

## STUDIES IN SAMUEL No. 1

### “Introduction”

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Why Study the Books of Samuel? Or, better, the “Book” of Samuel. The Jews thought of it as a single book and it really is. The Massorettes, the Jewish scribes who were the custodians of the sacred text for the Jews from AD 500 to 1000, as part of their procedure to ensure the most accurate copying of the biblical text, would count the letters, the words and the verses to find the exact mid-point of a book. The mid-point for Samuel is in 1 Sam. 28:24, three chapters from the end of 1 Samuel, indicating how much they thought of Samuel as a single book. Samuel as a book of two volumes is merely, as one scholar puts it, “an artifact of ancient manuscript production.” [Alter, x]. That is, they couldn’t get it all on one scroll, so they divided it in two, and the division was related to space on the scroll, not to the content of the book.

And what content! Particularly the story of the rise and reign of King David. Listen to one scholar describe it.

“The story of David is probably the greatest single narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, the impulses of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh. It also provides the most unflinching insight into the cruel processes of history and into human behavior warped by the pursuit of power.” [Alter, ix]

The Bible, as we have been observing in our studies of Genesis, teaches so much with its historical narrative. It is theology in flesh and blood. It is the Christian life in its reality, both tender and harsh. It is faith the way faith is in the real world of sin, temptation, flesh. We saw ourselves with all the warts on in Isaac and Jacob, but we also saw in them the Lord’s grace and power in our own lives.

And so it will be in Samuel. Indeed, even more so! As one of the new breed of scholars of the biblical narrative art has written:

“...nowhere is the Bible’s astringent narrative economy, its ability to define characters and etch revelatory dialogue in a few telling strokes, more brilliantly deployed [than in the narrative of Samuel]. [Alter, *Ibid.*]

Frankly, that is one reason I have selected Samuel for our next study in an OT book. For Samuel has been more closely studied, more closely even than Genesis, with a view to the Bible’s narrative art. There is more help available here than anywhere and over the past few months I have been accumulating that help in books and articles. And, frankly, with Genesis now fresh in mind, I am eagerly looking forward to gaining a still deeper understanding of and appreciation of the meaning of this history.

Think of the Joseph story we just considered so carefully. Remember how you and I together used to be confused by what Joseph did, by the way he kept his brothers in the dark, by the stratagems he used on them time after time, which struck us as unnecessary, even cruel in some cases. Many of you have said to me how illuminating our study of that material had been, what wonderful sense it made of that particular part of the story. I felt the same way. And what made the difference was understanding all that was being communicated *that was never said in so many words*, which is what we are talking about when we speak of the Bible's narrative art. The narrator in Genesis expected us to see Joseph as a God-figure, acting on God's behalf to bring his brothers to repentance and reconciliation and spiritual renewal, that the steps he took were not ill-motivated but were necessary to put the pressure on the consciences of men who had not yet dealt with their old crimes. He expected us to see that Judah was the true hero of the story because he was the man most wonderfully and powerfully transformed by grace, brought to repentance and to a repentance so deep that a man who had once sold his own brother into slavery was now willing to offer his life for his brother. You see, none of that was explicitly said anywhere in the text. But I see now how clearly and in how many ways the narrator tipped his hand and told us how to read the history he was reporting to us, what to make of its characters, what to think of their actions.

Well, think of Samuel. Think, for example, of the Saul story. Hasn't it bothered you, as it has me, that it seems that Saul was chosen to be Israel's king and then, after quite a good beginning, was so quickly rejected by the Lord for one failure, and, to be honest, a failure that doesn't strike us as nearly so terrible as David's later failures (even as terrible as some of David's early failures!). Well, I have read enough now in the new works on Samuel that take advantage of the insights of narrative interpretation to know that reading Samuel with an eye to the sophistication of its narrative art is going to change the way you think about the Saul story and what we are meant to understand of Saul's behavior and the reason for his rejection. Much of that episode is going to be much clearer than it was before!

Now, in saying all of this, I certainly do not mean to say that people haven't understood Samuel before this. Of course they have; just as they understood Genesis through the ages. Much of what we will carry away from our studies in Samuel we would have carried away if we had never read the narrative interpreters. No, what these insights into the genius of the biblical writers gives us is a new depth, a new appreciation, a new brightness and color in the revelation of truth in this book. We may see a few things we never saw before – that is the wonder of the infinite depth of the Bible – there is always new light to break out of it – but, by and large, I think we will simply see things more clearly than we saw them before and learn, along the way, to read the Bible in a more searching way, expecting to find more in it than we have before. And surely that is right and wonderful!

