

1 SAMUEL

A Narrative Commentary



Keith Bodner

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic text
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OTL	Old Testament Library
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SOTSMS	Society for Old Testament Study Monograph Series
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

INTRODUCTION

The book of 1 Samuel has engaged readers over the centuries because of its dramatic depths and theological mysteries. Readers are not just attracted to the famous stories such as David's confrontation with the giant Goliath, but other episodes such as the travails of Hannah, the capture of the ark, the birth of Ichabod, and the shade of the long-dead Samuel reappearing on a dark night in Endor, each of which is endlessly intriguing. 1 Samuel is a brilliant and intricate work of literature that often resists easy conclusions and confronts the interpreter with innumerable challenges. In this brief introduction, I would like at least to draw attention to several of these challenges, and discuss a few preliminary matters and questions that we will encounter during the course of our journey. My remarks are limited to and organized around four different areas: *title and text* (the name of the book and its textual traditions), *canonical location* (the placement of the book within the Bible and issues of context), *major characters* (the key personalities), and *approach* (the reading strategy used in this commentary).

1. *Title and Text*

The book we are studying has been saddled with a couple of different titles. Its title in the Greek tradition is '1 Reigns' (or '1 Kingdoms'), the first of four books known as Samuel–Kings in the Hebrew Bible. Some have argued that the division of the books is fairly loose, and based on relative scroll length or some other practical purpose. The title *1 Reigns* has a particular aptness in light of the book's content: the transition from charismatic judgeship to the beginning of dynastic monarchy, with a sustained reflection on leadership. 1 Reigns alerts the reader to the fact that the stakes are high during this stretch of Israel's history, and political decisions and ideas proposed here will have far-reaching implications for the nation. While there is a certain currency in the title 1 Reigns, the Hebrew tradition opted instead for *Samuel* (with further division into 1 and 2 Samuel taking place in the early sixteenth century). This title has nothing to do with authorship, as Samuel the character could not possibly have written either 1 or 2 Samuel. Nor does it primarily have to do with Samuel (Hannah's son) as a dominant

figure in the story, who does not even appear in the next installment of the story, 2 Samuel. In my view, the title *Samuel* has to do with a prophetic utterance that Samuel happens to speak: ‘your kingdom will not arise’, the last judge informs the first king, because ‘the LORD sought for himself a man according to his heart’ (13.14). This is a story, in other words, about a prophetic utterance gradually finding its fulfillment, and Samuel’s declaration guides the plot of both 1 and 2 Samuel.

This commentary is based on the standard Hebrew Masoretic text (MT). However, scholars appreciate that there are difficulties with the MT of 1 Samuel, and there are numerous places in the text where one is unsure of the reading. Translators usually turn to the Greek Septuagint tradition in places where the Hebrew text is problematic. The Septuagint (LXX) is not without its own idiosyncrasies, and at some points offers a substantially different story (the David and Goliath narrative in chap. 17 is such an example; see Auld and Ho 1992: 19-39). While my primary interest is the Hebrew text, I occasionally discuss a variant reading as a window into understanding how the text may have been interpreted in ancient times. Furthermore, the Qumran fragments of Samuel (finally published in Cross 2005) also add another dimension for text criticism that can prove helpful. But, of course, not all readers have the advantage of specialized training in biblical languages. Fortunately there are a host of serviceable English translations. Preferably, the reader of this commentary will have at least two translations handy; since the RSV and the NRSV are readily available, I will assume that the reader is able to consult these two versions. For all that, I tend to translate a fair bit of the text during my analysis—often quite literally—in order to bring out a certain point under discussion. Moreover, I will follow the verse numberings of these English translations (rather than the Hebrew, which has occasional discrepancies) for ease of use.

