

Literary Flow

A. THE SETTING: 1:1-8:22

Literary Function: The literary function of the setting was to establish the tension of God-ly leadership [an obedient ruler], and to provide the context for this tension, the nation of Israel as it emerged from the time of the Judges. Within this context is God's move to eliminate judges disobedient to the covenant [Eli and sons] and replace them with a judge who will be obedient to the covenant and the voice of God [Samuel], as a step toward establishment of a righteous king [David].

Means of Literary Function: The beginning establishes a contrast between the existing leadership in Israel, Eli and his sons, and the emerging leadership of Samuel. Samuel, born of, and devoted to God by a covenant obedient mother, ministered to the Lord [2:11], in contrast to Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were wicked, worthless, and not intimate with God [2:12-17]. Samuel grew before the Lord [2:21], in contrast to Hophni and Phinehas, who were continuing to violate the covenant, and Eli, who failed to judge them according to the covenant [2:22-25]. God declared that he had raised up a faithful priest in Samuel [2:35], in contrast to what God said about Hophni and Phinehas, that he would strike them down [2:34]. God confirmed Samuel as a prophet as he grew in the Lord [3:19], in contrast to what God revealed to Samuel about bringing a curse to Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas because of their iniquity [3:11-14]. Samuel became more influential for God in Israel [4:1], in contrast to Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas, who died [4:11-18]. Overall, this contrast shows how God was sweeping away the old, corrupt leadership, and replacing it with Samuel, a judge who was willfully obedient to the covenant.

There is an interlude [5:1-7:2] which focuses on the loss of the Ark to the Philistines, its effects on the Philistines, and its return to Israel by the Philistines. The people were more dependent on the presence of the Ark than on the promises and covenant of God for deliverance. The consequent loss of the Ark provided the historical reader with a lesson about God's provision, which at least one future generation would fail to understand, just prior to the fall of Jerusalem and capture by the Babylonians. This interlude serves to show how degenerate the nation had allowed itself to become, wracked by covenant disobedience in its leadership, covenant disobedience in its people, even the loss of the Ark, and – despite their waywardness – the blithe expectation that the presence of the Ark would protect and deliver them from their enemies [similar to the expectations of later generations with regard to the Temple]. God allowed the Philistines to take the Ark [4:11], but then brought about such calamity to whichever Philistine city held it [5:1-12] that after seven months they sent it back to Israel [6:1-21].

In contrast to the moral decay of the nation, the story then reveals that Samuel had risen to be a leader obedient to the covenant, and that he led the people in a time of repentance and consequent deliverance in battle from the Philistines [7:3-17]. However, the advancing age of Samuel and the failure of his sons to be obedient to the covenant in their roles as judges [8:1-3], inspired the people to demand a king prematurely [8:4-5]. God revealed this to be against his desire, as a rejection of his own leadership in as much as it was of Samuel's [8:7]. Thus, in contrast to obedient and covenant following Samuel, the people chose to disobey the covenant by rejecting God's anointed leader [Samuel] and deviating from God's expressed will for them. Samuel gave the people fair warning of what such a king would do [8:10-18], but the people were insistent [8:19-20] on having a king like all the other nations [thus rejecting their unique status under God as well], so God told Samuel to go ahead and acquiesce to their demand [8:22].

The setting provided the location and time, the tension of God-ly leadership, the state of disobedience in the nation's leadership and people, and a contrast between a covenant-following leader [Samuel] and those who were willfully disobedient, both leaders [Eli and his sons] and the people.

B. THE RISE AND FALL IN GRACE OF SAUL: 9:1-15:35

Literary Function: The literary function of the section describing the rise and fall in grace of Saul was to demonstrate the folly of interrupting God's divine plan [the progression from righteous judge Samuel to righteous king David], as the people rejected God's anointed leader [Samuel] and demanded a king like the other nations had [Saul]. This section shows the failure of human reasoning and willful disobedience, as God provided and equipped the king demanded by the people, and this king struggled with the same failures of human reasoning and willful disobedience as the people.

