

A SON TO ME

An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel

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CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW

STRUCTURAL AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

As I pointed out in the introduction, this commentary on 1–2 Samuel is mainly concerned with literary and theological issues. Historical questions are discussed when such discussion is necessary to make sense of the story or when an historical perspective illuminates a theological point. Only rarely have I attempted to deal with historical, textual, or compositional difficulties; this limitation is due to lack of competence, lack of space, and (especially on the issue of compositional history) to settled lack of interest and an even more settled incredulity about the usefulness of scholarly speculations.¹ Yet, some historical orientation will be useful at the outset, and that is one goal of this opening chapter.

My other goal in this chapter is to offer a structural overview of the whole book. Throughout the commentary, I have included outlines, many of them chiasmic and many of them confined to footnotes, of smaller sections of 1–2 Samuel. Yet, whole books of the Bible, and not merely individual passages, have a discernible literary architecture, and in this chapter I offer what I believe is a plausible blueprint. Further, biblical books, notoriously various in incident as they are, tell a single story; they have a *plot*. In this opening chapter, I discuss the overall narrative shape of the book. Literary questions will be discussed first, and then I turn to issues of history and chronology.

¹ Readers interested in such questions should consult Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 15–47; Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 19–68; Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 17–56; Ronald F. Youngblood, *1, 2 Samuel*, *The Expositor's Bible Dictionary*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 553–562.

STRUCTURAL AND NARRATIVE OVERVIEW

The subtitle of this volume refers to 1–2 Samuel as a “book” and considers the two volumes of our English Bibles as a single story crucial to understanding the sweep of narrative.² The unity of the story is apparent when we look at its beginning and end.³ It begins with a world falling apart: The lamp was still burning, but only dimly, and the woman was barren. Early in 1 Samuel, the Philistines captured the ark and took it to Philistia. At the same time, Eli and his sons died, and the Mosaic tabernacle at Shiloh was destroyed (1 Sam. 4–6). To be sure, the ark was returned to Israel and David later set it in Jerusalem, but throughout 1–2 Samuel, the worship system described in Exodus and Leviticus was simply not operating. The early chapters of 1–2 Samuel report the death of the Mosaic order. Meanwhile, with the dark age descending, Yahweh intervened to open the womb, to trim the wick, and to create, as He always does, a future. The first major character, Samuel, was called as a prophet to speak the words that would initiate the construction of a new Israel. Samuel guided Israel through a period of liturgical and political chaos, and in the process laid foundations for a new order.

2 Samuel ends with David’s census, which led to a plague that devastated Israel (2 Sam. 24). To stop the plague, David purchased the threshing floor of Araunah and offered sacrifice on it. At first glance, this seems an odd place to end the story of David. It provides a fitting climax, however, because it brings the story of the house of God to a conclusion (at least, to a penultimate conclusion). The threshing floor of Araunah becomes the location for the temple (2 Chr. 3:1). And so the story that began with the desolation of the Mosaic tent ends with David purchasing the place for

² In addition to the narrative and structural considerations discussed here, the textual history indicates that 1–2 Samuel was originally a single book. On the textual unity and textual history, see Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 19–22, 57–66. To avoid confusion, I have used the conventional citations that assume two books of Samuel.

³ See also the discussion in my book *A House for My Name*, chapter 4.

the Solomonic house. The big story in the book of Samuel is the transition from tabernacle to temple.⁴

Political transitions accompanied this change in liturgy and worship. First, there was a shift from rule by Gentiles to rule by Israelites. At the beginning of 1 Samuel, the Philistines were dominating Israel, but by the end of 2 Samuel David had eliminated the Philistine threat and established a settled dynasty that would endure for several centuries. Second, 1–2 Samuel records a movement from rule by judges to rule by kings. Eli was a judge, and Samuel was the last of that breed. Though anointed king, Saul was something of a transitional figure, who remained at home plowing when he was not fighting Ammonites (1 Sam. 11). With David, however, Israel came fully into the monarchical period.

Within these larger transitions, the main story has to do with the “crossing fates” of Saul and David.⁵ Saul’s rise and fall is like an expanded retelling of the story of Adam, and if Saul was like the first Adam, David was a type of the Last Adam, called to replace the fallen king as the head of God’s people, persecuted without cause by his rival, waiting patiently until the Lord gave him the kingdom. This is not to say that David is perfect by any means, but David is a man after the Lord’s own heart, and foreshadows the work of his greater Son, Jesus.

