Samuel and Kings

The story of the history of Israel is told in a particular way, which is through the lens of the covenant. In the story of Joshua we saw the covenant fulfilled in the giving of the land because of the faithfulness of Joshua and his generation. In the generation following Joshua we see covenant identity disintegrating and getting worse and worse, yet God, in His compassion, raises up judges to deliver Israel. It gets worse and worse though, and there is a need for a king. They do not want an Israelite king or a Saulite. They need a Davidic king. We see a legitimation of Davidic kingship in the book of Ruth as one aspect of that story. Another aspect of that story is to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant including the nations and the sojourners who live among Israel.

Now we come to the books of the kingdoms. In the Septuagint there are four books of the kingdoms, with 1 and 2 Samuel being the first and second books and 1 and 2 Kings being the third and fourth books. The first time that these were designated, in 1517, 1 and 2 Samuel were the Rabbinic Bible. Samuel died in 1 Samuel 25, so he could not be the primary author of these books. But he was where the story began and where the story of the dawning of the Messianic age began. There are many other sources that are identified. We have the book of Geshar and the chronicles of Samuel, Nathan, and Gad, so we have several sources for the books of Samuel and Kings. The events extend through the divided kingdom and the exile, which is far past the time of Samuel. Where the book of 2 Kings ends and the way the stories of Samuel and Kings work together is an explanation for why the exile happened. The purpose of the books of Samuel and Kings, seeing them as a whole in the story of the united monarchy and the divided kingdom, is to tell the story of the history of the kingdom of Israel and why they were in exile. We might see the primary audience for the book of Judges as the people in Israel at the time of struggle between David and Saul, but the primary audience for Samuel and Kings is the exilic audience. The exile happened because even David, the most faithful of the kings, and the measure of the very few good kings who we hear about (Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah), was unfaithful to the covenant. So in Samuel and Kings we see an explanation for why the exile happened, but there is more to it than that. Another purpose is to tell why the kingdom of Judah should still support a Davidic king when they return to the land. We see a strong undergirding of David and his house as well.

Turn to where the story begins. In many ways we have a table of contents for the whole of the books of Samuel in the song or prayer of Hannah. Hannah’s story is that she cannot have children, but her rival Peninnah can have children. Hannah prays, and once she gets the pronouncement from Eli, she dedicates Samuel. Samuel’s name means “The Lord has heard my prayer.” Hannah prays in 1 Samuel 2:1,

My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance.

There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed.

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We see that the Lord exalts Hannah. Just like with Mary, whose prayer and song echoes Hannah’s prayer, her experience of being exalted is emblematic of the entire covenant community being exalted. That exaltation will come through the house of David, and that will happen through the prophet Samuel. We see that one of the primary narrative actions of the books of Samuel is the rise of Samuel and the fall of Eli along with the rise of David and the fall of Saul. That is foreshadowed here in Hannah’s experience and her exaltation. We also see the Lord’s inverting power, the rising and falling, and the bringing down of the arrogant and lifting up of the humble. That is really important for these stories of the trading of places of Samuel and Eli’s sons, of David and Saul. The contrast has to do with the Lord’s inverting power. We see that in 1 Samuel 2:4-8,

The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry hunger no more.
She who was barren has borne seven children,
but she who has had many sons pines away.

The LORD brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.

The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.

He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.

The Lord takes not the oldest son but the youngest, a shepherd boy, and He makes him a king. That inverting power is foreshadowed here in Hannah’s song. We see in the end her messianic hope for a secure future. Verses 8-10 read,

For the foundations of the earth are the LORD’s;
upon them he has set the world.

He will guard the feet of his saints,
but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.
It is not by strength that one prevails;

those who oppose the LORD will be shattered.
He will thunder against them from heaven;
the LORD will judge the ends of the earth.
He will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed.

We see almost an eschatological hope for the extension of the strength of the Lord. The way that the books of Samuel end is the appendix in 2 Samuel 21 through 24 that retells the story of David’s
successes and victories. We have that hope for Israel. Even though they are in exile, those who hear these stories hear an explanation of why they are in exile, and they can have a hope in the house of David. The song of Hannah foreshadows the entirety of the books of Samuel and the outline.