Means of Literary Function: Because the people demanded a king like other nations had, God gave them one like other nations had. God chose Saul, arrogant while insecure, willfully disobedient while desiring of blessings, outwardly superior while challenged internally. There is a progression as God chose Saul [9:17], had Samuel anoint him [10:1], and proceeded to equip him with spiritual experiences [10:9-11], fulfilled prophecies [10:9-10], public anointing [10:20-21; 11:14-15], written ordinances [10:25], and military victory [11:6-11]. However, even as this progression of equipping came to an end, the key to Saul's downfall became evident: he would make decisions that would appear to be sound, compassionate, and even faith inspired, but which really were willful examples of Saul's reliance on following his own human reasoning instead of obeying God's revelation in the covenant [11:12-15]. The example at this point of the story was that Saul refused to put to death those who had doubted his leadership before his military victory. His refusal seems merciful, and thus godly, to our human reasoning, but this decision went directly against the covenant stipulation that those who did not honor God's anointed leaders were to be put to death.

In the middle of the narrative about Saul, there is a one chapter [12] interlude that focuses on Samuel. The purpose of the interlude was to allow Samuel to set the stage for what was about to happen, declaring the people's rejection of his anointed and obedient leadership [12:1-5], their disobedient demand for a king [12:6-13], God's displeasure at their actions [12:16-18], and a warning about remaining faithful to God in good times and bad, lest they bring upon themselves their own punishment [12:14-15, 19-25].

In illustrating the decline of Saul in God's eyes, the narrative used bookends, framing a scene where Saul's son Jonathan acted in faith with two scenes in which Saul did not act faithfully to the covenant. Even in the chapter featuring Jonathan, Saul revealed himself as willfully disobedient when he could not keep his vow [14:45].

The opening of the bookend is in chapter 13, describing how Saul's leadership failures led to his inability to seize the opportunity for victory in battle. As they gathered for battle, the people feared the enemy [a covenant violation] and the enemy's weapons [a covenant violation; perhaps in part because they did not have many weapons themselves; 13:20-22], and many of them hid while others stayed on instead of going home [a covenant violation; 13:6-7]. Saul panicked as the people began to leave and Samuel had not yet arrived, so Saul violated Samuel's instructions from God [10:8] about waiting for Samuel to do the peace and burnt offerings [a covenant violation; 13:9] and got rebuked by Samuel [13:11-15]. The end result was no battle and Samuel's declaration that God would seek a replacement for Saul [13:14].

The next chapter offers the contrast for the bookends, in the approach Jonathan took to the same situation. Jonathan pursued battle, trusting in God's deliverance [in agreement with the covenant; 14:6, 14]. The result was that he and his armor bearer defeated about twenty men [in agreement with covenant expectations], which led to a general panic among the enemy [14:15-16; helped along by God's earthquake]. Saul and the others [including those who had hidden or gone over to the enemy] joined in the battle, and were helped by confusion of the enemy [in agreement with covenant expectations; 14:20-

22]. The end result was a great victory [14:23] – in contrast to Saul’s failure to fight in the opening of the bookend – though this victory was marred by Saul’s failure to keep his vow [14:45].

To urge the people onward in battle, Saul had vowed to put to death anyone who ate before evening [14:24]. Saul’s son, Jonathan, was unaware of this vow and ate some honey as he was passing a fallen honeycomb [14:27]. God made it clear to Saul that someone had violated his avowed rule [14:37], and that it was Jonathan [14:42]. Despite having again vowed to put to death the violator – even were it his son Jonathan! – Saul allowed himself to be talked out of fulfilling the vow [14:45] by people who were not only supposed to be under his anointed command, but also had shown themselves just then to be willfully disobedient by eating some of the plunder with the blood [14:34].

The closing of the bookend is in chapter 15, describing how even when Saul did lead the nation to victory, he willfully disobeyed God in the process [in contrast to Jonathan’s covenant obedience in the previous chapter] and thus cost himself God’s blessing. Saul defeated the Amalekites [15:7], as Samuel foretold [15:2-3]. However, Saul did not obey God’s orders [a covenant violation], leaving the King and some animals alive [a covenant violation; 15:8-9], and then he proceeded to build a monument to himself [a covenant violation; 15:12]. The issue with sparing the animals is another good example of how Saul’s decisions seem good by human reasoning but not when matched up against the covenant. Saul allowed the people to spare the animals so they could sacrifice the animals to God; to human reasoning, it would seem Saul and the people had their hearts in the right place, even if they were not exactly obedient to the letter of the covenant or what Samuel had told them to do. However, from God’s perspective, if Saul really had a heart for God, then he would have striven to obey; instead, Saul chose to ignore the covenant instruction and the spoken instruction through Samuel, to do things his own way. [A lesson for all generations: we must approach God in his way!] The end result of the scene was a military victory that cost Saul God’s favor [15:11], cost him Samuel’s guidance [15:35], and would eventually lead to the loss of the kingdom [15:28].