Viewing the book of Samuel from this perspective helps us to identify its particular relevance for our times. As I complained in the introduction, many biblical commentators, like systematic theologians, attempt to do their work from “midair,” floating above the conflicts of the contemporary world and attempting to provide a “timeless” and “definitive” explanation of the biblical text. Being middle-aged and possessed of a growing midriff, I have no allusions about being able to float in midair, and my study of 1–2 Samuel

⁴According to Chronicles, David was preoccupied with preparations for the building of the temple and with organizing the Levites for the worship of the temple.

⁵The phrase “crossing fates” comes from the title to the second volume of J. P. Fokkelman’s monumental *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986).

has explored how it might provide guidance for the church in the twenty-first century. Since it tells a story in which one world gives birth to another, it offers wisdom for Christians as we grope our way through (and, hopefully, out of) our present ecclesiastical crises toward the light.⁶ It points to the things we must do if we want to see the lamp burning again, if we hope to see the barren give birth.

Perhaps most importantly, what 1–2 Samuel highlights is the decisive importance of leadership, and specifically of leadership over generations. Americans like to pretend that the world works democratically, that reformations come from the masses. Surely, there is a symbiotic relation between leaders and the led; a leader with no following is no leader. But all societies are led, and all social transitions are the product of the vision, labor, and perseverance of leaders. As Oliver O'Donovan has pointed out, the modern obsession with the social sciences has obscured the fact that “the societies we inhabit are *politically formed*,” that is, “they depend upon the art of government.”⁷ Political and cultural leadership, or lack of it, determines the health of a civilization, and, likewise, the health of the church. It is not simply that good leaders *do* things that restore health to a civilization; the mere *fact* of righteous and godly leadership marks a rebirth.

At the outset of 1 Samuel, Israel was sick because she was ruled by Philistines and, worse, Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas. At the birth of Samuel, Hannah celebrated because she discerned that Yahweh had begun a revolution of the elites, casting down oppressive Philistines and wicked priests and raising up new nobles and, ultimately, a king (1 Sam. 2:1–10). And Hannah's hope was vindicated over the subsequent decades. Yahweh eliminated Eli and his sons and began to raise up a faithful priest, and through the efforts

⁶ Though my focus is on the relevance of 1–2 Samuel for the church, I believe that a rebirth of the church would be a profoundly important political and cultural event.

⁷ *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 16.

of Samuel, Saul, and David, the Philistines were driven from the land. 2 Samuel ends with an Israelite king sitting on the throne, receiving tribute from nations that had once oppressed the people of God. Israel's condition at the end of 2 Samuel is by no means ideal, and much of the wisdom that the book offers is given through negative examples. Saul turned from the Lord early in his reign, and he threw the nation into confusion by his obsession with David. David too fell into sin with Bathsheba and never recovered his earlier vigor. David's weakness opened the door for opportunists and rebels, Joabs and Absaloms. Yet, Israel's condition at the end of David's reign was an undeniable and vast improvement.

1–2 Samuel pay particular attention to the failure of Israel's leaders to raise up leaders from a new generation. Eli, apparently a well-meaning priest who had no clue about how to control his sons, set the pattern at the outset, and was followed by Samuel and, to a large extent, David. Surprisingly, the only leader to produce utterly faithful sons was Saul. In 1–2 Samuel, the pattern of a faithless son replaced by a faithful adopted son is typological, but this pattern also highlights a key failure of Israel's leaders during the early monarchy.

The promise of faithful leadership that Hannah looked to was finally fulfilled in Jesus. He is the True King, who rises like a sun and causes the vegetation of the land to flourish. Yet Jesus does not govern alone. Throughout the prophetic books of the Old Testament, the promise of a new covenant included the promise that Israel's corrupt and ungodly leaders would be replaced with true shepherds (Jer. 3:11–18; 23:1–4; Ezek. 34:1–31), a promise fulfilled when Jesus ascended on high and gave gifts to men (Eph. 4:8–13). Jesus' gathering of apostles was not just a pragmatic necessity, a way of ensuring that His "movement" would spread. His installation of new "bishops" over Israel was part of the good news for which Israel had been waiting, part of the gospel. And it is a gospel that we crave to see fulfilled in our time. How we get from where we are to where we hope to be is one of the main practical messages of

1–2 Samuel. We will know that reformation of the new Israel has occurred, and is occurring when Davids replace the Elis and the Philistines that rule the church today. The church will simply not be revived until that is fulfilled which was spoken by the Psalmist: “His office let another man take.”

