

A New and Greater Samuel: Luke 2:41-52

It is one of the unfortunate consequences of our culture's assumed familiarity with the Christ's infancy and childhood narratives that the story of Jesus with the teachers in the temple as a young boy is sometimes treated somewhat along the lines of stories one hears occasionally of twelve year olds receiving their bachelor's degrees: an interesting example of the Christ-child's inherent wisdom and maturity, and in that way, an attestation to his unique nature, but in the end, not much more. However, when one considers how the OT story of the young Samuel (1 Sm 2:12-26) forms the textual backdrop for the Lk 2:41-52 narrative (specifically 2:52), layers of meaning in Luke's narrative become clearer. Indeed, there seem to be at least two purposes in Luke's use of the OT, which may be summarized as "political" and "contextual."¹ First, the evangelist alludes to the young Samuel in order to compare his redemptive-historical moment with that of Jesus in his gospel, that is, to imply that just as Samuel was a threat to and eventually supplanted the spiritual and political leadership of Eli and his line, so Jesus is a threat to and will eventually supplant the spiritual and political leadership of second temple Judaism.² Second, Luke alludes to Samuel to compare the person and roles that Samuel fills to the person and roles Jesus will fill—in this sense, Jesus is a new and greater Samuel—and this allusion thus serves the gospel's ultimate purpose: to contextualize the early Christian church by showing the scope of the story of the redemptive purpose of God and calling its readers to renewed faithfulness to their ever faithful God.³

¹ I acknowledge that both these "summary" words are somewhat simplistic. But such is the nature of summarization.

² As we will see, "the call of Samuel to be prophet and judge of Israel formed a turning-point in the history of the Old Testament kingdom of God." Quoted from C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, Trans. by James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 21.

³ See the summary of Luke's purpose in Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 21-25.

The effect and import of this thesis is that it transforms a story that before primarily functioned to hint at Jesus' future teaching and messianic identity into a not-so-subtle subversion of the leadership of Israel, both in the context of Jesus' lifetime as well as the leadership structure that existed for Luke's original audience.⁴ In his allusion, Luke also urges his reader to remember the work of Samuel and the change he brought, thus pointing to the faithfulness of God—for here is a greater Samuel, one who will complete the work Samuel began in a way that David never could. The end result of this for the Christian reader is the same as the original readers of Luke: a greater allegiance to Jesus as Lord and a deeper comfort in the faithfulness of God to his chosen people, the new Israel.

A superficial reading of Luke's description of Jesus in 2:52 (*Και Ιησους προεκοπτεν εν τη σοφια και ηλικια και χαριτι παρα θεω και ανθρωποις*) reveals that it is not a direct quotation of the LXX description of Samuel in 1 Sm 2:26 (*και το παιδαριον σαμουηλ επορευετο και εμεγαλυνετο και αγαθον και μετα κυριου και μετα ανθρωπων*). However, the repetition of key words (especially the *κυριου/θεω* and *ανθρωπων* pattern) along with the broader thematic parallels in the first chapters of Luke and 1 Samuel, which include many corresponding events: a son born in unusual circumstances (i.e. to a virgin and a barren woman), the regular visits to the temple by Jesus and Samuel's families (1 Sm 1:21, 2:19, Lk 2:41), Samuel and Jesus staying at the temple as young boys and impressing their elders (1 Sm 2:11, 18, 26, Lk 2:46-7), as well as numerous linguistic and thematic parallels between the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) and Hannah's song (1 Sm 2:1-10)⁵, it is clear that Luke alludes to the Samuel story in his

⁴ With this in mind, the allusion can be seen to subtly point toward A.D. 70 as well.

