

1 & 2 Samuel

by Kurtis Peters

The books of Samuel pick up where the book of Judges leaves off. Israel is in a bad place. They are fighting among themselves and they are easy prey for the peoples round about. They are not faithful to Yahweh their God. And at that time the tabernacle (precursor to the later temple) was at the town of Shiloh and was being presided over by the high priest Eli and his sons. Eli had little control and his sons seemed rotten.

But into this setting, we have the rise of the boy Samuel, who was born to his mother Hannah (who had been barren – who does that remind you of?) and dedicated by her to service at the tabernacle. Samuel rises to replace Eli as priest, but he also fills the role of prophet and judge. In fact, he's best thought of as the last of the judges. Samuel leads Israel more faithfully than the judges before him, but as he grows old, the people want to replace him with a king. They want to "be like other nations" – a clear sign if ever there was one that Israel was heading the wrong way. The people who

are to be set apart want nothing other than to be the same as the others. They do not trust Yahweh to care for them. They want a king. Samuel warns them of the oppressive nature of kings, how they will take and take in order to prop up their own centralized power. But still they want a king, and so God grants it and draws out the tall Benjaminite kid Saul.



Saul is everything one would expect in a king – he's tall and he's strong. He defeats the enemy. The only problem is that he isn't always faithful to God. He makes rash vows, and he tries to force the divine hand. And so God rejects Saul. Samuel is bidden to anoint an unlikely shepherd kid from Bethlehem in Judah to be Saul's replacement sometime down the road.

The story then moves to make David the protagonist, fighting the giant Philistine Goliath, winning the loyalty of Saul's son and heir Jonathan, marrying Saul's daughter Michal (check out the bride price he had to pay though!), all the while raising Saul's jealousy. Saul eventually

goes mad and tries to kill David and David flees for his life. He spends a long time running from Saul, with some close calls. But all the while, David is strategic and shores up allegiances with the clans in the south of Judah. He anticipates that his day will come and he wants Judah on his side. Eventually, Saul is defeated and killed by the Philistines and David takes the crown in the south, and is later made king over all Israel. He is a powerful leader. He captures Jerusalem from its previous non-Israelite inhabitants and brings the ark of Yahweh there. In short, he solidifies his power base, both political and religious.

“We read these stories as an expression of how Israel, as very typical humans, are messy.”

Not long after, however, this “good” king strolls on his rooftop when he should’ve been out with his troops and he spies Bathsheba and takes her and impregnates her. He has her husband Uriah killed and takes her as his wife. At this point, the story unravels rapidly. He and his family fall from grace. His son Amnon rapes David’s daughter by a different woman (therefore, Amnon’s half-sister). His other son Absalom leads a rebellion against him, albeit a failed rebellion. And the book ends with David repenting from yet another unfaithful act – his census of the people, an act that asserts his power over all the people of Israel.

Like the book of Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel are comprised of narrative. As readers we are not expected to see every

main character as a hero. Far from it. One of the only characters that comes off quite well is Jonathan, Saul’s son, who steps aside to ensure David’s rise to the throne. What we are expected to do, however, is to see through the lens that the narrator provides. Clearly the narrator does not approve of David taking Bathsheba, but perhaps the narrator leaves us clues before the Bathsheba story that things weren’t as they ought to have been even before that. Maybe David wasn’t always as righteous as we might think. It doesn’t mean he was rotten all the way through, but neither was he a saint. It is important, then, to be careful how we read and use these texts. It is not wise to reduce these stories to little life-lessons

(at least not without a great deal of nuanced reading!). Instead, we read these stories as an expression of how Israel, as very typical humans, are messy.

This portrayal of Israel as messy runs right through the whole Old Testament, but most clearly in this larger unit of Joshua- Judges-Samuel-Kings. The end of this unit lands many of the people of Israel/Judah in exile, many of whom are in Babylon. They seem to have been asking how they ended up there when they thought that Yahweh their God would have protected them. The answer, in this biblical unit and elsewhere, was that they earned it. They followed patterns of normal kings, as Samuel warned them before they even got one.

They took power, and they abused it. They mistreat the poor of the land. They forget to remain faithful to Yahweh, the God who delivers the oppressed. And so, while the stories are not always as grisly as those in Judges (though sometimes they are), we are nevertheless spiraling downwards and we look for the movement of God. It comes in bright moments here and there, and it will come more clearly in the Prophets, but for now we sit with the difficult story of Israel as they slip deeper and deeper