

Kings Saul and David

The Books of Samuel

First and Second Samuel were originally one book that was later divided into two parts when it was translated into Greek in ancient times. Since they form a unity, this introduction will discuss both books as one. The Books of Samuel concern the transition from the time of Judges to the time of Kings and the reign of Israel's first two kings, Saul and David (ca. 1025–965 BC). Throughout the history, the narrative maintains the previously developed interest in political continuity in the face of significant change.

Transitions in Leadership: From Judges to Monarchy

The Books of Samuel continue the political questions raised in Judges. The Israelites request a king, which proves problematic in several ways. How can Israel have a human king if God is the king of Israel? God's kingship was indicated in Judges 8:23 and more explicitly in 1 Samuel 8:7 and 10:19 (see Deuteronomy 33:5; Isaiah 6:5; Jeremiah 8:19; 10:7,10; Psalms 24:7–10, 29:10, 93:1, 96:10, 97:1, 99:1). The Israelites reject God's leadership because they want a permanent human leadership "like other nations" (1 Samuel 8:20; cf. 8:5). This request makes some sense given the problems that arose in the time of the judges. However, the request is peculiar because the Israelites have already had experience that suggests hereditary leadership is no guarantee of good leadership (1 Samuel 2:12–17, 8:1–5). Furthermore, Israel is to be "a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6, Deuteronomy 4:5–7), set apart from the other nations (Deuteronomy 28:1).

The Israelite request initiates a sequence of narratives concerning the relative merits of kingship (1 Samuel, chapters 8–12). The Israelites see the advantages of a permanent centralized government. They hope to achieve lasting independence for themselves and protection from their enemies through a king who will lead them in battle. Samuel, however, cautions the people about the institution. Their own king will be as burdensome as a foreign ruler, because the king will draft a standing army and require taxes and services to maintain his military and other royal establishments (palaces, bureaucracies, and so on) (1 Samuel 8:10–18). The various evaluations of the new institution in 1 Samuel, chapters 8–12, reflect the ambivalent attitude of the Israelites (or any people) to powerful centralized government.

In his cautionary speech, Samuel notes that the Israelites suffered military defeat because of their infidelity to God not for lack of a king (1 Samuel 12:9–11). Not even a king will be able to save Israel from the consequences of disobeying God. In this respect, the institution of monarchy will change nothing.

Transitions Within Monarchy: From Saul to David

In addition to the transition from judgeship to monarchy, transitions within monarchy can also be problematic. Kingship should be hereditary, but the second king of Israel (David) is not the son of the first king (Saul). This irregularity raises two major problems: one concerning the nature of God, the other concerning Saul and David. In regard to the nature of God, the narrative causes the reader to ask, "Does God have second thoughts?" God says to Samuel, "I regret having made Saul king" (1 Samuel 15:11; see repetition in verse 35). In verse 29 of the same chapter, however, Samuel tells Saul that God "neither retracts nor repents, for he is not man that he should repent." The fact that God chooses Saul as king and then chooses David suggests that God has experienced some change of heart. In this chapter, the narrator and God acknowledge this possibility while Samuel denies it to Saul.

This problem of God's repentance so that a chosen leader is replaced, is not unique to the choice of Saul and then David. The narrative prepares for this change in other ways. Samuel replaces Eli as David



replaces Saul and monarchy replaces judgeship. Hannah's prayer at the beginning of the story announces this theme of replacement and reversal and foreshadows the development of monarchy (1 Samuel 2:1–10).

If God regrets making Saul king, and gives the kingdom to a man better than Saul (1 Samuel 15:28), then what makes David better than Saul? The text connects Saul's rejection to his disobedience. This explanation may seem adequate until one notices that Saul is rejected for relatively minor sins (1 Samuel 13:6–14, 15:9), while David continues as king in spite of more serious crimes (2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12). The narrative therefore strives to explain David's rise and Saul's demise in other ways. For example, the request for a king clarifies that the primary responsibility of the king will be military leadership. David is represented as the superior military commander. Although Saul is at first embraced as king due to his success in battle (1 Samuel, chapter 9), his leadership in subsequent episodes is less spectacular (1 Samuel 13:8–14, 14:29–30, 15:17–24). David, by contrast, leads consistently successful campaigns. He rises in Saul's court as a victorious military leader (1 Samuel 18:5, 13–16, 30) and his success continues after he escapes from Saul (1 Samuel 23:1–5, 27:8–12, 30:9–31). The Israelites, who wanted a king "to lead us in warfare and fight our battles" (1 Samuel 8:20), give more credit to David than Saul for Israel's military victories. The women sing, "Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7, 21:12). Since David appears as the greater military leader, he should also be the better king. Saul fears exactly this result (1 Samuel 18:8–9).

