

Introduction to 1 Samuel

Where is it in the Bible?

1 Samuel is the ninth book of the Old Testament and the fourth of the historical books in Christian Bibles. It follows Ruth and comes before 2 Samuel. In Hebrew Bibles, there is one book of Samuel and it follows Judges as part of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). This book is on a single scroll in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It was divided in Greek and Latin manuscripts because of its length.

Who wrote it?

In spite of the fact that ancient tradition says that Samuel was the author of most of the book, it is unclear exactly who wrote 1 Samuel. It seems to have been written by a number of people who had different opinions about the monarchy and the major figures in the book.

When was it written?

1 Samuel was written and edited in stages, but scholars disagree on the date when this was done. The book includes stories which were probably passed on orally for a considerable period of time before they were written down. Some scholars suggest that most of the book was written after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. Others feel that it was composed during the Babylonian exile after the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.

What is it about?

1 Samuel describes how Israel was transformed from the loose confederation of tribes that is found in Judges to a unified nation with a monarchy. Although the book looks like a history, there are many contradictions with other Biblical sources and within the book itself. For example, in 1 Samuel 31:4, Saul commits suicide, but according to 2 Samuel 1:10 he was killed by an Amalekite. Our understanding of what a history should look like is very different from that held by authors in biblical times. These books have a basis in history but they have a theological motivation and are more concerned with theme and character than accurate reporting. Like other parts of the Deuteronomistic History, 1 Samuel shows how God was active in Israel's history and guiding the events which occurred.

How is it structured?

- I. The Rise of Samuel (1:1-7:17)
 - a. Samuel's Birth and Childhood (1:1-4:1a)
 - b. Story about the Ark (4:1b-7:1)
 - c. Samuel the Judge (7:2-17)
- II. Samuel and Saul (8:1-12:25)
 - a. Israel Demands a King (8:1-22)
 - b. Saul Becomes King (9:1-10:27)
 - c. Saul Defeats the Ammonites (11:1-15)
 - d. Samuel's Farewell Speech (12:1-25)

- III. Saul and David (13:1-31:13)
 - a. Saul Is Rejected (13:1-15:35)
 - b. David Is Anointed (16:1-13)
 - c. David in Saul's Service (16:14-17:58)
 - d. David and Jonathan (18:1-4)
 - e. Saul's Jealousy of David (18:5-16)
 - f. David Marries Michal (18:17-30)
 - g. Saul Attempts to Kill David (19:1-28:2)
 - h. Saul's Last Days (28:3-31:13)

What are some things to look for?

- **Canaanite Practices:** The religion and other practices of the Canaanites continue to plague and tempt the Israelites. In 1 Samuel, Baal, a fertility god and one of the most important Canaanite gods, Dagon, a Philistine god, and Astartes (Asherah), a goddess who was Baal's consort, are particularly prominent. Other practices such as the worship of inanimate objects and consultation with mediums are also found in 1 Samuel.
- **Prophets:** In this book, prophets are seen as men who announce God's word and reveal God's will. This is especially true of Samuel, but there are a few others who also have prophetic roles. For example, the "man of God" in 1 Samuel 2:27-36 and David in 1 Samuel 17:45-47.
- **Reversal of Fortune:** In her song, Hannah points out that God makes people rich or poor and raises them up or brings them down. This is seen throughout 1 Samuel. For example, the house of Eli is brought down and Samuel is raised up. Saul is raised up as king and then brought down to be replaced by Jesse's youngest son, David.
- **Significant Numbers:** The numbers 3 and 7 are unusually prominent in 1 Samuel. There are over 40 occurrences of the number three, which often symbolizes completeness and wholeness. For example, in 1 Samuel 10:3, Saul is greeted by three men with three goats and three loaves of bread after he is anointed; also, Jonathan shoots three arrows as a signal to David in 1 Samuel 20:20. The number seven also occurs many times. For example, the Philistines keep the ark of the covenant for seven months (6:1) and Samuel rejects seven of Jesse's sons before choosing David (16:10).