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978-0-521-09635-5 - The First Book of Samuel

Peter R. Ackroyd

Excerpt

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# THE FIRST BOOK OF SAMUEL

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## WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT

This book tells a story which begins with the birth of a man named Samuel and ends with the death of a king named Saul. It tells how Samuel became a leader in Israel—probably about 1050 B.C.—and was responsible for Saul becoming the first king of Israel. Though the book is named after him, Samuel dies before the end of the book (25: 1), but we can see that in many ways he is presented as the most dominant personality, involved in the events and in some measure controlling them. The title appears stranger still when it is used also for the Second book of Samuel which carries on the story from the accession of David as Saul's real successor through almost to David's death. David's death and the appointment of his successor form the opening part of the First book of Kings (1 Kings 1–2). Yet there is a unity in the two books of Samuel; the appearance of David in the first book provides a clear link with the second, and his relationship to Samuel makes it appropriate that the name of Samuel should have been used to suggest that the developments described in the two books could all be regarded as connected with this outstanding personality.

## THE DIVIDED 'BOOK' OF SAMUEL

In reality, the two books are one. At an early date the larger work was divided, and similar divisions have been made in other Old Testament books. Thus, the 'book' of Kings has been divided into two, and the writings of the author we conveniently call 'the Chronicler' have been divided into

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four—I and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. So too the first four (or perhaps five) books of the Old Testament should be regarded as a continuous work divided into smaller, more convenient, units—Genesis, Exodus, etc. The divisions may have been made partly on the basis of length: the two books of Samuel are more or less the same length. But it is clear that considerations of content have also played a part, and the division at the death of Saul marks off the period of Samuel and Saul from that of the first great king, David. It would, however, be a mistake to let the division prevent our reading straight on from the First book to the Second. The division of the commentary on these books into two volumes is dictated by the demands of space; but much that appears in this volume can only be more fully understood as we read its sequel.

THE LARGER WORK TO WHICH THE BOOK OF  
SAMUEL BELONGS

The division of the 'book' of Samuel into two parts was not first made in the original Hebrew text, but in the later translation of it into Greek. Translations of Old Testament books were made for the use of Greek-speaking Jews, particularly in Egypt but also elsewhere in the Mediterranean area, from about the third century B.C. At that time, the conquests of Alexander the Great, which took place in the period 333–323 B.C., had resulted in the spread of Greek language and culture in the Near East, and Greek became the common language employed for diplomatic and commercial purposes over a very wide area. The Greek translation of the Old Testament is very important because it provides evidence of a sometimes rather different Hebrew text, and helps in our understanding of the way in which the books were handed down. It is often known as the Septuagint, 'the translation made by the Seventy', from a story told in a writing called the Letter of Aristeas. This tells how representatives of all the tribes of Israel (actually seventy-two rather than seventy, six from each tribe) translated the

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Law—the first five books of the Old Testament—in Alexandria. It is a legend, but no doubt contains some elements of history. The name Septuagint came to be used for the whole Greek translation; it is abbreviated in N.E.B. as Sept., but often by the Roman numeral LXX.

In the Septuagint, the two books of Samuel are divided, but they are called the first two books of Kingdoms (Reigns), and the two books of Kings which follow are called the third and fourth books of Kingdoms. These Greek names are very appropriate, and they also show clearly that the division between Samuel and Kings is artificial. The death of David, the central figure of 2 Samuel, is in fact described in the opening of 1 Kings, because it there paves the way for Solomon's reign and the building of the temple in Jerusalem. Originally all four books belong together. But we may go further. The book of Ruth, which in the English Bible stands between Judges and 1 Samuel, appears in a different place in the Hebrew Old Testament, in a group of five books known as the five 'Scrolls', the Megilloth; the others are the Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther. The division between 1 Samuel and Judges is artificial, and Judges is also closely linked with Joshua. We are really dealing with the parts of a much longer work which extends from Joshua to 2 Kings. In the Hebrew Bible these books are given a special title: the Former Prophets. This distinguishes them from a second group of books: the Latter Prophets. The names indicate the position of the books in the Old Testament; the first group is made up of what we often call the 'history books' (though not including Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther); the second group has what we call the books of prophecy (Isaiah to Malachi, but omitting Lamentations and Daniel).

The book of Deuteronomy is also closely connected with this large work covering the period from the conquest of Canaan in about 1200 B.C. to the exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. So it is sometimes called the 'Deuteronomic

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History'; this is a modern title, indicating the nature and purpose of the work in its final form. To understand this, we must look a little more closely at how these books came into being.

## HOW DID THE BOOK COME TO BE WRITTEN?

The answer to this question is complex. We know nothing directly concerning those who were responsible. The most we can hope to do is begin from the book as we have it and see what we may deduce about the time when it reached this form, the kind of concerns and interests of the final author(s), and then work back by careful examination of the contents of the book to see what lies behind it.

