



## *Yahweh's Self Revelation in Deed and Word: A Biblical Theology of 1-2 Samuel*

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### Introduction

The phrase “Biblical theology,” when applied to a text, typically refers to the theological themes embedded in that text by authorial intention. For the purpose of this essay, I use the phrase in a more restricted theocentric sense to refer to what the text communicates about God. In my view, the vehicle of the theology of 1-2 Samuel is Yahweh’s self-revelation in both deed and word. The theology of 1-2 Samuel is what Yahweh reveals about his character through his self-revelation as recorded within these books. However, since Yahweh’s self-revelation is inherently relational (after all, the very concept of revelation assumes an audience or recipient), I also recognize that the theology of 1-2 Samuel has an anthropological dimension and includes the themes of how God relates to people and what he expects from them.

Quotations play an important role in Old Testament narrative.<sup>1</sup> In addition to their literary role of contributing to characterization and plot development, they are often the conveyors of a narrative’s themes and the narrator’s theological message. This is certainly the case in the Books of Samuel, where the major theological themes are often (perhaps we could say, almost always) stated in quotations.<sup>2</sup> The narrator describes Yahweh as very involved in the life of the covenant community. Yahweh intervenes in events and lives,

<sup>1</sup>For example, in 1 Samuel 1-15 quotations appear in 228 of the 383 verses (60%).

<sup>2</sup>Bergen points out that the authors of biblical narrative express their “values and ideological concerns” through the “overall storyline,” “statements made by characters in the narrative,” and “nonnarrative comments embedded into the story.” He states that the second of these is the most common. In a method he calls “Quote Prominence Analysis,” Bergen seeks “to identify the quotations the canonical author highlighted the most, and in so doing to pinpoint the quotes most likely to contain thematically central propositions.” It is important to consider the importance of the character, ranked in the order “Israel’s deity, spokesmen for Israel’s deity, and kings,” and quotation length, as well as several other factors, some of which are stylistic and linguistic. See Robert D. Bergen, “Authorial Intent and the Spoken Word: A Discourse-critical Analysis of Speech Acts in Accounts of Israel’s United Monarchy (1 Sam. 1—1 Kings 11),” in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*, ed. David M. Howard, Jr. and Michael Grisanti (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 362-68.

and he reveals something of himself through his actions. But it is through the spoken word—statements made by Yahweh himself and/or by those who experience his self-revelation—that the theological significance of Yahweh’s deeds is articulated. Thus, pertinent quotations will be an important focus in our study. We will proceed inductively, surfacing the books’ major theological themes as we move through 1-2 Samuel, before concluding with a theological synthesis of 1-2 Samuel.

My approach differs to some degree from that of some recent major works on 1-2 Samuel. For example, Firth identifies three “central themes” in 1-2 Samuel—the reign of God, kingship, and prophetic authority.<sup>3</sup> The “reign of God” is certainly a fundamental theological theme, but the second and third themes are more literary in nature, at least by my definition. Bergen lists four themes under the heading “1, 2 Samuel as Theology”—covenant, land, the presence of God, and the demand for wholehearted obedience to the Lord.<sup>4</sup> The first two themes in his list are literary; the third and fourth are theological by my definition in that they focus on God’s self-revelation and his expectations of his people, respectively. Arnold, after a discussion of Yahweh’s kingship, lists three other theological themes in the book—messianism, the right use of power, and the definition and nature of repentance.<sup>5</sup> Yahweh’s kingship is a theological theme, but messianism and the right use of power are more literary in nature. The repentance theme may be viewed as theological in the sense that it pertains to how people should relate to God. Yet it is anthropological in focus, rather than theocentric. Cartledge discusses three prominent themes—“the Deuteronomistic dichotomy of blessing for obedience and punishment for sin,” grace, and crisis.<sup>6</sup> The third is literary in nature; the first two are theological in that they focus on how God relates to his people. Tsumura lists three categories under “Theology of 1 Samuel”—kingship of God, God’s providential guidance, and God’s sovereign will and power.<sup>7</sup> These are theological themes that address God’s self-revelation in 1 Samuel.

This brief survey reveals diversity in recent approaches to the theology of 1-2 Samuel. There is a tendency to mingle literary themes with theological themes. Most address to some degree God’s character as self-revealed, but some focus more on the anthropological dimension of how God relates to people and how they should respond to him, rather than the theocentric dimension. In my view, literary and theological themes should be kept distinct, and theology *per se* should hold the theocentric and anthropological

<sup>3</sup>See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, AOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 42-48.

<sup>4</sup>See Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 43-45.

<sup>5</sup>See Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 30-40.

<sup>6</sup>See Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 13-15.

<sup>7</sup>See David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 69-73.

dimensions in balance.

This is well done in an earlier study by Martin.<sup>8</sup> He identifies the “center” of the books’ theology as relational in nature; he summarizes it as follows: “The well-being of the people of God (Israel) depended on their response to His choosing them as His instruments and saving them; the righteous ones, those chosen by God, prosper while those who oppose God’s instruments of rulership are cut off.”<sup>9</sup> Martin then organizes the theology of the books around the three headings of “the theology of God,” “the theology of man,” and “the relationship between God and man.” Under the first of these, he speaks of the character of God (he is compassionate, he communicates, he is spiritual and unique, he demands obedience, and he is worthy of praise) and the acts of God (he sovereignly chooses, is forgiving, and fights for his people). All of these themes are present, but I will be focusing on how the book articulates its theological themes through the voices that speak within its pages.

