

THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

This summary of the book of 1 Samuel provides information about the title, author(s), date of writing, chronology, theme, theology, outline, a brief overview, and the chapters of the Book of 1 Samuel.

Title

1 and 2 Samuel are named after the person God used to establish monarchy in Israel.

Samuel not only anointed both Saul and David, Israel's first two kings, but he also gave definition to the new order of God's rule over Israel.

Samuel's role as God's representative in this period of Israel's history is close to that of Moses (see [Ps 99:6](#); [Jer 15:1](#)) since he, more than any other person, provided for covenant continuity in the transition from the rule of the judges to that of the monarchy.

1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book. It was divided into two parts by the translators of the Septuagint (the pre-Christian Greek translation of the OT) -- a division subsequently followed by Jerome (in the Latin Vulgate, c. a.d. 400) and by modern versions.

The title of the book has varied from time to time, having been designated "The First and Second Books of Kingdoms" (Septuagint), "First and Second Kings" (Vulgate) and "First and Second Samuel" (Hebrew tradition and most modern versions).

Who Wrote the Book of 1 Samuel?

The authorship of 1 Samuel is unknown. This book, along with 2 Samuel, was originally a single volume in the Hebrew canon. Traditionally, the prophet Samuel was considered the author of the books of Samuel, and it is likely that he contributed to it. However, Samuel died prior to the completion of 1 Samuel, meaning he could not be its only author.

In [2 Samuel 1:18](#), we find a reference to the [Book of Jashar](#). [1 Chronicles 27:24](#) mentions the Annals of David and [1 Chronicles 29:24](#) mention the records of Samuel, Nathan, and Gad.

The references in 1 Chronicles do not prove that these other records were used as sources in 1 Samuel, but it is clear there were multiple historical records available for whoever did write 1 Samuel.

Contents and Theme: Kingship and Covenant

1 Samuel relates God's establishment of a political system in Israel headed by a human king. Before the author describes this momentous change in the structure of the theocracy (God's kingly rule over his people), he effectively depicts the complexity of its context. The following events provide both historical and theological background for the beginning of the monarchy:

1. *The birth, youth and call of Samuel (chs. 1 - 3)*. In a book dealing for the most part with the reigns of Israel's first two kings, Saul and David, it is significant that the author chose not to include a birth narrative of either of these men, but to describe the birth of their forerunner and anointer, the prophet Samuel.

This in itself accentuates the importance the author attached to Samuel's role in the events that follow. He seems to be saying in a subtle way that flesh and blood are to be subordinated to word and Spirit in the process of the establishment of kingship.

For this reason chs. 1 - 3 should be viewed as integrally related to what follows, not as a more likely component of the book of Judges or as a loosely attached prefix to the rest of 1,2 Samuel. Kingship is given its birth and then nurtured by the prophetic word and work of the prophet Samuel.

Moreover, the events of Samuel's nativity thematically anticipate the story of God's working that is narrated in the rest of the book.

2. *The "ark narratives" (chs. 4 - 6)*.

This section describes how the ark of God was captured by the Philistines and then, after God wreaked havoc on several Philistine cities, how it was returned to Israel.

These narratives reveal the folly of Israel's notion that possession of the ark automatically guaranteed victory over her enemies. They also display the awesome power of the Lord (Yahweh, the God of Israel) and his superiority over the Philistine god Dagon.

The Philistines were forced to confess openly their helplessness against God's power by their return of the ark to Israel. The entire ark episode performs a vital function in placing Israel's subsequent sinful desire for a human king in proper perspective.

3. *Samuel as a judge and deliverer (ch. 7)*. When Samuel called Israel to repentance and renewed dedication to the Lord, the Lord intervened mightily in Israel's behalf and gave victory over the Philistines.

This narrative reaffirms the authority of Samuel as a divinely ordained leader; at the same time it provides evidence of divine protection and blessing for God's people when they place their confidence in the Lord and live in obedience to their covenant obligations.

All the material in chs. 1 - 7 serves as a necessary preface for the narratives of chs. 8 - 12, which describe the rise and establishment of kingship in Israel.

The author has masterfully arranged the stories in chs. 8 - 12 in order to accentuate the serious theological conflict surrounding the historical events.