2. *Canonical Location*

a. *The House That Ruth Built*

In the Greek ordering of the Scriptures—which the Christian Bible follows—1 Samuel is immediately preceded by the book of Ruth. The reader can observe that both Ruth and 1 Samuel begin with a domestic tableau, and various household problems are used to comment on the national situation. Birth of offspring is a key component of both narratives, and in both books important themes of reversal and surprise unfold, as God creatively works in situations where hopelessness seems to abound. Perhaps most importantly, the book of Ruth provides a tacit introduction to David; the house that Ruth builds culminates in David, who is mentioned as the last word of the book.

b. *'In those days there was no king in Israel'*

In the Hebrew canon, however, Ruth is situated in the third section, the Writings. Consequently, in the Hebrew Bible 1 Samuel is preceded by Judges, and is grouped together with the books known as the 'Former Prophets'. 1 Samuel is therefore one segment of a larger collection (Joshua to 2 Kings) tracing the experience of Israel in the land. The book of Judges functions as an introduction to many of the issues raised in 1 Samuel, where the reader notes the subtle foregrounding of Judah and the gradual degeneration of Benjamin. Various locales are shared between the latter part of Judges and early parts of 1 Samuel, such as Shiloh, the hill country of Ephraim, Bethlehem, and Gibeah of Benjamin. Most compelling is the correspondence between the final sentence of Judges—a refrain that occurs some four times in the final five chapters—and the storyline of 1 Samuel. Judges ends with the ambiguous line: 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did what was upright in his own eyes.' Does this suggest that once a king arrives in Israel things will be better? Or worse? The last sentence of Judges thus functions as a transition to the story of kingship recounted in 1 Samuel.

c. *The Deuteronomistic History*

Both Ruth and Judges form a useful literary backdrop for 1 Samuel, and create a different sense of expectation in the reader's mind. For my analysis, though, I will ultimately privilege the book of Judges, and assume that 1 Samuel is part of the larger story of the Former Prophets, or the 'Deuteronomistic History' as it has come to be known in scholarly circles since the formulation of the hypothesis by Martin Noth. In short, this grand narrative is a response to the crisis of life after destruction. In 586 BCE, the Babylonian army invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and deported a significant number of people. The trauma of this event resulted in new literary creation. It was during this time of exile—as a religious and cultural minority who were captives in a foreign land—that the nation seriously reflected on their faith, in the crisis of Jerusalem's collapse. What do they believe? What went wrong? If they ever get a chance to return to their land, how should they live? There are a number of voices and reflections during this period that are preserved in the Hebrew Bible. The book of Ezekiel is one example, parts of other prophetic books are other examples.

A major compilation during the exile and its aftermath—we imagine—is the epic recounting of Israel's story in the 'Former Prophets' spanning from Joshua to 2 Kings. As I mentioned above, the Former Prophets are often referred to as the Deuteronomistic History, this being because the theology articulated in the book of Deuteronomy informs the subsequent narrative of Joshua to 2 Kings. Our assumption is that these books—Joshua, Judges,

1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, with the core of Deuteronomy as a necessary overture—form a reasonably unified and cohesive narrative that tells the story of Israel from its *conquest* of the land until its eventual *collapse* at the hand of the invading Babylonians. At the beginning of the story, Israel is *outside* the land of promise, looking in. Addressing the nation, Moses exhorts the people: ‘I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life, that you and your descendants may live, to love the LORD your God, to listen to his voice, and to cling on him, for *he* is your very life and the length of your days, so that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them’ (Deut. 30.19-20).

In this long sermon of Deuteronomy, Moses challenges the people: if you love the LORD and walk with him in covenant obedience, then you will experience a healthy measure of blessing in the land. By contrast, Moses warns, should the people persist in disobedience, covenant unfaithfulness, and compromise, they will not experience blessing, but ultimately ‘cursing’. Expulsion from the land is the epitome of non-blessing. In 2 Kings 25, the people are again *outside* the land of promise. With this theological premise of Deuteronomy the long narrative of Joshua–2 Kings begins: will Israel be faithful and enjoy blessing in the land? Or, in the end, will unfaithfulness prevail, and with it the long passage to exile? This theological challenge is woven into the fabric of the text, and the Deuteronomistic History has a cast of thousands who live through many centuries in time. As Thomas Römer (2005: 24) summarizes, ‘The book of Deuteronomy, which is presented as Moses’ testimony, appears as the hermeneutical key and the ideological basis for reading and understanding the following history’.