⁵ See, for example, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 2 vols, The Anchor Bible, vol. 28, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981-1985), 1:359.

account of the young Jesus.⁶ Though Craig Evans writes that the allusion to Samuel is “subtle,” and “would be clear only to those knew their Old Testament stories well,”⁷ if one accepts that Luke wrote his gospel at least in part to emphasize God’s continued faithfulness to his promises, it is not surprising that Luke would self-consciously and purposefully echo Old Testament narratives in his presentation of Christ.⁸ Indeed, this kind of OT echo fits firmly in the Lucan pattern, for Luke, in contrast to Matthew, tends to avoid ‘proof text’ quotations, and, as Darrell Bock writes, instead “alludes to the [OT] text and uses its ideas rather than citing specific texts.”⁹ Though the Samuel allusion may be subtle (though surely, not as subtle as some of Luke’s allusions!), it seems clear that the evangelist intend for his readers to see and grasp the connection between Jesus and the young Samuel.

1 Sm 2:26 falls in a pericope that begins after Hannah’s song in 2:12 and is clearly designed to contrast the faithfulness of the young boy Samuel with the failure of Eli and the unfaithfulness of his sons. As Joseph Campbell succinctly puts it, 1 Sm 2:12-26 is “carefully organized to depict the future prophetic figure against a background that is in need of change.”¹⁰ Though some scholars argue the pericope is better defined as 2:11-36, the point remains the same—Samuel and the Elides are implicitly contrasted throughout.¹¹ The basic form for the contrast is two negative vignettes describing the Elides (2:12-17, 22-25) alongside one short positive story of Samuel (2:19-21a) and

⁶ Among many others, Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, Trans. by J. S. Bowden, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 43; and Raymond E. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, Anchor Bible Reference Library, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993), 494-95.

⁷ Craig Evans and James Sanders, *Luke and Scripture*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 104.

⁸ See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, 2 vols, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 3, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994-1996), 1:15.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Proclamation From Prophecy and Pattern*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, vol 12, (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1987), 89.

¹⁰ Antony F. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol 7, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 47

¹¹ For example, Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 10, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 21-28.

interspersed, significantly, with a series of repetitive refrains describing the growth of Samuel (2:11b, 2:18, 2:21b) that culminate in the statement of 2:26.¹²

Authorial comment in 1 Sm 2:12a, “Now the sons of Eli were worthless men,” sets the tone for how the Elides are to be understood in this text. In 2:13-17, the Elides are shown abusing their priestly role by eating more of the sacrificial meat than belonged to them, and eating it before the fat had burned away, actions which violated Levitical law (Lev 3:3-5, 7:30-34), and amounted to theft from the Lord.¹³ In verses 2:22-25, the Elides begin to sin in another direction as they lie with women serving at the temple. Where before the sin of the Elides was primarily directed against the Lord, it is now turned toward the people of Israel; indeed, Eli rightly confronts his sons by saying to them, “I hear of your evil dealings from all the people” (2:23).

Though the space devoted in 1 Sm 2:11-26 to Samuel is significantly less than the Elides, it is obvious that, in contrast to the sons of Eli, Samuel is presented as a true priest of the Lord in both action and dress. In 2:11 and 2:18, Samuel “ministers” to the Lord, forming an inclusio around the Elides’ robbery of the sacrificial meat. Here the verb *mesaret* is used in a sacerdotal context; according to the word choice, clearly Samuel is being shown as a priest.¹⁴ In 2:18, the young boy is described as “clothed with a linen ephod,” a distinctly priestly garment.¹⁵ As the linen ephod was “not a child’s garment but a priest’s whether he be a youth or a full grown man,”¹⁶ we might easily assume the Elides wore similar garments—the fact that only Samuel is described as wearing the garment underscores whom the text’s author believes to be the true priest. The final distinction is perhaps the most subtle, but no less powerful. As noted above, the author

¹² This structure is best outlined in Rene Peter-Contesse, “La Structure de 1 Samuel 1-3,” *The Bible Translator* 27:3 (1976): 313.

¹³ See C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, 35.

¹⁴ See P. Kyle McCarter, Jr, *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 8, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 82.

¹⁵ Cf. Keil and Delizsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, 36.

