


TEACH THE TEXT
COMMENTARY SERIES

1 & 2 Samuel

Robert B. Chisholm Jr.


BAKER PUBLISHING GROUP

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, photocopied, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, audio recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton

GENERAL EDITORS

Rosalie de Rosset

ASSOCIATE EDITOR



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Robert B. Chisholm Jr., 1 & 2 Samuel
(Unpublished by Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2013. Used by permission.)

© 2013 by Robert B. Chisholm Jr.

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Chisholm, Robert B.
1 and 2 Samuel / Robert B. Chisholm Jr.
p. cm. (Teach the text commentary series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8010-9225-1 (cloth)
1. Bible. O.T. Samuel—Commentaries. I. Title. II. Title: First & Second Samuel.
BS1325.53.C49 2013
222'.407—dc23 2012020200

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. Baker Publishing Group does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This commentary is dedicated with love and affection to my first four pastors,
all of whom had a profound impact on my life:

The late Floyd Childs,
who introduced my father to the Savior
and radically altered the course of our family's history

The late Richard Prue,
who showed a young boy what it means
to love and serve Jesus with one's heart and soul

John Hunter,
who inspired a college graduate to go to seminary
rather than become a sportswriter

The late Richard Anderson,
who gave an inexperienced seminarian the opportunity
to preach and teach the Word of God on a regular basis



All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, photocopied, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, audio recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Contents

Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series ix		
Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series xi		
Abbreviations xiii		
Introduction to 1 & 2 Samuel.....	1	
1 Samuel 1:1–2:11.....	8	
<i>Barren No More</i>		
1 Samuel 2:12–36.....	14	
<i>Disrespect Can Be Deadly</i>		
1 Samuel 3.....	20	
<i>The Lord Chooses a Prophet</i>		
1 Samuel 4.....	26	
<i>Defeat, Death, and Departure</i>		
1 Samuel 5.....	32	
<i>The Ark Does Some Damage</i>		
1 Samuel 6.....	38	
<i>The Ark Heads Home</i>		
1 Samuel 7.....	44	
<i>Repentance and Victory</i>		
1 Samuel 8.....	50	
<i>Israel Demands a King</i>		
1 Samuel 9:1–10:8.....	56	
<i>Meet Israel’s New King</i>		
1 Samuel 10:9–27.....	62	
<i>Be Careful What You Ask For</i>		
1 Samuel 11.....	68	
<i>Saul’s Finest Hour</i>		
1 Samuel 12.....	74	
<i>Samuel Confronts the People</i>		
1 Samuel 13:1–15.....	80	
<i>Saul Forfeits a Dynasty</i>		
1 Samuel 13:16–14:23.....	86	
<i>Jonathan’s Faith Ignites a Victory</i>		
1 Samuel 14:24–52.....	92	
<i>Saul Dilutes a Victory</i>		
1 Samuel 15:1–22.....	98	
<i>Obedience Is Better Than Sacrifice</i>		
1 Samuel 15:23–35.....	104	
<i>Saul Forfeits His Throne</i>		
1 Samuel 16.....	110	
<i>The Lord Chooses a New King</i>		
1 Samuel 17.....	116	
<i>David’s Faith Ignites a Victory</i>		
1 Samuel 18.....	122	
<i>The Lord Is with David</i>		
1 Samuel 19.....	128	
<i>The “Nine Lives” of David</i>		
1 Samuel 20.....	134	
<i>God’s Protection Takes the Form of a Faithful Friend</i>		
1 Samuel 21:1–22:5.....	140	
<i>David on the Run</i>		
1 Samuel 22:6–23.....	146	
<i>Saul on the Rampage</i>		
1 Samuel 23.....	152	
<i>The Lord Guides, Encourages, and Protects David</i>		
1 Samuel 24.....	158	
<i>David Spares Saul’s Life</i>		
1 Samuel 25.....	164	
<i>David Listens to the Voice of Wisdom</i>		
1 Samuel 26.....	170	
<i>David Spares Saul’s Life—Again</i>		

1 Samuel 27:1–28:2	176	2 Samuel 15:13–37	256
<i>David Flees to Gath—Again</i>		<i>David Runs for His Life—Again</i>	
1 Samuel 28:3–25	182	2 Samuel 16:1–14	260
<i>Séance in Endor: Bad News from Beyond the Grave</i>		<i>The Lord Thwarts a Curse</i>	
1 Samuel 29–30	188	2 Samuel 16:15–17:29	266
<i>Escaping a Tangled Web</i>		<i>The Lord Thwarts a Shrewd Counselor</i>	
1 Samuel 31–2 Samuel 1	194	2 Samuel 18:1–19:8	272
<i>Tell It Not in Gath!</i>		<i>“O Absalom, My Son, My Son!”</i>	
2 Samuel 2:1–5:5	200	2 Samuel 19:9–20:26	278
<i>The Road to the Throne Is Covered with Blood</i>		<i>The Return of the King Brings Turmoil in the Kingdom</i>	
2 Samuel 5:6–25	206	Additional Insights	284
<i>David the Conqueror</i>		<i>The Structure and Function of 2 Samuel 21–24</i>	
2 Samuel 6	212	2 Samuel 21:1–14	286
<i>The Ark Finds a Resting Place</i>		<i>Blood Vengeance in Gibeah</i>	
2 Samuel 7	218	2 Samuel 21:15–22; 23:8–39	292
<i>The Lord Decides to Build David a House</i>		<i>David’s Mighty Men</i>	
Additional Insights	224	2 Samuel 22	296
<i>The Davidic Covenant</i>		<i>“The LORD Is My Rock”</i>	
2 Samuel 8–10	226	2 Samuel 23:1–7	302
<i>Fighting Wars and Keeping a Promise; David Establishes an Ideal of Kingship</i>		<i>Ruling in the Fear of the Lord</i>	
2 Samuel 11	232	2 Samuel 23:8–39	
<i>“Oh, What a Tangled Web We Weave”: Power Poisons the Conscience</i>		<i>(with 21:15–22, in the epilogue’s concentric structure)</i>	
2 Samuel 12	238	2 Samuel 24	306
<i>“Your Sin Will Find You Out”: The Lord Confronts His Sinful Servant</i>		<i>David Brings a Plague upon Israel</i>	
2 Samuel 13	244	Notes	313
<i>You Reap What You Sow</i>		Bibliography	323
2 Samuel 14:1–15:12	250	Image Credits	329
<i>A Prodigal Son Comes Home in Body, but Not in Spirit</i>		Contributors	330
		Index	331

Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

Why another commentary series? That was the question the general editors posed when Baker Books asked us to produce this series. Is there something that we can offer to pastors and teachers that is not currently being offered by other commentary series, or that can be offered in a more helpful way? After carefully researching the needs of pastors who teach the text on a weekly basis, we concluded that yes, more can be done; this commentary is carefully designed to fill an important gap.

