

Introducing the Monarchy: Samuel, Saul, and David

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Introduction

The two books of Samuel—texts fascinated with David. Originally one book—split in LXX. Text covers 135 years from birth of Samuel to end of David’s reign.

If we do the text justice, we will not hurry to David. We must begin where the author begins—Samuel embodies the ancient covenantal commitment.

Samuel

- The birth of Samuel is a gift that determines Israel’s future as a gift of God. God’s role will be decisive. All are creatures of God’s sovereignty and are agents in God’s intended future.
- Israel begins as a marginal community—marginalized by the powerful Philistines. Politically/morally weak, as at end of Judges, moral chaos, brutality, undisciplined religion.
- Thus Israel is waiting for a king who will protect, defend, gather, liberate, and bring new legitimacy to this community. But the story does not rush to David—there is the long wait—at times bitter, confused.
- Story of book of Samuel is surprising gift of David, but it begins with desperate need so that we can be amazed with the gift is offered. It begins with Hannah’s waiting.
- Wonderful story, but we must not tarry too long. Hannah’s song of celebration has a national dimension which anticipates a king (2:10). We learn that the rule of God is the strength of the king—the king who is agent for the poor, needy, hungry. The song eventually becomes the song of Mary (Luke 1) and the faithful community understands that Jesus is the ultimate solution to barrenness, death, and the one who brings life, just as Ezekiel 34 speaks of the Christ under the terminology of David.

Samuel Replaces Eli

Narrative which continues from 2:11 serves to raise Samuel and discredit Eli.

- Note the failed leadership of house of Eli. Sons of Eli do not know God (v. 12).
- God nullifies his eternal promise.
- Chap. 3—gives legitimacy to new leadership, de-legitimate the old. Serious power struggle.
- Eli forfeits the word of the Lord and it is given to Samuel, see. 3:19-4:1a.
- Samuel’s rise reflects the freedom and promise of God according to covenant.
- Holy governance (leadership) matters in life, not conventional leadership. Newness is possible in God’s resolve to do something new.

God’s Presence

Consider “hand” of God, and interestingly Samuel is not present in this text—chapters 4-6.

- Defeat; ark makes no difference, because glory of God is gone (v. 21). First, Israel is defeated; the Ark of the Covenant is mobilized as an emblem and embodiment of divine power. The first defeat is due to God’s absence, and the now God is thought to be present through the ark, but Israel is again defeated. Even the ark cannot deliver Israel. We want to know why—does the narrator have no theological curiosity?
- The outcome devastates—Eli dies, Israel is humiliated. God is gone, absent. This is why the enemy wins. God is gone, and the incongruity is clear. Yet God’s hand prevails (5:11-12). God

¹ Developed from notes from Brueggeman, *1-2 Samuel*

does bring to life, bring down and raise up, make poor and rich, bring low and exalt. This is classic reversal story.

- The Philistines have failed to reckon with the character and power of God.
- The panicked Philistines return the ark.
- The narrative shows descent and ascent—glory departed (4:21-22) and glory given (6:5). Israel moves from crying out (4:14) to rejoicing (6:13). God goes into bondage and is emancipated. If God is humiliated (4:8) he is also exalted.
- This is the nature of God's character, and such extremes belong to the nature of God and life with God.
- The repeated phrase is "hand of God" to show his power is not dependent on human action. Our embarrassed modernity is wrong when we affirm: God has no hands but our hands. God acts in total sovereignty.

So Samuel (chapter 7) urges Israel to return to God with whole heart (v. 3). This is the nature of covenantal faith—look to God for every need. Samuel promises that God is completely adequate to deliver. Israel's response (v. 4) re-forms the community as obedient people and we witness a great ceremony of covenant-making.

→It is precisely because Samuel's modes of power and faith are so unrelated to reality that Israel wants a king—thus we enter a great intellectual and theological struggle.

