

Answers to tough questions in 1 and 2 Samuel

1. If we accept the scholarly view that the surviving ancient manuscripts of 1 and 2 Samuel were relatively poorly preserved, what should be our attitude toward these books as part of God's Word?

Given the challenges involved in hand copying and preserving scrolls, it is a wonder that we have the ancient documents that we do have. Our attitude ought to lean more towards amazement that we have such few discrepancies rather than concern over the difficulties that may puzzle and challenge us.

Many of the discoveries in the science of analyzing ancient manuscripts involve the typical errors that commonly appear when handwritten documents are copied. For example, when two lines of text end with the same word or words, the eye of the copyist tends to skip the second line, deleting it completely. Careful comparisons between manuscripts and reconstruction of the text often reveal these simple errors.

In the case of 1 and 2 Samuel we have two ancient text families: (1) the Masoretic text, in the Hebrew language, and (2) the LXX (Septuagint) text in Greek, which was translated by Jewish scholars in about 100 B.C. Comparing the two, it is true that they differ more often here than they do in other OT books. There are frequent disagreements between the texts when it comes to numbers. In settling these discrepancies, because of the age and language of the Masoretic text it is generally considered a closer version of the original manuscript unless grammar and context indicate a copying error.

A central fact to remember when thinking about the possibility of textual errors in the Scriptures we have is the following: The central doctrines of the Christian faith are never based on a single verse of Scripture, nor do they rely on a disputed section of Scripture. God's plan of salvation and the main outline of Christian teaching can be found throughout Scripture.

2. How do 1 and 2 Samuel help us understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the time of the OT?

First and 2 Samuel illustrate part of the Holy Spirit's role in the OT. The Spirit's specific actions are noted in the following passages: 1 Samuel 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:13, 14; 19:20, 23; 2 Samuel 23:2. These references offer several conclusions regarding the Holy Spirit's ministry: (1) it was an occasional "coming upon" a chosen person for a particular task or statement; (2) the Spirit's ministry was not controlled by the person(s); (3) the expectation of the Spirit's help could be given and withdrawn; (4) the Holy Spirit inspired certain people to speak or write God's message.

Jesus promised the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, not surprise visits. Certainly at times believers might experience a particular empowering by the Holy Spirit for a task, but the picture of the Holy Spirit's ministry changes from the OT of an external visitation by God to the NT picture of a resident presence by God in the life of a believer.

3. Was the rule of kings part of God's plan all along, or did the people's demand for a king bring about a monarchy as a form of divine discipline?

When Israel entered the Promised Land, they encountered Canaanite city-states that were ruled by kings (Josh 12:7-14). Later, during the time of the judges, Israel was enslaved and oppressed by nations led by kings (Judg 3:8, 12; 4:2; 8:5; 11:12). The Book of Judges repeatedly mentions the lack of a king (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The idea of having a king like the surrounding nations became a powerful temptation. According to Deuteronomy 17:14, however, God knew this would be their desire and He predicted that He would grant permission. First Samuel 8:4-20 reveals that their motive was actually a rejection of God.

In spite of Samuel's dire warnings about the drawbacks of monarchy, the people offered what they thought were three compelling reasons why they needed a king (1Sam 8:20): (1) to be like the other nations; (2) to have a national judge; (3) to have a war champion. Each of these contradicted God's specific purpose: (1) Israel was to be a holy nation, not like any other; (2) God was their ultimate judge; (3) God had fought their battles for them, whereas a king would send them to battle. Israel's problem was not about having a king but rather, it was about replacing God with a human ruler. They exchanged an awesome and powerful Ruler they could not see for one they could see who was utterly capable of failure.