By the way, it is worth pointing out and worth our giving thanks to God that the study of biblical narrative is pointing a dagger at the kind of skeptical liberal scholarship that has dominated the study of the OT for several generations now. In that viewpoint the OT books are a patchwork, often quite crudely put together by a not very skillful editor who

could do little more than combine the various sources he had before him, sources that often didn't even agree with each other. There were, therefore, supposed to be many quite different viewpoints represented in the same text, viewpoints that the editor of the final product did little or nothing to reconcile. Now, more and more, that opinion is being challenged even by scholars that are not evangelically Christian in their view of the Bible or their reverence for it as the Word of God. Now it is seen more and more that the narrative as we have it is magnificently produced, written and, in some cases, edited thereafter (as we saw in Genesis – remember, inspiration terminates on the final product!) [e.g. the genealogy of Edom, Gen. 36:31 gives the men who reigned “before there were kings in Israel]. It is a unity, its parts and pieces are present for what they contribute to the whole, and, if a text is the result of the combination of material from different sources, the whole is a unity that cannot so easily be divided up into its constituent and original sources, so perfectly and thoughtfully have they been wed together.

A scholar who is making a name for himself in the area of the literary or narrative study of the Bible (especially, as it happens, 1 and 2 Samuel) is Phil Long, who teaches OT at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, the PCA's seminary. He is, thus, Jack Collins' colleague in the OT department there. In an article, Phil spoke of the tension that is mounting between the liberal scholars of the old style and the newer narrative interpreters.

“In principle, of course, there is nothing objectionable in the assumption that 1 and 2 Samuel may have been composed using earlier source materials. One need only think of the numerous references in Kings and Chronicles to the sources used by their compilers to see the plausibility of such a hypothesis. The problem, however, is in the criteria sometimes adduced to ‘divide the text’ when, as in the case of Samuel, putative sources are no longer extant. [He is saying that in Kings and Chronicles we often have statements to the effect that “the other events of so and so's reign and all he did, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?”. We know some of the sources, even the names of the books, that were used in compiling Kings and Chronicles. But we have no such information about sources that may or may not have been used in the writing of Samuel. Those sources have to be guessed at and so scholars seek to discover signs or characteristics that they think identify certain sources. The problem now is that many of the features in the Samuel story that were thought by scholars to be signs of different sources that were patched together to make the book, are more and more being seen by the narrative scholars as brilliant editorial and rhetorical devices used by the narrator to communicate his theology and his interpretation of the history he is recording.] Often the very same textual features isolated by traditional literary critics as indicating distinct sources can and have been explained in entirely different ways by literary scholars committed to giving the text a ‘close reading’ on its own terms.... Repetition within a narrative context, for example, is frequently cited by traditional literary critics as indicating a juxtaposition or co-mingling of two sources...,but modern literary scholars often point to the very same criteria as evidence of the narrator's rhetorical skill. [A good case in point would be the flood story in Genesis. It was long supposed by liberal scholarship to be a rather clumsy patchwork of sources, each source representing a different viewpoint;

but the narrative interpreters have now found in what was supposed to be a patchwork a precise literary and narrative design, to be precise, a palistropic arrangement of the various sections of the story – ABCCBA.] In short, the criteria of division frequently employed by source-oriented literary scholars are sometimes undercut by the insights of more recent literary scholarship.

“Peace within the scholarly guild has, so far, been maintained largely through polite non-communication. Many scholars seem to prefer a deferential nod in the others’ direction to the heated debate that would likely ensue were their competing and, in some instances, mutually exclusive conclusions to be compared. [Phil is saying, politely that the old liberal source critics would have to admit that much of their work was worthless if they admitted that the literary reading of the historical books of the OT was, in fact, proving the literary genius that went into the writing of these books.] “It seems likely that open discussion would lead to a generally firmer conviction of the unity and coherence of the books of Samuel...” [“Scenic, Succinct, Subtle: An Introduction to the Literary Artistry of 1&2 Samuel,” *Presbyterion* 19/1 (1993) 33]

I hope that isn’t all just confusion to most of you. It may help if I tell you what exactly we are talking about when we speak of narrative artistry. What are these new insights? What do I mean when I refer to the narrative art on display in Samuel?

Well, let me give you Phil Long’s summary. He says that we will find three basic characteristics to the narrative in Samuel.

