The prophet Samuel's story is told mostly in the first sixteen chapters of the book of 1 Samuel. Beginning with Samuel's birth in the first chapter, 1 Samuel goes on to describe how Samuel grows up as servant to the priest Eli, whom he eventually replaces as the primary mediator between Lord and Israel. Under Samuel's leadership the people of Israel—who at this point have no other formal leader—enjoy relief from foreign attackers. But when Samuel grows too old to lead the people himself, they ask him to appoint a king. Lord tells a reluctant Samuel to comply. Samuel anoints Saul, who has some promising early successes but eventually loses Lord's support. After Samuel has communicated this news to Saul, Lord sends Samuel to anoint David. The rest of 1 Samuel is primarily about David and Saul, with Samuel mentioned only a few times. He makes his final appearance as a ghost, summoned by Saul, who declares that on the morrow, “Lord will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines” (1 S 28:19; this and all subsequent biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, unless otherwise indicated).

I first paid serious attention to the biblical character Samuel when a student asked me to preach on 1 Samuel 3 at his ordination. The student, whose great passion was ministry with children, had chosen the chapter because in it Lord calls to the young Samuel as the boy sleeps in the temple. Since my student mostly wanted to show that even a very young person can be called by God, he trimmed the reading to leave out God's actual message to Samuel in 3:11–14, a message formulated to “make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle” (3:11).

Now this student, who had been my teaching assistant, knew full well that I do not think problematic verses should be clipped from readings (as they so frequently are in church Bible lessons). If people have a problem with something in the Bible, I think they should talk about it rather than proclaiming respect for the Bible while censoring—if not downright misrepresenting—it. Furthermore, in my experience people grow far more by wrestling with difficult passages than by lingering over old favorites. The ordinand was, I am sure, not at all surprised when I began my sermon with the omitted verses, in which Lord says, “On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blasphemying God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever” (3:12–14).
It is not hard to see why these verses were left out. They are rather sobering from the standpoint of ministry to children. The target of Lord’s condemnation, Eli, is not some stranger to Samuel. Eli is the person to whom Samuel’s mother, Hannah, brought her child as soon as he was weaned, fulfilling an earlier vow that if she conceived she would dedicate her child to Lord (1 S 1). While his mother had reportedly visited him once a year, bringing a new robe for him each time (2:19), it was Eli who cared for and taught Samuel. Their closeness shows when Eli addresses Samuel as “my son” in 3:6 and 16. How does the young Samuel feel when he hears Lord’s declaration of punishment against Eli? What is he thinking as he lies in the temple during the long hours after his visitation until dawn (3:15)? Is this really the story we want to use to teach children that God may have something to say to them?

In commentaries and preaching resources on the chapter, interpreters asserted Eli’s corruption and the deservedness of Lord’s punishment with a vehemence that looked for all the world like “protesting too much.” For instance, a popular online commentary, David Guzik’s Enduring Word Media, comments that Lord’s word was rare (3:1) “probably, because of the hardness of heart among the people of Israel and the corruption of the priesthood. God will speak, and guide, when His people seek Him, and when His ministers seek to serve Him diligently.” Guzik further tells us that being unable to see (3:2) “was true spiritually of Eli, as much as it was physically.”

I concluded that perhaps I was not the only person unsettled by this oracle of punishment. I began to question it. Does Eli’s dimming physical vision really symbolize spiritual blindness? Eli’s physical eyes may not be able to see, but he can perceive who is calling Samuel and tell the clueless boy (who cannot tell the difference between Lord’s voice and Eli’s) how to reply (3:8). Meanwhile the supposed paragon of new faith, Samuel, fails to follow Eli’s instructions: instead of answering, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,” as Eli advises, Samuel says simply, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (3:9–10). Possibly Samuel’s dropping of Lord’s name is an inconsequential variation, but I have learned from scholars such as Robert Alter (1981), Adele Berlin (1983), and Meir Sternberg (1985) to pay close attention to repetition in biblical narratives and ask if exact or inexact repetitions suggest some nuance of meaning. I wondered if the child Samuel actually doubted Eli’s conclusion about the speaker and was hedging his bets by leaving out the divine name when he answered.

Then I noticed something even more disturbing. Lord says in 3:11 that Eli’s “sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.” But according to the previous chapter, Eli did make a spirited attempt to restrain his sons. They refused to listen, but the reason given is not that Eli has been lax in his exhortation. Rather we are told that “they would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the
will of the Lord to kill them” (2:23–25). Lord condemns Eli for the sons’ failure to reform, but the narrative has already named Lord’s intervention as their reason for persisting in sin. This is a God who is not merely harsh, but one who shifts blame for divine actions onto humans (Fokkelman 1993, 177).