There are a number of major themes the reader can discern in the Deuteronomistic History: the monotheistic ideal (the one God who saved Israel from Egypt, and led them back to the land of promise); the struggle against idolatry; the centrality of Jerusalem; the dynamic nature of Torah; the necessity of avoiding foreign influence; the election of the Davidic dynasty; the prophetic word and its fulfillment (see Weinfeld 1972). Following the lead of scholars such as Robert Polzin, I use the term ‘Deuteronomist’ simply as a shorthand term for the implied author(s) of the work, in order to stress continuity with Deuteronomy and a coherent plotline throughout the narrative. The various books themselves contain a number of highlights that contribute to this overall story:

(i) *Joshua*. The book of Joshua opens with a speech from God himself, who rallies the new leader with a challenge to believe amid formidable obstacles. The book of Joshua will be about conquest, yet the opening speech is centered on *God’s word*, not military strategy. After some qualified success

and a few notable setbacks, the second half of the book recounts the allocation of the land to the various tribes (Judah gets the largest share), and closes with a speech from the aged Joshua exhorting the people to stay faithful and not give up.

(ii) *Judges*. After the death of Joshua, the book of Judges begins with a subtle foregrounding of the tribe of Judah and proceeds to illustrate the roller-coaster of Israel's faith. There is a fourfold cycle of backsliding in the book: Israel serves other gods, becomes enslaved to the nations whose gods they worship, and at the end of their rope, they cry out to God, and invariably God rescues them in a surprising way. There is a *south to north* movement over the course of the book, as the various narratives focus on one judge for virtually every tribe. The last chapters of the book include episodes of idolatry and civil war, and the book concludes with the overt mention of 'a king'. This prepares the way for the advent of the monarchy in the nation.

(iii) *1 Samuel*. The birth of kingship is painful—much like having children has its painful moments—and this is the image the author uses to introduce the monarchy. The first 'son' born in this book is Samuel, who in turn becomes the first kingmaker in the nation. The birth of Samuel intersects with the fall of the house of Eli, and a serious crisis arises in chap. 8 when the elders demand, 'Give us a king, like all the nations!' Israel's first king, Saul, is from Benjamin, and his name means 'asked for'. While Saul has his good points, the tribe of Benjamin does not share the same destiny as Judah, and in time David of Judah is secretly anointed as Saul's successor. The book ends with the tragic picture of Saul falling on his sword, a fatal action that might presage the fall of the monarchy itself in Israel.

(iv) *2 Samuel*. The book opens with the account of David's accession over all Israel and the capture of Jerusalem, renamed 'the city of David'. A key moment is chap. 7: David offers to build God a 'house' (temple), but God declines the offer, and instead promises to build David a 'house' (dynasty). This promise of a dynastic line represents a watershed moment in the theological plot of the narrative, a promise that is sorely tested in the days ahead. A turning point for David's career is chap. 11, the Bathsheba *rendezvous* and subsequent murder of her husband Uriah. David has been promised a dynastic house, but now the sword will not depart from that house, as the considerable family dysfunction in the remainder of 2 Samuel testifies. The book ends with a sin, a sacrifice, and the acquisition of land for the eventual 'house' of God.

(v) *1 Kings*. The early events of *1 Kings* include the death of David and the succession of Solomon, who purges his opponents and consolidates his throne by means of some extensive building projects: the palace takes thirteen years to build, the temple takes seven years. At the end of his life the narrator discloses that Solomon has a divided heart, and this directly leads to a divided kingdom in *1 Kings* 12. There are now two nations: 'Israel' in the north, and 'Judah' in the south. The northern kingdom experiences a rapid flow of fleeting dynasties and one-term wonders, while the southern kingdom is comparatively more stable, with a descendent of David continually on the throne. However, both nations struggle with theological orthodoxy, and the escalating international tensions and frequent confrontations between king and prophet does not augur well for the future of both north and south.