### An Inductive Survey

#### 1 Samuel 1:1—2:11

Oppressed Hannah is the central character in this first episode in the story. The plot complication (her oppression by and conflict with the rival wife due to her barren condition) is resolved when Hannah receives a son from Yahweh in response to her prayer. Hannah’s song of thanks (2:1-10) expresses the main theological theme of this episode: Yahweh is the incomparable, just king who vindicates his oppressed servants and brings down their proud oppressors. He had vindicated Hannah, and she anticipated he would do the same for Israel through an anointed king.<sup>10</sup>

Hannah affirmed the incomparability of Yahweh by asserting that there is none who can rival his kingship (v. 2a) or his ability to protect his people (v. 2b). Directly refuting what the Canaanites claimed about their fertility god Baal, Hannah declared that Yahweh alone is “holy,” a term referring fundamentally to his royal transcendence.<sup>11</sup> She also called Yahweh her “rock” (or, rocky cliff), a term depicting Yahweh as a source of refuge and protection for his people. In Hannah’s experience, Yahweh demonstrated his justice by vindicating her and humiliating her enemy (vv. 3-9).<sup>12</sup> Again, there

<sup>8</sup>See John A. Martin, “The Theology of Samuel,” *BSac* 141 (1984): 303-14.

<sup>9</sup>Martin, “The Theology of Samuel,” 306.

<sup>10</sup>Bergen (“Authorial Intent and the Spoken Word,” 367) points out that an author will sometimes highlight a quotation by placing it “in a highly stylized format, such as a poem.” This appears to be the case with Hannah’s poetic song.

<sup>11</sup>On the polemical dimension of Hannah’s song, see Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Yahweh Versus the Canaanite Gods: Polemic in Judges and 1 Samuel 1-7,” *BSac* 164 (2007): 177-79.

<sup>12</sup>This “reversal-of-fortunes motif” becomes an important theme in 1-2 Samuel. See Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 42, as well as John A. Martin, “The Literary Quality of 1 and 2 Samuel,” *BSac* 141 (1984): 131-45.

is a polemical dimension. Yahweh (not Baal) is the one who gives children to the barren woman. In contrast to Baal, who succumbs periodically to Mot, the god of death, Yahweh holds both the power of life and death in his hands. Rather than descending into the land of the dead, as Baal did after being defeated by Mot, Yahweh “brings down to the grave and brings up” (v. 6).<sup>13</sup> Hannah’s portrait of Yahweh culminates with a vision of him shattering his enemies and thundering against them from the sky (v. 10a). This depicts Yahweh, the source of all fertility and life, as superior to Baal, the Canaanite god of the storm who allegedly controlled the thunder and lightning. Anticipating the kingship theme that will dominate 1-2 Samuel, Hannah looked forward to a time when Yahweh would exercise his mighty power on behalf of his chosen human ruler (v. 10b). As we will see, Hannah’s declaration that Yahweh is his people’s incomparable king and protector is foundational to the theology of 1-2 Samuel.

### 1 Samuel 2:12-36 // 3:1—4:1a

The next two episodes form a thematic tandem. The first focuses on Eli and his sons, who were wicked and angered Yahweh. Eli rebuked them, but did not stop them. From Yahweh’s perspective, he had honored his sons more than Yahweh, so Yahweh announced Eli would forfeit his priestly dynasty. The second episode, which tells of Yahweh’s choice of Samuel to be his prophet, complements the first and reiterates the announcement of Eli’s rejection (cf. 2:27-36 with 3:11-14). The main theological theme of this section is spoken in 2:30 by Yahweh through the man of God: “for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.”<sup>14</sup> This theme complements Hannah’s song by indicating that only those who honor Yahweh, as Hannah did, can expect to experience his vindication and protection. Those who fail to honor Yahweh, like Eli, will lose what they already have.

### 1 Samuel 4:1b—7:1

The next three episodes focus on the Ark of the Covenant. The first (4:1b-22) records the initial fulfillment of Yahweh’s decree of judgment (2:27-36), when Eli’s sons died on the same day (2:34). The Israelites took the Ark into battle, thinking it would assure them of victory, only to experience a humiliating defeat in which the Ark was captured. The news of the Ark’s capture so shocked aging Eli that he fell over dead. One tragedy led to another. When his pregnant daughter-in-law heard that the Ark was cap-

<sup>13</sup>Unless otherwise noted, biblical citations are from the *New King James Version* (NKJV).

<sup>14</sup>The quotation is highlighted by the fact that Yahweh speaks through an authorized spokesperson. Bergen suggests that “statistically rare speech acts,” such as a prophetic oracle, can be used for emphasis (“Authorial Intent and the Spoken Word,” 367). As Patrick D. Miller, Jr. points out, the statement also employs a “correspondence motif” that utilizes both verbal repetition and variation, and “is expressed in general theological terms.” See *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets*, SBLMS, 27 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 84.

tured and that her father-in-law and husband were dead, she went into labor and died in childbirth. Her statement, “the glory has departed from Israel” (4:22), states the literary theme of the episode.

The second episode in this section (5:1-12) tells how the Ark went to Philistine territory and did some serious damage, especially to the god Dagon. The main literary theme is stated in 5:7 by the Philistine victims, who recognized the superiority of Israel’s God: “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for His hand is harsh toward us and Dagon our god.”

In the third episode of the section (6:1—7:1), the Philistines sent the Ark back to Israel. Ironically, the Philistine priests state the primary theological theme of this entire so-called Ark narrative: “and you shall give glory to the God of Israel” (6:5).<sup>15</sup> They even sound like prophets of Yahweh when they ask: “Why then do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?” (6:6) This message, with its focus on the honor due Yahweh, complements the statement made by the man of God to Eli (cf. 2:30).

