

Session 1

Text and Context

Canon

As a literary unit, the books of Samuel and Kings constitute one continuous narrative. Scholarly consensus is that they did not begin that way. Layers of tradition and earlier versions of stories seem to have been artfully brought together in the composition of these texts. Not everyone agrees where one layer begins and another ends. The approach taken in this study is not to try to decipher the particular layers of each of these texts, but to look at the story they tell as they now stand. This may be called a “canonical” approach to the material. That is, it takes the text “as is” and tries to discern what meanings it may render that offer guidance to contemporary readers and communities of faith (*NISB*, 2263) who, though they may not always agree among themselves, already consider these texts to be important to, and in some way formative for, the life of faith.

Translation

As they first appeared in written form, the four books of Samuel and Kings formed two scrolls, one for the material in 1 and 2 Samuel and the other for the material in 1 and 2 Kings. The division of these stories into four separate books arose out of translation. When these stories were translated into Greek so that they could be read by Greek-speaking Jews and other Greek speakers, in a version known as the Septuagint, it took nearly twice the space to write the Greek as it had to write the Hebrew. Hence, two Hebrew scrolls resulted in four Greek books. In this first Greek translation, the books were given the titles I, II, III and IV Kingdoms.

Study Bible

See “Translations of the Hebrew Text” in *NISB*, 2244-45.

An early version of the Old Testament, printed in the sixteenth-century in Venice adopted this four-fold division. Subsequently, translations of these texts into English have divided the material into four books, though the titles I, II, III and IV Kingdoms used by the Septuagint have given way to the titles 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings.

Why “Samuel?”

There is no consensus as to why the first two books as we now have them, 1 and 2 Samuel, bear the name of the prophet. Some schools of thought reason that because the books are associated with other prophetic books called the “Former Prophets” in the tradition of the Old Testament, the title Samuel was used to reinforce that connection. Others argue that the books bear Samuel’s name because the story of his birth, dedication and destiny, with which 1 Samuel begins, make him the foundational character in all that follows. A more compelling reason may be that as the individual who serves in the tradition as a “bridge” personality between the turbulent waters of the failed leadership of the period of the judges (cf. Judges 21:25) and the emergence of the idea of a divinely-sanctioned monarchy (1 Sam 8:21-22), Samuel’s role is unique. The incredibly poignant passage, known as Samuel’s “farewell speech,” gives us a glimpse of that stature and uniqueness.

One of the groups responsible for editing Samuel and other books from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings used the technique of farewell addresses to sum up what was most crucial about an individual’s contribution to Yahweh’s people. Samuel’s speech, which is charged with theological/ethical implications, is one such passage. This speech reveals a vision for leadership at once simple and sublime:

“. . . I am old and gray, but my sons are with you. I have led you from my youth until this day. Here I am: testify against me before the Lord and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from

whose hand have I taken a bride to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore you.” They said, “You have not defrauded or oppressed us or taken anything from the hand of anyone . . .” He said to them, “The Lord is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.” And they said, “He is witness” (1 Sam 12:2b-5).

God and King

It is remarkable that in Samuel’s farewell address God and king are presented as equivalent entities that may bear covalent witness for or against him. The people validate this close association of God and king in their reply, “He is witness.” Samuel’s day of leadership is indeed passing. A new day in Israel has surely come. The idea that royal and divine authority may be closely identified has emerged by the time this passage appears. It is an idea that will drive the texts through the books of Samuel into the books of Kings, and despite vigorous echoes of opposition in the other places by those who long for the days of leaders like Samuel, it will play a significant role in Israel’s history for centuries to come. The identification of God and king will resonate with empires thousands of miles and years away.

Context

First and Second Samuel may be divided into five major movements. Taken as a whole, these five sections accomplish two major goals. First, the books present a literary record that explain how Israel moved away from former kinds of authority toward, for a window of time, a monarchical model of government. Second, 1 and 2 Samuel proclaim that the crown came to rest on the head of David and his “house” because the God of Israel, the one true God who had rescued the people from slavery, guided them through the wilderness, and gave them a land to call their own, was also directing their history in similar benevolent ways.

The idea of monarchy did not emerge among the Hebrew people without considerable opposition.

Study Bible

See “Excursus: Biblical Ambivalence to Government” in *NISB*, 407-8.

Study Bible

Read and discuss Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; 1 Peter 2:13-17; Titus 3:1. See also “Excursus: Christians and Government,” *NISB*, 2029. What historical and cultural factors may have been important when these texts were written?

Hence, the stories that we have in 1 and 2 Samuel are drenched with tensions between prior models of authority and the coming new future. As is still the case, any centralization of power involves the loss of power in more localized settings. For this period of Israelite history in particular, the move toward a king threatened the authority of tribal systems. Those systems were based on family and extended family structures first, and then tribal councils of elders whenever a family system failed or was perceived to fail, or whenever a need (village agriculture), too large to be faced by family units alone, emerged.

During the period of the judges, authority could come to rest on a particularly charismatic individual who would unite various tribal units to face a temporary threat too great for individual tribes—for example, Deborah’s leadership against the military forces of Sisera and northern Canaan. But such leadership during the period of the judges was not imbued with royal authority. Indeed, mighty leaders such as Deborah and Gideon were celebrated not as monarchs, but as temporary and expedient agents of Yahweh. Yahweh’s preferred response to kings, non-Israelite, during the period reflected in the book of Judges, was to crush them (cf. Judges 5). Even the first Israelite who would be king found his ambition ran afoul of Yahweh and brought him and his community to quick ruin (Abimelech in Judges 9).

Teaching Tips

Render to Caesar

Read and compare Mk 12:13-17, Matt 22:15-22, Lk 20:20-26. See *NISB*, 1833 on Mark 12:17 and Mitzi Minor’s study of the Gospel of Mark, Session 10 under Mark 12:13-17.