FORMAL STRUCTURE

So much for the “plot” of 1–2 Samuel. With respect to formal structure, many portions of 1–2 Samuel are chiasmically arranged, and I have provided many detailed outlines in the following chapters. The entire book, however, may also be seen as a large chiasm. David Dorsey has suggested the following outline:⁸

- A Samuel succeeds elderly Eli and rules over all Israel, 1 Sam. 1–7
- B Saul’s failure, 1 Sam. 8–15
- C David’s initial rise, 1 Sam. 16–20
- D Turning point: Yahweh reverses fortunes of Saul and David, 1 Sam. 21–31
- C’ David’s initial rise to power over all Israel, 2 Sam. 1–8
- B’ David’s failure, 2 Sam. 9–20
- A’ Solomon succeeds David, 2 Sam. 21–1 Kgs. 2

Though plausible, this outline has a number of weaknesses. First, a number of Dorsey’s sections would be better divided into smaller units. To subsume the ark narrative of 1 Samuel 4–6, for example, under the heading of “Samuel succeeds elderly Eli” obscures crucial aspects of the opening chapters of the book. Eli’s death is recorded in 1 Samuel 4 and he is never mentioned again in these chapters, and Samuel does not even make an appearance in chapters 4–6. Making 1 Samuel 21–31 a single section, moreover, blurs the distinction between David’s “wanderings in the wilderness” and his “exile in Philistia,” a distinction that is important narratively and theologically. Finally, though 2 Samuel 9–20 do hang together as a record of “David’s failure,” the chapters describe

⁸ *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 135.

not only David's sin with Bathsheba, but also the struggle between Absalom and Amnon, Absalom's rebellion, and the secession led by Sheba. To include all this in one section again seems clumsy.⁹

Second, at least one of the strongest parallels between A and A' makes sense only if 1 Kings 1–2 is included with 1–2 Samuel. Solomon is not even mentioned in the closing chapters of 2 Samuel, and so it is odd, to say the least, to title A' "Solomon succeeds elderly David." I am certainly open to the possibility that Samuel and Kings form one large book and that the whole has a chiastic arrangement. But 1–2 Samuel has its own structural integrity, and that is obscured by Dorsey's outline. Finally, Dorsey has set up his outline in a way that obscures some of the important connections between the beginning and end of the book.

For these reasons, I propose the following as an alternative outline:

A	Birth of Samuel, 1 Sam. 1:1–2:11 (Hannah's song, 2:1–10)
B	The corruption of Eli's house, 2:12–3:21
C	Exile and return of the ark, 4:1–7:17
D	Saul's rise, 8:1–12:25
E	Saul's fall, 13:1–15:33
F	David in Saul's house, 15:34–20:42
G	Saul versus David, 21:1–27:12
H	Saul's death, 28:1–2 Sam. 1:27 (lament)
G'	House of Saul v. House of David, 2:1–4:12
F'	David as King, 5:1–9:13
E'	David's fall, 10:1–12:31
D'	Absalom's rise, 13:1–15:12
C'	Exile and return of David, 15:13–19:43
B'	Rebellion of Sheba, 20:1–26
A'	The True King, 21:1–24:25 (poems, 22:1–23:7)

⁹Dorsey does acknowledge that 2 Samuel 9–20 "comprises two long sections" and seeks to show their unity by pointing to "echoes between the two parts" (*ibid.*, 133), but the distinction between these sections is lost in his larger outline. Though he does not mention it, Dorsey may be influenced by speculation that 2 Samuel 9–20 forms, along with 1 Kings 1–2, an originally distinct document known to scholars as the "Succession Narrative." In responding to this, I can only remind the reader of my settled incredulity about conjectures concerning the compositional history of 1–2 Samuel.

Though a few of these correspondences appear stretched (even to me!), overall the scheme works well and was arrived at by applying the most rigorous and scientific methods known to man. In any case, one of the features of chiasmic structures is that corresponding sections illuminate each other and together form a mini-narrative of their own. Let me attempt to explain how this works with this particular chiasm:

A and A': Both sections contain poetry, and David's psalms in 2 Samuel 22:1–23:7 celebrated the fulfillment of Hannah's hope for an "anointed one" (1 Sam. 2:10). Further verbal parallels between these two poems are explored in chapter 11 of this book. Through the instrumentality of David, who was anointed by the son of Hannah, the doomed "temple" at Shiloh (1 Sam. 1:9) is replaced by the new permanent temple location at the threshing floor of Araunah (2 Sam. 24).