The technicality of modern commentaries often overwhelms readers with details that are tangential to the main purpose of the text. Discussions of source and redaction criticism, as well as detailed surveys of secondary literature, seem far removed from preaching and teaching the Word. Rather than wade through technical discussions, pastors often turn to devotional commentaries, which may contain exegetical weaknesses, misuse the Greek and Hebrew languages, and lack hermeneutical sophistication. There is a need for a commentary that utilizes the best of biblical scholarship

but also presents the material in a clear, concise, attractive, and user-friendly format.

This commentary is designed for that purpose—to provide a ready reference for the exposition of the biblical text, giving easy access to information that a pastor needs to communicate the text effectively. To that end, the commentary is divided into carefully selected preaching units, each covered in six pages (with carefully regulated word counts both in the passage as a whole and in each subsection). Pastors and teachers engaged in weekly preparation thus know that they will be reading approximately the same amount of material on a week-by-week basis.

Each passage begins with a concise summary of the central message, or “Big Idea,” of the passage and a list of its main themes. This is followed by a more detailed interpretation of the text, including the literary context of the passage, historical background material, and interpretive insights. While drawing on the best of biblical scholarship, this material is clear, concise, and to the point. Technical material is kept

to a minimum, with endnotes pointing the reader to more detailed discussion and additional resources.

A second major focus of this commentary is on the preaching and teaching process itself. Few commentaries today help the pastor/teacher move from the meaning of the text to its effective communication. Our goal is to bridge this gap. In addition to interpreting the text in the “Understanding the Text” section, each six-page unit contains a “Teaching the Text” section and an “Illustrating the Text” section. The teaching section points to the key theological

themes of the passage and ways to communicate these themes to today’s audiences. The illustration section provides ideas and examples for retaining the interest of hearers and connecting the message to daily life.

The creative format of this commentary arises from our belief that the Bible is not just a record of God’s dealings in the past but is the living Word of God, “alive and active” and “sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Our prayer is that this commentary will help to unleash that transforming power for the glory of God.

The General Editors



All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, photocopied, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, audio recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

This series is designed to provide a ready reference for teaching the biblical text, giving easy access to information that is needed to communicate a passage effectively. To that end, the commentary is carefully divided into units that are faithful to the biblical authors' ideas and of an appropriate length for teaching or preaching.

The following standard sections are offered in each unit.

1. *Big Idea*. For each unit the commentary identifies the primary theme, or “Big Idea,” that drives both the passage and the commentary.
2. *Key Themes*. Together with the Big Idea, the commentary addresses in bullet-point fashion the key ideas presented in the passage.
3. *Understanding the Text*. This section focuses on the exegesis of the text and includes several sections.
 - a. *The Text in Context*. Here the author gives a brief explanation of how the unit fits into the flow of the text around it, including refer-
 - b. *Outline/Structure*. For some literary genres (e.g., epistles), a brief exegetical outline may be provided to guide the reader through the structure and flow of the passage.
 - c. *Historical and Cultural Background*. This section addresses historical and cultural background information that may illuminate a verse or passage.
 - d. *Interpretive Insights*. This section provides information needed for a clear understanding of the passage. The intention of the author is to be highly selective and concise rather than exhaustive and expansive.
 - e. *Theological Insights*. In this very brief section the commentary identifies a few carefully selected theological insights about the passage.

4. *Teaching the Text.* Under this second main heading the commentary offers guidance for teaching the text. In this section the author lays out the main themes and applications of the passage. These are linked carefully to the Big Idea and are represented in the Key Themes.
5. *Illustrating the Text.* Here the commentary provides suggestions of where useful illustrations may be found in fields such as literature, entertainment, history, or biography. They are intended to provide general ideas for illustrating the passage's key themes and so serve as a catalyst for effectively illustrating the text.



All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, photocopied, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, audio recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Abbreviations

ANET	James B. Pritchard, ed. <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . 3rd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969	ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place
ARAB	Daniel David Luckenbill. <i>Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia</i> . 2 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926–27	KJV	King James Version
AT	author's translation	LXX	Septuagint, ancient Greek version of the OT
b.	born	mg.	marginal reading/note
BDB	Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon</i> . Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979	MT	Masoretic Text; Hebrew reading or verse numbers
ca.	<i>circa</i> , around, approximately	NASB	New American Standard Bible
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	NIDOTTE	Willem A. VanGemeren, ed. <i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997
chap./chaps.	chapter/chapters	NIV	New International Version (2011) number
COS	William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds. <i>The Context of Scripture</i> . 3 vols. Boston: Brill, 2003	no.	number
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
esp.	especially	NT	New Testament
HALOT	Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Revised by W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm. Translated and edited by M. E. J. Richardson. 2 vols. Boston: Brill, 2001	OT	Old Testament
		¶	paragraph
		repr.	reprint
		rev.	revised, revised by
		TDOT	G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds. <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006
		v./vv.	verse/verses
		ZIBBCOT	John H. Walton, ed. <i>Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament</i> . 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009



All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, photocopied, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, audio recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Introduction to 1 & 2 Samuel

Canonical Importance

The books of 1–2 Samuel are at the core of the Bible’s account of Israel’s history. The book of Judges ends with the observation that Israel’s lack of a king was responsible, at least in part, for the moral chaos that characterized the judges’ period (Judg. 21:25; cf. 17:6). In 1 Samuel this problem is seemingly rectified, as the Lord gives Israel a king. But as Saul’s reign goes from bad to worse, we discover all too quickly that not just any king will do. The rise of David, the man after God’s “own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), appears to right the ship, but his reign too is characterized by tragic failure and a return to the chaos that characterized the judges’ period. Nevertheless, in contrast to his relationship to Saul, the Lord has committed himself to David by covenant and preserves him on Israel’s throne, leaving readers with the hope that all is not lost after all. The Lord’s covenant promise to David is a pivotal event in Israel’s history and a guarantee that God’s purposes for his people will be eventually realized. As 2 Samuel ends, one can forge ahead in the history with the confidence that the Lord

has a plan for his people and will bring it to fruition through his chosen, albeit imperfect, servant David.

Literary Strategy

Three major characters, whose careers overlap, dominate the pages of 1–2 Samuel: Samuel (1 Sam. 1–16), Saul (1 Sam. 9–31), and David (1 Sam. 16–2 Sam. 24). David is the focal point of the story; literarily and historically, the other two characters function primarily in relation to David. As the Lord’s chosen prophet, Samuel is the one who anoints both Saul and David. Saul is the king Israel desires and perhaps deserves, but in the end he is a foil for David, who is, at least when at his peak, the king Israel needs.