1. The first is that it is *scenic*. That means it tends to communicate more by *showing* than by *telling*. The narrator very often does not tell you exactly what he wants you to think about a person or what that person said or did. He will rely on your discernment, though he will often give indications in the text as to how we ought to judge matters that we are reading about. But remember “scenic”; Samuel will show more than it will tell. You will find out more about Saul by watching what he does and listening to what he says than from any evaluation of his character provided by the narrator.
2. The second is that it is *succinct*. The narrator accomplishes his goals with a minimum expenditure of words and the result of that is a heightening of the importance of what he *does say*. Presumably, then, when we come to a text, what is there is what is essential for us to know that we might understand the material and gain its lesson for ourselves. Things we might have felt were unimportant details now, more and more, show themselves to be critical parts of the story. Short statements may mean a great deal.
3. The third is that it is *subtle*. It conveys much of its message by implication and implicitly, using a variety of narrative techniques. That is, the means of communicating the narrator’s – and so the Bible’s – point of view will be indirect, pithy, and concise. With a few striking exceptions, the narrator will show us a characters good or bad traits but not make an explicit comment telling us that he was a good man or a bad man. He wants us to conclude that ourselves from what we learn of him in what is told of his words and deeds. For example, in chapters 13 and 14

Saul and Jonathan are described in a variety of ways that encourage us to compare one with the other. And the result of that will be that Saul, already very early in his appearance in the narrative is presented in unfavorable terms. It is not just because of his jumping the gun on sacrifice at Gilgal. There are fundamental problems with Saul. We are not told so explicitly that Saul's character and faith is defective, but it shows up as defective in comparison to that of his son. For example, in 13:11 Saul explains that he went ahead with the sacrifice, even though he had been told to wait for Samuel and even though he was not a priest, because "he saw his army scattering." But, a few verses later we hear Jonathan, Saul's son, facing the Philistines all by himself, "Nothing can hinder the Lord by saving, whether by many or by few." [14:6] The comparison between the perspective of father and son is a devastating indictment of Saul's faith, or lack of it.

Some of those techniques we have become familiar with already in our study of Genesis: 1) **a shift from prose to poetry** to emphasize a stretch of text (you will notice, for example that, not right at the beginning but very early in Samuel there is a long, important poem, "Hannah's song of praise" and not at the very end but very near the end there is another long and important poem, "David's Song of Praise and his Last Words." These two songs frame the entire book and tell us what the author thinks is most important about all he is going to be telling us – the demonstration of God's sovereignty, faithfulness, and goodness, which is the subject of both hymns, each of which introduce themes that reverberate throughout the book. 2) **the use of key-words** (*leitwortstil*) [e.g. "language" and "scatter" in Gen. 11:1-9, last Lord's Day morning. 3) **word-plays** (which, of course, show up only in Hebrew or a very clever English translation) often to indicate irony. 4) **repetitions** (for example, similar events or scenes in different circumstances invite comparison or contrast and so interpretation [Abraham's servant prays at the well in Paddan Aram; Jacob shows off! Abraham goes down to Egypt and comes back loaded with wealth in Gen. 12; Israel will follow imitate that progression.]

A very good example of the narrative art in Samuel is provided for us in the account of Eli's judgment for his failure to raise his sons to revere the Lord. **Have them turn up 1 Sam. 2:29.** You remember in the midst of that section the famous statement the Lord makes through his prophet, "He who honors me, I will honor." The word honor is from the same root from which are derived the words "heavy" "harden" and "glory" (remember Eli died when bad news was brought to him of the ark's capture by the Philistines, he fell over backward and died for he was an old man and *heavy*!; and as Phinehas' wife was dying in childbirth shortly after the news of her husband's death reached her, she named her son "Ichabod," the *glory* has departed). And that is not all. 5:6 ("The Lord's hand was heavy on the Philistines.") 6:5 (The Philistines "pay honor" to the Lord) and 6:6 (The *Philistine* priests say to their people, "Why should you *harden* your hearts like the Egyptians and Pharaoh did...") The meaning of all of what has happened is being tied together. They have not honored God and he is not honoring them. The Philistines, of all people, are showing more concern for God's glory than the Israelites!

But, what is more, the rejection of Eli for his unfaithfulness, even though a believing man, is the first instance of a pattern in Samuel, it serves programmatically to prepare the reader for the account of another rejection for unfaithfulness, namely, that of Saul. All the terms by which we should understand the Saul story have been given us at the beginning of the book in the Eli story. 2:29 is thus the theme of Samuel?

Well, I hope you get the idea. There is a great deal here in this wonderful book, A great deal about sin and grace, a great deal about the life of faith, and a great deal about Jesus Christ, who is, after all, the Son of David and the King of Israel, ideas and terms that are introduced and fleshed out in Samuel.