¹⁶ N. L. Tidwell, “The Linen Ephod: 1 Sam. II 18 and 2 Sam VI 14,” *VT* 24 (1974): 507.

has taken pains to show the Elides' sin against both God (2:12-17) and man (2:22-23); in contrast, the author particularly notes that Samuel "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man" (2:26). Where the Elides are abusing their priestly role for their own gain, Samuel ministers to the Lord and wears the garments of a true priest. Where the Elides incur the wrath of the people (2:23-24) and the Lord himself (2:25b), Samuel grows in favor with both the Lord and the people. As Kyle McCarter puts it, "the good and the wicked, the chosen and the rejected are set before us in an almost simplistic juxtaposition. We are [now] prepared for the fall of the house of Eli and, with equal certainty, for the corresponding rise in the fortunes of Samuel."¹⁷

Similarly to 1 Sm 2:26, Lk 2:52 serves as a summing up of a pericope—one that begins in 2:41 and forms a narrative where Luke advances his audience's understanding of Jesus in at least two distinct ways: as teacher and as son of God. When Mary and Joseph discover their lost child in the courts of the temple in 2:46, Jesus is with the teachers not as a teacher himself, but engaged in their dialogue as would typify a devout young Hebrew.¹⁸ What amazes those who heard Jesus was not the fact he interacted with the teachers, but the manner of his interaction, that is, "his understanding and his answers" (2:47), and this understanding is itself a foreshadowing of the power of Jesus' future teaching.¹⁹ The Christological nature of this passage is revealed in Jesus' simple response to his mother: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (2:49)²⁰ Jesus' explicit self-identification as the son of God is the central message of the pericope²¹—these are Jesus' first words in the evangelist's account, and they speak to

¹⁷ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr, *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, 85.

¹⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 442.

¹⁹ John J. Kilgallen, "Luke 2,41-50: Foreshadowing of Jesus, Teacher," *Bib* 66 (1985): 559.

²⁰ It should be noted that "my father's house" here is a debated translation of *εν τοις πατρος μου*. A survey of the various translation options (as well as a defense of the 'house' translation) is found in Raymond E. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 475-77.

²¹ Though de Jonge rightly notes the numeric centrality (i.e. the 85th word in a 170 word pericope) of Jesus "among the teachers" in v46, it seems better to consider, as Joel Green puts it, "the dramatic movement of

both his special identity as well as the locus of his mission being in the temple of his father.²² In this context, 2:50, which records that Mary and Joseph “did not understand the saying that he spoke to them,” can only be regarded as a foreshadowing of the confusion of many in response to Jesus throughout the rest of his pre-resurrection life—for if even the parents of the young messiah do not understand his identity or mission, neither will the neutral bystander. The pericope culminates in a summary statement in 2:26: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” Though the prominence here of the wisdom of the Christ-child may rise from the Isainic promise of a messiah figure in Isaiah 11:1-2,²³ as noted above, the near-echo of 1 Sam 2:26 brings the story of young Samuel firmly into view. Indeed, it would seem that Luke invites his audience to understand that Jesus grew in wisdom and favor with God and man in much the same way as Samuel in the house of Eli.

But if Luke is borrowing literary styles and themes from the life of the young Samuel in his gospel of Jesus, what is his purpose? Though it is impossible to declare with complete certainty the evangelist’s intentions, I believe there are at least two viable implications of the allusion: by echoing the story of 1 Samuel 2 in Luke 2, Luke compares Jesus to Samuel’s moment in redemptive-history, adding a political undertone, as well as contextualizing the work of Jesus by casting him as a “new Samuel.”

It must be noted that Luke’s original audience would not only have understood the allusion to Samuel’s youth, but they would also have known the whole of Samuel’s life, including what was to come in 1 Sm 4 and beyond, when the Eli and their sons were

the account,” which firmly places Jesus’ statement as the main point of the pericope. See H. J. de Jonge “Sonship, Wisdom, Infancy: Luke ii. 41-51a,” *NTS* 24 (1977-78): 338n5 and Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 155n6.

