Introduction to 1 Samuel: Getting what you asked for

Hi. My name is Heather Jackson. I am a CWCI Speaker and KYB leader. In the past I have written some of our KYB studies. It is a privilege for me to present this introduction to the KYB Study titled *Getting what you asked for – 1 Samuel.*

History

If you have a Bible with you take a moment now to open the front cover and find the list of all the books in the Bible. This list usually appears soon after the title page.

Here you will see that 1 Samuel is the ninth book in the Old Testament. It follows the five Books of the Law (The Pentateuch) and is the fourth book in the next section of the Old Testament.

In the Hebrew Bible Samuel belongs to the Former Prophets – the books of Joshua to Esther. 1 & 2 Samuel were one book in the original Hebrew text. They were divided when Samuel was translated into Greek and in our English translations they remain as two books. However, this is an artificial division into what is one continuous narrative.

The Former Prophets (like the Later Prophets of Isaiah to Malachi) present God's perspective on the history of Israel, God's people. Between the Former and Later Prophets are the wisdom and poetry books of Job through to Song of Solomon.

Take a moment now to turn to 1 Samuel in your Bible. There is probably a page reference given in that list of books to help you find it.

Your version may also give a brief introduction to every book in the Bible, immediately before the first chapter. You may find it helpful to read the introduction to 1 Samuel before you start Unit 1 of your KYB study.

Now who wrote Samuel?

The book of 1 Samuel is anonymous however clues are given in the Bible as to its probable authorship. Let's look, for example, at 1 Sam 10:25 because it gives an example of a clue that we might use. I'll give you a moment to find this verse in your Bible. 1 Samuel 10:25 reads,

25 *Samuel explained to the people the rights and duties of kingship.* ***He wrote them down on a scroll*** *and deposited it before the Lord. Then Samuel dismissed the people to go to their own homes.*

So in this verse we learn that Samuel kept written records from his time.

A few books over in 1 Chronicles 29:29 we read that other prophets, like Gad and Nathan, recorded many of the acts of King David. So, it is possible that the book of Samuel was compiled by an unnamed prophet from the writings of Samuel, Gad, Nathan, and perhaps other sources. Biblical scholarship suggests the book was compiled around 900BC - about 100 years after the death of Samuel.

So, how did the compiler or compilers structure these records?

The dramatic and intriguing narrative of 1 Samuel covers a period of 94 years - from the birth of Samuel through to the death of King Saul. These events occurred around 1100 years before Jesus was born.

The book of Samuel focusses on three key figures – Samuel, Saul and David.

Now the biblical record to this point has often focussed on key historical figures. Cast your mind back to the books before 1 Samuel in the list we were just looking at. How many key figures come to your mind when you think about the books of Genesis or Exodus, Joshua and Judges?

You might like to stop the recording at this point and discuss and compile a list of names. Here's a clue – start with Adam. 😊

Pause recording (1 mins)

Welcome back! I hope you were able to come up with a good list of names pre-dating Samuel. Perhaps you thought of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and maybe you thought of some judges like Gideon, Deborah and Samson.

Names like these help us recognise that ever since God delivered his people out of Egypt (as a nation of more than a million people), guided them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, he had appointed leaders – prophets, priests and judges – to represent him before the people. 1 Samuel marks the start of a new era hinted at in earlier books – namely the transformation of this loosely affiliated group of tribes into a unified nation under a hereditary monarchy.

So, the compilers of Samuel structure their material around three key transitions: Firstly from Priest Eli to Prophet Samuel, secondly from Prophet Samuel to King Saul and thirdly from King Saul to his divinely appointed successor, David.

As we look at these three key sections of 1 Samuel you may like to flick through your Bible with me noting the division headings in your version and see how they correlate with these three key transitions.

