Samuel: Great Stories, But What’s the Point?

Among the books of the Bible, there are those I teach often, among them Revelation and Isaiah. There are many I teach occasionally. And then there are those I have not taught at all or perhaps only once. Among them is Samuel. I don’t think it is good to ignore any part of Scripture, so I have been paying attention to this book lately, even though I do not expect to teach it any time soon.

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And the more I thought about Samuel (the book), the more mysterious it seemed. I felt like an absolute beginner with the book. What is its message or purpose!?

Well, one answer is: to tell us about David and the monarchy in Israel. Samuel is part of an ongoing story connecting Joshua and Judges with Kings. Without Samuel, there would be a big hole in the ongoing narrative. The answer is true

as far as it goes, but there is much in the book that is not needed to accomplish this.

And notice this: the other three books in the continuing story have a very clear focus beyond simply telling the story of Israel. Joshua documents God's faithfulness in enabling Israel to settle in the land of promise. Judges shows Israel's *un*faithfulness in the same. Kings explains the eventual loss of the land and the exile. And Samuel? What is its focus?

Well, kingship. That much can be said. But what about it?

Big Blocks

Let's take a step back and ask a more foundational question: what do we get in this book? Because that is part of its mystery. There appear to be several larger blocks of material. How do they fit together? Here is what we get:

1. The story of Samuel, including that of Hannah and her song (1 Sam. 1-7). As an aside: I have come to believe we underestimate Samuel's importance for Israel's development. He is the towering figure of the era; in the time between Joshua and David, he is without equal. As both prophet and judge, he

stood at the centre of a significant revival of Israel's faith. Without him, humanly speaking, Israel's faith might not have survived.

2. Samuel's story is interrupted by that of the ark of the covenant's capture by the Philistines, in which Samuel is absent (1 Sam. 4:1-7:2, plus perhaps 2 Sam. 6).

3. Starting in 1 Samuel 8, we learn about the initiation of kingship in Israel and its first king, Saul.

4. Saul's story overlaps with that of David's rise to power, which begins in 1 Samuel 15. The end of this 'source' is less clear, perhaps 2 Samuel 5. The overlap means it can also be understood as the story of the struggle between the two houses of Saul and David.

5. Once David is fully established as king over all Israel, we read of his sin, leading to what is often referred to as the succession narrative (2 Sam. 10-20), although there is no succession until Kings.

6. Samuel finishes with an appendix including six items, forming a chiasm (2 Sam. 21-24):

A Saul's guilt due
to killing Gibeonites

B Heroic
exploits against 'giants'

C David's psalm
of deliverance (cf. Ps. 18)

C’ David’s last
words

B’ David’s
mighty men

A’ David’s guilt
due to census

More than a few interpreters have taken these units to reflect separate sources. However, none of them makes sense on its own; they overlap and depend on information included in other units. They are well integrated into the book; we do not have a collage of disparate pieces.

Nevertheless, the material is diverse; is there an overall message, a unifying focus?

Three Songs

Three songs give us a hint. They are strategically placed at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end: Hannah’s song (1 Sam. 2:1-10), David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:19-27), and David’s song of deliverance together with his last words (2 Sam. 22:1-23:7).

What is more, they share several terms and themes, especially Hannah’s song and David’s psalm. Both refer to God’s anointed, salvation, and the upside-down reversal God brings about. Hannah’s surprising conclusion, spoken before there was a king in Israel, looks ahead and defines the theme of Samuel:

> The LORD … will give strength to his king
>
> and exalt the horn of his anointed. (1 Sam. 2:10)