The narrator of 1–2 Samuel demonstrates David’s superiority to Saul. He begins his defense of David’s kingship by establishing Samuel’s credentials as the Lord’s prophet. This is important to his strategy since Samuel, the Lord’s authorized spokesman, eventually denounces Saul and his dynasty, while anointing David as the new king. Samuel’s support of David becomes

foundational to the narrator's defense of David. After all, how can one argue with Samuel? In chapter after chapter, the narrator then establishes David's superiority to Saul, a fact that is recognized by virtually everyone, including Saul himself. The high point of this presentation is when the Lord makes a promise to David that secures his dynasty (2 Sam. 7). Of course, one might think that David's great sin will lead to his demise and the forfeiture of his special position, as it does with Saul. But even the account of David's failure contributes to the narrator's defense of his kingship. While certainly depicting the Lord's disciplinary measures in horrifying detail, the narrator makes it clear that the Lord's commitment to David remains firm. Indeed, a very tragic story concludes on an optimistic note as the thematically central poems of the epilogue celebrate David's status as the recipient of the divine promise (see 2 Sam. 22:51; 23:5).

Literary Connections to the Book of Judges

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections: the Torah (Law), the Prophets, and the Writings. The Prophets are divided into two parts: the Former and the Latter Prophets. First and Second Samuel are part of the Former Prophets, which include Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings (Ruth is in the Writings in the Hebrew Bible). The Former Prophets record the history of Israel from their entry into the promised land under Joshua to their expulsion from the land in 586 BC. Though this history undoubtedly contains many literary sources written over this long period of time, in its final form it is a literary unit, complete with a macroplot, as well as several subthemes. In short, it is a story in every sense of the word, albeit one that displays great literary diversity.

As a story, the Former Prophets display

the features one expects in a literary work, including foreshadowing and parallelism. This is especially true of 1–2 Samuel in relation to the book of Judges. The narrator employs patterns from Judges in his characterization of Samuel, Saul, and David.

From a literary standpoint, Samson (Judg. 13–16) and Micah (Judg. 17–18) are foils for Samuel. The accounts of all three



Fresco showing David's being anointed by Samuel, from the remains of the synagogue at Dura Europos (AD 245)

begin with a similar formula (Judg. 13:2; 17:1; 1 Sam. 1:1). Like Samson, Samuel is born to a barren woman. However, Samson’s moral weakness and lack of wisdom led to his humiliation and death, while faithful Samuel becomes the catalyst for political and religious revival. Samson only began the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines (Judg. 13:5), but Samuel and the great king he eventually anoints complete this task (1 Sam. 7:14; 17:1–58; 2 Sam. 5:17–25; 8:1). In contrast to Micah, whose idolatry led to the rise of a renegade religious center that competed with the authorized sanctuary at Shiloh, Samuel’s godly influence restores Shiloh to its rightful place (1 Sam. 3:21).¹

As for Saul, though he is physically well endowed and empowered by the divine Spirit (1 Sam. 10:10; 11:6), he ends up a tragic failure who epitomizes all that is wrong with early Israel and many of its leaders. He resembles several of the characters that the narrator presents in a negative light earlier in the history. His initial hesitancy to take the responsibility of leadership (1 Sam. 10:22) is reminiscent of Barak (Judg. 4) and Gideon (Judg. 6–7), and his formal statements of self-commitment (1 Sam. 14:28, 44) are every bit as rash as those of Jephthah (Judg. 11:30–31) and the non-Benjamite tribes (Judg. 21:1). His failure to obey all the details of God’s instructions regarding the destruction of Israel’s enemies (1 Sam. 15) reminds one of Achan’s sin (Josh. 7). Like Samson, Saul expires with a death wish on his lips and is publicly ridiculed

by the Philistines (Judg. 16:21–30; 1 Sam. 31:1–10).

David’s career likewise reflects patterns established earlier in the history. During his rise to power and the early years of his reign, he displays many of the admirable qualities of early Israel’s great leaders. He completes the military conquests started by Joshua, in the process demonstrating faith and courage (2 Sam. 5). Like Joshua and Caleb, he trusts in God’s power, even when confronted by giant warriors (cf. 1 Sam. 17 with Num. 13:22, 33; Josh. 11:21–22; 15:14). Like Othniel he wins the hand of a prominent leader’s daughter through heroic military deeds (cf. Judg. 1:12–13 with 1 Sam. 17:25; 18:20–28). However, when he sees “a woman” and succumbs to lust (2 Sam. 11:2), he turns from being the new Joshua/Caleb/Othniel and becomes the new Samson. From this point onward in the story, David’s family experiences the same sins that characterize the judges’ period: rape, murder, and civil war (cf. Judg. 19–21 with 2 Sam. 13–20).



Israel was able to expand its borders under David’s kingship because of the political weakness of the major powers across the ancient Near East. This map shows the empires of the ancient Near East in 900 BC.

Structure

Perhaps the simplest way to outline 1–2 Samuel would be a three-part division corresponding to the three main characters. Samuel is the focal point of 1 Samuel 1–8, Saul of 1 Samuel 9–31, and David of 2 Samuel. However, because of the extensive overlapping of these characters' careers, this outline is too simplistic. Unlike the book of Judges, these books have no clear-cut structural markers at the macro-structural level, so perhaps the best we can do is outline 1–2 Samuel in light of its major plot movements, revolving around the theme of kingship:

Prelude to Kingship: The Lord chooses Samuel to lead Israel (1 Sam. 1–7)

Kingship Inaugurated: Saul becomes king of Israel (1 Sam. 8–12)

Kingship Fails: Saul forfeits his dynasty and throne (1 Sam. 13–15)

Kingship in Limbo: The Lord chooses and protects a new king (1 Sam. 16–31)

Kingship Revived: The Lord establishes David's throne and dynasty (2 Sam. 1–10)

Kingship Threatened and Preserved: The Lord punishes and preserves David (2 Sam. 11–20)

Epilogue: A microcosm of David's reign (2 Sam. 21–24)

The Focus and Approach of This Commentary

As indicated in the welcome to the series, this commentary is not

designed as a reference work that provides exhaustive analysis of the text. There are plenty of these works available, many of which are cited in this volume's endnotes. The purpose of this commentary is to identify the major themes of each literary unit, to show how the text itself develops them, and to suggest how teachers can relevantly and accurately apply those themes to a modern audience. For this reason, readers should consult the reference commentaries for detailed discussions of higher-critical problems, background matters, and technical issues. This commentary focuses on the text's thematic and theological dimensions. Since the text's theological themes are often bound together with its literary features, this commentary is sensitive to the text's

This map shows the territory initially controlled by Saul, the large area conquered by David, and the expanded area ruled by Solomon.



literary dimension, especially intertextual connections within the Former Prophets and within 1–2 Samuel. Oddly enough, this literary dimension has been sorely neglected for the most part in the reference commentaries, which unfortunately and typically fail to see the forest for the trees.

Moving from Text to Lesson

As stated above, the narrator's overriding concern is to demonstrate that David (not Saul) is the Lord's chosen king and the heir to a covenant promise that guarantees the realization of God's purposes for his people Israel. Throughout the commentary I show how each literary unit contributes to this strategy. For the most part, these observations appear in the sections titled "The Text in Context." Sound exposition of the book should keep this authorial intention before the modern audience. Granted, the interrelated themes of David's election and superiority to Saul may not seem as relevant today as they would have to an ancient Israelite audience, but it is important to recognize that the Davidic covenant is vital to biblical theology and, for that matter, to our understanding of Christology.