The books of Samuel explain God’s covenant with David’s house, which remained Israel’s best hope for a stable future though David’s sins had brought covenant curse of exile on her. We have the preview of the messianic hope and Samuel preparing for a kingdom in 1 Samuel 2 through 7. The failure of Saul is given in 1 Samuel 8 through 15. The rise of David is in 1 Samuel 16 through 2 Samuel 8. The trouble of David’s kingdom is in 2 Samuel 9 through 20, and the messianic hope is reviewed in the appendix of 2 Samuel 21 through 24.

In the first seven chapters we hear a story that is symbolized by the movements of the ark. The ark narrative in 1 Samuel 5:1 through 7:1 fits between this story of the decline of Eli’s house and the rise of Samuel. We will begin to see the symbolic function of the ark in just a moment. First we have the wickedness of Eli’s sons contrasted with the approval of Samuel. First Samuel 2:12-14 says, “Eli’s sons were wicked men. They had no regard for the Lord. It was the practice of the priest with the people that whenever anyone offered a sacrifice while the meat was being boiled, the servant of the priest would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand and plunge it into the pan or kettle and take for himself whatever the fork brought up.” But we see they take the very best pieces. We also see that they have illicit sexual relationships, and Eli reproves his sons. These sons are characterized by their wickedness, but Samuel grows in favor. We see this passage echoed in Luke’s description of Jesus. First Samuel 2:26 says, “The boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.” In Luke 2 he describes Jesus the same way. The prophecy against Eli’s house in 1 Samuel 2:27 and following reads,

Now a man of God came to Eli and said to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: “Did I not clearly reveal myself to your father’s house when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh? […] You scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?” Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: “I promised that your house and your father’s house would minister before me forever.” But now the LORD declares: “Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained. The time is coming when I will cut short your strength.”

This is exactly the kind of thing that happens over and over. It happens to Saul in that he is initially honored, but he dishonors the Lord so the kingdom is ripped away from him. Solomon is honored, but what we see in the prophecy against Solomon is the division of the kingdom. We have a foretelling of how the history will unfold. The history is told through the evaluative lens of the covenant.

We see these two stories of the fall of Eli’s house and the rise of Samuel are symbolized in the ark narrative. Look at 1 Samuel 4 where the Philistines capture the ark and the name of Ichabod is given. Verses 5-11 say, “When the ark of the LORD’s covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, ‘What is all this shouting in the Hebrew camp? […] Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians.’ […] So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated, and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.” Then there is a story of how the ark is in the Philistine cities. The wife of Phinehas names her son Ichabod in 1 Samuel 4:21, which means “the glory has departed from Israel.”
The presence of God is associated with the ark, and the Philistines capture the ark because of the sins of Israel’s priest. In 1 Samuel 7 the Philistines are subdued by this last of the judges, Samuel, and the ark is recaptured. The ark comes under its own accord because the Philistines cannot hold the ark. It is not just the greatness of Samuel that brings the ark back, but it is clearly the work of the Lord. First Samuel 7:10 says, “The LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites [...] Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Thus far has the LORD helped us.’ So the Philistines were subdued and did not invade Israelite territory again.”

We see that the presence and blessing of God is associated with the ark, which makes sense in terms of the tabernacle. That symbolizes the story of the fall of Eli’s house and the rise of Samuel. This sets the stage for the symbolism of the ark later in the story of David when he brings the ark into Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6. That is a very important prelude to the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7.

In 1 Samuel 8 Israel asks for a king. Let me go forward for a second to mention that there is an uneasy tension for how kingship fits within Israel’s covenant. Samuel clearly warns against having a king, and 1 Samuel 8:4 says, “All the elders gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and they said, ‘You are old, your sons do not walk in your ways. Appoint a king to lead us like all the other nations have.’” The reply is that they rejected the Lord as king, but the Lord gives them a king and anoints Saul through Samuel. We see that the office of prophet is an important element of how kingship works in Israel. We have a similar notion of advisors to kings in the ancient Near East, but let me draw your attention to how kingship works.

Ancient Near Eastern kings were viewed as sons of the gods, so they had divine status like Pharaoh. Then there were the laws of the king, and then there were the people. That is not the way it worked in Israel. In Israel the Lord is king, and under the Lord’s kingship we do not have the king as a son of a god. Instead we have the law. The prophets represented the law, they were not just advisors to the king like in ancient Near Eastern settings. They represented the law and the covenant to the king and to the people. Then under the law was the king, who was supposed to read and copy the law according to the provisions of Deuteronomy. Then the people came under the king.