C. THE RISE OF DAVID: 16:1-30:31

Literary Function: The literary function of the section describing the rise of David was to demonstrate God’s sovereignty in raising up an obedient leader, and to contrast that obedience [and thus blessing] in David’s leadership with the existing struggles of Saul.

Means of Literary Function: Because Saul had displeased God, God began a progression of preparing Saul’s successor, David. God revealed his choice to Samuel [16:12], who anointed David in front of his family [16:13]. At this time, the Holy Spirit came upon David [16:13]. Even prior to that moment, God had been developing David’s faith through fulfillment of covenant promises [17:34-37]: when David referred to defending his flock from lions and bears in explaining his confidence in going against the Philistine giant Goliath [17:34-36], he was disclosing his previous reliance on covenant promises and God’s deliverance as anticipated from those covenant promises. For the battle against Goliath, God again inspired faith in David [17:45-47], which resulted in his victory [17:48-51], before all the people of the army camp [who had themselves been afraid], which led to a great overall victory [17:52]. Saul’s son, Jonathan, gave his robe, armor, and weapons to David, perhaps a symbolic gesture of acknowledgment of David being God’s anointed one [18:4]. God allowed David to prosper in Saul’s army, and the people noticed [18:5]. God prospered David in all his ways, and the people noticed [18:13-14], with this prosperity including victories over the Philistines, which led to great esteem for David [18:27, 30]. As evidence of this progression mounted, even Saul sensed that God was with David [18:12, 28], and said that David was a fatal threat to Jonathan’s succession [20:31].

As David became more successful, Saul turned against him; thus as the progression empowered David to be more able to carry out God’s will, in contrast Saul turned from fighting God’s battles to fighting his own, against God’s anointed successor to him. Saul threw a spear at David [18:11], tried to get him killed by sending him against the Philistines [18:17], put a death sentence on his head [19:1], again threw a spear at him [19:9-10], again tried to have him put to death [19:11], and then pursued him outside of the city [19:20]. Despite [and in contrast to] the animosity of Saul, David made a covenant of friendship with Jonathan [20:42], and then fled for good. After getting some provisions from a priest, to whom he lied [21:1-9], which would later cause the death of the priest [22:6-23], David went to the Philistines [21:10], but then ran from them and hid in a cave [22:1], stashed his parents in Moab [22:3-4], and returned to Judah. These events indicate some flaws in David’s character, yet his heart for God was still a contrast to the willful disobedience of Saul. For example, while David was in hiding from Saul, he defeated the Philistines at God’s guidance [23:1-6]; but, despite this service to the nation, Saul continued to pursue David [without success; 23:6-29].

In chapters 24-26, the narrative used bookends concerning three opportunities David had for putting to death an antagonist, best illustrated in a table [see below].

	Chapter 24	Chapter 25	Chapter 26
Provocation	24:1 Saul provoked David by pursuing him to kill him.	25:10-11 Nabal provoked David by refusing to be helpful and hospitable.	26:1 Saul provoked David by pursuing him to kill him.
Vulnerability	24:3 Saul was in a cave relieving himself.	25:36 Nabal was drunk.	26:7 Saul was asleep and unguarded.
Advice	24:4 David’s men encouraged him to see this as God’s provision and kill Saul.	25:24-31 Abigail discouraged David from killing Nabal, suggesting it would be a sin.	26:8 Abishai encouraged David to see this as God’s provision and allow him to kill Saul.
Decision	24:4-6 David chose not to kill Saul, because Saul was God’s anointed.	25:32-34 David chose not to kill Nabal.	26:9-11 David chose not to have Saul killed, because Saul was God’s anointed.
Evidence	24:4 David cut off the corner of Saul’s robe.	25:35 David took the provisions Abigail offered.	26:12 David took the spear and jug of water that were beside Saul’s head.
Revelation	24:8-15 David revealed to Saul his vulnerability and his own unwillingness to harm him.	25:37 Abigail revealed to Nabal his vulnerability and David’s desire to harm him.	26:14-16 David revealed to Saul his vulnerability and his own unwillingness to harm him.
Result	24:16-22 Saul stopped pursuing David and acknowledged David’s claim to succession.	25:38 Nabal died.	26:21-25 Saul stopped pursuing David and acknowledged David would prevail.

