

**February 14, 2010**

Saint Valentine, Priest and Martyr

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Properly to appreciate the Books of Samuel, a first step is to read them as two halves of a single work. This is, in fact, how we find them in our earliest extant Hebrew manuscript of Samuel, from Cave IV at Qumran on the Dead Sea. Indeed, the Hebrew copies of Samuel did not divide it into two books until 1448.

When Samuel was translated into Greek, however, it was copied onto two scrolls. There was a simple reason for this: Unlike Hebrew transcription, with consonants only, Greek orthography includes seven vowels and several diphthong forms. Consequently, the Greek version of Samuel required an expansion into two *volumina*, or "books."

In determining where to divide Samuel, the translators (a rabbinical group at Alexandria two centuries or so before Christ) took their inspiration from the literary structure of the work. Accordingly, they made their division at the Battle of Mount Gilboah, perceiving that the death of Saul formed a natural break in the narrative. This battle (roughly 1000 B.C.), which ended the reign of Saul, permitted David to take the throne of Israel. David's reign thus became the substance of what we now call 2 Samuel.

For its proper understanding, nonetheless, the reader should bear in mind the original unity of Samuel. It will give shape to its interpretation.

This perspective will show the reader, for example, that Samuel is structurally concerned with the transposition of Israel's religious center from Shiloh to Jerusalem. He will observe that both the opening and closing scenes of the work have to do with worship: The opening of 1 Samuel describes a pilgrimage to Shiloh, whereas the last chapter of 2 Samuel finishes with David's purchase of the site of the future temple at Jerusalem. At the story's beginning, the Ark of the Covenant is kept at Shiloh, but it has been moved to the new site as the book ends. Sacrifices are offered in each place, whether by the priest Eli or by David. In both places, likewise, there is a description of prayer: We start with two prayers of Hannah and end with two prayers of David.

This transposition of Israel's religious center from Shiloh to Jerusalem, which forms one of the structural themes of the book, is matched by another: Israel's political transition from the rule of the Judges to that of the Davidic monarchy, the prophet Samuel serving as the hinge.

Even as our understanding of the book is guided by the original unity of the

Book of Samuel, we can hardly fail to observe that its place in the canon integrates the work into a vastly larger narrative. This incorporation was shaped in two ways:

First, in the Hebrew text, the Book of Samuel is part of the "prior prophets," a designation that includes all the biblical books from Joshua through 2 Kings. The Hebrew editors of Holy Scripture, in calling these books the "prior prophets" meant that their reading should come *prior* to the reading of the "latter prophets," whom we know as the "literary prophets." An understanding of prophecy demanded a knowledge of historical facts

For example, a familiarity with the reign of Jeroboam II was considered essential to an intelligent reading of the Hosea and Amos. Thus, when they inserted these two books into the Bible, the editors were careful---as we see in their opening verses---to date the prophets explicitly during the reign of Jeroboam II. Another example was the theology of the Davidic covenant in the prophetic literature. How could a reader unfamiliar with the history of the Davidic throne understand Isaiah or Micah?

Second, in the classical Greek text of the Old Testament (Septuagint, or LXX), the Books of Samuel were joined to the Books of Kings under a common name, the "Books of the Kingdoms." Referring to the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, this designation effectively shifted attention from the history of prophecy to political history.

This shading of perspective determined much of the Church's biblical reading: In all Christian manuscripts of the Old Testament, Samuel and Kings are read as four parts of a sweeping historical panorama, covering the long period from the last of Israel's judges to the last of Judah's kings. Thus, for most Christians over the centuries, the name of 1 Samuel has been "1 Kings" in the West and "1 Kingdoms" in the East.

I believe care should be taken, nonetheless, that the later incorporation of Samuel into larger historical surveys---whether by post-Exilic editors, or Alexandrian translators, or Christian scribes---should obscure neither the book's literary integrity and nor its unified theological perspective.

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