Part 1 is about Samuel and covers chapters 1-7

Chapters 1-3 we read the record Samuel's birth and his early call by God. Because of Samuel's responsiveness to God he was confirmed as a prophet at a time when, the Bible tells us, 'the word of the Lord was rare' (3:1)

Chapters 4-6 are concerned with the corruption of the priesthood and the loss of the ark of the covenant to the fighting Philistines. These chapters are perhaps best summed up in the words of chapter 4:21-22, and the phrase, I quote *'…the glory has departed from Israel for the ark of God was taken'*. Those of us who have recently completed the KYB study *Tabernacle and Temple* will particularly appreciate the tragedy of this statement.

In chapter 7 Samuel's prophetic ministry led to a revival in Israel, the return of the ark and a great victory over Israel's enemies the Philistines.

As Gordon Fee has said in his book *How to read the Bible book by book,* 'All this is marvellously told – with wit, irony, suspense, wordplays – but above all with an eye to what God is doing with and among his people, even as he gives them a king'.

So that's part 1 and the first transition.

In the second section of the book, the stories of Samuel and Saul overlap.

Chapters 8 – 15 covers the causes of the transition from the rule of judges to the rule of a king. It includes God's affirmations and warnings about monarchy (previously set out in the Book of Deuteronomy). These chapters include the early success of King Saul but also his failures and they include God's eventual rejection of him as King.

The final section of 1 Samuel, comprising chapters 16-31, is the final transition and it focusses on the movement of kingship from Saul to David. With great drama and intrigue the story is told of Saul's attempts to kill David (a vain attempt to secure his dynasty through human effort), these chapters tell of the rise of David in exile and they tell of the final decline and death of Saul.

So, what are the big ideas we need to look out for as we study these three key transition periods in 1 Samuel?

Come with me back to 1 Samuel chapter 2. It would be helpful to stop the recording at this point, read the verses from 1 Samuel 2: 1 – 10 aloud. This is the record of Hannah's prayer following the birth of the long-awaited Samuel. As you read these verses note Hannah's references to humility, sovereignty and kingship.

Pause recording (3mins)

Welcome back! The story of Hannah, recorded in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel, is strategically placed to introduce three key ideas –

1. God despises the proud and exalts the humble
2. God is sovereign in all things
3. God is the true King of his people

Hannah's prayer alerts us to these key themes of the book – vs 3-4 speak of reversals, vs 5-9 speak of God's providence and in vs10 Hannah's words foreshadow both the future kings of Israel *and* the Messiah who would come just over 1,000 years later: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Turn now to Deuteronomy 17:14-20. It would be helpful to stop the recording at this point, read the passage aloud and talk or think about the affirmations and warnings (the positives and negatives) of kingship which are referenced in these verses – Deuteronomy 17:14-20.

Pause recording (5mins)

Kingship

Welcome back again! So we've got some key themes here and the first one I want to think about is the theme of kingship as this raises important tensions for us as we read the book of 1 Samuel.

Firstly, there is tension between nationalistic loyalty to the monarchy and covenant loyalty to God. Secondly, there is another tension running through these chapters between the king representing the people to God *while at the same time* representing God to the people. As the narrative builds throughout the book, the reader is constantly reminded that even kings appointed to their rule by God, will behave like other human kings, just as God warned his people.

The passage you just read, Deuteronomy 17:14 – 20, encourages the reader of 1 Samuel to ask questions like:

1. What happens if a proud and sinful king disobeys the commands of a covenant-keeping God, or we might ask the question
2. What happens when a loyal, though still sinful, king lives humbly before a covenant-keeping God?

This is what is at the heart of the story of Saul and David. The books of Samuel and Kings in the Old Testament tell the history of God's people almost exclusively through the deeds and exploits of their kings. The book of 1 Samuel is not so concerned with whether Israel has a king but rather, **if they have a king, what kind of king will he be**? Will this king remember that God is sovereign over all things concerning his creation? Will this king remember that he is but an earthly representative of God's enduring kingship and govern accordingly?

