



The Books of Samuel

Introduction

The Books of Samuel tell the story of the transition from the period of the Judges to the monarchy. In the earlier period, when there was no king in Israel, the tribes were ruled by charismatic figures, who emerged in time of crisis and then, supposedly, continued to rule for forty years. The rule of these judges is schematized in the biblical text. The overall impression is that tribes rallied around a leader in time of crisis, but that these leaders had no institutional authority over all of Israel. The transition to monarchy was a major development, which marks a new era in the history of Israel.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, scholars have regarded the Books of Samuel as part of the Deuteronomistic history. This history was composed of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. It was dubbed Deuteronomistic because kings and leaders were typically judged by the standards of the Book of Deuteronomy. This is most obvious in the Books of Kings, where the kings of northern Israel are routinely condemned for allowing worship outside of the central sanctuary of Jerusalem. There is also a very clear editorial hand in the Book of Judges. The Books of Samuel also show signs of Deuteronomistic editing, as we will see regarding the kingship, but the editorial layer is not so heavy-handed. These are some of the most sophisticated and subtle stories in the Hebrew Bible.

The two books of Samuel were originally one book in Hebrew. They are copied on a single scroll in the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were divided in Greek and Latin manuscripts because of the length of the book. The Greek translation (the Septuagint, or LXX) reflects a longer form of the text than has been preserved in Hebrew. For a long time, scholars thought that the translators had added to the Hebrew text. The Dead Sea Scrolls, however, preserve fragments of a Hebrew text that corresponds to the Greek. It now appears that the Greek preserves an older form of the text, and that some passages were lost in the form transmitted in Hebrew.

Three figures dominate the books of Samuel: Samuel, Saul, and David. 1 Samuel begins with the birth and early career of Samuel. Chapters 4-6 deal with struggles between Israel and the Philistines. Samuel does not appear at all in those chapters, but he takes the lead in a battle against the Philistines in chapter 7. Chapters 8-15 deal with the beginnings of the kingship under Saul. Then David appears on the scene, and he dominates the remainder of 1 Samuel and all of 2 Samuel.

There are several tensions and duplications in 1 Samuel. In chapter 8, the desire to have a human king is taken to imply the rejection of Yahweh as king. Yet the first king is anointed at Yahweh's command. In chapters 10 and 11 there are different accounts of the way in which Saul is chosen. There are also different accounts of his rejection in chapters 13 and 15. There are two accounts of how David came into Saul's service, in chapters 16 and 17. David becomes Saul's son-in-law twice in chapter 18. David defects to the king of Gath twice, in chapters 21 and 27, and he twice refuses to take Saul's life when he could have done so (chaps. 21 and 27).

Older scholarship identified two strands in 1 Samuel. One, in chapters 9:1 to 10:16; 11; and 13-14, had a generally favorable view of the monarchy. The second, in chapters 7-8; 10:17-27; 12 and 15, had a negative view. The second layer was thought to correspond to the Deuteronomistic edition. Other scholars, however, think the situation is more complex. The negative view of kingship may be older than Deuteronomy, and there may be more than one Deuteronomistic edition. It is clear, however, that different sources were combined in the 1 Samuel, and that they entailed different views of the kingship. Deuteronomistic passages have been recognized in the oracle against the house of Eli in 1 Sam 2:27-36 and 3:11-14, in Samuel's reply to the request for a king in 8:8, and especially in Samuel's farewell speech in chapter 12.

2 Samuel also incorporates sources that have been only lightly edited by the Deuteronomist. The key Deuteronomistic passage is the account of the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7, although here too an older source is being adapted. 2 Samuel 9 to 2 Kings 2 is often identified as the Court History of David, or the Succession Narrative. The account of the rebellion of Absalom reads like a distinct source. 1 Kings 1-2 is an account of the rise of Solomon to the kingship.

Despite all these tensions, however, the Books of Samuel present an engrossing story that compares well with any narrative that has come down to us from the ancient world. More than most biblical books, they sketch their characters vividly and provide complex and realistic accounts of human motivations.

History or Fiction?

The most pressing question for a reader of these books concerns the expectation we should bring to them. They tell a story about a pivotal period in the history of Israel. This story is realistic. It has none of the mythical characteristics that we find in the early chapters of Genesis, or in the story of the Exodus. Battles are not decided by divine intervention. The leading characters have credible human motives for what they do. Accordingly, many scholars have assumed that the story these books tell is basically historical. To be sure, the details cannot be verified. But many a History of Israel has been written on the assumption that the story is essentially reliable.

For much of the twentieth century, the historical reliability of the Bible seemed to be supported by archeology. Biblical scholars of a conservative bent thought they could support the historical reliability of the Bible by archeological work. This approach was associated especially with William Foxwell Albright, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, who dominated Old Testament scholarship in North America in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century.