When the Ark returned to Israelite territory, the people of Beth Shemesh treated it with disrespect and paid a heavy price for their actions (6:19). Their statement complements the earlier exhortation of the Philistine leaders: “Who is able to stand before this holy LORD GOD?” (6:20). The Hebrew expression translated “stand before” can mean, “attend to” (Judg 20:27-28), but it can also carry the nuance “withstand, resist” (Exod 9:11; Judg 2:14; 2 Kgs 10:4),<sup>16</sup> which fits well here as an affirmation of God’s invincible, destructive power. The term “holy” refers most basically to what is distinct from the commonplace or ordinary. Here the nuance may be “off limits, unapproachable,” since touching and peering into the Ark caused the death of the people. This is just the second time that the word has been used in 1 Samuel. Hannah used it to describe Yahweh as absolutely sovereign and unique in his capacity to protect his people (1 Sam 2:2). For Hannah, Yahweh’s holiness was reason to celebrate, because his incomparability ensured his loyal followers of vindication. The contrast between Hannah and the people of Beth Shemesh is striking. Those who disrespect the holy God experience him as terrifying, but those who honor him find his holiness to be reassuring and cause for hope.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>It appears that this example goes counter to Bergen’s hierarchy of prominence for quotations, but, by having Philistine priests state the main theological point of the pericope in the form of hortatory discourse, the author contributes to the irony of this account. Yahweh is alienated from his people and the symbol of his presence is in foreign territory, so why not give these foreign priests a prophetic role? Their spiritual insight stands in contrast to the spiritual insensitivity of God’s covenant people described both before and after this. Furthermore, there are no Israelites in sight to make any profound theological statements! And that is precisely the point here.

<sup>16</sup>Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 60.

<sup>17</sup>When one recognizes this contrast, the apparent violation of Bergen’s quote prominence hierarchy in 6:20 makes sense. It would seem that deviation from the norm is a

### 1 Samuel 7:2-17

In this next episode, Israel repented and Samuel led them to a great victory over the Philistines, reversing their earlier defeat. Samuel's address to the people prior to the battle states the main theological theme of the episode: "and prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines" (7:3b).<sup>18</sup> "Serve" carries connotations of worship and loyalty. The addition of "only" emphasizes the exclusivity that is intended. Only here and in verse 4 is the Hebrew verb translated "serve" used with the Hebrew phrase translated "only."<sup>19</sup> There is no room for polytheism or syncretism in the worship of the one true God. Samuel's exhortation and promise highlight Israel's responsibility. Allegiance to Yahweh is foundational to divine blessing in the form of deliverance. This theme complements the message of the Ark narrative by indicating what it means to honor Yahweh. It also complements Hannah's song by making it clear that only Yahweh's loyal followers can expect to experience his deliverance.

### 1 Samuel 8-12

These next five chapters tell how Israel came to have a king. They demanded a king "like all the nations" (8:5). Yahweh gave them a king, but maintained authority over this ruler (10:25; 12:14-15). Once again the major literary themes and primary theological themes appear in quotations:

1. In 8:7, Yahweh declares to Samuel: "for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them."
2. In 9:16, Yahweh, after informing Samuel that he must anoint Saul as king, announces: "that he may save My people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have looked upon My people, because their cry has come to Me." In verses 16-17, Yahweh calls Israel "my people" four times, in contrast to chapter 8, where he refers to them simply as "the people" (8:7). Despite being rejected by the people (8:7), Yahweh intended to maintain his relationship with them.<sup>20</sup> The people's desire for national security had motivated them to demand a king like all the nations (8:20; cf. 12:12). Their proposed solution to the military threat they faced was wrong and amounted to rejecting Yahweh (8:7), yet Yahweh recognized their need for security as legitimate. He promised to provide for this need through his chosen instrument of salvation, just as he had done through

feature of literary irony.

<sup>18</sup>It is not surprising that Samuel, Yahweh's prophetic spokesman, would state the main theological idea, nor that it occurs in hortatory discourse.

<sup>19</sup>Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part Two: 1 Samuel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 74.

<sup>20</sup>Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 123.

Samuel (7:7-10).

3. In 10:19, Samuel reiterates Yahweh's earlier statement (cf. 8:7): "But you have today rejected your God, who Himself saved you from all your adversities and your tribulations."
4. In 11:13, Saul, having defeated the Ammonites, declares: "for today the LORD has accomplished salvation in Israel."

The theological theme that emerges from these quotations is apparent: Despite Israel's rejection of their king, Yahweh, he continues to save them.

This section concludes with Samuel's call to covenant renewal. Samuel laid out the options before the people in 12:14-15. Verses 20-25 reiterate the point, draw the expected application via hortatory discourse, and buttress it with a promise.<sup>21</sup> The main theological themes of the speech are:

1. 12:20, 24: "but serve the LORD with all your heart . . . Only fear the LORD, and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you."
2. 12:22: "For the LORD will not forsake His people, for His great name's sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you His people."

Israel's rejection of Yahweh must not continue. Because of all Yahweh had done for them, he had every right to demand their full allegiance. Refusal to do so would deprive the community of Yahweh's protection and deliverance, and result in exile (12:25).

### 1 Samuel 13-15

These three chapters record the account of Saul's spiritual demise and Yahweh's rejection of him as king. The key literary theme appears in the following quotations:

1. In 13:14, Samuel informed disobedient Saul that he had forfeited his dynasty: "But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."
2. In 15:11, after another act of disobedience by Saul, Yahweh informed Samuel: "I greatly regret that I have set up Saul *as* king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments."
3. In 15:23, 26, Samuel announced to Saul that Yahweh had rejected him as king: "Because you have rejected the word of

<sup>21</sup>As Bergen ("Authorial Intent and Spoken Word," 371-72) points out, Samuel's speech in verses 6-17 has several indicators of prominence, including Samuel's prophetic status (validated by the miracle recorded in v. 18), the length of the discourse (Samuel's longest recorded speech), its "cultically significant geographic setting," "its temporal setting," and "its addressees (*all* Israel)." While the brief narrative of verses 18-19 concludes the discourse *per se*, verses 20-25 may be viewed as an epilogue to or extension of verses 6-17.