²² Stein summarizes the passage thus: “the main theological emphasis of this passage is Christological. Long before Jesus began his public ministry, Luke revealed that he was aware of his unique relationship to God,” in Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 24, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 124. Regarding the centrality of the temple in Luke, note that the gospel begins (Lk 1:5-23) and ends (Lk 24:52-53) in the temple.

²³ See Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 157n20.

destroyed and their authority given over to Samuel. With this context in mind, it is not a stretch to imagine that Luke is preparing his audience for what is come in the rest of his gospel: a replacement of the current leadership of Israel with a new and permanent leader in Jesus. Though there is no hint of comparison in Luke 2 between the wickedness of the Elides and the conduct of the teachers at the temple, there is certainly an implicit similarity in their situation. It may be perhaps for no fault of their own, but Luke is hinting here to his readers that Jesus' presence in the temple signals that the time of the authority of the temple leaders is over in the same way that Samuel signals the end for the Eli and his line—as the fortunes of Samuel and Jesus rise, the dynasties of Eli and the Jewish leaders will certainly fall. This implicitly political tone of Luke's allusion must not be missed: the shadow Samuel casts in Jesus' childhood is dark, and its implicit judgment of the current leadership of Israel supports the prophecies of both Mary (Lk 1:51-52) and Simeon (Lk 2:34).²⁴

When considering the viability of viewing Jesus as a “new Samuel,” it is first necessary to consider the entire life of Samuel, and especially the way that Samuel functions as a priest, prophet and judge of Israel,²⁵ as well as the implied connections between Samuel and Moses in the OT.

Though the original authorial intent of the 1 Sm 2:12-26 is certainly primarily to contrast Samuel with the Elides, the young boy is not presented here only as a foil to the wicked sons of Eli. Indeed, the phrase “Samuel grew in the presence of the Lord” in 2:21 (lit. ‘with Yahweh,’) is eerily reminiscent of the description of Moses in Ex. 34:28.²⁶ The Samuel-Moses connection is also supported by explicit links between the two men in Jer.

²⁴ Though Jesus will not replace the power structure of Israel in quite the way Luke's audience might expect at this point in the gospel.

²⁵ In this discussion, I rely heavily on John T. Willis, “Cultic elements in the story of Samuel's birth and dedication,” *Studia Theologica* 26 (1972): 40-54.

²⁶ See Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, The New American Commentary, vol. 7, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1996), 80.

15:1 and Ps. 99:6.²⁷ Additionally, in his farewell address in 1 Sam 12, Samuel seems to self-consciously compare the people of Israel at his time to the people under Moses, and thus himself to Moses.²⁸

The Lord is my witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt...when Jacob went into Egypt, and the Egyptians oppressed them, your fathers cried out to the LORD and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron who brought your fathers out of Egypt and made them dwell in this place...but they forgot the LORD their God. And he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the king of Moab...and they cried out to the LORD...and the LORD sent Jerubbaal and Barak and Jephthah and Samuel. (1 Sam 12:6-11)

Along with the connections to Moses, we must note the priestly, prophetic and judicial activities of Samuel. Although Samuel was not a Levite, and did not pass on the priesthood to his sons, his early priestly activities in 1 Samuel 2 have already been discussed, and are continued in his sacrificial practice for the people of Israel in 1 Sm 7:9-10 and 9:13 and the new king Saul in 9:19-24. Though Samuel is not a “classical priest,” he certainly functions as a “kind of” priest for Israel in a time of national transition after the destruction of the priestly line of Eli.²⁹

In 1 Sm 3, when the “word of the Lord was rare” (3:1), Samuel has an extensive vision (3:10-14), issues words of judgment to Eli (3:18), and by the end of the chapter is known by all of Israel as “a prophet of LORD” (3:20). If the point of 1 Sm 2 is to portray Samuel as a new priest to replace the sons of Eli, 1 Sm 3 seems to be intended to show Samuel as a prophet.³⁰ Later in his life Samuel continues to function as a prophet, warning the people of Israel to avoid idols (1 Sm 7:3-4), proclaiming judgment on Saul

²⁷ Moshe Garsiel, *The first book of Samuel: a literary study of comparative structures, analogies and parallels*, (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1990), 45.