I am not suggesting that this strategic theme exhausts the application potential of 1–2 Samuel or that we should simply teach a series of lessons that repetitively assert David's election and the importance of the Davidic covenant. The Scriptures are too multidimensional to be squeezed into such a mold. Under the umbrella of David's divine election, the narrator weaves together the story of Israel in such a way that multiple and often interrelated themes emerge. Under the sections titled "Key Themes,"

I have tried to state these, as an ancient Israelite audience might have perceived them. In identifying the text's themes, I have taken my cue from the text itself. For example, in 1 Samuel 1–17, the major theme of almost every unit is stated in generalized form within discourse (quoted material) that appears within the episode (see 2:1–10, 30; 4:21–22; 5:7; 6:5–6, 20; 7:3, 12; 8:7; 9:16; 10:19; 11:13; 12:14–15, 22, 24–25; 13:14; 14:6, 29; 15:22–23; 16:7; 17:45–47).

In trying to surface the text's themes, I have consistently asked myself two questions: (1) How does God reveal himself in this passage? In other words, what does this passage teach us about God's character? (2) How does God relate to his people in this passage? In other words, how does God intervene in the story and/or respond to the actions of the human characters? I use a theocentric hermeneutical principle, focusing on what we learn about our sovereign, relational God in this story. Such an approach is foundational to sound exposition of the Scriptures, a primary purpose of which is to reveal the infinite God to his finite creatures.

Yet the actions and experiences of the characters in the story are also instructive and contribute to the text's message. True, the main characters in the story are leaders who occupy special positions in the covenant community at a particular time and place within Israel's history. For this reason we cannot simply assume that their actions and experiences are normative or paradigmatic. But at the same time, we dare not relegate their actions and experiences to their historical context as if they are completely time-bound. After all, the kings of Israel are to be spiritual leaders

of the covenant community (Deut. 17:14–20). Indeed, the destinies of king and of community are linked (1 Sam. 12:13–15, 24–25). God’s people can learn much from examining these kings’ successes and failures, especially in cases where they obey or disobey covenant commands that apply to the entire community.

In developing the themes of the story, I have also tried to take account of the narrator’s implied audience (the audience he envisions). Unfortunately, we do not know when 1–2 Samuel was written. We can safely assume that at least some of the source material originated as early as David’s or Solomon’s reign, because the pro-David apology, coupled with the anti-Saul polemic, would have been especially relevant in that setting. However, the book

in its present form cannot be isolated to this one historical context. As noted above, it is part of a larger history known as the Former Prophets. The story of the Former Prophets culminates in the exile (2 Kings 25:27–30), so we can assume that the implied audience is the exilic or postexilic generation. With that in mind, as I sought to identify and develop the text’s theme(s), I have asked myself: How would the literary unit under examination have affected the exiles? By including or retaining this particular episode in the larger story, what point is the narrator trying to make to his exilic audience? What lessons are there for them? My thoughts in this regard appear,

BAKER PUBLISHING

This stepped-stone structure, called the Millo, located in the ancient City of David in Jerusalem, may have supported a royal building, such as David’s palace.

for the most part, under the sections titled “Theological Insights.”

Finally, having derived themes from the text, I use them as the basis for the principles stated and developed in the sections titled “Teaching the Text.” Here I develop so-called timeless truths from the text’s themes and build a bridge from the ancient context to our contemporary situation. Hopefully, in this way the teach-

ing points designed for a modern context are firmly rooted in the text’s purpose in its ancient context and reflect the divine Author’s intention for the passage. In this regard, the statements that appear under the “Big Idea” of each unit highlight the key timeless principle that emerges from that unit. Often this “Big Idea” synthesizes the themes into one concise statement.

BAKER PUBLISHING GROUP

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, photocopied, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, audio recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Barren No More

Big Idea *The Lord, the incomparable King, vindicates his loyal followers.*

Understanding the Text

The Text in Context

The judges' period was a low point in Israel's history. God's people, without effective leadership, hit rock bottom morally, ethically, and spiritually. The final chapters of Judges contain alarming accounts of gang rape, civil war, mass slaughter of entire tribes and cities, and kidnapping. The book ends by declaring, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judg. 21:25).

First Samuel is a fitting sequel to Judges. Samuel reverses the downward leadership trend depicted in Judges and eventually anoints David as king, giving the nation hope that the situation lamented at the end of Judges will be rectified. The book begins with an account of Samuel's birth. The key figure in the story is an oppressed, childless woman named Hannah. That this woman is suffering and oppressed comes as no surprise since the book of Judges ends with Israelite women being victimized by their own countrymen's misguided zeal and cruelty.

One of the central themes in 1–2 Samuel is David's God-given right to rule as Israel's king. The narrator demonstrates that God

rejects Saul and chooses David. Though he does exhibit some political ambition, David does not usurp the throne and then claim divine authority to justify his power play. He respects Saul as God's anointed ruler and waits for God to remove Saul from the throne, rather than taking matters into his own hands. Samuel has an important role to play in this regard: after anointing Saul as king, Samuel with prophetic authority also pronounces God's rejection of Saul just before anointing David as his successor. It thus is important for the narrator to establish Samuel's credentials. This account of his divinely enabled birth (cf. 1 Sam. 1:19; 2:5) from a mother who demonstrates unwavering allegiance to the Lord contributes to this goal. It also links Samuel with the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, who also were conceived by previously barren mothers, and suggests that Samuel will have a role in the outworking of the Lord's ancient promises to the patriarchs. The Lord's deliverance of Hannah from humiliation also foreshadows how he will deliver his people from their enemies through Hannah's son and the king he will anoint, as Hannah herself anticipates in her song of thanks (2:10).¹

Key Themes of 1 Samuel 1:1–2:11

- The Lord begins a process of providing competent leadership for Israel.
- The Lord is the incomparable King, who protects and vindicates his loyal followers.

Historical and Cultural Background

The Canaanites (neighbors of ancient Israel) worshiped the fertility god Baal, believing him to be a mighty warrior king who controlled the elements of the storm. They counted Baal as responsible for both agricultural and human fertility. Baal's quest for kingship, under the ultimate authority of the high god El, is the main theme of their mythological texts. He defeats Yamm, the god of the unruly, threatening sea, but must then face the challenge of Mot, the god of the underworld and death. Mot initially defeats Baal, much to the dismay of El and the other gods. But then Baal returns to life and eventually engages in a violent conflict with Mot. Baal wins, but one suspects that the struggle for power is not over. The myth reflected the realities of nature. When the rains arrived at the proper time and the crops grew, Baal was in control. But when drought interrupted the natural cycle and brought starvation, Mot had defeated Baal.

