not at the tabernacle (1 Sam. 4:3-7:2), idolatry was practiced (1 Sam. 7:3-4), and the judges were dishonest (1 Sam. 8:2-3).

Through the influence of godly Samuel (1 Sam. 12:23), and David (1 Sam. 13:14), these conditions were reversed.

Second Samuel concludes with the anger of the Lord being withdrawn from Israel (2 Samuel 24:25).

During the years narrated (in 1 and 2 Samuel), the great empires of the ancient world were in a state of weakness.

Neither Egypt nor the Mesopotamian powers, Babylon and Assyrian, were threats to Israel at that time.

The two nations most hostile to the Israelites were the Philistines (1 Sam. 4; 7; 13; 14; 17; 23; 2 Sam. 5), to the west and the Ammonites (1 Samuel 11; 2 Samuel 10-12), to the east.

The major contingent of the Philistines had migrated from the Aegean Islands and Asia Minor in the 12th century B.C.

After being denied access to Egypt, they settled among other preexisting Philistines along the Mediterranean coast of Palestine.

The Philistines controlled the use of iron, which gave them a decided military and economic advantage over Israel (1 Sam. 13:19-22).

The Ammonites were descendants of Lot (Gen. 19:38), who lived on the Transjordan Plateau.

David conquered the Philistines (2 Sam. 8:1), and the Ammonites (2 Sam. 12:29-31), along with other nations that surrounded Israel (2 Sam. 8:2-14).

Themes: There are four predominate theological themes (in 1 and 2 Samuel).

The first is the Davidic Covenant.

The books are literally framed by two references to the “anointed” king in the prayer of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:10), and the song of David (2 Sam. 22:51).

This is a reference to the Messiah, the King who will triumph over the nations who are opposed to God (see Gen. 49:4-12; Num. 24:7-9; 17-19).

According to the LORD’s promise, this Messiah will come through the line of David and establish David’s throne forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16).

The events of David’s life recorded in Samuel foreshadow the actions of David’s greater Son (i.e., Christ), in the future.

A second theme is the sovereignty of God, clearly seen in these books.

One example is the birth of Samuel in response to Hannah's prayer (1 Sam. 9:17; 16:12-13).

Also, in relation to David, it is particularly evident that nothing can frustrate God's plan to have him rule over Israel (1 Sam. 24:20).

Third, the work of the Holy Spirit in empowering men for divinely appointed tasks is evident.

The Spirit of the Lord came upon both Saul and David after their anointing as king (1 Sam. 10:10; 16:13).

The power of the Holy Spirit brought forth prophecy (1 Samuel 10:6), and victory in battle (1 Samuel 11:6).

Fourth, the books of Samuel demonstrate the personal and national effects of sin.

The sins of Eli and his sons resulted in their deaths (1 Sam. 2:12-17; 22:25; 3:10-14; 4:17-18).

The lack of reverence for the Ark of the Covenant led to the death of a number of Israelites (1 Sam. 6:19; 2 Sam. 6:6-7).

Saul's disobedience resulted in the Lord's judgment, and he was rejected as king over Israel (1 Sam. 13:9; 13-14; 15:8-9; 20-23).

Although David was forgiven for his sin of adultery and murder after his confession (2 Sam. 12:13), he still suffered the inevitable and devastating consequences of his sin (2 Sam. 12:14).