Given this troublesome aspect of Lord’s words, I did not rush to align myself with the divine condemnation of Eli. Instead I observed in the sermon that my student was shifting from the role of Samuel to that of Eli, and he might learn something from the virtues of the older character in the story. Eli keeps trying even when he does not get much support from above, has the perceptiveness and generosity to instruct his fostering in responding to a voice that Eli himself cannot hear, and accepts Lord’s bitter sentence without raging against the youngster who reports the message and who will take Eli’s place. Would that more of us in teaching and ministry had the faithfulness and skill to send our charges so generously to places we ourselves cannot go! I noted, as comfort for those of us in roles more like Eli’s than Samuel’s, that while 1 Samuel 2–3 may leave the impression that all positive connections between Eli’s family and Lord are being terminated, the cutoff is not absolute: the prophet Jeremiah seems to be a descendant of Eli.²

The preaching of this sermon piqued my curiosity about how people respond to Samuel. Most Bible readers are, in my experience, uneasy with him. This uneasiness arises in part from the negativity of Samuel’s messages. From the oracle against Eli at the beginning of Samuel’s career to the message of death that his ghost delivers the night before Saul’s final battle (“Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; the Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines”; 1 S 28:19), Samuel speaks stern warnings and predicts destruction. Worse yet (remember that oracle against Eli), it is not always obvious that the condemnations are deserved.

Even relatively inexperienced readers sense the problem. I ask students in my Introduction to the Old Testament class to write questions related to biblical readings, and one semester a striking twenty-six of twenty-eight students asked whether Samuel’s condemnation of Saul in 1 Samuel 13 is fair (Steussy 2000, 126). In this story Saul, who has experienced some initial military successes, musters the Israelites at Gilgal (a site that the book of Joshua associates with the beginning of Israel’s successful conquest of Canaan). This is the place were Saul’s kingship has been confirmed and celebrated in 1 Samuel 11:14–15. The Philistines muster, too, with “thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude” (13:5). The frightened Israelites hide in caves, cisterns, and even tombs; some flee to the other side of the Jordan (13:6–7). Now comes the crucial verse: Saul, we are told, “waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people began to slip away from Saul” (13:8).
The words, “the time appointed by Samuel,” apparently refer to 1 Samuel 10:8, where Samuel tells Saul that “you shall go down to Gilgal ahead of me; then I will come down to you to present burnt offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do.” Saul has now gone to Gilgal and has “waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel,” but Samuel has not arrived. With the Philistines mustering and his volunteer army beginning to desert, Saul goes ahead and makes prebattle offerings without Samuel, who, after all, has also told him to “do whatever you see fit to do, for God is with you” (1 S 10:7).

As soon as Saul does this, Samuel arrives, accuses him of foolishness and disobedience to Lord, and declares in 13:13–14 that Lord has appointed someone else ruler. While this information is surely upsetting to Saul, it does nothing to resolve the immediate problem. The new appointee will not be identified (and then only to his family and Samuel) until chapter 16. Meanwhile Saul still has to cope with demoralized Israelite soldiers and threatening Philistine armies.

Of the twenty-six students who asked about the fairness of the condemnation, twenty-three pronounced it justified, citing Samuel’s statement that Saul has disobeyed Lord’s commandment (13:13). But what commandment has Saul broken? The narrator has told us in so many words that Saul did wait “the time appointed by Samuel.” It is Samuel who does not arrive according to plan. The question of what commandment Saul is supposed to have broken will arise again later, but suffice it here to say that the very need to explain what it is that Saul has done wrong—not to mention the variety of answers proposed to that question—demonstrates that the nature of his disobedience is not obvious. The students sensed this, and that was why so many of them asked whether Samuel was being fair. But they backed away from their own accurate perceptions, assuming that because Samuel is a prophet, he must therefore be right.