In the study of these chapters, scholars have often noted the presence of a tension or ambivalence in the attitude toward the monarchy: On the one hand, Samuel is commanded by the Lord to give the people a king (8:7,9,22; 9:16-17; 10:24; 12:13); on the other hand, their request for a king is considered a sinful rejection of the Lord (8:7; 10:19; 12:12,17,19-20).

These seemingly conflicting attitudes toward the monarchy must be understood in the context of Israel's covenant relationship with the Lord.

Moses had anticipated Israel's desire for a human king (Dt 17:14-20), but Israelite kingship was to be compatible with the continued rule of the Lord over his people as their Great King.

Instead, when the elders asked Samuel to give them a king (8:5,19-20), they rejected the Lord's kingship over them. Their desire was for a king such as the nations around them had -- to lead them in battle and give them a sense of national security and unity.

The request for a king constituted a denial of their covenant relationship to the Lord, who was their King. Moreover, the Lord not only had promised to be their protector but had also repeatedly demonstrated his power in their behalf, most recently in the ark narratives (chs. 4 - 6), as well as in the great victory won over the Philistines under the leadership of Samuel (ch. 7).

Nevertheless the Lord instructed Samuel to give the people a king. By divine appointment Saul was brought into contact with Samuel, and Samuel was directed to anoint him privately as king (9:1 -- 10:16). Subsequently, Samuel gathered the people at Mizpah, where, after again admonishing them concerning their sin in desiring a king (10:18-19), he presided over the selection of a king by lot.

The lot fell on Saul and publicly designated him as the one whom God had chosen (10:24). Saul did not immediately assume his royal office, but returned home to work his fields (11:5,7). When the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead were threatened by Nahash the Ammonite, Saul rose to the challenge, gathered an army and led Israel to victory in battle. His success placed a final seal of divine approval on Saul's selection to be king (cf. 10:24; 11:12-13) and occasioned the inauguration of his reign at Gilgal (11:14 -- 12:25).

The question that still needed resolution, then, was not so much whether Israel should have a king (it was clearly the Lord's will to give them a king), but rather how they could maintain their covenant with God (i.e., preserve the theocracy) now that they had a human king.

The problem was resolved when Samuel called the people to repentance and renewal of their allegiance to the Lord on the very occasion of the inauguration of Saul as king (see note on 10:25).

By establishing kingship in the context of covenant renewal, Samuel placed the monarchy in Israel on a radically different footing from that in surrounding nations.

The king in Israel was not to be autonomous in his authority and power; rather, he was to be subject to the law of the Lord and the word of the prophet (10:25; 12:23).

This was to be true not only for Saul but also for all the kings who would occupy the throne in Israel in the future. The king was to be an instrument of the Lord's rule over his people, and the people as well as the king were to continue to recognize the Lord as their ultimate Sovereign (12:14-15).

Saul soon demonstrated that he was unwilling to submit to the requirements of his theocratic office (chs. 13 - 15).

When he disobeyed the instructions of the prophet Samuel in preparation for battle against the Philistines (13:13), and when he refused to totally destroy the Amalekites as he had been commanded to do by the word of the Lord through Samuel (ch. 15), he ceased to be an instrument of the Lord's rule over his people.

These abrogations of the requirements of his theocratic office led to his rejection as king (15:23).

The remainder of 1 Samuel (chs. [16](#) - [31](#)) depicts the Lord's choice of David to be Saul's successor, and then describes the long road by which David is prepared for accession to the throne. Although Saul's rule became increasingly antitheocratic in nature, David refused to usurp the throne by forceful means but left his accession to office in the Lord's hands.

Eventually Saul was wounded in a battle with the Philistines and, fearing capture, took his own life. Three of Saul's sons, including David's loyal friend Jonathan, were killed in the same battle (ch. [31](#)).

Chronology

Even though the narratives of 1,2 Samuel contain some statements of chronological import (see, e.g., [1Sa 6:1](#); [7:2](#); [8:1,5](#); [13:1](#); [25:1](#); [2Sa 2:10-11](#); [5:4-5](#); [14:28](#); [15:7](#)), the data are insufficient to establish a precise chronology for the major events of this period of Israel's history.

Except for the dates of David's birth and the duration of his reign, which are quite firm (see [2Sa 5:4-5](#)), most other dates can only be approximated.