the LORD, He also has rejected you from *being* king . . . for you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel.”<sup>22</sup>

4. In 15:22, Samuel stated the theological theme that underlies Yahweh’s rejection of Saul: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *And* to heed than the fat of rams.”<sup>23</sup>

When Saul grabbed Samuel’s robe in an effort to keep him from leaving, Samuel stated another important theological principle that emerges from this story: “And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He *is* not a man, that He should relent” (15:29). Of course, many passages depict Yahweh as relenting (or “changing his mind”). For example, 1 Sam 15:11, 35 uses the same Hebrew verb of Yahweh regretting having made Saul king. Two texts even indicate that Yahweh’s willingness to relent is characteristic of his immutable merciful nature (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). Rather than being a universal principle, true at all times in all situations, Samuel’s statement in verse 29 confirms that the previous announcement of Saul’s rejection was a divine decree, a speech act that sealed Saul’s destiny. When Yahweh, usually in response to flagrant and/or persistent sin, makes such an unconditional pronouncement, he does not retract it.<sup>24</sup>

As in the case of Eli (2:12-36), Yahweh expected his servant to be loyal and obedient. Being called to a special position did not insulate one from divine discipline. Like Eli, Saul’s failure caused him to forfeit what Yahweh had intended for him (cf. 2:30 with 13:13) and for both of them the divine decision was sealed (cf. 3:14 with 15:28-29). Yet even in this tragic account of disobedience and divine rejection, the important theological theme of Yahweh’s deliverance is still visible. In 14:6, on the verge of battle, Saul’s son Jonathan, who is a literary foil for his father throughout the story, declares: “For nothing restrains the LORD from saving by many or by few.”<sup>25</sup> Unfortu-

<sup>22</sup>The correspondence pattern draws attention to the statement, which is the climax of the discourse. See Miller, *Sin and Judgment*, 85.

<sup>23</sup>Samuel, as Yahweh’s authorized spokesman, makes both of the key theological statements in this section. The first gives the theological basis for Saul’s rejection notice (v. 23b) and the second (v. 29) seals the decision. Both theological statements can be recognized as such by their generalizing character.

<sup>24</sup>For more on this subject, see Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Does God ‘Change His Mind?’” *BSac* 152 (1995): 387-99; Richard L. Pratt, Jr., “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions,” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 180-203; and Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “How a Hermeneutical Virus Can Corrupt Theological Systems,” *BSac* 166 (2009): 270n18.

<sup>25</sup>One might not expect a secondary character like Jonathan to make a key theological statement, but his status as a foil may explain this. In 11:13, Saul spoke of Yahweh’s saving power, but Saul faltered in chapter 13, leaving Jonathan to exhibit the kind of faith and courage that one would expect from the king. Jonathan’s generalizing statement reflects Israel’s experience. At the Red Sea, Yahweh rescued his defenseless people by miraculously drowning Pharaoh’s charging charioteers in the surging water. Ehud ignited a war of liberation by assassinating

nately, his father's failure to grasp this principle (see 13:11-12) contributed to his eventual demise.

### 1 Samuel 16

The two episodes in this chapter focus on David. The first describes Yahweh's choice of David, who apparently was not as impressive a candidate for king as his older brothers. But in directing Samuel to anoint David, Yahweh reminded the prophet of an important theological principle that is foundational to the narrative: "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (16:7).<sup>26</sup> In the second episode, we discover that David's reputation preceded him to Saul's court. One of Saul's attendants, in commending David for Saul's service, observes: "the LORD is with him" (16:18).<sup>27</sup> This theme of Yahweh's enablement of his chosen servant, which links David with Samuel (3:19), becomes a prominent one in David's story (18:12, 14, 28; 2 Sam 5:10; 7:3).

### 1 Samuel 17

In the account of David's victory over the Philistine hero Goliath, it is not surprising that the key theological theme comes from David's lips.<sup>28</sup> After declaring his confidence that Yahweh would give him the victory so "that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel" (17:45-46), David stated: "Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's, and He will give you into our hands" (17:47; cf. v. 37). The expression "the battle is the LORD's," consists of the preposition "to" + LORD + article + common noun. When used elsewhere, this collocation indicates Yahweh's sole possession of the object in view and implies his sovereign authority over it: Exod 9:29 (the earth belongs to Yahweh; cf. Ps 24:1); Ps 22:28 (dominion; cf. Obad 21); Ps 3:8 (deliverance); Prov 21:31 (victory). This theme of Yahweh's absolute power to deliver has, of course, been a prominent one up to this point (see 2:1; 7:3; 9:16; 11:13; 14:6). Yet there is an added dimension in David's declaration—that of Yahweh's power being displayed in the world. Firth points out, "David goes on to insist that his victory will be a testimony to the reality of the God of Israel to

the oppressive Moabite king Eglon in the royal palace while the royal bodyguards stood by in a nearby room. Yahweh reduced Gideon's army to a meager three hundred men, armed with torches and trumpets, and then gave this small force a supernatural victory over the vast Midianite army. And, of course, the divine Spirit empowered Samson to defeat a thousand Philistines single handedly.

<sup>26</sup>The Lord refers to himself in the third person; this is consistent with the generalizing nature of this theological statement.

<sup>27</sup>As with the Philistine priests (6:5) and Jonathan (14:6), one would not expect a servant to make such a theologically significant statement, but his confession contributes to the narrator's strategy. That David is an object of the Lord's favor is obvious to everyone.