In her song of praise following Samuel's birth, Hannah declares that the Lord is incomparable to all other so-called gods. Living at a time when many are worshipping the fertility god Baal (cf. Judg. 2:11–13; 6:25–32; 8:33; 10:6, 10; 1 Sam. 7:4), Hannah could be tempted to look to this popular god to deliver her from her childless condition. But she remains faithful to the Lord and is vindicated. She affirms that the Lord is sovereign, challenging the Canaanite belief that Baal is the incomparable king who ensures fertility. In contrast to Baal,

who periodically succumbs to the god of death, the Lord both kills and makes alive. The Lord, not Baal, is the one who thunders in the storm.²

Interpretive Insights

1:1 *There was a certain man from Ramathaim . . . whose name was Elkanah.* Hannah's story begins the same way as the stories of Samson (Judg. 13:2, "A certain man of Zorah, named Manoah") and Micah (Judg. 17:1, "Now a man named Micah from the hill country of Ephraim"). In contrast to Samson's unnamed mother, whose supernaturally conceived Nazirite son fails to recognize his role as the Lord's deliverer and never rises to the level of an effective leader, Hannah supernaturally gives birth to a son through whom the Lord restores effective leadership to Israel. Samson only begins the deliverance of Israel (Judg. 13:5), but Samuel and then David, whom Samuel anoints as king, defeat the enemies of Israel (1 Sam. 7:14; 17:1–58; 2 Sam. 5:17–25; 8:1). Micah's anonymous mother's obsession with idols contributes to the Danites' unauthorized worship system (Judg.



A god, perhaps Baal, is depicted as a warrior in this bronze figurine from Tyre (1400–1200 BC).

17–18). But Hannah’s allegiance to the Lord is the catalyst for the revival of true worship through the spiritual leadership of her son, Samuel.

1:5 *the LORD had closed her womb.* The narrator introduces an element of tension to the story by informing us that the Lord is responsible for Hannah’s condition.³ In the biblical world, events and circumstances that we might call natural occurrences are attributed to God. We probably would not think of a woman’s inability to bear a child as being due to divine displeasure. But Hannah’s family and even Hannah herself might wonder if God is displeased with her since she seems to be excluded from his promise of blessing (Exod. 23:25–26; Deut. 7:14). When the Lord answers her prayer for a child, Hannah’s character is vindicated.

1:6 *her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.* We know from reading the patriarchal stories in Genesis that polygamy gives rise to domestic conflict, especially when one wife is barren. The same is true in Elkanah’s home. The narrator identifies Peninnah as Hannah’s *rival* because she ridicules Hannah’s condition to the point where Hannah weeps and refuses to eat (v. 7). This portrait of Hannah’s torment sets the



Hannah turned to the Lord in her despair over her barrenness. Other women in her situation may have used fertility figurines. Shown here is a pottery piece with an exaggerated female form. Referred to as “pillar figurines,” hundreds have been found in Judah and date to the eighth and seventh centuries BC. Some think they may have been a type of talisman to bring about fertility and childbirth.

stage for her desperate plea for relief from her humiliation.

1:10 *In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly.* The expression “deep anguish” means severe depression and emotional torment (Job 3:20–22; 10:1; Prov. 31:6–7; Ezek. 27:31). Hannah’s own words testify to her intense suffering. She speaks of her “misery” (v. 11) and “great anguish and grief” (v. 16); she describes herself as “deeply troubled” (v. 15). By emphasizing Hannah’s suffering, the narrator sets the stage for the Lord’s intervention. The Lord is not indifferent to the pain and oppression of the needy; he takes notice of them and lifts them from their affliction (2:3, 8).

1:11 *she made a vow.* In this culture, making a vow to a deity in a prayer for deliverance was a typical response to a crisis. Vows commonly offered the Deity a gift in return for granting the desired favor (cf. Num. 21:2).⁴

LORD Almighty. Hannah addresses the Lord with a title (traditionally, “LORD of Hosts” [KJV]) that highlights his sovereignty, envisioning him as one who sits enthroned above the cherubim of the ark of the covenant, the earthly symbol of his heavenly throne (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2). It makes sense that she would address the Lord in this way at Shiloh, for “the ark of God” is housed there (1 Sam. 4:3).

no razor will ever be used on his head. Though Samuel is never actually called a Nazirite, lengthy hair is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Nazirites (Num. 6:5; Judg. 13:5). This description facilitates the comparison with Samson (see the comments above on 1:1).⁵

1:13 *Eli thought she was drunk.* In this chapter the male characters misunderstand

Hannah.⁶ Elkanah misunderstands the depth of Hannah's suffering and anguish, thinking that his assurances of his love should be enough to cheer her up (1:8). Eli fails to discern the depth of her sincerity and desperation, misinterpreting her intensity as drunkenness. The narrator begins to develop a portrait of Eli as being spiritually insensitive.

1:19 *the LORD remembered her.* In her prayer Hannah asks the Lord to “remember” her by giving her a son (v. 11). As used here, the word does not refer to simple cognition or recall but carries the idea “remember and act.” The repetition of the word draws attention to the fact that the Lord answers her prayer.

2:1 *my horn is lifted high.* The horn of an ox underlies the metaphor (Deut. 33:17; 1 Kings 22:11; Ps. 92:10), which depicts military strength. The idiom “exalt the horn” signifies military victory (Pss. 89:17, 24; 92:10; Lam. 2:17). In the ancient Near East powerful warrior kings would sometimes compare themselves to a goring bull using its horns to kill its enemies. Hannah views herself as the victor in her struggle with Peninnah.

2:2 *There is no one holy like the LORD.* In the Ugaritic myths the assembly of the gods is called “sons of the Holy One” (COS, 1:246, 343). El, the high god, is the head of this assembly, but Baal has a prominent position. He is even depicted as standing beside El. The goddess Anat declares: “ Mightiest Baal is our king, our judge, over whom there is none” (COS, 1:254–55). As if directly countering this claim, Hannah calls the Lord “holy” (that is, unique) and affirms that he is incomparable.

there is no Rock like our God. The term “Rock” refers to a rocky cliff, which is relatively inaccessible and provides protection for those being pursued by enemies. Consequently it depicts God as a place of refuge and safety.

2:6 *The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up.* In the myths Baal engages in a struggle with death; he goes down to the grave, is pronounced dead, and later returns to life. In stark contrast, the Lord is sovereign over death. He can kill and make alive.

2:10 *The Most High will thunder from heaven.* The title “Most High” is used of Baal in the Ugaritic legend of Kirta, in a passage describing the storm-god as the source of rain (COS, 1:341). But Hannah affirms that the Lord is the one who will intervene in the storm as he defeats the enemies of his people.

and exalt the horn of his anointed. Though Israel has no king at this point, Hannah, reflecting the concern expressed in Judges 21:25, anticipates a time when the Lord will raise up a king for Israel like the one described in the law (Deut. 17:14–20).⁷ The use of the horn metaphor here forms a thematic bracket (or inclusio) for the song.⁸

Theological Insights

Samuel's birth is a turning point in Israel's history. As Hannah acknowledges in her song of praise, her deliverance from her oppressed condition foreshadows what God will do for the nation in the years that immediately follow (2:10). Through Hannah's son, Samuel, God will once again reveal his word to his people, give them military victory over hostile enemies, and establish a king who will lead the nation

to previously unrealized heights. The final canonical context of the Former Prophets is the exile (2 Kings 25). The exiles are enduring the consequences of their ancestors' and their own rebellious deeds and suffering oppression under foreign rule, but they can find hope in the realization that the Lord is just and eventually vindicates those who are loyal to him. They can confidently look to the future, anticipating God's intervention in the life of the covenant community and the arrival of an ideal Davidic king, through whom God will bring about the fulfillment of his ancient covenant promises.