The textual problem with the chronological data on the age of Saul when he became king and the length of his reign (see NIV text notes on [1Sa 13:1](#)) contributes to uncertainty concerning the precise time of his birth and the beginning of his reign.

No information is given concerning the time of Samuel's birth ([1Sa 1:20](#)) or death ([25:1](#)). His lifetime probably overlapped that of Samson and that of Obed, son of Ruth and Boaz and grandfather of David.

It is indicated that he was well along in years when the elders of Israel asked him to give them a king (see [8:1,5](#)).

One other factor contributing to chronological uncertainty is that the author has not always arranged his material in strict chronological sequence. It seems clear, e.g., that [2Sa 7](#) is to be placed chronologically after David's conquests described in [2Sa 8:1-14](#) (see notes on [2Sa 7:1](#); [8:1](#)).

The story of the famine sent by God on Israel during the reign of David because of Saul's violation of a treaty with the Gibeonites is found in [2Sa 21:1-14](#), though chronologically it occurred prior to the time of Absalom's rebellion recorded in [2Sa 15-18](#) (see further the notes on [2Sa 21:1-14](#)).

The following dates, however, provide an approximate chronological framework for the times of Samuel, Saul and David.

1105 Birth of Samuel ([1Sa 1:20](#))

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1080 Birth of Saul

1050 Saul anointed to be king ([1Sa 10:1](#))

1040 Birth of David

1025 David anointed to be Saul's successor ([1Sa 16:1-13](#))

1010 Death of Saul and beginning of David's reign over Judah in Hebron

([1Sa 31:4-6](#); [2Sa 2:1,4,11](#))

1003 Beginning of David's reign over all Israel and capture of Jerusalem ([2Sa 5](#))

997-99 David's wars ([2Sa 8:1-14](#))

991 Birth of Solomon ([2Sa 12:24](#))

980 David's census ([2Sa 24:1-9](#))

970 End of David's reign ([2Sa 5:4-5](#); [1Ki 2:10-11](#))

Outline

Historical Setting for the Beginning of Kingship in Israel (chs. [1-7](#))

Samuel's Birth, Youth and Call to Be a Prophet (chs. [1-3](#))

Israel Defeated by the Philistines; the Ark of God Taken and Restored (chs. [4-7](#))

The Beginning of Kingship in Israel under the Guidance of Samuel (8:1;16:13)

The Rise of Saul (chs. 8-12)

1. The people's sinful request for a king (ch. 8)
2. Samuel anoints Saul privately (9:1;10:16)
3. Saul chosen to be king publicly (10:17-27)
4. Saul's choice as king confirmed (11:1-13)
5. Saul's reign inaugurated at a covenant renewal ceremony (11:14;12:25)

Saul's Kingship a Failure (13:1;16:13)

The Establishment of Kingship in Israel (16:14;31:13)

The Rise of David (16:14;27:12)

6. David enters Saul's service (16:14;17:58)
7. David becomes alienated from Saul (chs. 18-19)
8. Jonathan protects David from Saul (ch. 20)
9. David continues to elude Saul (21:1;22:5)
10. Saul kills the priests at Nob (22:6-23)
11. David rescues the people of Keilah (23:1-6)
12. Saul continues to pursue David (23:7-29)
13. David spares Saul's life (ch. 24)
14. David threatens Nabal's life (ch. 25)
15. David spares Saul's life again (ch. 26)
16. David enters Achish's service (ch. 27)

The End of Saul's Reign (chs. 28-31)

The Consolidation of Kingship in Israel (2Sa 1-20)

David's Lament over Saul and Jonathan (ch. 1)

David Becomes King over Judah (chs. 2-4)

David Becomes King over All Israel (5:1-5)

David Conquers Jerusalem (5:6-25)

David Brings the Ark to Jerusalem (ch. 6)

God Promises David an Everlasting Dynasty (ch. 7)

The Extension of David's Kingdom (ch. 8)

David's Faithfulness to His Covenant with Jonathan (ch. 9)

David Commits Adultery and Murder (chs. 10-12)

David Loses His Son Amnon (chs. 13-14)

David Loses His Son Absalom (chs. 15-20)

Final Reflections on David's Reign (2Sa 21-24)