David’s Rise

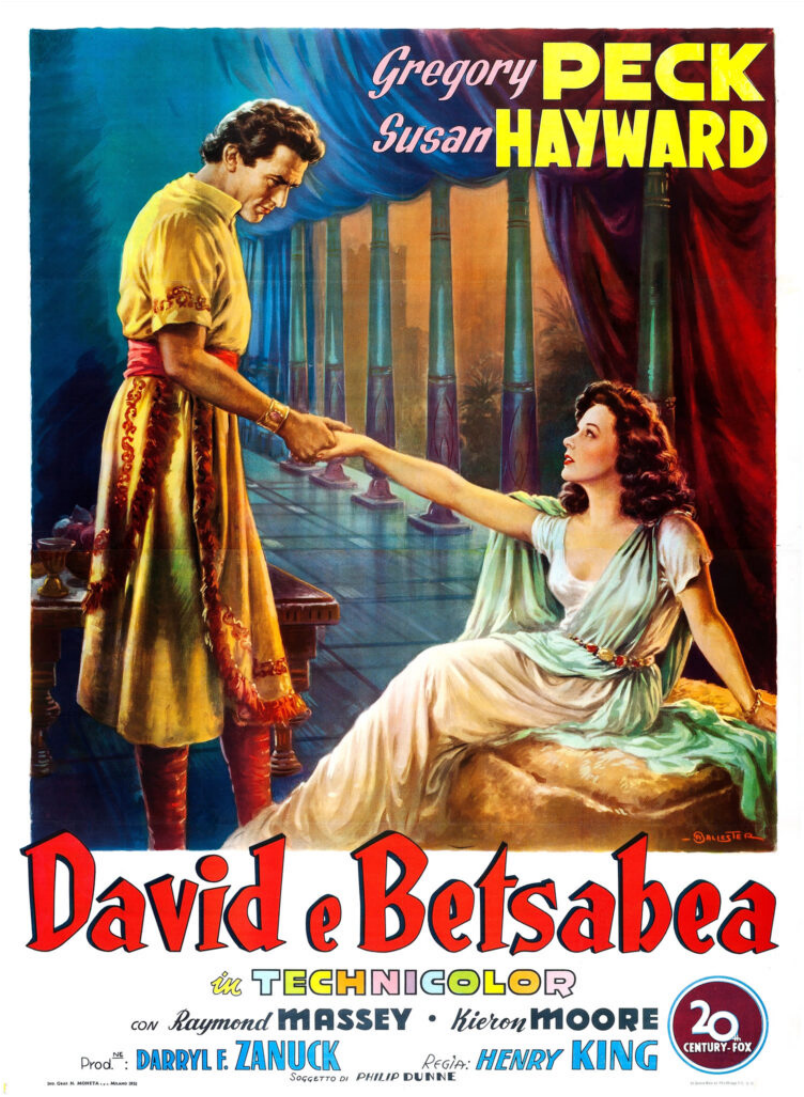
His king, *his* anointed. It is YHWH who appoints and provides his people with leadership.

David becomes king but he is an unusual king (until he isn’t, in 2 Samuel 11). He does not grab for power and – unlike Joab – he does not strive to hold on to it. David does not exalt himself.

David is far from perfect. For instance, in reaction to Nabal’s provocation, he almost eradicates his entire household (1 Sam. 25). Nevertheless, David stands out as different from ‘normal’ kings in those days.

Once in power, he does not kill those who might become a threat to him later. He is furious with those who kill Ish-bosheth, thinking to do him a favour and earn a reward (2 Sam. 4). That Abner is killed is not his doing (2 Sam. 3:26-39). He shows kindness to Mephibosheth, a potential competitor and heir to the throne (2 Sam. 9).

Even in his sin – or precisely then? – he is different. He accepts Nathan’s rebuke (2 Sam. 12).



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David’s Failure

Still, his affair with Bathsheba is an appalling stain. Notice that the narrative (2 Sam. 11-20) slows down at this point by going into substantial detail compared to other episodes in this book.

When David stumbles and acts more like a ‘normal’ king – by taking the woman he craves and having her husband murdered – he opens the door to such

leadership in Israel, beginning in his own household. Amnon rapes Tamar. Her brother, Absalom, kills Amnon. Once he is pardoned, he sets out on an ambitious campaign to make himself (himself!) king of Israel.

His idea of being a king: “a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him” (2 Sam. 15:1).

The impression we get of life at this early royal court in Israel does not bode well for its continuation. The house of David cannot be the long-term answer, even though David provides a model, even if an imperfect one, pointing to a better path. He is simultaneously a model of what is right and what is wrong – a mirror, like so much else in the OT.

Ruthless Joab

Another key in the book, besides the three songs, is Joab, a fascinating character somewhat in the background. He is loyal to David but ruthless. His ruthlessness shows in revenge (killing Abner in 2 Sam. 4). When Abner had killed Joab’s brother, it was a legitimate act of war, not murder. But when Joab kills Abner, it is essentially murder because there now is peace, not war. Joab is equally ruthless when his position as commander-in-chief is threatened (2 Sam. 19:13; 20:8-10).

Like Absalom, Joab is an example of the world’s way of being a leader.

The Emerging Focus

In telling the story of Israel’s first kings, the book of Samuel does a lot more than fill the gap between Judges and Kings. There is a contrast between leadership ‘according to the ways of the world’ and leadership God’s way. God’s way is different, and Samuel begins to map out how.

David is the model for such leadership, even if imperfectly; Joab and Absalom are its antithesis. Studies in the use – and abuse – of power.

Leadership based on human ambition may lead to disaster. Only God-given leadership has the potential to do good.

> The LORD … will give strength to his king
>
> and exalt the horn of his anointed. (1 Sam. 2:10)

The LORD, not human wisdom or skill or ambition, will bring about the great and direly needed reversal of things.

David knew this. It's the theme of his life, expressed both in the first words David speaks in this book, 1 Samuel 17:37, and in the summary of his life toward the end, in 2 Samuel 22. In addition, it is illustrated in many of the stories in between: God, the Rock, is David's deliverer.

That's the secret of David's legacy. And it should be ours.

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