

INTERVARSITY

Introduction to the Book of Samuel

One Book—1 and 2 Samuel were initially one book and in the Hebrew Bible. It was combined with 1 and 2 Kings in the Greek version to make up the four Books of the Kings.

Span of Time—It covers a piece of literary history from about 1050 to 970BC. The author(s) was unknown as were possible source documents.

Main Characters—The three primary characters in the book are Samuel, the last of the judges, Saul, the first king, and David, the most admired king.

Transition of Governance—The book highlights the transition from a theocracy, where God was king and Samuel his prophet to a monarchy. There a king served at the political leader and ruler of day to day affairs. The prophet served as a member of court and an advisor to the king. He spoke the words of God into the political arena.

Change and Conflict— We can assume that the transition took place over many years and was filled with controversy, false starts, protest, and struggle as the whole system of governance changed. A loose collection of agrarian tribes held together by a circuit riding prophet who settled disputes and spoke the word of God was transformed to become something more unified with a standing army and court officials. Factions that wanted to keep the things the way they were under Samuel were pitted against those who wanted a king like the other nations.

The Regional Super Power—A factor that precipitated the change was the migration of a technologically superior tribe of people from Crete to Western Palestine—the Philistines. They had iron weapons verse sticks and stones. They aggressively gobbled up land and subjected the Israelites to their rule. Defenseless Israel recognized that Samuel, their leader, was getting older. His sons were corrupt and unacceptable as his successors, so they cried out for a king.

Overview of Content—1 and 2 Samuel is 55 chapters long. It begins with the birth of Samuel and describes his unusual upbringing in the house of God under Eli. The reader is given a brief overview of his revered career as the last of the judges. Saul, the heroic, but tragic and conflicted first king is given four chapters before David was introduced. The interaction between Saul and David occupy the next 15 chapters. After that the author takes 24 chapters to tell us of the exploits of David to expand and secure the borders of the kingdom. We are also given a soap opera view of the drama in his own family. A major purpose of the book is to help the reader understand that God is the true king working out his purposes in history using ordinary sinful men to do so. The political king is expected to be one who listens and obeys the voice of the Lord and puts him first above all else.

Textual Problems—Scholars recognize that there are some textual problems in the book of Samuel. Parts sometimes seem chronologically out of order. David was invited to play the harp for Saul who was suffering bouts of depression and melancholy. The following chapter tells of David's fight with Goliath and afterwards, Saul does not seem to know who David is. We are given one view of Saul

through the eyes of Samuel and a contrasting view through the eyes of David. It may be that the author of the book was trying to present a diversity of perspectives using a variety of sources on the life and times of these complex people. That effort created some unevenness, but it also gives us a lot to chew on.

Theological Issues—The book also presents us with theological challenges. God orders Saul to annihilate the Amalekites and then punishes him when he fails to do so completely. God appoints Saul King and then later seems to regret his choice and withdraws his Spirit. Modern psychologists suggest that Saul seems to suffer from a form of mental illness, yet he is still help accountable for his actions. How do we understand these issues? Then as now, history is often a bloody, confusing process and the author gives it to us in the unvarnished edition.

Work of Art—Stories from this book have inspired and challenged God's people for generations. Read against the backdrop of the daily newspaper, they have a timeless relevancy. They point to a God who dwells with his people to suffer with, caution, and bless.