<sup>28</sup>In 11:13, Saul made a theologically significant statement about Yahweh's capacity to save his people. But Saul falters in chapter 13, leaving his son and foil Jonathan to speak of Yahweh's ability to deliver (14:6). Now the newly anointed king proclaims Yahweh's power to save, while Saul stands paralyzed with fear on the sidelines.

the whole world. David has grasped the special nature of Israel's role before the nations in a way that Saul never does—Israel exists as a witness to the nations of the reality of Yahweh.<sup>29</sup>

It is noteworthy that David twice called Yahweh the “living God” (vv. 26, 36). This is a relatively rare title that appears only once prior to this in the canon (Deut 5:26; for later uses, see 2 Kgs 19:4, 16 = Isa 37:4 17; Jer 10:10; 23:36). An alternative form of the title appears in Josh 3:10 (see as well Pss 42:2; 84:2; Hos 1:10). These titles do not simply affirm God's existence (he is alive, as opposed to non-existent or dead). They focus on God's active presence, self-revelation, power, authority, and ongoing involvement in history.<sup>30</sup> He is the living God in the sense that he actively intervenes for his people. He delivers (v. 37) and saves (v. 47) his people, and hands their enemies over to them (vv. 46–47). He is a mighty warrior king, who is “the LORD OF HOSTS, THE GOD OF THE ARMIES OF ISRAEL” (v. 45). The title “Lord of Hosts” in this context depicts Yahweh as the one who leads his “hosts” (here the Israelite army) into battle. He is the invincible warrior who determines the battle's outcome regardless of how well equipped the combatants may be (v. 47).<sup>31</sup>

### 1 Samuel 18—2 Samuel 1

This next lengthy major literary unit tells how Saul tried to kill David, forcing David to flee from his homeland and live as an exile. The unit ends with the tragic death of Saul, which paves the way for David to occupy the throne of Israel. Throughout this section, the narrator develops his primary agenda of demonstrating that David, the newly chosen one, was superior to Saul, the rejected one, and that David did not conspire to steal the throne from Saul.

Yahweh's enabling and protective presence is a prominent theme. For example, Jonathan recalled how David had risked his life against the Philistine and Yahweh had given Israel a great victory (19:5). He also anticipated that Yahweh would cut off David's enemies (20:15–16) and make him king (23:16). Saul even acknowledged David's destiny (24:20), as did Abigail (25:28–31). David praised Yahweh for keeping him from doing wrong (25:32–34, 39–40), and reminded his men that Yahweh had protected them from their enemies (30:23). While the narrator uses quotations throughout

<sup>29</sup>Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 200.

<sup>30</sup>For a helpful study of this title, see Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (tr. F. Cryer; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 82–91. He concludes that this title “demarcated Israelite thought from the conception of a dying and rising god whose cyclical biography reflected the vegetational seasons, and which was ubiquitous in Israel's surroundings. The characterization of YHWH as ‘the living God’ does not signify that fertility and agricultural abundance were his preeminent manifestations. Rather, the field of expression of ‘the living God’ was history” (pp. 90–91).

<sup>31</sup>David's viewpoint is not unique in its ancient Near Eastern context. Though well equipped with chariots and weapons, Assyrian kings emphasized that victory came from their gods and criticized enemy kings for placing their confidence in their weapons. See Samuel A. Meier, “The Sword: From Saul to David,” in *Saul in Story and Tradition*, ed. C. S. Ehrlich and M. C. White (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 170.

this section to develop literary themes, there are relatively few theological statements comparable to the ones seen in 1 Samuel 1-17. One such statement appears in 26:23, where David, having again spared Saul's life, stated: "The LORD repays every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness" (author's translation).<sup>32</sup> This reward motif is a prominent theological theme in David's song of thanks in the epilogue of 1-2 Samuel (2 Sam 22:21, 25).

A noteworthy feature of this literary unit is the narrator's use of what could be termed "counter-theological statements." At least twice a character makes a statement that is clearly false and runs counter to the theological themes the narrator highlights. These statements serve as foils to the narrator's theology. For example, when David was running from Saul, he was delighted when he discovered that Goliath's sword was available to him. He even said: "There is none like it" (21:9). His attitude toward swords had certainly changed. When he faced Goliath, he remembered how Yahweh had delivered him in the past (17:37) and courageously challenged the Philistine, announcing that Yahweh does not deliver by "sword and spear" (17:47). But now David, overcome by panic and fear, asked for "a spear or a sword" (21:8). He jumped at the opportunity to take Goliath's sword, declaring it to be an incomparable weapon (v. 9), and then went to Gath to seek security from his enemies (v. 10). It was as if David had become Goliath, armed with his sword and going to his hometown. David's language is ironic, for the only previous use of this precise idiom "there is none like" in 1 Samuel is when the people cried out regarding Saul, "there is no one like him" (10:24). Their vision was shortsighted and so was David's on this occasion. But this will change in 2 Sam 7:22, when David declares that "there is none like" Yahweh.

Another counter-theological statement comes from Saul in 23:7: "God has delivered him [David] into my hand." Saul believed that divine providence was working to his advantage, rather than David's. He based this on the wrong assumption that David had acted unwisely in taking refuge in a walled town. But his statement is clearly wrong, given Yahweh's assuring words (23:4) and protective oracle (23:11-12) to David.