The Question of the Monarchy

- We do not know how the question of kingship arose in Israel—perhaps in response to the Philistine threat. Kingship does not easily accommodate covenantal power. In Israel, the new power must yield to the covenantal norm. This is the description of Deut. 17:14-20. Saul's inability to hear and obey God as supreme is his undoing. We must note that the choice is his.
- The story tells of the dispute between the old tradition of reliance on God and the new ideology of monarchy.
- It is a long time between chapters 7 and 8. Samuel is old. His sons fail in taking bribes and perverting justice. The sons of Samuel are engaged in the undoing of covenantal Israel.
- Thus the elders call for governance "like the other nations" (v. 5). This reflects the intense dispute concerning the character and identity of the community. Israel was chosen by God and is not to be like the other nations. Israel is to order life according to the Torah and God's remarkable promises. This is an abandonment of the long-standing self-understanding. This changes foundational commitments.
- The monarchy issue shows Israel's unwillingness to have God as source and rule of life.
- Note that the narrative and God speech (8:10ff) show reservation about the introduction of the monarchy. The monarchy begins under a cloud of divine resistance.
- The king will take (vv. 11,13,14,15,16,17). Remember the false shepherds of Ezek. 34. Israel will be enslaved. The covenantal connection to God will be broken because this version of monarchy substitutes human power for God.
- The monarchy is left in that interesting OT category of "permitted but disapproved." The application to the faith community concerning power, influence, security, and fidelity is real. Can the church devise modes of power/leadership to secure its own life? Is the church's power like the leadership of the nations? The issue of faith and power is always problematic.
- Thus chapter 7 has shown the old order is adequate, chapter 8 asserts that although human kingship rejects God as king, kingship is reluctantly authorized by God.

Enter Saul

The Saul narrative is odd collection of differing materials. The narrative seems most interested in contrast of Old Covenant and new monarchy.

Chapter 9-11--Saul's rule is introduced

- Young Saul appears before Samuel and is secretly anointed, 9:1-10:16
- Public recognition of Saul, 10:17-27
- Battle crisis with spirit rushing on Saul, 11:1-15

Chapter 12--Weighty theological convocation of Samuel.

- Contrast between old covenant under Samuel and the new monarchy.

Chapter 13-15--Rejection of Saul to clear way for rise of David

- Saul's failure, 13:1-15
- Battle and victory, 14, displacement of Saul by son Jonathan
- Saul's rejection, 15:1-35

The unsuspecting Saul is transformed into a person for God's purposes. He is given another heart (10:9). He becomes another man, and opens the way for Israel to become a new people.

- It begins in 9:19-20, put the mind on the desire of Israel—a king.
- Saul will act as both judge and king, 10:1.
- Saul is empowered and transformed; he meets the prophets and joins them. This is the gift of the spirit, a genuine newness. Freedom, ecstasy, self-transcendence for a purpose beyond self. This is the story of a man caught up in God's powerful rescue.
- Saul is available for God's power and purpose, embarrassing others (vv. 11-12).
- Still, the monarchy is a rejection of God, 10:19.
- The key to understanding this text in my view is that Samuel and God know that the version of kingship the people are seeking is foolish and destructive (cf. Dt. 17).
- Can Saul save? (10:27) Saul has not yet acted as a king. Chap 11: Saul intervenes, acts as king, seized by spirit, empowered, 11:6. Saul knows that credit belongs to the spirit that responds to God beyond human control. Saul is properly deferential to God. Saul is confirmed as king.

Chapter 12—Expanded

Here is intentional theological statement—theological understanding of Israel. The tension is apparent: old covenant vs. new monarchy. Monarchy threatens Israel's character as covenantal community. How can covenant work in the midst of monarchy? How value human rights, dignity, worthy in authoritarian, self-serving, or totalitarian government? How give credibility and durability to relationships in face of power arrangements that seem not to value such?