Albright was by no means a fundamentalist. He was incomparably learned in the cultures of the ancient Near East, and he hoped to put Old Testament scholarship on a scientific basis. His student, John Bright, wrote a magisterial History of Israel that attempted to correlate the biblical text with what was known of ancient Near Eastern history from other sources. Eventually, however, the attempt to support the Bible by archeology backfired. Too many important incidents in the Bible were not corroborated, or even seemed to contradict the archeological evidence. Consequently, a movement of "minimalist" biblical historians arose who were unwilling to give historical credence to any biblical story that could not be corroborated by archeology.

The failure of archeology to corroborate biblical stories was devastating in the case of a book like Joshua, where centerpiece stories such as the capture of Jericho and Ai would have seemed to lend themselves to archeological verification. If there is no archeological evidence of the destruction of the walls of Jericho in the appropriate period, this raises a fundamental question about the nature of the biblical narrative. The Books of Samuel, however, pose a somewhat different problem. The main place where one might look for archeological verification of the biblical stories is Jerusalem, where David allegedly established his kingdom and where Solomon would build his temple. Unfortunately (or not!) much of Jerusalem is off-limits for archeologists, especially the area now covered by the Temple Mount.

Nonetheless, there has been vigorous debate among archeologists as to what Jerusalem was like in the tenth century BCE, the supposed time of David. "Minimalist" archeologists and historians, such as Israel Finkelstein, have argued that Jerusalem was no more than a "cow town" in this period – a provincial backwater that could not possibly have been the center of a great kingdom. At one point, some of the more skeptical historians questioned even the existence of David and his kingdom. That extreme position was refuted, in the eyes of most scholars, by the discovery of an Aramaic inscription at Tel Dan in northern Israel, in 1993-4, which mentioned the "house of David." The inscription dates to the second half of the ninth century BCE and confirms that the kingdom of Judah was known as "the house of David" at that time. At the other end of the spectrum Eilat Mazar, who comes from a line of famous Israeli archeologists, has claimed to have found the palace of King David, in the area called "the city of David," outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. Her claim has been greeted with widespread skepticism. She has found an impressive ancient structure, but it seems impossible to determine whether it was built by King David or by one of his Canaanite predecessors in Jerusalem.

In fact, little if anything in the Books of Samuel lends itself to verification or falsification by archeological means. As a result, scholars have tried to assess the plausibility of the stories. Can we think of reasons why someone would have invented a given story? This enterprise, however, is inevitably subjective, and explanations that seem plausible to one scholar may not always seem so to another. Without external evidence to verify or falsify the biblical stories, the question of historicity is moot. On the one hand, we cannot have great confidence that events happened as reported. On the other hand, we must realize that new archeological evidence is constantly coming to light, and we cannot preclude the possibility that evidence supportive of the biblical story may yet be found.

Ancient Prose Fiction

In the meantime, it is probably better to read the Books of Samuel as “ancient prose fiction,” in the phrase of Robert Alter, rather than as history in the modern sense. No one doubts that Julius Caesar existed, but the value of Shakespeare’s play about him does not depend on its historical accuracy. David most probably existed too, but the stories told about him are impossible to verify. Their value does not lie in their historical evidence, but rather in the ways in which they dramatize human nature.

There is much about the Books of Samuel that can be appreciated if we read them as simply as stories. Saul is a tragic figure, who seems at first to be destined for greatness but is brought down by his own character flaws. His relationship with Samuel is fraught, and highly suggestive of the mistrust and misunderstandings that take place at a time when power and authority are in transition between different institutions and between two strong-willed figures. David emerges as one of the most complex and captivating figures in the Bible. On the one hand, he is ruthless. He is a mercenary figure, who engages in extortion and does not hesitate to have people murdered if they stand in his way. On the other hand, he is often a sympathetic figure, quick to repent of his sins (or at least to appear to repent). He is most sympathetic when he is vulnerable, and when he suffers through the tragedies that beset his own family and his laments for his friend Jonathan and for his son Absalom are moving. It is the great merit of the Books of Samuel that they do not represent any of the leading characters as simply saintly figures. They all have their flaws, and they are more engaging for the fact that they are portrayed realistically.

The importance of David transcends the story of his own lifetime. He is the king who receives the promise of an everlasting dynasty. His dynasty lasted for more than 400 years. When it was eventually ended by the Babylonians, the promise gave rise to the hope for a messiah, a king who would restore a kingdom that would never be destroyed. The idea of a messiah was important for Judaism, and even more so for Christianity. The different understandings of the messiah provide one of the most fundamental reasons for a parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity. In the Books of Samuel, however, we are dealing not with the messiah but with the historical, or legendary, figure of David, without whom there would have been no idea of a messiah at all.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org