Teaching the Text

This story has two main themes, the second of which has various dimensions:

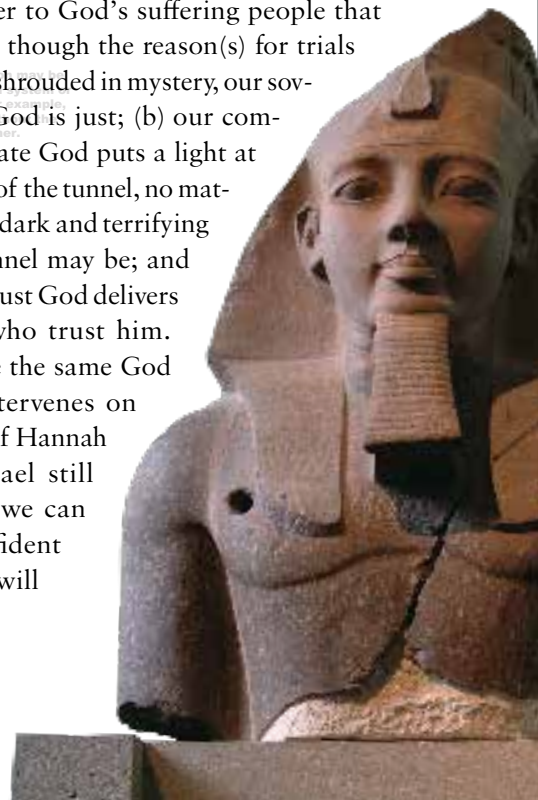
1. *Even when the Lord's covenant community is spiritually deficient and plagued by a leadership void, his commitment to his people prompts him to provide leadership.* Ancient Israel needs a king (Judg. 21:25)—not just any king, but the kind of king envisioned in Deuteronomy 17:14–20. This king, in contrast to the typical king of the ancient world, is not to build a powerful chariot force, have a large harem, or accumulate great wealth. Instead, he is commissioned to promote God's covenant through his policies and practices. In response to Hannah's loyalty, the Lord gives her a son, Samuel, and sets in process a sequence of events that will culminate in the anointing

of David, a man after God's own heart, as king of Israel.

In many ways David proves to be a tragic failure, and his dynasty fails to live up to God's standards. But God's covenantal commitment to David stands firm: eventually Jesus, the son of David par excellence, arrives on the scene as Israel's king (John 1:49; 12:13; 18:37). He eventually establishes his kingdom on earth, fulfilling God's promises to David (2 Sam. 7:16; Pss. 2:8–9; 72:1–19; 89:19–37) and completing what God has started with the birth of Samuel (Matt. 16:28; Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

2. *Though the sovereign Lord may allow his people to endure trials and even oppression, he is just and will eventually deliver them from distress when they cry out to him for vindication.* Hannah's story is a reminder to God's suffering people that (a) even though the reason(s) for trials may be shrouded in mystery, our sovereign God is just; (b) our compassionate God puts a light at the end of the tunnel, no matter how dark and terrifying that tunnel may be; and (c) our just God delivers those who trust him. Because the same God who intervenes on behalf of Hannah and Israel still reigns, we can be confident that he will

The kind of king envisioned in Deuteronomy was not a typical king of the ancient world, like Ramesses the Great (shown here). This thirteenth-century BC ruler of Egypt led his army into battle, had close to one hundred children, and commissioned many elaborate building projects.



vindicate his church when he establishes the rule of his Son, Jesus Christ.

This text does not promise or even imply that God will give children to a childless couple if they just pray hard enough or promise to God they will dedicate the child to his service. The text affirms that God is a just King, who vindicates his people. Hannah experiences that truth in a particular way that is relevant to her situation; others may experience it in different ways that are appropriate to their own circumstances. Though there is room for personal application of the text's theme, the passage is most naturally applied corporately to the covenant community: Hannah's experience foreshadows Israel's coming deliverance from foreign oppression and gives hope to the exiles, who are experiencing humiliation in a foreign land.

Illustrating the Text

There is mystery to trials and suffering.

Memoir: *A Stranger in the House of God*, by John Koessler. In this memoir (2007), Koessler, a professor and author, writes:

My prayers felt like the petitions I sometimes made to my parents. The greater the request, the more ambiguous the response.

“Mom, can I get a new bike?”

“Mmm, we’ll see.”

Such an answer occupied that mysterious no-man’s-land between wish and fulfillment children know so well. This is a region where the atmosphere is a mixture of hope and disappointment—only as much hope as is needed to keep our wildest dreams at bay, and not enough disappointment to kill them altogether.⁹

The prayers of the persecuted are effective.

True Story: *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, by Robert Coles. Ruby came from a hardworking and deeply faith-reliant family. When a judge ordered the schools of New Orleans to be desegregated, Ruby was one of the first chosen to make this happen. Angry crowds gathered for her first school day, and for many days after. For months, Ruby was alone, escorted in and out by marshals. One day, Ruby uttered a prayer in front of the crowd, asking God to forgive those who had mistreated her because “they don’t know what they’re doing,” just like people had said terrible things about Jesus “a long time ago.”¹⁰

The justice of God identifies with and vindicates his oppressed people.

Poetry: William Cullen Bryant. The following poem by Bryant (1794–1878) was found (interleaved) at the opening of chapter 40 of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Deem not the just by Heaven forgot!
Though life its common gifts
deny,—
Though, with a crushed and bleed-
ing heart,
And spurned of man, he goes to die!
For God hath marked each sorrow-
ing day,
And numbered every bitter tear,
And heaven’s long years of bliss
shall pay
For all his children suffer here.

Disrespect Can Be Deadly

Big Idea *The Lord opposes those who treat him with contempt and withholds his promised blessings from those who despise him.*

Understanding the Text

The Text in Context

Samuel's arrival at Shiloh (1:28; 2:11) provides a contrastive backdrop for the author's negative portrait of Eli and his sons. The narrator alternates between negative accounts of Eli's house (2:12–17, 22–25, 27–36) and brief positive observations about Samuel's growing relationship with the Lord (2:18–21, 26). This culminates in the account of how Samuel becomes the Lord's prophet and reiterates the earlier judgment announcement upon Eli's house (3:1–4:1a). The narrator's positive assessment of Samuel helps to establish the latter's credentials, which is an important part of his strategy in promoting David as God's chosen king (see the discussion above, under "The Text in Context" for 1 Sam. 1:1–2:11).