In the above table, blue text suggests similarities, while purple suggests differences, illustrating the contrast of the scene regarding Nabal with the two bookend scenes regarding Saul. The primary contrast is in David’s attitude: In the two bookend scenes with Saul, David recognized Saul as God’s anointed

and therefore would not harm Saul even though Saul had provoked him greatly in trying to kill him; in contrast, in the scene with Nabal, the provocation was less, but David's anger burned because Nabal was not anointed by God [though this was an error by David, for he had no right to judge yet, since Saul was still God's anointed king]. Another big contrast was the part played by the other characters: In the two bookend scenes with Saul, the men with David encouraged him to attack Saul; in contrast, in the scene with Nabal, Abigail discouraged David from action. There is also a contrast in the result: Nabal dies when given the news of David's anger; in contrast, in the two bookend scenes, Saul becomes temporarily peaceful when given the evidence of David's loyalty.

Throughout this time of equipping David for leadership, David made mistakes and sinned against the covenant. However, whereas Saul's sins were willful – a choice to follow his own reasoning rather than God's direction – in contrast David's sins were momentary lapses from a man who was earnestly trying to obey the covenant. The story made use of an interchange at this point, to acknowledge David's various strengths and weaknesses. The interchange first reveals David's weaknesses, a willingness to seek provision from an enemy of the people [27:1-3], taking multiple wives [27:3], and agreeing to fight against Israel or at least not help Israel in battle [28:1-2; 29:11]. In contrast, the interchange shows David was strengthening himself in God [30:6], inquiring of God [30:7-8], achieving victories at God's deliverance [30:17-20], being honorable to acknowledge God's deliverance in his victories [30:23], and willing to share the spoils of victory with the people who had helped him before [30:26-31]. Again, this interchange shows us that David was not perfect or sinless, but that he had a heart for God and willfully was seeking to obey him.

D. CONCLUSION: 31:1-13

Literary Function: The literary function of the conclusion was to resolve the tension by closing out the part of Saul in the story and setting up the following narrative segment about David's kingship.

Means of Literary Function: The Philistines killed Saul, Jonathan, and Saul's other sons in battle [31:2-4].

SUMMARY: Throughout the book of 1 Samuel, there is a tension about obedient leadership. The story opens with Eli effectively in leadership as Priest, but he had delegated some power to his sons, who were not obedient, and he was unwilling to judge them properly. God raised up Samuel to be an obedient judge and prophet [in contrast to Eli and his sons], and he was effective in those roles, but as he aged and his own sons were disobedient to God, the people took matters into their own hands by clamoring for a king like the other nations had. At God's leading, Samuel anointed Saul, who – despite equipping by God – proved an incapable leader because of his pursuit of his own ways of doing things rather than God's, willful disobedience to God's directives [both through the covenant and Samuel], and eventual turn to fighting God's anointed successor instead of God's enemies. During Saul's reign, God raised up and equipped David, a king who would sin grievously, yet one who would pursue obedience to the covenant and God's direction through his prophets. This is the greatest contrast in the book: to human wisdom – even today! – Saul's decisions often seem to be sound and based on goodness, but they were really willful deviations from what he knew to be God's will; in contrast, David seems to sin just as often as Saul, yet is called a man after God's own heart because he genuinely sought to obey and his sins were fleshly but not willful. Interestingly, even while Saul was king, Samuel continued to act with authority for God, including anointing David as the next king, indicating God's will to progress from a righteous judge to a righteous king. With David's claim to the throne at Saul's death, the book closes, God having delivered up his righteous ruler and covenant blesser, with whom God would make another covenant and from whose line God would bring about the true Messiah in Jesus.