## 2 Samuel 2-10

In this next section we read of David's rise to the throne of Israel, Yahweh's covenant with him, and his great military successes. David spoke of Yahweh's intervention on his behalf (4:9; 5:20) and of his election as Yahweh's king (6:21). The most theologically significant passage in this section is 2 Samuel 7, where Yahweh recalled his choice of David to be king and promised him an enduring dynasty that would be sustained by his divine loyal

<sup>32</sup>The NKJV translation, "May the Lord repay every man for his righteousness and his faithfulness," understands the verb "repay" as a jussive (prayer), but the Hebrew prefixed verb is a distinctive long form, indicating it is imperfect. In this context, David appears to be stating a general truth. See Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 280. For this reason, it may be labeled theological, for it expresses a fact about Yahweh's self-revealed character.

love.<sup>33</sup> Yahweh made it clear that his ultimate purpose in choosing David was to make his covenant nation secure (7:10). In his response, David reiterated Yahweh's commitment to his covenant nation (7:23-24).<sup>34</sup> He also affirmed Yahweh's incomparability (7:22; note the contrast with 1 Sam 21:9) and the reliability of his promises (7:28).<sup>35</sup> Yahweh's incomparability is a foundational theme in 1-2 Samuel, expressed by both Hannah and David in their songs of thanks that bracket the Books of Samuel (see 1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam 22:32).

## 2 Samuel 11-20

The last major literary unit before the epilogue tells the tragic story of David's sin and how it seemingly jeopardized his rule and led to civil war in Israel. The story records the outworking of David's self-incriminating pronouncement of judgment (12:5-6) and of Nathan's judgment speech (12:7-14).

Perhaps the clearest theological statements are those made by David as he came to grips with the reality of divine discipline in his life. In 15:25, he told Zadok: "If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, He will bring me back and show me both it and His dwelling place." Later, when Shimei cursed him, David told his men: "Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him. It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing this day" (16:11-12).

David realized that he was being punished for his earlier crimes. His own son was seeking his life and David suspected that Yahweh had prompted Shimei to utter his curse. He must accept what this enemy was dishing out as part of Yahweh's discipline. This did not mean that David agreed with Shimei's accusation, but he was willing to accept such unjust treatment as coming from the hand of Yahweh. Actually, if the curse failed to materialize, David's innocence regarding Saul and his family would be proven, so David was willing to suffer this indignity in the meantime. David realized that Yahweh is merciful, even in the midst of dishing out punishment. After all, following the death of his infant son as punishment for his crimes, Yahweh had given him a child and named him Jedidiah as a sign of his special favor (12:24-25). David hoped that Yahweh would take notice of his suffering and

<sup>33</sup>As Bergen ("Authorial Intent and the Spoken Word," 368) points out, 2 Sam 7:4-16, which contains 197 words, "is the longest quote by the highest-ranking character [Yahweh himself] within the United Monarchy narratives." He adds: "Discourse criticism suggests that among the propositions expressed through the medium of attributed quotations, those most central to the author's concerns are found here." Bergen points to several stylistic features that highlight the speech's special prominence (pp. 368-69).

<sup>34</sup>As Bergen's chart shows ("Authorial Intent and the Spoken Word," 367), 2 Sam 7:18-29 is the second longest quotation from David in the United Monarchy narratives (198 words). The longest is 2 Samuel 22.

<sup>35</sup>The prefixed verbal form is ambiguous; it can be taken as jussive, "may your words be true," or as imperfect, "your words are/will be true." If the form is jussive here, then the statement is a prayer, not a theological generalization. I understand the form as imperfect, indicating an affirmation in conjunction with the preceding assertion, "you are he, the God" (author's translation).

grant him favor in the face of Shimei's curse.<sup>36</sup> The failure of the curse to materialize indicates it is another example of a counter-theological statement, used as a foil to the narrator's message (see above).

Two other counter-theological statements appear in this section. Following Uriah's death in battle, David assured Joab: "Do not let this thing displease you, for the sword devours one as well as another." (11:25). David's exhortation reads literally, "Let not this thing be evil in your eyes." A rare theological statement by the narrator counters it: "But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD" (11:27; literally, "the thing which David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD"). Yahweh's words to David through Nathan bring out the full implications of what David had done: "Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight? [literally, "eyes"]?" (12:9) The verb translated, "despised," also appears in 1 Sam 2:30 in Yahweh's denunciation of Eli: "those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed." Nathan charged David with treating Yahweh with contempt (12:14).<sup>37</sup>

Another counter-theological statement appears in 14:14, where Joab, speaking through the woman of Tekoa, made this statement: "But God does not take away life; instead he devises ways for the banished to be restored." Joab was trying to convince David to show leniency to the murderer Absalom (as David had already shown to Joab, the murderer of Abner). He pointed out that death is inevitable for all (as the death of Amnon illustrated), but argued that God is not in the business of taking away life. On the contrary, Joab claimed, God devises ways to reconcile to himself those who have been banished. One cannot help but think of David's experience. Despite his capital crimes, God forgave his sin and allowed him to retain his position as king. There is, of course, truth in what Joab claimed. Indeed, the Lord declared to Ezekiel: "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek 33:11). He is predisposed to save, not destroy.

<sup>36</sup>The Hebrew text in 2 Sam 16:12 reads "(will see) my iniquity," probably referring to "iniquity done [by Shimei] against me." A marginal reading in the Hebrew text has "my eye," perhaps meaning "my tears." However, some Hebrew manuscripts and ancient versions read "my suffering," (cf. NIV, "my distress") which makes better sense. In Hebrew the forms "my iniquity," "my eye," and "my suffering" are almost identical in spelling. David was not so much hoping for divine justice as he was for divine mercy.

<sup>37</sup>The Hebrew text reads, "You have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt." However, the Hebrew verbal form elsewhere means, "to treat with contempt," not "make someone else treat with contempt" (Num 14:11, 23; 16:30; Deut 31:20; 1 Sam 2:17; Pss 10:3, 13; 74:10, 18; Isa 5:24; 60:14; Jer 23:17). "Enemies," which appears in the Hebrew text as the object of the verb, is a euphemistic scribal addition made out of respect for David. See P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel*, AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1984), 296. (A Qumran text has "the word of the Lord" as the object.) There is an echo of the narrator's description of Eli's sons, who treated the Lord's offering with contempt (1 Sam 2:17). The charge of treating the Lord with contempt is serious, for elsewhere those who do so are evil enemies of God (Pss 10:3, 13; 74:10, 18; Isa 1:4) and receive severe punishment (Num 14:23; 16:30).