B and B': The division between Samuel and the sons of Eli (1 Sam. 2:12–3:21) foreshadowed the division between Israel and Judah that manifested itself in Sheba's rebellion (2 Sam. 20). Moreover, the structure brings out correspondences between Eli's house and David's: Eli's house was dominated by his wicked sons, while David's house was dominated by the wicked Joab (see the list of David's royal house in 2 Sam. 20:23–26, and chapter 10 of this book). Eli's sons ignored his rebuke, as Joab ignored David's orders.

C and C': In both sections, we have an "exodus and return" story, and the parallel suggestively highlights a correspondence between David and the ark, both bearers of the Lord's presence and Spirit.

D and D': The matching sections bring out important analogies between Saul and Absalom: Both were distinguished by their "head" (Saul's head towered above Israel's and Absalom was known for his hair), both were closely related to David (Saul was father-in-law and Absalom was son), both eventually persecuted David and drove him from the city into the wilderness. Within the two D sections particularly, there is a contrast between Saul's early

humility and faithfulness and Absalom's arrogance and violence. Saul received the crown without seeking it; Absalom plotted to overthrow David. Saul sought for donkeys and hid among the baggage, while Absalom gathered horses and a chariot and stationed himself at the gate.

E and E': Both sections record the sins of a king and the prophetic judgment against him. Because of these sins, both kings lost their kingdoms, though David regained his. As we shall see in the commentary, Saul's sins and David's sins shared certain features (impatience, an assault on a "brother," ungodliness in relation to Gentiles).

F and F': In both sections, David is the focus of attention, in F as warrior and servant to Saul, and in F' as warrior-king and head over Israel. In both sections, David acts wisely and prospers wherever he goes. In both sections, David defeats Philistines and other enemies of Israel.

G and G': In both sections, there was struggle between Saul and David; in G, the struggle was between Saul and David personally, while in G' the struggle was between their houses. David's behavior was similar in both sections, as he showed restraint in the face of opposition and treated Saul and Saul's house with respect. But there is also a contrast between David's treatment of Saul in G and Joab's treatment of Abner in G'; Joab's relation to Abner was analogous to David's relation to Saul, but Joab's violent actions exacerbated rather than pacified tensions between the two houses, between "Israel and Judah."

H: The death of Saul is the hinge on which the whole action of the book turns. Described in sacrificial terms in the text, Saul's death cleansed the land and cleared the way for a new king to assume the throne. Further, poetry is found at the center of the book, as at the beginning and end.

More detailed structural analyses will be offered throughout the commentary, and in particular the commentary will defend the sectioning of the text that is assumed in the above outline.

HISTORICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

The history of 1–2 Samuel covers about a century and a half of Israel's history: forty years of Philistine oppression, plus some thirty years as Samuel grows old, and then forty years each for the reigns of Saul and David. The story opens during the forty-year Philistine oppression referred to in Judges 13:1. Joyce Baldwin has offered a concise summary of the larger political situation at the time of the Philistine invasions:

At this period no great world power was seeking to dominate the New East. Israel's battles were waged against near neighbours, whose territory bordered the land occupied by the twelve tribes, and in particular against the Philistines, a military aristocracy from Crete, small numbers of whom had settled in Canaan in patriarchal times. Soon after Israel's arrival in Canaan, however, they had arrived in force and had occupied the coastal plain of the south-west. There they set up five city-states, organized under . . . 'lords', and demonstrated their mastery of iron technology and their military professionalism in their attacks against Israel. . . . Throughout the reign of Saul, and initially during the reign of David also, they continued to be a thorn in Israel's side; both Saul and Jonathan died at their hands, and the Philistines penetrated to Bethshan, so dominating the Jordan valley.¹⁰

The early chapters of 1 Samuel report the events of the period of Philistine dominance that overlap with the events in Judges 13–16. 1 Samuel 4 describes the battle of Aphek against the Philistines, and in chapter 7 another battle with the Philistines is chronicled, the battle of Ebenezer. Ebenezer brought an end to the Philistine domination of Israel (1 Sam. 7:13), and was fought twenty years after the death of Eli and the capture of the ark (1 Sam. 7:1-2). Thus, the forty-year oppression by the Philistines was bisected by the capture of the ark at the battle of Aphek. This basic chronology of the early chapters of 1 Samuel may be diagrammed as follows:

¹⁰ Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 19.