A number of scholars writing about Samuel and Saul have shown greater resistance to the idea that the prophet must always be right or at least must be expressing God’s opinion. David Gunn in The Fate of King Saul presses the issue particularly hard. He points out that in 1 Samuel 8:6 the people’s request for “a king to govern us” assigns the king a duty of governing (Hebrew špt—for more, see the section “Judge” in chapter 3) that has hitherto belonged to Samuel (mentioned four places in 1 Samuel 7) and that Samuel has tried to pass to his own sons (8:1). A king will thus replace Samuel and his sons. Lord’s assurance to Samuel that “they have not rejected you” confirms that Samuel has complained about precisely such a rejection (8:7; Gunn 1980, 59). We cannot take Samuel’s words about Saul as a transparent window onto Lord’s viewpoint, because Samuel is not a disinterested broker between Lord and the king. Samuel has a stake in seeing Saul fail.
As further evidence of the possibility of disconnect between Samuel’s viewpoint and Lord’s with regard to kings, notice that after the people ask for a king, Lord tells Samuel three times (1 S 8:7, 9, and 22) to “listen to their voice” (a biblical idiom meaning “obey them”) and anoint them a king. Instead Samuel says to them, “Each of you return home” (8:22). Lyle Eslinger comments that Samuel “has heard nothing Yahweh has said and seeks only to dissuade the people from their purpose” (1985, 271). Later, in 16:1 and 6–7, Lord openly chides Samuel for his attitudes about anointing Saul’s replacement. Samuel’s disgruntlement and obstructionism with respect to kingship well support Robert Alter’s assessment: “The prophet Samuel may have God on his side, but he is also an implacable, irascible man, and often a palpably self-interested one as well” (1999, xv).

The fact that Samuel has his own agenda does not, as Alter recognized, preclude a close relationship between Samuel and Lord. If the dispute in 1 Samuel 13 is indeed over Samuel’s instruction that Saul wait seven days for him (10:8), one might ask if such an instruction from Samuel really qualifies as “the commandment of the Lord your God, which he commanded you” (Samuel’s phrasing in 13:13). Lord does not, however, disown responsibility for the command. Elsewhere Samuel tells the people, “The wickedness that you have done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves” (12:17). This evaluation squares with Lord’s comment that “they have rejected me from being king over them” (8:7), but it sits less well with Lord’s description of Saul as Lord’s own chosen savior for the people (9:16). Given the conflicting evidence about Lord’s attitude, it is an open question whether the indignation in 1 Samuel 12 originates with Lord (as Samuel seems to want the people to believe) or with the noticeably touchy Samuel. When Samuel prays for a thunderstorm, however, Lord sends one (12:17–18).

Each time I read 1 Samuel 12’s account of Samuel praying for a thunderstorm and Lord delivering it, I recall the end of the calling-in-the-temple story. “As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. . . . And the word of Samuel came to all Israel” (3:19–4:1). What is odd about this is that I would expect Samuel not to let any of Lord’s words fall to the ground (rather than the other way around), with the result that Lord’s word (not Samuel’s) would come to all Israel. It is almost as if Lord decides simply to back what Samuel says, which would be one way of understanding the thunderstorm incident.3

The closeness between Samuel and Lord may itself be a source of uneasiness as we read Samuel’s story. Could we be troubled by a prophet who is close to Lord because there is something troubling about the way Lord is portrayed in these chapters? Most Jews and Christians have been taught that God is good, trustworthy, and wants people to treat one another with compassion, and most of us
inject that conviction into our reading of Bible passages. If Bible stories contain material that contradicts those beliefs, we usually manage not to see it. (I have already mentioned how often Christian lectionaries trim offending verses out of their readings.) For instance, the conviction that God gives life and helps barren women is so pervasive that most readers celebrate Lord’s giving of a child to Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 without ever noticing that Lord is said to be responsible for her barrenness to begin with. In 2:30–31 an anonymous “man of God” says to Eli on behalf of God, “I promised that your family . . . should go in and out before me forever; but now the Lord declares . . . I will cut off your strength and the strength of your ancestor’s family.” Many interpreters respond, as they do to 1 Samuel 3, by rehearsing justifications for the cutting-off, while avoiding the uncomfortable question of Lord’s reliability. If Lord here recalls making a promise “forever” and nonetheless revokes it, what are the implications for other promises made by Lord?

When we reach the scene where “Samuel hewed Agag [the captured Amalekite king] in pieces before the Lord” (1 S 15:33), the violence is hard to overlook. It is, however, apparently what Lord wants (see 15:3). Indeed Saul is rejected precisely because he has “spared” Agag (15:9; the Hebrew word here could also be translated “showed compassion” or “had pity,” as in 1 Samuel 23:21 and 2 Samuel 12:6). If Samuel is brutally violent in this scene, it is because he serves a lord who (at least according to this chapter) desires such behavior.

