

1 & 2 SAMUEL

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The Books of 1 & 2 Samuel summarize 150 years of Jewish history: from the end of the period of the Judges to the beginning of the monarchy and the reigns of King Saul and King David. Up until the beginning of the 3rd century Jewish scripture scholars considered these two books as one, known simply as *Samuel*. It was only in later translations that *Samuel* was divided into two books, and probably because it would not fit on a single scroll. Although named after the Prophet Samuel, the main figure in both books is David.

Transition from twelve Judges to a single king

At the end of the Book of Judges the people were so disheartened at the state of affairs that they thought a king was their only hope. Having defeated all but one of her enemies, Israel was still threatened by the Philistines from the Mediterranean coast. This fearsome tribe of “sea people” was so powerful and ambitious for more territory that the very survival of Israel was at stake. So the people cry out for a king to unite the twelve tribes against their common enemy. But first Israel needs a prophet who will act on God’s behalf to anoint such a king. That prophet is Samuel: **“After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet”** (Acts 13:20). Even though he is not numbered among the twelve judges, Samuel was the last of all the judges because after him, Israel was led by kings.

The Prophet Samuel and establishment of the monarchy (1 Samuel 1-15)

In thanksgiving for the birth of her son, his mother, Hannah, gives young Samuel back to the Lord as soon as he is weaned, dedicating him to Temple service. Samuel is now a *Nazarite*, i.e., a kind of “priest assistant” in the Temple sanctuary. Later God calls Samuel to be His prophet (1 Samuel 3:19-21) and directs him to anoint Saul of the tribe of Benjamin as Israel’s first king. At first Samuel refuses but God insists that Samuel do as the people ask: **“And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do”** (1 Samuel 8:8-9). With his anointing Saul becomes a sacred person; and indeed God blesses Saul with the insight and courage necessary to give his people good government. However God eventually rejects Saul because the king decided to assume the duties of a priest himself (1 Samuel 13:8-15). But the priesthood was reserved for only the tribe of Levi. God is also unhappy with Saul because he disobeys the command to destroy completely the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:1-23). Thus, just as it was during the period of the Judges when Israel was repeatedly unfaithful, so now the same infidelity infects the newly created monarchy under Saul.



The calling of Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1-10)

Saul and David.

At this point, when Saul fails to reach a decisive victory against the Philistines, God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint David as the future king. Apart from Moses, David is the dominant figure of the Old Testament. In fact, the Old Testament pays more biographical attention to David than to any other person. In all the Scriptures the only one who garners more biographical attention than David is Jesus Himself in the Gospels.

David, a shepherd boy and youngest of Jesse's sons, is brought to Saul's court where he greatly impresses the king, who in turn makes David his armor bearer. Armor bearers traditionally carried extra weapons for their commanders and applied the *coup de grace* to enemy combatants wounded in battle. Soon another battle with the Philistines looms—the famous encounter between David and Goliath. After David's victory over Goliath and subsequent victories over Israel's enemies, Saul becomes jealous of David's conquests and seeks to kill him. Despite Saul's murderous pursuit, David maintains reverence for the office of the anointed king. To escape Saul, David eventually takes refuge in Philistine territory, leaving Saul to face the Philistines alone. Now desperate, Saul panics and breaks the law of Moses by seeking counsel from a "medium" or "witch" in the town of Endor. Eventually Saul comes to a bitter and pathetic end in battle by falling on his own sword, which is the one major example of suicide in the entire Hebrew Bible (1 Samuel 31).

2 Samuel 5-10 Establishment of the Davidic kingdom and the covenant

After Saul's death, his son, Ish-bosheth, reigns for only two years in the north (Israel). David reigns in the south (Judah). After a long war (2 Samuel 2:1) between the house of Saul and the house of David, Saul's son is killed and David captures Jerusalem. David in turn has the Ark of the Covenant transported to Jerusalem, thereby making the city not only the capital but the center of the people's worship.

Transport of the Ark of the Covenant

About the year 1406 B.C., after the Israelites conquered Canaan and took possession of the Promised Land, the Ark of the Covenant was moved to Shiloh (today, Israel's West Bank) where it remained until it was captured in battle by the Philistines (2 Samuel 6:1-7). Much to the Philistine's dismay, however, the presence of the Ark brought them only disaster after disaster, and so they returned it to the Israelites in 1024 B.C. The Ark remained at Kiriath Jearim (six miles west of Jerusalem today) for the next twenty years. Eventually the Ark was kept at the house of Obed-Edom, a family within the tribe of Levi (recall only members of the tribe of Levi were to tend the ark—Numbers 4:15). After David captured Jerusalem, he ordered the Ark be brought to Jerusalem. Loaded onto a wagon and drawn by oxen, the cart stumbled and Uzzah reached out to keep it from falling. Uzzah was struck dead on the spot. Why did Uzzah suffer such a fate? It should be noted that whenever the Ark was moved from place to place, it was never transported on a cart or wagon drawn by animals; rather the Ark was always carried on the shoulders of men.