Samuel calls a meeting—his characteristic way of leading.

- Vv. 6-11: Israel is characteristically fickle/wayward, God is characteristically responsive and powerful, characteristic rescue is through raising up a judge.
- 12:12-18. King has no individual role to play, is simply a member of the covenant community. Denies the kingship any theological significance. What counts is Torah.
- Samuel shows his power in vv. 16-18 to support vv. 14-15.
- Vv. 22-24: God is concerned about Israel, Samuel is faithful to Israel, Israel must be faithful.

Moment of demanding reflection upon nature of power and leadership in Israel.

Chapters 13-15 provide counterpoint to 9-11

Basic Saul story is told in this short section. Remind: 13 and 15 are nullification with chap. 14 showing the tragedy of Saul's choices.

- Ch. 13: 1-7, conflict with Philistines; 8-15a, stunning theological verdict against Saul, 15b-23, conflict with Philistines. Major point may be that "spirit" does not seem to be present. Not said in so many words, but things are not working right. Broken command: 13:13. Usurping of authority—denies God's authority. 13:14: Saul could have been the man after God's own heart but was not.
- Ch. 14: See the destructive darkness in Saul's life. Pious man makes an oath he thinks to be obedience. Parallel to Abraham? Yields to people—costs him his throne. Note: God is present, Jonathan is exalted by the people, Saul is pious man in pitiful contrast to Jonathan.
- Ch. 15: rejection for lack of obedience. Samuel is still in control; the covenantal order works. The king must listen to the Lord—theory of leadership, royal power. The spiritual leader is not a free man with policy options.
 - Vv.17-19, legal process: (1) reminder that Saul is a nobody, (2) reiterate commission of 2-3, (3) indictment with 3 questions.
 - Vv. 22-23, massive verdict: rebellion, sin, stubbornness, iniquity, idolatry. Rejection. Saul has rejected the word of the Lord, the old tradition, the normative word of Samuel. Rebellion by Saul leads to rejection by God. Will spend most of rest of life pursuing the one who is after God's own heart.
 - V. 29—massive theological statement.
 - Vv. 10,29,35 are wonderfully theologically, what is God doing in this world?

Enter David

The one anointed as king (chapter 16) is qualified by his right heart. Great stories—choice, Goliath, contrast with Saul [in attitude, humility, presence of Spirit, power, war, relationships, selfishness, dependence on God]. To hasten on, come to the artificial distinction placed between the two books as we have them, and think of what happens after Saul's death. How can legitimacy be transferred?

- 2 Sam. 1—news of Saul's death, lesser person would rejoice and thank the news-bearer. David is not a lesser person. Responds in pathos, for king is dead. Laments over Saul and Jonathan. David in grief is in most faithful, most powerful form.
- 2 Sam. 2:1—first act is to inquire of God.
- Chapter 1-4 summary:
 - Saul and Jonathan die at hand of Amalekite, David laments.
 - Abner dies at hand of Joab, David grieves and fasts.
 - Ishbosheth dies at hand of Rechab and Baanah, David takes revenge.
 - There are killings, no other conclusion to Saulide threat is possible, but David is innocent. David knows that only God redeems life (4:9).
- Chapter 5—thus David is established as successor with covenantal solidarity, 5:1.
 - The shepherd term is usual metaphor in ancient world for king, indicating role of guarding, feeding, nurturing, protecting (Psalm 23, Ezek. 34). Must not miss Nathan's use of the metaphor in the upcoming parable.
 - The prince term is disputed, but avoids king. V. 3 uses king, but actual wording leaves room for God, thus escaping idea that human kingship automatically rejects God as king.

David's Reign

List of family, 5:13-16

Battle with Philistines, 5:17-25

Ark as old, 6:1-20

Oracle as new claim, 7:1-29

Battle with two nations, 8:1-14

List of officials, 8:15-18

David can handle the Philistines, but he asks the pre-king question of God, v. 19 (also v. 23 in the second victory).