This account, along with the one that follows (3:1–4:1a), also contributes in another way to the narrator's goal of presenting David, not Saul, as God's chosen

king. The rejection of Eli's house and the announcement of a new priestly dynasty establish a pattern that will be repeated with Saul and David. Just as God withdraws his promise of dynastic succession from Eli and gives it to another (2:30–36), so he will do with Saul (13:13–14). The house of Saul will not be able to appeal to God's election as unconditional, for Eli's experience demonstrates that disobedience can result in forfeiture of the divine promise. The Lord has the sovereign right to reject rebels and to accomplish his purposes through other and more-worthy instruments.

The account of Eli's rejection is important to the subsequent history in yet another way. When Solomon takes over the throne following his father's death, he replaces Abiathar, a descendant of Eli, with Zadok (1 Kings 2:26–27, 35). Solomon's decision, though motivated by Abiathar's decision to support Adonijah, is consistent with the prophetic proclamation recorded in 1 Samuel 2:27–36. One gets the impression

During Eli's day the tabernacle was in Shiloh, in the hills of Ephraim, making this an important religious center. Shown here is the tell at ancient Shiloh (modern Khirbet Seilun) with its visible Middle Bronze walls.



Key Themes of 1 Samuel 2:12–36

- The Lord expects his servants to treat him with the utmost respect.
- The Lord is not compelled to grant his promised blessing when his servants prove to be unworthy.

that the narrator of 1 Kings, by drawing attention to the fulfillment of the prophecy (cf. 2:27), is trying to absolve the house of David of any wrongdoing in the matter.

Interpretive Insights

2:12 *scoundrels*. In contrast to Hannah, whose trust in the Lord is exemplary, Eli's sons are depicted as those who dishonor God. Earlier Hannah pleads with Eli not to regard her as "wicked" (1:16), the same Hebrew word used of Eli's sons in 2:12. Eli's harsh initial response to her (1:14) suggests that he perceives her as such a woman, but ironically his own sons are really the ones who are wicked.¹ Eli is thus portrayed as a poor judge of what is evil or not, which calls into question his qualifications to serve as a judge in Israel. The narrator's characterization of Eli's sons as "scoundrels" is especially disconcerting when one realizes that the same expression is used of the men of Gibeah, who threaten to gang-rape a Levite and then violate and murder his concubine (Judg. 19:22).

they had no regard for the LORD. They surely know who the Lord is: they are serving at his sanctuary! But the verb translated "had no regard" means "did not acknowledge (as LORD)." Their actions demonstrate that they do not recognize the Lord's authority. Instead of following the procedure prescribed in the law (Lev. 7:28–36), they take the meat they want, even before the Lord is given his share (the fat; vv. 13–15).

2:17 *This sin . . . was very great in the LORD's sight*. This sin is considered to be as serious as adultery or idolatry (Gen. 20:9; Exod. 32:21, 30–31; 2 Kings 17:21). These other texts also mention a "great sin," but only here is the phrase emphasized by the

addition of "very." This assessment of their sin stands in stark contrast to the statement in verse 18 that Samuel is ministering in the Lord's sight.²

they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt. To treat the Lord or the things of the Lord with contempt usually results in severe punishment (Num. 14:23; 16:30; 2 Sam. 12:14; Pss. 10:13–15; 107:11–12; Isa. 1:4; 5:24).

2:22 *how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting*. Here we read of another sin committed by Eli's sons. This particular statement is not mentioned, however, in the Qumran text of this passage, or in the Greek manuscript Codex Vaticanus. Some regard it as a later addition.³ The narrator does not mention such a sin in his earlier account (2:13–17), nor does the prophet who confronts Eli mention it (2:27–29).

2:25 *God may mediate for the offender*. Eli's point is that a mediator is available to resolve a purely human conflict, but when someone sins against the Lord, there is no one who can successfully challenge his accusation against the wrongdoer. In short, Eli's sons have placed themselves in the unenviable and unviable position of being the opponents of God.

for it was the LORD's will to put them to death. Eli's warning to his sons falls on deaf ears because the Lord has already given them over to judgment and has determined to kill them. The statement is ironic in light

of Hannah's earlier declaration that the Lord both kills and makes alive (v. 6).

2:29 *Why do you scorn?* The Hebrew verb occurs only here and in Deuteronomy 32:15, where it is used of an animal's kicking (a metaphor for Israel's rejection of God). The form here is plural, associating Eli with his sons.

Why do you honor your sons more than me? Though Eli confronts his sons about their behavior, albeit belatedly (vv. 23–25), apparently he still experiences the benefits of their actions and enjoys the food they take from the people. As far as the Lord is concerned, Eli's actions speak louder than his words and implicate him in their crimes.

2:30 *would minister before me forever.* The phrase translated “forever” refers to an indefinite period of time, with no immediate end in view (Deut. 23:3; 1 Sam. 1:22; 2 Sam. 12:10; Isa. 32:14; Jer. 17:4), and does not necessarily connote the concept of eternity. One might think that the use of “forever” in the Lord's promise would make it irrevocable, but this is clearly not the case here. The expression is used simply to emphasize the Lord's intention to bless

Eli. The actions of Eli and his sons cancel the conditional promise.

Those who honor me I will honor. In this case honoring the Lord means obeying him by offering the sacrifices properly and giving the Lord his proper share. The Lord would honor Eli by bestowing the promised blessings upon him (Ps. 91:15–16).

those who despise me will be disdained. To despise the Lord means to blatantly disobey him (2 Sam. 12:10; Prov. 14:2; Mal. 1:6–7). By honoring the enemies of the Lord (v. 29), Eli has despised the Lord. This is a key statement for understanding the primary theme of this chapter.

2:33 *to destroy your sight and sap your strength.* The language gives the impression that Eli will be around to see God's judgment on his descendants, but he is nearing one hundred years of age (1 Sam. 4:15) and will soon die (4:18). This is a dramatic rhetorical device and may also assume the principle of corporate solidarity, according to which an ancestor experiences later events through his offspring (Gen. 3:15; 28:14).

all your descendants will die in the prime of life. The prophecy seems to indicate that Eli will continue to have a priestly succession for a time, but that each successor will die prematurely (see vv. 31–32). According to many, the primary fulfillment of this prophecy is recorded in 1 Samuel 22 (see “Theological Insights” under 1 Sam. 22:6–23).



Offering sacrifices properly was part of honoring the Lord. Most cultures of the ancient Near East brought meat sacrifices to their gods. This relief from the Hatshepsut temple at Deir el-Bahari in Egypt shows an offering table before the Egyptian god Amon that includes whole cattle, cattle heads, and legs of beef (fifteenth century BC).

Conditional Promises

More often than not, the Lord's promises in the Old Testament are conditional (whether explicitly or implicitly) and depend for their fulfillment on a proper response from the recipient.^a Jeremiah 18 is a foundational text in this regard. Just as the potter improvises his design for the uncooperative clay, so the Lord can change his plans for Israel (vv. 5–6). If the Lord intends to destroy a nation, but it repents when warned of impending doom, the Lord will relent from sending judgment (vv. 7–8). Conversely, if the Lord intends to bless a nation, but it rebels, the Lord will alter his plan and withhold blessing (vv. 9–10). God announces his intentions, but the recipient's response can and often does affect God's decision as to what will actually transpire. In fact, contingent promises are designed to motivate a proper response to God's word so that a threatened judgment may be canceled or a promised blessing may be realized.^b One finds the same phenomenon in Mesopotamia, where "most predictions were conditional."^c

^a Pratt, "Historical Contingencies"; Chisholm, "When Prophecy Appears to Fail."