The way I would explain the warning of Samuel and yet the clear need for and provision for a king is that there was an uneasy tension. There were tremendous temptations and threats that power brought, yet we see that in the background of Deuteronomy 17 it contains the requirements and provisions for the king. Israel’s king is supposed to be a different kind of king, one who is under the law and is an expression of law keeping. The role of the prophet is to anoint the king. The public will affirm the work of that anointing by the Spirit, but the prophet represents the covenant to the king. Samuel warns against the fact that the king will take their land. If he is a king like the other nations, he will violate the inheritance legislation of Leviticus and Numbers. The land does not belong to the king, though. The land belongs to God, and God has given it to the tribes. But the king will take the land and will accumulate land, horses, and chariots. He will make unhealthy alliances with other nations. The covenant warns against these things. The other thing a king will do is take their sons and put them in his army. They will fight for him and die. Samuel warns against kings like the other nations. The people reject the Lord’s kingship over them, but the notion of a king is something that is provided for by the law. It is not illegal for them to have a king, but they need to have a certain kind of king. The king needs to be in submission to the Lord, who is the real King, and that is expressed in his submission to the law.

Kingship in Israel and the ancient Near East was different, and it was supposed to be that way. We see in the telling of the story that unfortunately the kings became more and more like those of the nations.
around them. Saul was a prince. He was charismatic, and his tribe was in tact. There was not bureaucracy or a harem. He had a fortress, not a palace. He had no private holdings, and the prophet Samuel was in his life speaking. David was a prince, then a king. He was charismatic, and his tribe was relatively in tact. There came to be a bureaucracy of officers, and he developed a harem. He had a palace and began to have private holdings. He had the prophets Nathan and Gad speaking into his life. Solomon became effectively an ancient Near Eastern king by the end of the story. He started off well but did not end up that way. He was chosen dynastically, and he redistributed the land. He had a temple, and he intermarried. He had vast holdings and, most of all, there was no prophet voice speaking into his life. There was no one representing the covenant to him. We see this contrast with the kind of king Israel as a covenant was supposed to have and the kind of king that the ancient Near Eastern peoples had. The Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look on things that man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance; the LORD looks at the heart.” This crystallizes the notion of what kind of king Israel should have had. A good memory verse is 2 Samuel 7:16, which will come later, about the Davidic covenant. We have seen the fall and the rise of Eli’s house and of Samuel.

The next part of the story, the big part of these books, is given to the fall of Saul and the rise of David. What we have is various contrasts in their character. This is crystallized in the whole story of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. Saul is not a champion, and he is not courageous. He does not go out against Goliath even thought Goliath vilifies the Lord and the Lord’s people. These are the contrasts that we see: the paranoia of Saul and the courage of David; and the unpredictability and treachery of Saul and the faithfulness and steadfastness of David. Saul is constantly trying to kill David; David protects Saul even when he has the opportunity to kill him. We are supposed to get these contrasts and understand why the writer chooses these scenes to give us. He intentionally contrasts Saul and David. Saul is deceitful and guilty of innocent blood, and the kingdom is torn away from him. David is given a kingdom that is promised forever. We also see this contrast crystallized in Jonathan and David’s friendship. Jonathan is Saul’s son, and he is supposed to be the heir of the throne. Saul is even treacherous with his own son, and David is a faithful friend. You can see how these things are played out. Look at 1 Samuel 18:12, “Saul was afraid of David because the LORD was with David but had left Saul.” There is the move of the Lord from one to another.

Second Samuel 7 is the high mark of this promise to the house of David. There is a word play on the word “house.” Verse 1 says, “The king was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies.” In 2 Samuel 6 is when David brings the ark to Jerusalem, and he has defeated his enemies. David says,

“Here I am living in a palace of cedar while the ark of God remains in a tent.” Nathan replied, “What ever you have in mind, go ahead and do it. The LORD is with you.” That night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying: “Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling […] Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed […] The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he
does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed him from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.””

Notice that the word of the Lord came to Nathan, not David. God fulfills what He said in the provisions of the covenant in Deuteronomy, giving them a place for His people. The language in this passage should be familiar. The father-son language that we see with Jesus primarily refers to His role as the Davidic king, not necessarily His deity. It is the language of the Davidic covenant and a direct echo of 2 Samuel 7:14, and we hear it at the baptism and the transfiguration. We see in the word “house” a movement.