But the issue was not this simple. As Hannah declared, “The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up” (1 Sam 2:6). God does not automatically restore the banished. As he made clear to Ezekiel, he restores those who repent and turn from their wicked ways. Divine leniency was extended to David in part because he confessed his sin (2 Sam 12:13) and did so, unlike Saul, without trying first to deny or justify his behavior (1 Sam 13:11-12; 15:13-25). Furthermore, his subsequent behavior, while plagued by weakness at times, was consistent with his confession of sin and demonstrated genuine humility before God (see 2 Sam 15:25, 31; 16:11-12; 19:23). But in the case of Joab and Absalom there was no remorse, only a continuation and escalation of their self-serving, murderous behavior. As the Teacher says, there is “a time to kill and a time to heal” (Eccl 3:3), and it takes wisdom to know which one is appropriate in any given case. David made the wrong choice with Absalom, just as he had with Joab, and would live to regret it.

## 2 Samuel 21-24

The epilogue to 1-2 Samuel is arranged in a mirror structure, where the elements in the second half of the literary unit thematically correspond to those of the first half, but in reverse order, creating a mirror effect:<sup>38</sup>

- A Saul’s sin and its atonement: David as royal judge (21:1-14)
- B The mighty deeds of David’s men (21:15-22)
- C David’s song of thanks (22:1-51)
- C’ David’s final words (23:1-7)
- B’ The mighty deeds of David’s men (23:8-39)
- A’ David’s sin and its atonement: David as royal priest (24:1-25)

The structure of the appendix corresponds to the course of David’s career as it unfolds in 1-2 Samuel.<sup>39</sup> Section A (21:1-14), with its contrast between David and Saul, supplements 1 Samuel 15—2 Samuel 4, which demonstrates that David, not Saul, was the rightful king of Israel and that David was not responsible for the death of Saul and his descendants. On the contrary, David always sought to honor Saul and his family. Sections B (21:15-22) and B’ (23:8-39) correspond to 2 Samuel 5-10, which describe

<sup>38</sup>Several interpreters have recognized this structure. For a summary and bibliography, see Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 616, to which should be added, Herbert H. Klement, *II Samuel 21-24: Context, Structure, and Meaning in the Samuel Conclusion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

<sup>39</sup>Firth (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 502-03) sees the section as mirroring the literary unit 2 Sam 5:17—8:14, whereas I see the conclusion mirroring David’s entire career.

David's military victories. Section A' (24:1-25) is thematically parallel to 2 Samuel 11-20, which describes David's moral failure and punishment. Sections C (22:1-51) and C' (23:1-7) are poetic texts that give a theological commentary on the career of David.<sup>40</sup>

These Davidic poems are a rich source for the theology of 1-2 Samuel. The major theme of the song (2 Samuel 22) is Yahweh's protection and deliverance.<sup>41</sup> David opens the song by using nine different metaphors to assert that Yahweh is his protector and savior (vv. 2-3). In both the middle of and conclusion to the song, he again calls Yahweh his "rock" (or rocky cliff, vv. 32, 47). The song is filled with the vocabulary of protection and deliverance. David recalls that when he cried for help he was "saved" from his enemies (v. 4). Yahweh pulled him from the raging waters (v. 17) and "delivered" him from his powerful foes (v. 18). He led David into a "broad place" as he "delivered" him (v. 20). Yahweh characteristically saves the humble (v. 28) and is a "shield to all who trust in Him" (v. 31, cf. v. 3). Prior to battle Yahweh gave him a protective shield (v. 36; literally, "shield of salvation"). While David's enemies had no one to save them (v. 42), he experienced Yahweh's deliverance to the fullest extent (vv. 44, 47, 49, 51).

Another prominent theme in the song is Yahweh's supernatural enablement. Using hyperbole in some cases, David tells how he charged the enemy and even leaped over a wall with Yahweh's help (v. 30). Yahweh strengthened him (v. 40), giving him ability and skill (vv. 34-37) so that he was able to annihilate his enemies on the field of battle without stumbling (vv. 38-43). Yahweh elevated David to a position of kingship over nations, some of which had not yet recognized the authority of Israel (vv. 44-46, 48).

Because of Yahweh's mighty acts on his behalf, David was convinced that Yahweh is the incomparable king over all nations. He demonstrates his living presence by exercising his saving power on behalf of his people (v. 47). No other so-called god can begin to match his protective power (v. 32). In the thick of the battle, Yahweh saves; other gods do not (v. 42). Yahweh is the "Most High" and exercises control over even the raging waters of chaos (vv. 14-16). As ruler of the nations, he deserves their recognition and worship (v. 50). He controls the storm and uses it to subdue his enemies, including death

<sup>40</sup>For an insightful study of how the material in the epilogue relates to the depiction of David's career given in the preceding narrative, see Philip E. Satterthwaite, "David in the Books of Samuel: A Messianic Hope?" in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 41-65. He contends correctly that there is ambiguity and tension in the narrative of David's career and in the epilogue: "David as king has fallen short of the ideal represented by" the poetic texts in 1 Sam 2:1-10; 2 Samuel 22; and 2 Sam 23:1-7 and "has been subject to God's judgment." He adds, "The ideal remains intact, but the tension between David's Thanksgiving/David's Last Words and the preceding narrative remains unresolved" (p. 64).