Then he remembers the ark, and rejoices when it arrives in Jerusalem, to the disgust of Michal. David is utterly God's man, a fact Michal either cannot understand or refuses to acknowledge. David is the one who humbles himself and by God's power is exalted.

He wishes to build a temple for God.

The kingdom expands, because the power is of God, 8:6,14. 8:15 is a summary statement of David's governance.

After God's Own Heart?

2 Sam. 9 begins new section of literature. We see again a theological dimension, cunning and artistic. This section dares to articulate the interior hurt, anguish, conflict, ambiguity. Utterly human in hurt, hate, hope. See what humanness is about when lived in presence of haunting God and power that seduces and destroys. The impact is so contemporary—as every great drama or novel it tell us how it is with us.

- 2 Sam. 9—David is man of hesed, loyalty. Kind to all—first, in his relationship to house of Saul, 9:1-8, see 1,3,7.
- 2 Sam. 10—David again proposes to practice hesed, 10:2; hesed to house of Nahash (cf. 1 Sam. 11:1-11). He seeks to honor oaths and keep faith.
 - Ch. 10 standing alone has no great theological significance, but it looks ahead to war account of 11-12. Perhaps no real interest in Ammonite war except as context for personal episode which shapes the future of David's life.
 - Ch. 10 also looks back against ch. 9. We see David as a man of fidelity. Ch. 9-10 provide introduction to real action now to be presented.
- 2 Sam. 11—here is our invitation into presence of delicate art, deep/aching psychology, ruthless political action.
 - David stayed in Jerusalem—four words that change the subject of the narrative.
 - Sees what he wants—a woman with a dangerously hyphenated name.
 - Notice the verbs in v. 4—he sent, he took, he lay. She conceived. He took her. Samuel had warned that kings are takers, 1 Sam. 8-11-19. Mostly David has not had to take—everything has been graciously given him by God. Harah anoki, I am pregnant.
 - v. 6—quick, decisive action. No vacillation, no debate.
 - v. 7—shalom, 3 times.
 - v. 25-27—evil. David presumes to be moral arbiter. People die in wars.
 - v. 26-27—pause, two events, and a verdict.
- 2 Sam. 12—David thought no one would notice.
 - The struggle of this narrative is how truth shall speak to power. Such is dangerous. The truth is bold, direct.
 - Vv. 7b-12—long speech in mouth of God.

- In the narrative of ch. 11 and the verdict of ch. 12, the text contrasts two views of historical reality. David, seduced by the wrong worldview, demonstrates that the king is always answerable to the covenantal reality—he cannot escape because of his position.
- In 1 Sam. 15—David is the neighbor who is better than Saul and will receive the throne.
- In 2 Sam. 12:11—Absalom is the neighbor who will arise from David’s own house.
- David’s response is confession, 12:13. Perhaps some do not see much to celebrate of David’s life in this narrative, but there are two things: David still has a considerable degree of moral courage and sensitivity. He can face truth. Second, it is not too late for David’s repentance.
- Harah ‘anoki; ‘attah ha’ish; hata’ti lyhwh. 11:5; 12:7; 12:13.
- In 12:24-25, second son is born to this ill-wrought marriage. Shalom, Solomon, loved and treasured by God. The placement is stunning. Solomon, born close to sordidness, still within the echo of the prophetic lawsuit. But life continues for this family.
- It continues in conflict and turmoil, with a separatist coup under Sheba, but always under the guidance and oversight of God.

Note the significant turning points, contrasts.

- The continued presence of the spirit, take not your holy spirit from me (Ps. 51)
- The willingness to repent up front
- The knowledge that the king is also accountable
- A man after God’s own heart
- The continuation of God’s promise

This God has an amazing capacity to work life at the border of death, to act in promise-keeping ways when the promise seems impossible. Alienation and judgment, but gestures of grace.