²⁸ Garsiel, *The first book of Samuel*, 44-45. Garsiel also notes a host of other similarities between Samuel and Moses, including similar literary structures in their infancy narratives and other references to Moses in 1 Sam 12.

²⁹ Willis, “Cultic elements,” 47.

³⁰ Willis, “Cultic elements,” 48.

for his wickedness (1 Sm 13, 15, 28) and interceding with God for the people (1 Sm 7:8-9, 12:19, 23).³¹

There is also ample evidence for Samuel as a judge: he evidently traveled Israel in order to perform the duties of a judge (1 Sm 7:15-17) and made his sons judges after him (1 Sm 8:1-3).³² Indeed, Samuel is the last in the line of judges, and when Israel demands a king (1 Sm 8), the office of the judge is ended and transmogrified into the office of the king. The way that Samuel unites the offices of priest, prophet and judge are a convincing echo of Moses' role for the people of Israel, and indeed, begin to hint at what Luke might have in mind by alluding to Samuel in his gospel of Jesus. H. W. Hertzberg summarizes this point well:

[Samuel] unites the priestly office with the prophetic vocation. He becomes the spiritual leader of his people, and that means that he receives a public, indeed a political status...By now, however, it is already clear that there has not been a man like him since the days of Moses. Samuel should be regarded in this light. Joshua was Moses' successor, the 'servant of God'. But he is never called a prophet, nor is he a priest. Here is more than a Joshua. Here, too, we have something more than the prophets of later times, who stood in the midst of the people as the spokesman of God, but in other respects were still on their periphery. Samuel unites in his person the three offices of the Christ who is to come, prophet, priest and king. It is no wonder that the shadow of this particular figure falls over the 'Books of Samuel' which bear his name. Nor is it by chance that in the passage which describe the growth of the boy Jesus we find the same words which describe the growth of the young Samuel...the Bible regards [Samuel] as being to a special degree one of the forerunners of Christ, and does so with justification.³³

As Hertzberg argues, after considering the three offices of Samuel, as well as his connection to Moses, the implications of Luke's allusion to him in his description of Jesus become more clear: Jesus is the "new Samuel" who is greater than his fleshly precedent, and will complete the work Samuel began. Where Samuel's actions as a

³¹ Willis, "Cultic elements," 48.

³² Willis, "Cultic elements," 50.

³³ Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, 43.

prophet, priest and judge for Israel were temporary and eventually rejected by the people of Israel, Jesus will forever unite the three offices and will never be rejected.³⁴ Indeed, just as Saul and eventually David are historical replacements for Samuel, Jesus is the new David who completes and fulfills the work of Samuel. Understood in this way, the allusion serves Luke's gospel purpose of showing the redemptive faithfulness of God by connecting the work of Jesus to his forerunner Samuel, as Samuel provides an "interpretive grid" to understand Jesus' life and work through. By noting the allusion to Samuel in Jesus' life, Luke's readers are encouraged to look forward to what they will find throughout Luke-Acts: the culmination of an ancient story of redemption wherein all the promises of God are fulfilled in the person and work of Christ and his church.

We return now to the original story: Jesus, as a boy stays behind at the temple and amazes all with his understanding and answers, then calmly assures Joseph and Mary that he must be in his father's house, and finally, his growth in favor with God and man is stated. There is much here on just the surface of this story—a picture of the wisdom of Jesus that will later be revealed, an implicit claim of his messianic identity, and a prediction of the confusion that will follow Jesus until (and even beyond) his resurrection. But when the OT allusions are considered, and the interpretive grid of Samuel stands fully behind the story, we find in its words fuller meaning: an implicit political statement about the future of Israel and its leaders, as well as a revelation of the contextual history of the fulfillment of God's promises and the consummation of all in Christ. For Samuel was once the hinge on which the history of Israel turned, and here is a new and greater Samuel, one who will turn the history of world.

³⁴ See for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F.L. Battles, ed. John McNeill, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960), Book II, Chapter XV.