

I Samuel
A King in Israel



Amnon Bazak

I SAMUEL
A KING IN ISRAEL

TRANSLATED BY

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Yeshivat Har Etzion
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I Samuel
A King in Israel

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We are proud and honored to continue in their legacy.*

*Their Children, Grandchildren,
Great-Grandchildren and Great-Great-Grandchildren
Jerusalem, Israel
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Dedicated in loving memory of

Tom Weisz z"l

משה מאיר בן אברהם הכהן ורבקה רחל

*A man of integrity and humility
with a relentless pursuit of the wisdom of Torah.
A son of Holocaust survivors, he built a family of Torah
with his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.
He continues to be a source of inspiration
and strength to all who knew him.*

תְּלִמְיָדֵי חֲכָמִים אֵין לָהֶם מְנוּחָה אֶפֶּילוּ לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא

Shelli Weisz and family

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Preface

Ever since my early childhood, I have been particularly fond of the book of Samuel. I remember the hours when, as a child who could not yet read or write, I listened with great attention to the stories that my mother told from this book, and as I grew older, my fondness for the book and its fascinating characters continued to grow. No other book in the Tanakh presents such long and in-depth descriptions of its various characters – the major characters of Saul and David, as well as the minor characters of Eli, Samuel, Jonathan, Joab, and others. In addition, the book of Samuel constitutes an important link in understanding central issues in Jewish thought, such as the essence of prophecy, the complexity of the monarchy, the location of the House of God, Israel's relations with the nations of the world, and the morality of war.

For many years, I have had the privilege of teaching the book in various settings, especially at Herzog College at the Yeshivat Har Etzion in Alon Shevut. Among the yeshiva's many projects, a special place belongs to the Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash website, which boasts thousands of subscribers and tens of thousands of students around the world. The website, which is managed with dedication and thoroughness by my friend and colleague Rabbi Ezra Bick, is a tool for the dissemination of Torah learning in all its branches, with nothing else quite like it throughout the world.

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In the framework of this site and over the course of several years, I presented lectures on the book of Samuel, from beginning to end. These lectures reflect the method of studying the Tanakh that I learned in Yeshivat Har Etzion and in Herzog College, the essence of which involves an examination of the plain sense of the Tanakh (*peshat*), using various literary tools, some of which are innovations of recent generations. We have been privileged to see how these tools expose layers of prophetic content that had been hidden for many generations, in the spirit of the famous words of Rashbam (in his commentary on Genesis 37:2) concerning “the plain meanings of the text which become clearer with each passing day.”

From the outset, these lectures were written for the audience of subscribers, who studied them every week, and for that reason emphasis was placed on the content, without noting who dealt with each topic and the various opinions that were raised in relation to it, as is customary when writing on an academic level. However, over time it became clear that a broad sector of the community, especially Tanakh teachers and their students, showed great interest in these lectures. Therefore, when the Koren-Maggid publishing house, which maintains a warm and fruitful relationship with the Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, approached me with an offer to publish these lectures as a book, I thought that the advantage of this way of writing might outweigh its disadvantages, and therefore I gladly accepted their offer. To this end, I edited the individual lectures so that they could be read in book form.

I would like to thank all those who contributed to this volume. I learned my approach to the study of Tanakh from two of the greatest Tanakh teachers of our generation: my revered teacher, the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yaakov Medan, and my teacher Dr. Mordechai Sabato, in whose classes I learned significant parts of the book of Samuel. Their ideas and interpretations, directly and indirectly, constitute a significant part of this book, and I extend my deep gratitude to them for everything I learned from them. I wish to thank the staff of the Virtual Beit Midrash, and especially my friend Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, who has played a significant role in managing the project and its development, and Boaz Kalush, who meticulously proofread the original lectures. My heartfelt thanks go out to Matthew Miller for his initiative to publish the book

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and to the Koren-Maggid staff. This book is a translation of the original 2013 Hebrew version. Many thanks to Rachelle Emanuel, Ita Olesker, David Silverstein, Dr. Yoel Finkelman, and Nechama Unterman for all of their excellent editorial work on the English edition, and to David Strauss for his skillful translation.

I would like to thank my beloved wife Anat and our dear children, Rinat, Talya, Elnatan, Hillel, and Gil, for their support and encouragement throughout the writing of this book. Special thanks to my mother, Zehava Bazak (née Frank), who instilled in me a love for the books of the Tanakh and especially the book of Samuel. I would like to also thank my father, Moshe Bazak, of blessed memory, who raised me with a love for Torah and fear of Heaven.