The first part of the discussion clearly turns on the probability that this book is part of the much larger work mentioned above, covering the whole period from the conquest to the exile. Since the last recorded event in 2 Kings is the release of the captive king of Judah, Jehoiachin, from prison, in 561 B.C., we may say that the final form of the work cannot be earlier than this. Whatever the earlier stages, the last author(s) were working when the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah had fallen, the one to Assyria in 722 B.C., the other to Babylon in 587 B.C. Part of the population was in exile in Babylonia, part in Palestine, and some scattered elsewhere, in the neighbouring lands, and in Egypt. We know very little indeed about their condition, but we can appreciate that at such a moment of depression and doubt about the future, the writing of a history from the conquest to the exile would be of considerable importance. It might help in answering two questions: What went wrong that the great hopes of the conquest and Davidic periods should come to nothing? How, if there is a time of restoration, can the people so organize their life that the future will be better? The whole work—Deuteronomy to 2 Kings—appears to be concerned with this, and answers the questions in terms of God's promise, his giving of the land of Canaan, his care for his people, and the dis-

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obedience of leaders and people to his demands, their turning away to other forms of worship, their failure to conform to certain standards of justice and right. It should not surprise us to find, in the First book of Samuel, some passages in which the emphasis rests on this final consideration of the meaning of judgement and the nature of hope.

But it is not likely that the book was first written at that late date. The later interpreters or editors made use of much already existing material, though it is not easy for us to discover now just what they had at their disposal. There are several possibilities. (1) We could suppose that the final authors made use of a great mass of early material, stories, poems, annals (that is, list of officials, names and the like), and that they built this up into its present complex form. (2) There may have existed already one or more accounts of the period and they may have dovetailed these together, fitting them into a sequence in somewhat the way that in the second century A.D. a Christian named Tatian made up a Gospel harmony, using pieces of the four gospels to create a unified narrative. (3) We might picture the process more in terms of the gathering of stories around certain great figures of the past—stories associated with Samuel, others with Saul, with Jonathan, with David.

Probably we should not assume that any one such approach will solve all the problems; we are dealing with a work whose beginnings lie back in the eleventh century B.C. in the lives of Samuel and Saul; its final form was reached about 500 years later, and the process is almost certainly much too complicated to be unravelled from the information available to us.

In the last century and more, the literary study of the books of the Old Testament has been actively pursued. Although there is no complete agreement about the answers to many of the questions which have to be asked, it is most often believed that in the books with which the Old Testament begins—Genesis to Numbers—two or perhaps three early accounts covering the first stages of the people's life have been woven

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together. Many scholars believe that these accounts can be traced also in the books Joshua, Judges and Samuel (perhaps even in Kings). It would be natural enough if in the period of David and Solomon, when the kingdom was at the height of its new-found prosperity and unity, an attempt should have been made to set out the story of how this had been achieved, to endeavour to trace the hand of God at work in the events and in the people involved in them. Other such accounts may have been developed later, within the life of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Eventually all this different material, or selections from it, has been welded together to form books something like those which we now have. But it is likely that the process was accompanied by much addition of other material, and revision of emphasis. For in the ancient world, where everything was done by hand, a re-writing of a book may well mark a re-presentation of its material, suited to a new situation, offering a new insight into men's thinking. If we read sensitively, we may detect some of these levels in the material, and gain a deeper understanding of how men lived and thought, not just in the period which is being described, but also when these stories were being re-told and re-interpreted.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Why are books written? Clearly the question may be differently answered for each book we consider and for each of the stages through which a book may have passed. For an ancient book, we may recognize the possibility that it was produced to offer an explanation—what led up to the rule of David and Solomon could be related by a professional scribe, working at the court, whose business was to record events from day to day and perhaps also to glorify the ruler under whom he worked. His interpretation of the story would be determined in part by this aim. A book may be written for the sheer joy of telling a story. But though this could be a factor

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in the preservation of many ancient traditions in Israel, the books which we have in the Old Testament must all be regarded as religious books in the sense that they offer an interpretation in religious terms of what they relate. This does not make them any the less artistic as stories.

If we ask what the purpose is of the First book of Samuel, then clearly we can give only a partial answer. Its purpose can only be fully understood when it is seen as part of the larger work to which it belongs. But within that larger purpose, we can see some of the particular interests which are developed. The author(s) set(s) out to tell us how Israel came to have a monarchy, an institution which for good and ill was to be part of the people's life from the time of Saul to the time of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 B.C. We are shown how the first king, Saul, was a failure, but the future of the monarchy was secured in the person of David. As the story is told, it is David who is the real centre of interest from chapter 16 onwards. We are also shown how the way was prepared for there to be a single central place of worship, at Jerusalem. This is made clear in 2 Samuel, though the real centrality of Jerusalem was only fully established in the seventh century under king Josiah. But the way towards this is shown, and here we can see how the later reality has influenced the telling of the story. The book opens at the ancient sanctuary of Shiloh; but this is doomed, and the situation remains unclear until David captures Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5) and takes there the Ark, the symbol of the God of Israel. Alongside this runs the theme of the priesthood, and again the story is incomplete here. The priesthood of Eli at Shiloh is equally doomed; but it is Samuel who takes over the succession. The priestly line of Eli may be traced further; but it is eventually under David that we see the establishment of a new priestly line, that of Zadok in Jerusalem.