(vi) *2 Kings*. The story of division continues, and the conflicts intensify (both external with other nations, and internal with faithfulness to the covenant). The advancing Assyrian army eventually destroys the northern kingdom of Israel (*2 Kgs* 17), but the tiny kingdom of Judah continues because of a spectacular divine intervention. The southern kingdom survives for a while, but it is only a matter of time before the Babylonian army (the new superpower on the block) advances toward Jerusalem and destroys the country, sending the people into exile among the various Babylonian provinces (*2 Kgs* 25). Yet the lamp of hope has not been extinguished, and this is not the end of the story. With the nation in exile, and stripped of the illusions of idolatry and the failed institution of the monarchy, the people of God now have to consider how best to live in radically altered circumstances.

The narrative of *1 Samuel*, therefore, is part of the national autopsy performed in light of its monarchic collapse. In all probability, the composition of this narrative was a complicated affair (see, e.g., Sweeney 2007: 3-32), and I should say that numerous scholars of late are contesting the notion of the Deuteronomistic History and abandoning it, much like the Philistines were ready to abandon the ark after it caused so many hemorrhoids. Nonetheless, I use the idea of the History as a heuristic way of making sense of the available data as a cohesive story, and instead of reading *1 Samuel* in isolation, it is more profitable to understand the book as one section of wider narrative continuum.

3. Major Characters

There are a host of memorable and remarkably drawn characters in the book of *1 Samuel*, and we will have occasion to meet them in the pages that

follow. But three characters should be introduced briefly here—Samuel, Saul, and David—whose lives intertwine, whose portraits overlap, and who in many respects are defined by each other. I understand these figures to be presented with a high degree of complexity. In the past, many interpreters have viewed these characters as rather flat and somewhat robotic (Samuel being the good prophet, Saul the evil first king, and David his romantic and wonderful successor). In such interpretations, characters are usually read in fairly unequivocal terms: someone is an example either of virtue or vice, and every action of the character is then evaluated within this predetermined framework. My analysis suggests a more provocative set of characterizations by the Deuteronomist, paying attention to the *character zone* that surrounds each of these major figures: that is, the language used around the character, the configuration of dialogue, the postures adopted, direct and indirect evaluations, and the responses to various circumstances.

The prophet Samuel is a multi-layered figure. He is given a prenatal introduction in the story, and he is the one character who is granted a post-mortem cameo. Samuel emerges as a champion of orthodoxy, yet it must be said that he does not seem to be the most attractive personality. Samuel certainly has major issues with Saul—whom he anoints as king but then fires a week later—and surely one must ask whether or not Samuel is a good mentor for Israel's first king. The prophet Samuel, though, is not the only one to find fault with Saul. As David Gunn (1980: 23) summarizes, 'Saul's reputation has been hardly an enviable one, at least in Christian circles. While Jewish tradition has treated this first king of Israel with some sympathy, Christian tradition has shown him a large measure of hostility.' I will at least attempt to be more even-handed in my assessment of Saul, and not merely assume that he is wholly disposed to evil. A good example would be Saul's sacrificial error in chap. 13. John Goldingay (2003: 583) notes the following:

The story has a hard time demonstrating that Saul is at fault and an even harder time demonstrating that the magnitude of the wrongdoing justifies the magnitude of the price he pays. This question becomes all the more pressing when we reconsider his story after reading David's, for Saul never commits acts as grotesquely wrong as David's sin against Bathsheba and Uriah, with its horrendous consequences for his family and his people.