Amnon Bazak
Alon Shevut, 2023/ 5783

Introduction to the Book of Samuel

THE UNITY OF THE BOOK OF SAMUEL

The book of Samuel is one of three books in the Tanakh which, in today's editions of the Tanakh, are divided into two – I Samuel and II Samuel – just like the books of Kings and Chronicles. At first glance, the division of the book of Samuel into two seems authentic, since II Samuel opens with the words “Now it came to pass after the death of Saul,” just as the book of Joshua opens with the words “Now it came to pass after the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord,” and as the book of Judges opens: “Now it came to pass after the death of Joshua.” This division, however, was unknown to our Sages, who spoke of the twenty-four books of the Bible, and related to the book of Samuel, as they did to the books of Kings and Chronicles, as one book. So too the Masoretes, who counted the verses in each book and noted the number of verses in these books without relating to any internal division.

The division of Samuel into two parts originates in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible from the second century BCE. There the books of Samuel and Kings are combined into a single unit called *Sifrei HaMalkhuyot*, “The Books of the Kingdoms,” which is divided into four parts: *Malkhuyot* I (corresponding to I Samuel), II (corresponding to II Samuel), III (corresponding to I Kings), and IV (corresponding to II Kings). In later non-Jewish editions of the Bible, we find the division of the books as accepted today, but the vast majority of Jews were only exposed to it with the printing of the *Mikraot Gedolot* edition of the Tanakh at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

In any case, it is clear that, for all intents and purposes, I Samuel and II Samuel should be treated as a single unit as it originally was, and this is how we have related to them in this volume.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JUDGES AND KINGS

The main question regarding the essence of the book of Samuel is: Why was this book actually needed? The book of Samuel is found between two other books, Judges and Kings, which represent two different forms of government, and two different periods in the history of the nation of Israel. The book of Samuel could have been split into two parts, the first part as a continuation of Judges, dealing with two judges – Eli and Samuel – and the second part as the beginning of Kings, dealing with two kings – Saul and David. Why was a separate book needed?¹

It seems that the book of Samuel is an intermediate unit, describing a long and important transitional period between the time of the judges and that of the kings. The common denominator of the four leaders in the book of Samuel is that they all embody an intermediate level – above a judge, but not yet reaching the level of true royalty.

There are two main differences between judges and kings: first, judges are appointed according to the needs of the hour, and not consecutively, so that when one judge dies, there is no continuation, unlike the

1. This question intensifies in light of the fact that the beginning of the book of Kings is a direct continuation of the events described in the book of Samuel. Among other things, the book of Kings refers to the characters mentioned in chapter 1 – David, Nathan, Bathsheba, Absalom, Adonijah, and Solomon – as figures who are well known to the reader, and it does not bother to re-introduce them. When the book mentions Adonijah, it states:

Then Adonijah son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, “I will be king”; and he set up chariots and horsemen for himself, and fifty men to run before him. And his father had never disciplined him at any time, saying, “Why have you done so?” And he too was a very good-looking man; and his mother bore him after Absalom. (I Kings 1:5–6)

What does the verse mean when it says about Adonijah, “He too was a very good-looking man”? Without a doubt it means that he too was good-looking, just like Absalom, whose handsome features are described in detail in the book of Samuel (II Sam. 14:25–26). Thus, the book of Kings constitutes one narrative sequence with the book of Samuel.

monarchy, which continues in succession from father to son; and second, judges usually served as leaders of a part of the people of Israel – one or more tribes – but were not generally recognized as leaders of the entire people of Israel, unlike the kings.² In these two respects, Eli and Samuel were exceptions. Eli was not only a judge, but also the High Priest, and as such, he was recognized by the entire nation of Israel. Furthermore, his sons presumably continued his leadership, and had they not sinned, they would indeed have continued to lead the people of Israel.

This is even more true about Samuel. Samuel was a well-known figure who was revered by the entire nation of Israel, and as we will see over the course of the first chapters of the book, he is presented as one of the greatest leaders of the people, paralleling Moses. Samuel's sons were also considered as candidates to continue his role, but here, too, they were rejected due to the fact that they did not follow in their father's ways (see our discussion of the first verses of chapter 8).

Saul was the first king of Israel, but in practice his kingdom did not endure and had no continuation. The failure of Saul's kingdom will be discussed in the relevant chapters, but in general it can be noted that Saul did not meet the great challenges that the institution of monarchy in Israel poses; chiefly, the challenge of being a leader, on the one hand, and being subject to God's command and the words of His prophets, on the other.