We have to understand how this relates to the notion of kingship. A king’s power and kingdom was related to his identification as a son of a god. We get similar language of father-son here, but it is symbolized by building a temple for the god. A test of David’s obedience and submission to the covenant as the kind of king that Israel should have in submission to the Lord as king was not to build a temple. It was a huge political liability not to build a temple. It took a lot of faith, gumption, and loyalty to Yahweh to live according to this covenantal arrangement. It illustrates the submission to the covenant on the part of the king, a different kind of king than the ancient Near Eastern king. At the same time, David’s victories gained stuff to build the temple with, and he gave all of this stuff to build the temple. He did not keep it for himself. Basically all Solomon had to do was build it. It is almost like fitting point A into point A and point B into point B. The story points out that David prepared everything for the temple, and Solomon only had to hire the builders and the contactors.

Now we begin to see a contrast between David’s rise and David’s troubles. The eager holy warrior now stays in his palace when kings go out to battle. The one who marries honorably now commits adultery. The one who is innocent and protects Saul’s life plans the murder of Uriah. We see the contrast between David being decisive and indecisive and having effective prayers and ineffective prayers. He was fearless when outnumbered, but later he fearfully takes a census. He attracted followers but then loses followers. We get a sense of this trouble foreshadowed. In 2 Samuel 9:1 through 12:31 we have the initial troubles foreshadowing all the other troubles. There is trouble in David’s house through Bathsheba and trouble in his court. That is when he invites Mephibosheth back because of the promise that he made to Jonathan. The problem with that is the Saulites and the Benjamites end up coming back in rebellion. The trouble in David’s house interpersonally and the trouble in David’s court are interrelated. We see that foreshadowed in 2 Samuel 9 through 12, and then it is played out.

That is not the end of the story, though. The story ends with a rehearsal of David’s faithfulness and successes. We rewind the story and go back and see David’s intercessions for the land and success against the enemies. These are to support the temple. Then we have David’s praise and wisdom. In 2 Samuel 21 through 24 there are flashbacks to remind those who are in exile that they need to support a Davidic leader when they return to the land, and he will also support the temple.

Let us take a few minutes to talk about the books of Kings. The exile of Israel by Assyria and Judah by Babylon were just acts of God’s judgment for apostasy and a call to repentance that the covenant might be renewed and they might return to the land. We see hope and apostasy. There is hope in Solomon first, followed by the apostasy of Solomon. Then it turns around. The emphasis is most apostasy with a slight emphasis on hope at the end. The books can be broken up into three sections made up of 1 Kings 1 through 11, 1 Kings 12 through 2 Kings 17, and 2 Kings 18 through 25.
The story of Solomon is a patchwork of positives and negatives. He is David’s chosen heir, and that is made very clear in 1 Kings 1 as well as at the end of 2 Samuel. He gains power through a bloody coup, though, which gives us this patchwork. We see Nathan’s early support, but then we do not hear from Nathan again. The prophetic voice disappears in Solomon’s reign. We see Solomon’s prayer for wisdom to rule righteously in 1 Kings 3 and 4. It is an extraordinary passage, and 1 Kings 3:9 is a good memory verse: “Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and distinguish between right and wrong. Who is able to govern this great people of yours?” This is the kind of king you want, and this is how the kings of Israel and Judah are evaluated. Solomon completes the temple and dedicates it. In 1 Kings 7 and 8 we have an extraordinary dedication and prayer that echoes Deuteronomy: “If we are obedient You will bless us; if we are disobedient You will send us away.” History is evaluated through the lens of the covenant. At the end of that section we see the Lord’s support for Solomon. First Kings 9 says, “When Solomon had finished building the temple of the Lord and the royal palace and achieved all he had desired to do, the Lord appeared to him as he had appeared to him at Gibeon.” The Lord asks Solomon what he wants in 1 Kings 3, and he says, “I want wisdom.” That is the Lord’s first appearance to Solomon. Now He appears to him again in chapter 9. The Lord says, “I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me, and I have consecrated this temple which you have built by putting my name here forever. My eyes and my heart are here.” He goes on to say that if his sons turn away He will send them away, and they will have to pray toward this place.