^b Clendenen, "Textlinguistics and Prophecy," 388–90.

^c See Tiemeyer, "Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy," 349.

2:34 *they will both die on the same day.* This prophecy is fulfilled shortly afterward, when Hophni and Phinehas die in battle (4:11).

2:35 *I will raise up for myself a faithful priest.* This prophecy is fulfilled when Solomon demotes Eli's descendant Abiathar and appoints Zadok as priest in his place (1 Kings 2:26–27, 35).⁴ Zadok is descended from Aaron through Eleazar (1 Chron. 6:3–8, 50–53), whereas Abiathar's father Ahimelek (1 Sam. 22:20) is a descendant of Aaron through Ithamar and Eli (1 Chron. 24:3). The descendants of Ithamar/Eli continue to serve, but in a subordinate role (24:4).



Note: See 1 Sam. 14:3; 22:9, 20;
2 Sam. 8:17; 1 Kings 2:26–27, 35;
1 Chron. 6:3–8, 50–53; 4:3, 6

2:36 *bow down before him for a piece of silver and a loaf of bread and plead.* The punishment fits the crime. Eli's sons are gorging themselves on food that belongs to the Lord and is being taken from the people by force (vv. 12–17), so Eli's descendants will someday need to beg for their food.⁵

We are not certain when and how this was fulfilled. First Kings 2:26–27 tells of Abiathar's demotion, but the subsequent narrative does not describe him or his offspring being reduced to poverty.

Theological Insights

The Lord does not tolerate those who dishonor his royal authority, including Eli, who passively endorses his sons' disrespect by failing to confront it forcefully enough. The Lord even cancels his conditional promise to Eli and announces that he will replace Eli's descendants with those who are more worthy. As noted above, this episode foreshadows God's rejection of Saul and election of David. In the passage's larger canonical context (the Former Prophets), it is a sobering reminder to the exiles that a privileged position before God does not

insulate one from divine discipline and that disobedience can cause promised blessing to evaporate. At the same time, it serves as a challenge to the exiles not to repeat the sins of the past. They must respect the Lord's royal authority by obeying him.

Teaching the Text

1. *The Lord does not tolerate those who value their own selfish desires above honoring the Lord and thereby disrespect his royal authority.* In contrast to Hannah, who affirms the Lord's holiness (2:2), Eli's sons disrespect the Lord by disregarding his clearly revealed commands and depriving him of his proper portion of the people's offerings. Their attitudes and actions indicate that they value their own desires above honoring the Lord. In so doing they treat him as if he does not have authority over them. In a New Testament or modern context, disrespect for God's royal authority may take many specific forms, depending on one's circumstances. But at the most fundamental level, we disrespect God anytime we disregard his revealed moral will and by our attitudes and actions deny his authority over our lives. Now, as then, God will confront those who treat him with disrespect. In the case of Eli and his sons, they lose

their lives and their priestly dynasty. In a New Testament or modern context, God's discipline may take a variety of forms (see, e.g., Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor. 11:27–32; Heb. 11:15–17, 25), but one thing is certain: it can be unpleasant and even severe.

A corollary of this first principle may be stated as follows: the Lord expects total allegiance from his chosen servants. Eli warns his sons, albeit belatedly, about the consequences of their actions. Yet from God's perspective, this is not an adequate response. After all, apparently Eli is content to benefit from their misbehavior. Though he is old and weak, he has the authority to remove them from office, but he fails to do so. The Lord punishes Eli because he tolerates his sons' contempt, even though he does not approve of it or directly participate in it. In this case there is no middle ground. To participate in and tolerate the sons' sins in any way is to align oneself against the Lord. Eli serves as a reminder that God demands total allegiance from his servants. Halfhearted lip service without substantive action does not impress him.

2. *The Lord may withdraw his promised blessing from those who reject his authority.* The Lord is faithful and reliable, and he expects his servants to be loyal and obedient. Being called to a special position, as



Eli's sons dishonored the Lord by not following the sacrificial procedures described in the law. This life-size replica of the tabernacle located at Timna, Israel, shows the altar, with a shovel and three-prong fork leaning against it, in the courtyard of the tent of meeting.

Eli and his family are, does not insulate one from divine discipline. From everyone to whom much is given, much is required (Amos 3:2; Luke 12:48). God sometimes makes promises to those whom he chooses, but often these promises are contingent upon continued loyalty. Rather than being guarantees that give the recipients a license to act as they wish, these promises should motivate continued obedience.

This is not a text about parenting. One could use Eli's example to illustrate poor parenting *if* one were preaching from another passage that deals directly with the subject of parenting, such as a proverb. (The NT frequently uses OT characters and events for illustrative purposes, even when the OT text is not directly addressing the theme of the NT passage.) *But* if 1 Samuel 2:12–36 is one's base text for a sermon or lesson, then the themes outlined above, not parenting, should be the focus of the exposition.

Illustrating the Text

The importance of respecting God's authority cannot be overestimated.

History: During World War I, British soldiers understood that their leaders (military, political, and sovereign) expected them to fight even if it meant the loss of their lives, yet they entered the conflict. They knew that this was the only way for good to prevail. Even the overwhelming suffering of the war did not change their responsibility. Those who did succumb to their fears suffered the dire consequences of a court-martial or went before a firing squad. Among the first

to experience this kind of military justice was Private Thomas Highgate. Revulsed by the deaths of thousands of British troops at the Battle of Mons, he escaped the scene and hid in a barn. Just a month after entrance into the war he was put to death, at the age of seventeen.⁶

Our uncompromising allegiance to God is crucial; halfhearted service is unacceptable.

Literature: *The Wise Woman*, by George MacDonald. This memorable story (1875; also called *The Lost Princess*) by nineteenth-century British author MacDonald (1824–1905) is about the character of God as represented in the Wise Woman. She possesses supernatural powers and visits two young girls, one the daughter of royalty, the other a shepherd's daughter. Both girls must be disciplined rigorously to be delivered from sins of pride, willfulness, and selfishness. The Wise Woman's relentless but loving approach tolerates no halfhearted change. The book, a quick read, is one of the stronger portraits in print of God's helping one to understand the consequences of incomplete submission.

To forfeit God's blessing is a tragedy.

Literature: *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan. In this well-known work (1678), Bunyan (1628–88) tells of a man locked up in an iron cage, full of despair. When asked how he came to be this way, unable even to repent, he replies, "I left off to watch and be sober. I laid the reins upon the neck of my lusts. I sinned against the light of the Word and the goodness of God. I have grieved the Spirit, and He is gone."⁷