Year of Philistine Oppression	Event	Leaders of Israel
1		Eli as judge and priest
20	Battle of Aphek	Eli died
40	Battle of Ebenezer	Samuel as leader

To get a fuller picture, it is necessary to harmonize this chronology with the information in Judges. Judges 15:20 tells us that Samson was judging Israel for twenty years during the Philistine oppression. Did he judge Israel during twenty years before Aphek, during the twenty years between Aphek and Ebenezer, or during some twenty-year period that straddles Aphek? Several considerations help to answer that question. When Samson was born, the Philistines were already ruling (Judg. 13:1; 14:4), and Samson did not live to see the Philistines defeated. He died when he brought down the temple of Dagon upon the Philistine lords (Judg. 16:23–31), but there is nothing in the text about the Philistine oppression ending at that point (though it must have been a severe blow to their political system, to say the least). Assuming that he began judging Israel around the age of twenty (or even a year or two earlier) and noting that his judgeship lasted for twenty years, his life must have almost exactly corresponded to the period of Philistine dominance. He was thus born early in the forty-year period and grew up during the last twenty years of Eli's priesthood, prior to the battle of Aphek. His twenty years of judging Israel must have begun shortly before the battle of Aphek and must have ended shortly before the battle of Ebenezer. Intriguingly, this was also the time when Samuel is born and is growing up (1 Sam. 1–2).

Once we see the chronological overlap of Samson and Samuel, other connections between them become plausible, though not certain. Samson began his work shortly before the battle of Aphek, and his antics provoked the Philistines to organize an attack on Shiloh. Samson labored as a judge for most of the twenty years between Aphek and Ebenezer, dying in the temple of Dagon shortly before the battle of Ebenezer. Samson's assault on Dagon and the Philistine nobility may well have been the incident that prodded

Samuel to assemble the people at Mizpah to renew the covenant (1 Sam. 7:3–11). One hint that this was the sequence of events is the sequence of judges. Eli judged Israel for forty years (1 Sam. 4:18), and this ended at his death at the battle of Aphek. Samuel did not begin to judge Israel for another twenty years (7:6). It seems reasonable to assume that Samson judges Israel during the intervening twenty years.¹¹ This chronology is summarized in the chart below.

Event	Year of Eli's Priesthood (Age)	Year of Philistine Oppression
Samson's birth	Year 20 (78)	Near Year 1
Samuel's birth	Year 20+ (78+)	Year 1+
Samson begins	Year 39 (97)	Year 19
Aphek	Year 40 (98)	Year 20
Ark captured	Year 40 (98)	Year 20
Eli's death	Year 40 (98)	Year 20
Ark returned		Year 21
Samson destroys temple		Year 39
Ebenezer		Year 40
Samuel begins judging		End of oppression

Samuel remained as judge over Israel until old age (1 Sam. 8:1), which probably means some thirty years after the battle of Ebenezer. At this point, Israel requested a king and Samuel anointed Saul to be king. Sometime while Saul was pursuing David in the wilderness, Samuel died. Saul reigned for forty years (Acts 13:21) and died at the battle of Gilboa. David, who had been anointed a number of years earlier, became king in Hebron for seven years and six months, and then moved to Jerusalem, where he reigned for thirty-three years. The further chronology of 1–2 Samuel is summarized in the chart below, though a number of the ages are admittedly somewhat speculative.

¹¹ Several judges were often at work in different parts of the land, so it is reasonable to conclude that Samson and Eli were judging simultaneously, at least for a time. Indeed, the chronology demands some overlap.

Event	Samuel's Age	Saul's Age	David's Age
Ebenezer	40?	10?	
Request for a king	70	40	
Saul becomes king	70+	40+	
David born	80	50+	1
David anointed	97	67	17
David and Goliath	97	67	17
Samuel dies	105	72	22
Saul pursues David		72–80	22–30
Saul dies at Gilboa		80	30
David reigns in Hebron			30–37
David reigns in Jerusalem			37–70

Some details of this chronology will be further discussed in the commentary (e.g., Samuel's age at the time of Aphek and Ebenezer, Saul's age at the time of his becoming king), and a more detailed chronology of David's reign is offered in chapter 10.