Despite several efforts of the text to justify the rejection of Saul and the election of David, the divine choice is ultimately mysterious. If Saul is not the best king for Israel, then why did God choose him in the first place? Divine election does not necessarily correspond to merit or human expectation (1 Samuel 16:7, Romans 9:6–18).

The Making of a Great King

Of the many characters that traverse the stage in the Books of Samuel, none has received more attention than David. The story of the young shepherd who rises to become one of Israel's greatest kings has inspired many paintings, novels, and movies. However, there has been considerable disagreement over how to understand this enigmatic character. For many, David is a pious hero, a man after God's heart (1 Samuel 13:14) whose extraordinary virtues make him the focus of God's love. However, there are several problems with this common perception. Modern commentators have observed that the stories about David may have been composed for the purpose of justifying David's dynasty in the face of its detractors. The fact that the narrative strives to separate David from the many murders that pave his way to the throne may be an attempt to defend David from the accusation that he was involved in these deaths. The narrative itself preserves the voice of one such critic. As David flees from the rebellion of Absalom, Shimei curses David, calls him a "murderous and wicked man" (2 Samuel 16:7), and denounces him for shedding the blood of the house of Saul. The reader is left to wonder whether there is not some truth in Shimei's accusation.

The biblical narrative acknowledges that David killed the sons of Saul (2 Samuel 21:1–14), that he served with Israel's enemy the Philistines (1 Samuel, chapter 27), that Saul's captain Abner and his son Ishbaal both died under circumstances that must have seemed suspicious (2 Samuel, chapters 3 and 4), and that many other deaths surround David. Furthermore, David's motives remain mysterious. For example, when David mourns the death of Abner and refuses food, "all the people noted this with approval, just as they were pleased with everything that the king did" (2 Samuel 3:36). The reader may wonder whether David's mourning is sincere or calculated to distance himself from Abner's demise and thus gain popular support for his own bid for Ishbaal's throne. The biblical narrative supports both the



positive and negative evaluations of David because it strives to celebrate David's achievements without necessarily providing a model for anyone who chooses to become a usurper. But what exactly are David's achievements? David's exercise of monarchy differs considerably from that of Saul. While Saul returns to his farm after becoming king, David sets out to build a capital city. With his personal army, he conquers the city of Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6–12) that is therefore known as "the city of David" (2 Samuel 5:7,9; 6:16; 1 Kings 8:1).

David's choice of Jerusalem was politically savvy for two reasons. First, the city did not belong to any Israelite tribe, so he did not take anything away from any tribe in order to found his capital. Therefore, the claim to the city by the Davidic dynasty cannot be contested by any tribe. Second, Jerusalem is strategically located between the southern tribe of Judah (from which David came) and the northern tribes (that offered loyalty to Saul's son Ishbaal until his death). Like Washington, D.C., the location of David's capital was a compromise between the northern and southern sections of the nation. David built up his new capital and constructed a palace for himself (2 Samuel 5:9–12). He conducted military and diplomatic campaigns to solidify his rule and appointed officers to administer the kingdom (2 Samuel, chapter 8). These political innovations go well beyond anything described in the reign of Saul.

Once he conquers Jerusalem, David sets out to associate Israel's religious traditions with himself and his new capital. He brings the ark of God into Jerusalem and plans to build a temple. God, however, turns David's plans around and promises to build a house for David. God's promise to David in 2 Samuel, chapter 7, is critically important to the Old and New Testaments. The promise plays on the word *house*, which in Hebrew can also mean "temple" and "dynasty." David plans to build a house (temple) for God, but God instead decides to build a house (dynasty) for David. God promises David that "your house and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). This promise becomes the basis for the expectation of a messiah. The promise is recalled in Psalm 89, where the context indicates that the nation has been destroyed by the Babylonian Empire and the psalmist wonders whether God has reneged on the promise. The divine promise began to be reinterpreted as God's People looked for its fulfillment in a future messianic figure. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke identify Jesus as a descendant of David born in Bethlehem (David's hometown) in order to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise to David. David thereby becomes the central figure of the Old Testament who prepares the way for the New Testament.

Conclusion

Despite all his accomplishments, David's reign is not ideal. As a result of his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband Uriah, God punishes David by bringing "evil upon [David] out of [his] own house" (2 Samuel 12:11). The narrative grounds Absalom's rebellion ultimately in David's sin. However, Absalom is able to gather support by drawing attention to David's inadequate administration of justice (2 Samuel 15:1–6). The fact that Absalom's rebellion nearly succeeds indicates that the Israelites were not perfectly happy under David's rule.

On the basis of David's reign, one might wonder whether monarchy has solved the problems that appeared in the time of the judges. Although there appears to be more order in Israelite society and relief from foreign enemies, there is rape and murder within the king's own household (2 Samuel, chapter 13), and the Israelite civil war over dynastic succession (2 Samuel 3:1) recalls the chaos at the end of Judges.

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