"You shall cast four rings of gold for it, and put [them] in its four corners; two rings [shall be] on one side, and two rings on the other side. 13 "And you shall make poles [of] acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. 14 "You shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, that the ark may be carried by them. 15 "The poles shall be in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. and was only to be carried by Levites of the family of Koath" (Exodus 25:12-15).

Other sacred items may be loaded into wagons and drawn by animals, but not the sacred Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments. Therefore the placement of the Ark, even when being transported, was to be conducted with care to avoid any risk of sacrilege. Such sacrilege would be seen as diminishing the Ark's status and therefore its power. The Jewish scholar Maimonides (1138–1204) held that loading the Ark onto a wagon was a uniquely serious affront. Instead of men carrying it on poles, it was carried by beasts. Therefore what was Uzzah's sin? Some Jewish commentaries hold that God showed His displeasure at the Ark being transported in a wagon by causing the oxen to stumble, *so that the Ark would then be removed from the wagon*. But when Uzza intervened to keep the Ark in place, it was seen as undermining God's will. Therefore Uzzah suffered the ultimate punishment; for he apparently saw no difference between the Ark and any other sacred object. Uzzah's intention was to help, but he still showed a profound insensibility to the awe-filled sacredness of the Ark itself. In the end it was a seemingly good deed done in the wrong way.

“And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, when the camp is set to go, then the sons of Kohath shall come to carry them; but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die” (Numbers 4:15).

The transgressions and tragedies of King David (2 Samuel 11-20)

Soon after David reaches the height of his power, he commits a series of sins that make everything go from bad to worse. David falls prey to lust and commits adultery with the wife of Uriah, one of his thirty commanders. To cover his sin, David compounds it further by arranging for Uriah’s death in battle. The prophet Nathan confronts David and prophesies that the house of David will suffer as a result. The stability of David’s household begins to unravel quickly. David’s son, the Crown Prince Amnon, will follow the example of his father and assault his half-sister, Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22). Then Absalom, who is Tamar’s blood brother kills Amnon. Now fearful of David’s wrath, Absalom flees into exile. Eventually Absalom slowly builds political support to challenge his father’s throne; but his attempted coup fails and Absalom dies at the hands of Joab, David’s nephew and military commander. After a time of mourning for his rebellious son and a small secondary rebellion is put down, once again David’s reign is secure. In his “song of deliverance” in which David recalls two plagues and two more exploits of David’s men, David offers his final words as King, ordering a census of all the people.

Epilogue (2 Samuel 21-24)

The narrative throughout Samuel shows both David’s virtues and vices, and the final epilogue is no different. The epilogue remembers David’s righteousness (2 Samuel 22:21-15) and his sin (2 Samuel 24:1). It recalls that God exalted David as long as he was humble, but when David was prideful, again he was brought low. Therefore how could Israel ever find hope in this fallible man? Only by trusting in God’s mercy and covenant fidelity.

The moral of the entire tumultuous narrative of the books of 1 & 2 Samuel is uttered by David himself: **“Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great”** (2 Samuel 24:14). It is God’s covenant promises to David that gave reason for hope.

The last act of the book is the purchase of the future site of the temple, the place where sacrifices will be offered. Even though David atoned for his sins through sacrifice, the hope of Israel would be found not in individual or corporate righteousness, but in the mercy and faithfulness of God. God would graciously provide a place of worship and means of atonement for His people.

God’s promise of salvation to our first parents in the Book of Genesis (3:15) and further developed in the sacred books is made explicit in *Samuel*. Many centuries of history must pass before this promise would find its fulfillment when Jesus declared, **“The kingdom of God is at hand”** (Mark 1:15). In the end, preceded by the fall of Saul and following the infidelities of Solomon, David’s reign was one of relative peace. Then, when it seemed least expected, God sent a message of hope through the Prophet Nathan that God would establish his offspring on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16).



Prophet Samuel anoints young David (1 Sam. 16:12-13)