The first royal house of the people of Israel was the House of King David. However, the establishment of that royal house was realized only when his son Solomon ascended to the throne and, for the first time in the history of Israel, a son succeeded his father as king, thus starting the royal dynasty of the House of David. For this reason, it is appropriate for the book of Kings to begin with Solomon, while David, who was not yet part of a royal dynasty, still belongs to the intermediate period, to which the book of Samuel is uniquely dedicated.

The biographies of the four leaders in the intermediate period show the complexity of the role of the monarchy in Israel. This, then, is

2. Of course, there are many differences in terms of the king's ability to rule, including imposing taxes on the people, recruiting for war, and more, but all of these are a result of the basic differences between the two forms of government.

the central purpose of the book of Samuel – to offer an account of the period of preparation for the concept of monarchy in Israel. We will, of course, discuss this matter in detail in the chapters describing the foundation of the monarchy, but for our present purposes it suffices to say that this complexity is what justifies the existence of this special book.

WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF SAMUEL?

The book of Samuel is named after the central prophet of its first part, even though the prophet Samuel passed away in this first section (I Sam. 25:1). This point led the Gemara to ask about the identity of the author of the book, and to make the following suggestion:

Samuel authored his book. But surely it is written: “And Samuel died”! It was completed by Gad the seer and Nathan the prophet. (Bava Batra 15a)

These words of *Hazal* are probably based on an explicit verse in Chronicles:

Now the acts of David the king, first and last, behold, they are written in the words of Samuel the seer, and in the words of Nathan the prophet, and in the words of Gad the seer. (I Chr. 29:29)

It seems, however, that another prophet would have been needed to compile the books of the prophecies of Samuel, Nathan, and Gad, and add the necessary notes and transitional passages. According to Abrabanel, in the introduction to his commentary on the Early Prophets, this prophet was Jeremiah, who edited the books of Samuel and Kings, and among other things added comments that appear to have been written at a later date, such as “To this day”:

As I see it, Samuel wrote the things that happened in his time, and Nathan the prophet also wrote by himself, and Gad the seer also wrote by himself, each one writing all that happened in his time. The prophet Jeremiah collected these writings and joined them together and arranged the entire book based on them, for if

not so, who collected these works that were written by different authors? For the text does not say that these prophets wrote their words one after the other, but rather that each of them wrote a separate book. It seems that when Jeremiah wanted to write the book of Kings, he brought the book of Samuel that is next to it, and he collected the words of the prophets mentioned in the book, and without a doubt added things to clarify their words as he saw fit. This is what is stated: “To this day,” and this is what is written: “Formerly in Israel.”

Abrabanel’s last comment refers to I Samuel 9:9:

Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he spoke thus: “Come, and let us go to the seer”; for he that is now called a prophet was formerly called the seer.

This verse comes to explain what is stated immediately afterward, when Saul and his servant found some girls and asked them: “Is the seer here?” In order to facilitate our understanding of the meaning of the question, the verse clarifies that he whom “now” we call a “prophet” was called in the past (*lefanim*)³ a “seer.” This verse appears to be a later addition. Rabbi Yosef Kara, a disciple of Rashi, raised a radical possibility in his commentary to this verse:

He whom this generation calls a “prophet” was called in earlier generations a “seer.” You learn from this that when this book was written they already called a seer a prophet, implying that this book was not written in the days of Samuel . . . Our Rabbis, of blessed memory, said that Samuel wrote his book, and He who illuminates the earth will make darkness light and rugged places plain.

3. *Lefanim* (literally, “in front”) in Tanakh means in the past, and *le’ahor* (literally, “behind”) means in the future, as in Jeremiah 41:23: “Declare the things that are to come hereafter (*le’ahor*), that we may know that you are gods.” Conceptually, these terms have great significance: A person stands on the axis of time, his face toward the past, which appears “before him,” while the future, which is concealed and unknown, is found “behind him.”

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It seems, however, that there is no need to adopt such an extreme position, and argue that the book was written in a much later period, many years after the events described. It suffices to say that the book includes notes that were added at a later stage, but the book itself was indeed written close to the events themselves, as proposed by Abrabanel in the passage cited above and in his commentary to this verse: “And this verse teaches that it was not Samuel who wrote it, but rather Jeremiah or some other prophet who arose many years after him ... or that this verse was added by Ezra.”