We begin to see that Solomon begins to rule by forced labor, and he begins to accumulate unjustly. In 1 Kings 10 there is a description of Solomon’s greatness and all his riches. All kinds of people come to him because of his wisdom, and we begin to see the beginning of his downfall. Verse 26 says, “Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had 1400 chariots and 12,000 horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem.” This is important to note, because it is a direct violation of Deuteronomy 17. One of the things that kings were not supposed to do in Israel was accumulate land, horses, and chariots. At the same time that Solomon’s splendor is described, it is the beginning of his undoing, because he violates the covenant. He also has many foreign women besides pharaoh’s daughters. First Kings 11:4 says, “As Solomon grew old his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech, that detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD. He did not follow the LORD completely, as his father David had done.”

We begin to get again the standard of how the kings will be evaluated. Good kings will be evaluated as those who did what David did and followed the ways of David. Bad kings will follow the ways of Jeroboam, and they will do evil in the sight of the Lord. That language starts here with Solomon, and the Lord rejects him, saying, “I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates” (1 Kings 11:11).

There are many kings over the north and the south. With Jeroboam and Rehoboam we have two very unwise people. The people want relief from the forced labor of Solomon, but Rehoboam does not listen to the counselors and continues his father’s practices of forced labor in the building projects. Jeroboam does even greater evil because he establishes alternate worship sites so that they will not go down to the south. Notice almost every one of these kings, whether over Israel or Judah, is described as doing evil in the eyes of the Lord. Only a few, including Asa, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah are described as doing right and walking in the ways of their father David. Joash did some good and some bad. He followed in some of the ways of David but not in others. That is pretty much it, yet there is an overwhelming evaluation of Israel’s history through the lens of the covenant that they did evil in the eyes of the Lord. They worshiped Baal and Ashtoreth. They violated the covenant legislation of the
inheritance to the tribes. They violated the laws of the kings, they accumulated wealth to themselves, and they ruled unjustly. That is what we see in the stories of Elijah and Elisha in the north, especially in the confrontation with Ahab and Jezebel about Naboth’s vineyard. Property is seized wrongly, and they worship other gods. Elijah and Elisha represent the covenant to God’s people as a call to repentance so that He will not take them out of the land.

We get some hope in Hezekiah, whose prayers are answered. The mark of royal prayer being answered like David’s prayers were answered is very important. It shows that the king is faithful to the covenant. When royal prayer is not answered, as in David’s prayer about his son when he had gone into Bathsheba, is an indication of covenant unfaithfulness. We have some glimmers of hope, but even after his obedience, Hezekiah has a failure. He shows the treasury to the Babylonians. There is also Manasseh’s horrific apostasy in sacrificing his own children and letting others sacrifice their children to the star gods. Josiah’s renewal, as Jeremiah will say later, is only in part.

What happens is the fall of Jerusalem. The absolute worst that could happen according to the sanctions of the covenant in Deuteronomy is that Israel would be vomited out of the land. That is exactly what happened, first in the north and then in the south. According to the writer of this history, it happened because of covenant unfaithfulness and the severity of that unfaithfulness. However, even at the end of the story we have this interesting note of hope. There is the fall of Jerusalem, and Zedekiah foolishly rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, who then burns the city. At the end of 2 Kings we have Jehoiachin, who had been taken into captivity earlier but is released from captivity. He is a descendant of David and was released from prison on the twenty-seventh day of the twelfth month. The king of Babylon spoke to him and gave him a seat of honor at the table of the kings in Babylon. Second Kings 25:29 says, “Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes for the rest of his life and ate regularly at the king’s table. Day after day the king gave Jehoiachin a regular allowance as long as he lived.” Even though we have this terrible rupture of the covenant that produces the complete destruction of the temple, the story ends on a note of hope. God has not forgotten the Davidic covenant. It ends with a Davidite being released from prison and honored at the Babylonian king’s table. Those in exile who read the stories of Samuel and Kings understood why the exile happened—“It happened because of extreme covenant unfaithfulness even on the part of David. But David’s house and the promise that the Lord made to David is our best hope. As we might return to the land we should support Davidic rule and the rebuilding of the temple.” That is the big emphasis of Chronicles.

The audience for Samuel and Kings is the exilic audience. The audience for Judges and Ruth is the people in the land. Judges is probably earlier during the conflict between David and Saul while Saul was still the king. Judges is a critique of the Benjamites and the Saulites. That is my view based on Pratt’s work. Ruth comes a little later, and it establishes the legitimacy of David’s kingship. It probably came during his reign. Samuel and Kings came during the exile, explaining why the exile happened and why the Davidic promise was still the best hope for Israel.

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