These types of questions help us appreciate why the Book of Samuel depicts kingship as ultimately a theological rather than a political matter.

The God of Israel is the True King of Israel. The earthly king represents the nation before God and is ultimately responsible to God. For this reason, the deeds and exploits of the kings are deliberately chosen by the compilers to illustrate the success or failure of a king according to his obedience or disobedience to the Law, and his commitment to the will of God.

In 1 Samuel Saul proves to be disobedient to God's will. But, as the story continues in 2 Samuel, humble, repentant David, described in 1 Samuel as 'a man after God's own heart' is the one with whom God establishes his covenant. In this covenant God promises David that his throne will be established forever. How can this be? David was a sinful human being just like us. But this Davidic covenant becomes a central theme for the rest of the Bible.

Let's never forget that just as Samuel is one story divided into two books, so the Bible is one story divided into 66 books. 1 Samuel has its special place in the metanarrative of the biblical story because there are many ways in which King David foreshadows Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The New Testament specifically calls Jesus 'the seed of David according to the flesh' in Romans 1:3 and the New Testament calls Jesus the 'Root and offspring of David' in Revelation 22:16. And so we know that the promise of the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel is fulfilled in the eternal reign of David's descendant, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

So that's the theme of Kingship which is explored throughout our study this term.

Sovereignty

Throughout the narrative God repeatedly makes everyday events, seeming coincidences, work for his purposes. From the personal to the national God has the power and right to rule over everything in his creation. God's sovereignty is seen in the anointing of a king. It is displayed in his protection of David. We see it in the life of a barren woman (Hannah) giving birth to a great prophet and judge. We see it in Saul being led to Samuel during his search for lost donkeys! Closely related to this is the constant reversal of human fortune – Hannah's infertility to motherhood; Samuel made prophet instead of Eli's sons, Saul's rise to prominence from a lowly tribe, David anointed as king even though he was the youngest son. Normal human expectations are reversed by God so that his plans and his purposes are furthered.

The book of 1 Samuel will be an enormous encouragement to us as we study the exploits of Samuel, Saul and David.

Familiar stories abound – young Samuel hearing the call of God, the capture and return of the ark of the covenant, Samuel's anointing of David, a young shepherd boy, Goliath's challenge to the armies of Israel, the friendship of David and Saul's son Jonathan, Abigail's wise humility, the deaths of Saul and his sons – all are recorded with integrity, showing both the best and the worst of God's people. There are some key verses in the centre of 1 Samuel for us to keep in mind as we study the whole book.

Turn to 1 Samuel chapter 15 and find verse 22. You might like to read this reference and verse along with me now.

1 Samuel 15:22

Samuel replied, 'Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Now turn to the next chapter 16 and read verse 7 along with me.

1 Samuel 16:7

But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart'.

In conclusion

The book of 1 Samuel records Saul's abject failure as Israel's king. It reveals the Israelites' wavering commitment to God. It clearly portrays the temptations David faced.

And so, through all its narrative, 1 Samuel focuses on the amazing grace and mercy of God! Even when his people were unfaithful, God kept his covenant promise and God is still keeping his promises today. God is still King over all creation despite what human governments might think. God is still

sovereign in this world working out his purposes as year succeeds to year. God is still seeking out a people after his own heart who will serve him with humility and trust in his sovereignty.

God's plan and God's character are the over-arching pictures in the narrative of 1 Samuel. The book teaches us about the consequences of sin; it warns against pride and arrogance; it shows how blessing comes to those who live humbly before God - resting in his providence, content within his Kingship.

As we start out on the adventure of reading 1 Samuel we might ask ourselves this question.

In what ways will my study of 1 Samuel be used by the Holy Spirit to make me more like David (a man after God's own heart) but ultimately more like King David's greater Son, Jesus Christ – our Saviour, Redeemer and Friend?

Thank you for listening. May God speak to all of us through his word this term.