

Introduction to 2 Samuel

Where is it in the Bible?

2 Samuel is the tenth book of the Old Testament and the fifth of the historical books in Christian Bibles. It follows 1 Samuel and comes before 1 Kings. 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?

According to tradition, the prophets Gad (introduced in 1 Samuel 22:5) and Nathan (introduced in 2 Samuel 7) wrote the last part of 1 Samuel and all of 2 Samuel. However, many scholars today feel that the book is made up of older traditions which have been collected and edited by an unknown author or authors.

When was it written?

Since they were originally one book, it is not surprising that the history of this book is the same as that of 1 Samuel. Both were written and edited in stages, but scholars disagree on the date when this was done. They include stories which were probably passed on orally for a considerable period of time. Some scholars suggest that most of the material was written down after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. Others feel that it was done during the Babylonian exile after the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 B.C.

What is it about?

2 Samuel is the history of David's reign over Israel. It begins with him coming to the throne and goes on to tell of his military success and the unification of the kingdom. In addition to portraying David as a great king, 2 Samuel also shows him as a human being who gives in to temptation and has to deal with problems within his own family as well as the country. In all of this, David continues to trust God. Like 1 Samuel, this book is best seen as a theological history which shows how God was active and guiding the events for Israel.

How is it structured?

- I. The Story of King David (1:1-20:26)
 - a. Mourning for Saul and Jonathan (1:1-27)
 - b. David Becomes King (2:1-5:16)
 - c. David Unifies the Kingdom (5:17-8:18)
 - d. Mephibosheth (9:1-13)
 - e. War with Ammon (10:1-12:31)
 - f. Absalom's Banishment and Reinstatement (13:1-14:33)
 - g. Absalom's Rebellion (15:1-19:43)
 - h. Sheba's Rebellion (20:1-26)
- II. Reflections on David's Reign (21:1-24:25)

What are some things to look for?

- **Boundaries of the Promised Land:** The boundaries that were promised in Numbers were achieved during the reigns of David and Solomon.
- **Canaanite Practices:** The religion and other practices of the Canaanites continue to plague and tempt the Israelites. The worship of Baal and inanimate objects are referred to in 2 Samuel.
- **Davidic Covenant:** The promise which God made to David through the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 7 is a key passage in salvation history. God rejected David's offer to build a "house" (temple) for the Lord and in turn offered to build a "house" (dynasty) for David. This assurance that there would always be a descendant of David on Israel's throne was interpreted as a promise of restoration after the exile. It is the origin of the hope for a messiah which for Christians is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.
- **Doublets:** There are many places in the books of Samuel where the same story seems to be told twice. The two versions do not always agree. For example
 - Was Goliath killed by David (1 Samuel 17:49) or by Elhanan (2 Samuel 21:19)?
 - Did Saul fall on his sword (1 Samuel 31:4) or was he killed by an Amalekite (2 Samuel 1:10)?
 - Did Absalom have three sons (2 Samuel 14:27) or no sons (2 Samuel 18:18)?
- **The Philistines.** Throughout the books of Samuel, Israel's greatest threat came from the Philistines, a people from islands in the Aegean Sea who settled along the southern coast of Canaan after being repelled by Ramses III in a series of sea battles in the Nile Delta (1190 B.C.E.). There, they occupied some of the region's richest land and controlled the lucrative coastal trade route. The Philistines' military success is directly attributable to their monopoly in the manufacture and use of iron weapons (1 Samuel 13:19-23). In the absence of any written records, the probably pejorative biblical account of the Philistines becomes determinative. In the Bible, the Philistines are depicted as warlike, rather coarse, and uncircumcised; they worshiped Dagon as their national god in addition to other Canaanite deities such as Atargatis and Baal-zebul. Politically, they were organized as a federation under five "Serens" (Greek, *tyrannoi*, "tyrants"), who ruled in their five major cities (Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza). The Greek historian Herodotus named the whole area "Palestine" after the Greek form of their name (*palestina*, 450 B.C.E.).¹
- **Prophets:** As in 1 Samuel, prophets are seen as men who announce God's word and reveal God's will. In this book, Gad and Nathan are prophets in David's court.

¹ Mark Throntveit at <http://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=30>