<sup>41</sup>Regarding the song, Bergen ("Authorial Intent and the Spoken Word," 374) observes, "this quotation qualifies as the most prominent quotation attributed to a king. Its placement in the mouth of David, the central human figure of the narrative accounts of the United Monarchy, and its length (365 words) are sufficient to suggest its author-intended centrality."



itself (vv. 5-20).

On the basis of his experience, David also asserts that Yahweh is just and faithful. His assurances of victory are reliable (v. 31) and he keeps his covenant promises to his chosen servants (v. 51). He rewards those who are loyal and obedient (vv. 21-27a), but opposes the wicked (v. 27b). In fact, his actions toward an individual are a mirror image of that person's deeds. Loyal followers find God to be faithful in his dealings with them. Wicked and deceptive rebels, who oppose divine authority and seek to destroy others, find Yahweh to be a resolute and dangerous opponent who frustrates and reverses their efforts and is not beyond using deceptive methods of his own to bring about their demise (v. 27b).

The shorter poem in 23:1-7 makes an important theological contribution as well. Yahweh had chosen David to embody the Deuteronomic ideal of kingship (Deut 17:14-20). He was to promote righteousness, to fear Yahweh, and in so doing be an instrument of divine blessing for his people (23:3-4). At the same time, David could take confidence in his covenantal relationship with Yahweh, knowing that the divine promises had been formalized and secured (v. 5a). Consequently, David could expect to experience divine protection and blessing (v. 5b) and to see the demise of evil rebels (vv. 6-7). So, in short, the Davidic covenant demanded that the chosen king promote God's moral standard, and also guaranteed that obedience would be rewarded.

The two poems in the epilogue combine with Hannah's song of thanks (1 Sam 2:1-10) to form a theological framework for 1-2 Samuel. Several themes appear in both poems.<sup>42</sup> Yahweh is the incomparable sovereign protector of his people (1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam 22:32; 23:30) who rules the world with absolute justice, bringing low his proud enemies and exalting his humble servants (1 Sam 2:3-10; 2 Sam 22:21-28). He appears in royal theophanic splendor to bring deliverance to his servants, particularly his chosen king (1 Sam 2:10; 2 Sam 22:4-20).

Hannah, viewing her experience as typical, anticipated what Yahweh would do for Israel. Keil explains:

The experience which she, bowed down and oppressed as she was, had had of the gracious government of the omniscient and holy covenant God, was a pledge to her of the gracious way in which the nation itself was led by God, and a sign by which she discerned how God . . . would also lift up and glorify his whole nation, which was at that time so deeply bowed down and oppressed by its foes. Acquainted as she was with the destination of Israel to be a *kingdom* . . . she could see in spirit, and through the

<sup>42</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 272- 274. For a survey of how others (Brueggemann, Polzin) have further developed Childs' proposal, see Randall C. Bailey, "The Redemption of YHWH: A Literary Critical Function of the Songs of Hannah and David," *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995): 215-17.

inspiration of God, the *king* whom the Lord was about to give to his people, and through whom He would raise it up to might and dominion."<sup>43</sup>

David, at the end of his life, looked back on his experience and saw the fulfillment of Hannah's expectation. Yahweh had raised David and Israel to great heights (see especially 2 Sam 22:44-46), guaranteeing the future realization of his covenant promise (2 Sam 22:51; 23:5-7), which would bring with it security and prosperity for his people (see 2 Sam 7:9-10, 22-24).

### Synthesis

To return to our original agenda, what does Yahweh's self-revelation, as recorded in 1-2 Samuel, reveal about his character? What does Yahweh expect from his people? How should they respond to him?

As seen above in our comparison of their songs of thanks, the books' two primary human voices, Hannah and David, both recipients of Yahweh's deliverance, speak in unison. They affirm that Yahweh is incomparable, sovereign over life and death, just in his dealings, and a mighty warrior who controls the elements of the storm. Furthermore, the warriors Jonathan and David recognize that Yahweh alone determines the outcome of the battle. Soldiers and weapons have no impact on the outcome when Yahweh is involved (1 Sam 14:6; 17:47).

Yahweh is deserving of and demands honor. He honors those who trust in him and serve him faithfully (1 Sam 2:30; 6:5). These are the ones who experience his deliverance and are rewarded for their integrity (1 Sam 7:3; 12:20, 24; 26:23). Yahweh looks at the heart when choosing his servants, not at outward appearances (1 Sam 16:7). Loyal obedience gets priority over ritual with Yahweh (1 Sam 15:22). Those who despise Yahweh and his word suffer severe consequences (1 Sam 2:30; 15:23, 26; 2 Sam 12:9, 14). In the case of Eli and Saul, Yahweh irrevocably removed his blessing and promise (1 Sam 3:14; 15:29). In the case of David, to whom Yahweh had made an enduring promise, Yahweh subjected his servant to severe discipline. The proper response in this case was humble submission (2 Sam 15:25; 16:11-12).

In our survey, we encountered several counter-theological statements. In some cases, such statements reflected a purely human perspective that ignored the reality of Yahweh's power to save (1 Sam 21:9) or his commitment to justice (2 Sam 11:25). In other cases, enemies of David wrongly thought that Yahweh's providence or justice was working for them (1 Sam 23:7; 2 Sam 16:8), or a self-serving murderer misapplied the truth of Yahweh's commitment to redeem the banished (2 Sam 14:14). It is sobering to see self-serving individuals misuse theology by misinterpreting Yahweh's providence, justice, and mercy. But it is even more sobering that David, one

<sup>43</sup>C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, BCOT (reprinted ed.; tr. James Martin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 29.

of the primary theological voices in 1-2 Samuel, denied, at a practical level, Yahweh's saving power and justice when blinded by fear. Like sinking Peter when he attempted to walk on the water, David's failure reminds and warns the people of God to keep their eyes firmly fixed on the incomparable God, the warrior-King whose sovereign power is their sole source of security.