I have heard yet another kind of reaction to Samuel from students whose church traditions accord extremely high respect and authority to the pastor. A handful of such students have told me that Samuel reminds them of pastors they have known, sometimes their own mentors in ministry. These mentors were powerful, well-loved leaders who had earned respect by years of wise advice and courageous leadership. But eventually their leadership would be challenged, and the results could be ugly. The pastors seemed unable to accept that others might responsibly differ in their assessments of where the church should go. Too quickly, sometimes, the pastors equated questioning of their own programs with disobedience to God (compare Samuel’s apparent reference to his own instruction as “the commandment of the Lord your God” in 13:13). Sometimes they used their power not only to resist but to punish those who, in their view, stepped out of line (compare the thunderstorm in 12:18). Always they were hurt and confused by what they perceived as the ungratefulness of their congregations (compare Samuel’s “testify against me” in 12:3).

One student presented a drama, based on Samuel’s farewell speech in 1 Samuel 12, in which such a pastor confronted his elders in a “come-to-Jesus meeting” about their support for an associate’s new program. In 12:17–18, Samuel prays for a thunderstorm on the day of the wheat harvest, which might well mean loss of
the entire year's crop. In the drama the pastor told the elders that he had prayed regarding their factory jobs and they should consequently expect to receive pink slips. You could feel his love for his church, conviction that he was following God's will, and disquiet at what he saw as the elders’ mistakes. But the elders, too, had done much thinking and praying. They could not comprehend his failure to embrace new programs, and they were dismayed that he took their concerns as a total rejection of his, and God's, leadership. Although the pastor referred to the pink slips as an act of “tough love,” to the elders it felt like rejection and to the audience it looked like personal retaliation.

What this student correctly perceived was that 1 Samuel 12, and the story of Samuel more generally, is not a simple tale of a good prophet setting a bad people straight about what God wants for them. It is a story about conflict over who should be in charge, played out not just in terms of ordinary human power, but in claims about God's intentions for the community. The student recognized real sincerity and possibly even some truth in Samuel's and the pastor's convictions that they were representing God's will. He recognized what a painful position such persons are in when they believe that God has asked them to lead in a certain direction and the community balks at following. But he also recognized that the spokesperson's own stake in the position creates a possibility of slippage. However sincere the person speaking for God, who guarantees that the speaker will not confuse his or her own agenda with God's?

Almost everyone can recognize that questions of this kind do turn up in contemporary religious life. Not everyone is as comfortable supposing that this may be the case with Samuel himself. “Does not the Bible show us that he was aligned with God?” a reader may legitimately ask.

To that I have two answers. First, it is generally true that Samuel and Lord are shown working as partners. However, as I have already shown and will later show in more detail, at points the 1 Samuel text itself gives us grounds to suspect divergences between Samuel's opinions and Lord's.

That method, however, takes the biblical narrator's (or narrators’) account as the baseline for God's position. But who then tells this story? I suspect it is told by people who claim an authority similar to Samuel's, authority to instruct the people and their kings about what God wants and even to install or depose kings based on their obedience to that instruction. So my second answer is that because of the storytellers' probable stakes in depicting Samuel's closeness to God, we need to reckon with the possibility of slippage (however sincere) even in the narrators' account of God's position vis-à-vis Samuel.

In so saying, I reveal that I am not a historical or spiritual inerrantist. I do not believe that the Bible gives us divinely guaranteed historical information or even infallible spiritual guidance. My doubt about historical inerrancy comes not only
from the discrepancies between biblical accounts and other sources of historical information, and not only from knowing how much the Bible resembles other ancient Near Eastern documents that we would never dream of regarding as entirely historically trustworthy, but above all from the internal evidence of the Bible itself. Its multiple accounts refuse to merge into a single smooth storyline, though the effort at merger has provided careers for many persons over the centuries. Even in the chapters that tell Samuel's story, not all the historical markers line up. I point out several such discrepancies in the course of this book.

I also do not consider the Bible spiritually infallible, and my reasons are empirical. There has been too much mischief and flat-out evil committed in its name for me to be able to say with a straight face that the Bible provides reliable guidance to anyone who sincerely seeks it. Others might reasonably reply that the problem is not with the Bible but with the depravity of those who interpret it. I might even agree with them, except that if a Bible intended to communicate God's message to humans is so easily corrupted by human interpretation, what sense does it make to call it infallible? As soon as we qualify infallibility with the requirement of correct interpretation, the game changes: we are no longer talking about the Bible as a simple, reliable source in which anybody can look up the right answers. Instead we are dealing with the competing authority claims of its interpreters. Granted, many of those interpreters deny that they are advancing their own authority. They claim that they are just following the rules set by the Bible itself. The trouble is, the same claim can be and often is made by other interpreters who arrive at different results. Even when we seek to be faithful to the Bible's own principles, human judgment plays an inescapable role in biblical interpretation.