To my mind, Goldingay touches on one of the central questions of the narrative: Why does Saul fare so much worse than David? David himself emerges in the story an extremely talented individual with a knack for leadership, sound political judgment, with fine physical endowments and confidence in the God of Israel. Interpreters often clothe David with the expression 'a man after God's own heart', giving him the pious benefit of the doubt in those murkier situations he (often) finds himself in. Yet I will

argue that this expression ‘after God’s heart’ has far less to do with David’s inner spirituality as it does with God’s choice; in other words, ‘after God’s heart’ means ‘after God’s election’. It is an external rather than internal designation, and has more to do with God’s grace than David’s works. Consequently, the most intriguing and even surprising ‘character’ in 1 Samuel is God, who emerges as a ‘politically incorrect deity [who] refuses to be tamed’ (Noll 2004: 408). In my opinion, readers from all communities of faith can be challenged, encouraged, rebuked, and inspired by the portrait of God that emerges from the pages of 1 Samuel.

4. Approach

There have been numerous methods used to read biblical texts in the past: typological, philological, comparative, historical, and source-critical approaches are usually surveyed in introductory handbooks. This commentary adopts a literary approach, a close reading of the text that attends to matters of plot, character, point of view, irony, wordplay, direct speech, ambiguity, spatial and temporal settings, and the role of the narrator. A literary approach has a high degree of interest in the *poetics* of the text, that is, how it works as a piece of literature, and how language is used to convey meaning. For example, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the weird sisters open the drama with the refrain, ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’. In his opening scene, the main character Macbeth enters the stage with the words, ‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen’. There is an intersection of language here in these utterances of central characters that interweave their destinies, and foreshadow plot connections to come. In the same way, Hannah’s line in 1.28, ‘He is asked for/lent’ (or ‘He is Saul’, **הוא שאל**), serves to connect prophet and king at the earliest opportunity in the narrative, and alerts the reader to the importance of nameplays that will follow in the story. The literary approach, in brief, reads the story searching for evidence of intelligent design, discerning what Paul Ricoeur once described as ‘the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story’ (cited in Brooks 1984: 13). In the present academic climate, literary approaches are increasingly eclectic, drawing on scholarship that deploys a range of critical methodologies with the belief that insight can be obtained from many different reading strategies.

A NARRATIVE COMMENTARY

1 SAMUEL 1

After the tumultuous conclusion of Judges, or after the genealogy of Ruth, the reader is presented with another genealogy—that of Elkanah of Ephraim. While one might think that Elkanah will be a major figure in the narrative, he is gradually displaced as the central character in the story by his barren wife Hannah. This chapter is about openings: the long narrative about the birth of Israel's monarchy opens, just as Hannah's womb is opened to produce the first kingmaker. Hannah's womb opens with the birth of Samuel, who in turn will open the door to the birth of the monarchy in Israel. With great subtlety, the frequency of the verb 'to ask' indirectly introduces Israel's first king, Saul, whose name means 'asked'. From the outset, then, prophet and king are linked in this narrative that introduces kingship to Israel.

1.1-2

The story begins on the domestic front. A certain man named Elkanah is from the tribe of Ephraim ('double fruit'), from the town of Ramathaim ('double height'), and has a 'double wife' marital situation.

In the opening lines of 1 Samuel 1, the meaning of names has some significance. In this respect there is a similarity with the book of Ruth. In Ruth 1, the first character is Elimelech ('my God is king') who leaves Bethlehem ('house of bread') in Judah ('praise') because of a famine, and sojourns in Moab ('from his father'). Elimelech's wife Naomi ('delight') will later change her name to Marah ('bitter'), in part because of the fate of their two sons Mahlon ('sick') and Kilion ('failing'), who both die (not surprisingly, in light of such morbid nomenclature). The beginning of 1 Samuel is similar. Elkanah ('God is creator') loves Hannah ('favor'), but only Peninnah ('branching') bears fruit for this man from Ephraim ('double fruit').

While it is not always the case, there are numerous occasions in Hebrew narrative when the meaning of names bears some weight. As a literary technique, the use of names can be an efficient means of rendering character and individualization. The name can carry a sense of destiny, and character traits can be revealed by the name. At the level of the larger storyline,