Kingship, holy place, priesthood—three themes which were eventually to be of fundamental importance in Old Testament thought. They are shown here linked together in the figure of

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Samuel with whom the book opens; and with him is linked too that other great line of religious influence which so dominates the period of the monarchy and beyond—the prophetic movement. This was to stand alongside, involved but critical, to flower in the eighth century B.C. into one of the richest religious movements the world has ever known, in the great figures of Amos and Hosea and Isaiah and in their successors over the centuries that followed. Such a flowering cannot be understood without a recognition of where the roots lie; this book is a primary source of information.

## HISTORY AND INTERPRETATION

The book as we have it has a long history; we may detect in it some traces of how its content has been affected by the particular interpretations, the particular purposes, of those who were responsible for transmitting and shaping the material. How far does it represent what actually happened, and how clearly can we describe the people involved?

A little earlier the point was stressed that the books of the Old Testament as we have them are all religious books. So we may properly recognize at the outset that the authors at the various stages of the book's composition were not setting out to write history as a modern historian might attempt to do it. They are offering stories and traditions about the past of their own people, and offering them in such a way as to tell us what they believed that past experience to mean. They provide us with a great deal of important information. But where a modern historian offers his interpretation of the past, he is also concerned with sifting the information and assessing its historical value. If he has two accounts of the same event, or two estimates of the same person, he will show why he believes certain elements in these to be reliable, or more reliable, while other elements may be shown to be due to misunderstanding or propaganda or bias. The ancient writer is more likely to set down both accounts, side by side or in an

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interwoven form; or he may use only one account because it offers what fits best with his own understanding of the past.

An example will illustrate what can happen. For some parts of the books of Samuel we have a parallel account in 1 Chronicles. It is clear that the author of that much later work (probably in the fourth century B.C.) knew the material of the books of Samuel, though we cannot be sure whether he used the books more or less as we know them or whether he was working with a somewhat different 'edition'. We notice that in 1 Chronicles a great deal of what is in the books of Samuel does not appear. For example, the monarchy of Saul is very briefly dismissed. There is a short passage giving the family to which Saul belonged (1 Chron. 9: 35-44); one chapter only (1 Chron. 10) tells of Saul's death at Mount Gilboa—the story told in 1 Sam. 31. But to this story, the later author has added his comment: 'Thus Saul paid with his life for his unfaithfulness...' (1 Chron. 10: 13-14). He has selected part of the story of Saul and has made it the vehicle of a particular judgement, drawing out ideas which may be detected in a less developed form in the 1 Samuel narratives. Similarly 1 Chron. 19-20: 3 uses the same story of David's war against the Ammonites as is found in 2 Sam. 10-12; but whereas in the earlier work there is woven into this story that of David's adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, in the later work this is entirely absent. We may see the absence of this and some other rather discreditable stories about David as due to the way in which the Chronicler idealizes David to a much greater extent than does the author of 1 and 2 Samuel.

We do not have the same precise evidence when we try to get behind the narratives in the books of Samuel, for we do not possess an earlier form of these narratives with which we can make a comparison. But from the present form which they have, from the selection of events which they offer, from the pictures they present of the various great personages, we may readily recognize that here is an interpretation based on a

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particular handling of the material. One example may illustrate this. The story of David and Saul as it is told in 1 Sam. 16–31 is clearly written with an eye to the establishment of David as the great king whose name was to live as a pattern of kingship in Israel. But the stories about David are not all of them very creditable; as outlaw and bandit his behaviour was certainly sometimes of very doubtful morality. Even as the stories are told, we may sympathize with Saul's difficulties. And although Saul is depicted as failing as a king, we find stories which show him as a hero, as a noble warrior, as a man of generous impulse. We can imagine a telling of the story which would present him in a very favourable light, and if we had such a story, we might well be able to draw up a more accurate assessment of the relationship between him and David. We must, therefore, in reading be continually aware of the interpretation given to the stories. This interpretation may be by comment, shorter or longer, or, less obviously, by the actual arrangement and linking together of different pieces of material.

It is more difficult when we try to sort out the actual people involved, for here we find that, particularly for great figures like that of Samuel, there is more than will fit together for a neat simple description. Samuel was too great to leave only one impression; around him has gathered a wealth of stories, with different estimates of his achievement. Some of these are probably earlier than others; we have to evaluate them all. The same is true of David. Of the many other characters who appear, we can do no more than try to understand their words and actions; we must set them in the context of the period in which they are described, and endeavour to depict that period on the basis of a careful sorting of the information provided by the biblical material and by such non-biblical sources as are available.

The non-biblical sources are, as so often, somewhat elusive. Some of them are described more fully in *The Making of the Old Testament*. We do not have any documents which