

1 & 2 Samuel (May 5)

Reading 1 Samuel

He breaths a word and it is done. Though the word is a mere puff of air, he is not to break his word. It binds him tightly. It will be fulfilled in blood when he stands at the entrance of the tabernacle and makes a peace offering. The oath an Israelite swears cannot be undone, because he makes his vow before the Lord, who will judge the earth.

The books of Samuel record vows, or oaths, for the main characters: Elkanah, Hannah, and Samuel; Saul and his troops; David and Jonathan; Absalom; Joab; and even the Lord, who vows judgment on Eli and his sons. These vows show how greatly God treasures a promise. These books record how the Lord fulfilled his word concerning David and point to the promise that he would fulfill through David when the Word would become flesh.

Title

1 and 2 Samuel are named after the person God used to establish kingship 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 that began with the incorporation of kingship into its structure. Samuel's importance as God's representative in this time of Israel's history is close to that of Moses 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.

Theme: Kingship and Covenant

1 Samuel portrays the establishment of kingship in Israel. Before the author describes this momentous change in the structure of the theocracy (God's rule), he chronicles introductory events that provide both historical and theological context for the birth of the monarchy: the birth, youth, and calling of Samuel; the "ark narratives"; and Samuel as a judge and deliverer.

This material serves as a necessary preface for chapters 8-12, which describe the rise and establishment of kingship in Israel. The question is 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 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. But Saul very quickly demonstrated that he was unwilling to submit to the requirements of his theocratic office, leading to his rejection by the Lord.

The remainder of 1 Samuel and all of 2 Samuel depict David's kingship. David's long road to the throne is detailed, along with his "golden years," and then description of his weaknesses and failures. Even though David remained a king after God's own heart because he was willing to acknowledge his sin and repent, he nevertheless fell far short of the theocratic ideal and suffered the disciplinary results of his disobedience. Nevertheless, the Lord was gracious to David, and his reign became a standard by which the reigns of later kings were measured. 2 Samuel ends with David's own words of praise to God, who had delivered him from all his enemies. These songs echo many of the themes of Hannah's song at the beginning of 1 Samuel, and together they frame and interpret the basic narrative.

Blessings for Readers

As you study 1 and 2 Samuel, reflect on how the Lord constantly cares for his people despite their weaknesses. Just as in the book of Judges, the Lord hears the people's prayers and calls them to repentance again and again. Ultimately, he raises them up as a unified nation under his servant, the prophet-king David.

Though the stories about the kings describe the political intrigues and misdeeds of the ancient Israelites, the books of 1 and 2 Samuel as a whole anticipate the greater rule of the greater King, whose reign shall never end. Like all of Scripture, the history of Israel's prophets, priests, and kings ultimately points to Jesus, our heavenly leader.