While the track record of religious communities may prompt me to doubt the Bible's moral infallibility, it also testifies to the Bible's helpfulness and potential for good. Millions of people, many of them very simple in their faith (and others less simple), have found the Bible a source of hope, healing, wholeness, guidance, courage, and moral insight. The Bible has inspired lives that are admired well beyond the bounds of Judaism and Christianity.

I teach in an urban ecumenical seminary with students from a wide variety of Christian traditions and even occasionally from non-Christian traditions. Many come in assuming that the Bible presents plain truth that needs only to be embraced. Such views may have served them well in the past, but as our diverse community grapples with complex problems of racism, religious prejudice, sexual identity, and so forth, "simple" truths often turn out to be inadequate, or at least terribly complicated to apply. In this context an awareness of the Bible's complexity often turns out to be helpful. It can be useful to realize that the Bible does not offer just one set of answers and that its people struggled with problems
discernibly like ours at many points. Understood in this way, the Bible helps us by illuminating the questions (as in the issues around Samuel’s calling and Eli’s displacement or the parallels between Samuel’s farewell speech and a “come-to-Jesus meeting”) rather than by giving us straightforward answers. It is in such a spirit that I pursue the exploration of Samuel.

The student who went to 1 Samuel 3 for a story about God’s concern for children and the students who so desperately wanted Samuel’s condemnation of Saul to be fair brought assumptions about God (and prophets, and the Bible itself) that were not well supported by the particular texts they were looking at. The students who interpreted Samuel in light of their own experiences with powerful religious leaders had a more serviceable matrix. Who is Samuel? Who is Lord? Is Samuel cantankerous because the people he serves are stubborn and ungrateful or because the lord he serves is so touchy and demanding? Or both, or neither? Is Lord’s touchiness a divine fact, or do Samuel and the storytellers describe Lord as touchy because it fits with their own way of experiencing the world? How are these accounts of God colored by the dynamics of human personalities and struggles for religious power?

These questions lead us to ask who wrote 1 Samuel, and why, matters addressed in chapter 2 of this book. There I point out some of the tensions (points on which we seem to get conflicting information or attitudes) and uncertainties (places where information is simply missing or given but interpretable in multiple ways) in Samuel’s story. I also discuss some of the more prominent compositional theories that have been proposed to explain the book’s unevenness. I do not regard these theories as “assured results of modern scholarship.” Some are fairly widely accepted; none are universally embraced; and vigorous debate continues. But learning about the theories will reveal some complicated issues in the stories themselves and indicates that the composers may have been responding to somewhat different questions than those we now ask.

Since our perception of Samuel is colored by our ideas about prophets (recall the students saying that since Samuel is a prophet, his accusations against Saul must be fair), chapter 3 examines the meanings of the word “prophet.” How does Samuel fit these stereotypes, and in what ways does he challenge them? Since prophet is not the only role assigned to Samuel, the chapter also explores the roles of judge (as presented in the book of Judges) and priest. Once again the point is less to arrive at a definitive answer than to examine our own presuppositions and get a sense of the diversity of the biblical presentation.

An aspect of the Samuel stories that troubles or at least puzzles many readers is the characterization of Lord, to which we turn in chapter 4. Based on what Lord says and does in these stories, what is Lord’s personality and what are Lord’s goals?
How does Samuel fit into Lord’s program, as these chapters of the Bible present it? Do our own presuppositions about God help or hinder us in understanding what is happening in these stories?

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 identify common presuppositions about the Bible, prophets, and God, and show that those presuppositions do not always match up with what we encounter in 1 Samuel. In the course of that work, some of the Samuel stories are looked at in detail. With presuppositions questioned and some details already examined, chapter 5 goes through the Samuel stories in order. Who is Samuel? Why does he do the things he does? How does he feel about them? Can we give a coherent account of his personality and motives?

Finally, in chapter 6 it is time to reflect on what this book says about Samuel and his God. Part of that reflection focuses on the ancient world and on what Samuel’s story may tell us about the worldviews and agendas of its tellers. Part of it asks what these things mean for us. Does the story of Samuel give us answers for our own religious lives?