One of the most iconic figures in the Old Testament, the prophet Samuel is a character with a great deal of depth and a rich background. The blessed son of Elkanah and Hannah, Samuel grows up under the high priest Eli’s mentorship to eventually become a prophet of God. Although his fellow Israelites see him as an idealistic figure who delivers the word of God in an unbiased manner, Samuel has his own visible set of imperfections in 1 Samuel. The author of 1 Samuel portrays Samuel as a prophet who also has his own personal agenda, to show that even though he is God’s chosen prophet, he has his own personal interests and other human tendencies just like the Israelites whom he rules over.

Samuel takes it upon himself to become a judge for the people of Israel, even though doing so falls outside of his regular duties as a prophet. Twenty years after the Ark of God is moved to Kiriath-jearim, the Israelites lament over their Lord. Samuel tests the people’s faith in God by having them cut ties with all of their pagan Gods and Astartes (1 Samuel 7.3), reassuring them that their Lord will deliver them out of the hand of their enemies: The Philistines. None of this is out of the ordinary; a Prophet’s primary job is to spread the will of God. However, Samuel goes on to gather the population of Israel in its entirety at Mizpah, without being commanded to do so. Samuel then has them fast for the entire day, and proceeds to judge them (1 Samuel 7.6). After the resolution of the Philistines’ attack, Samuel goes on to keep judging the people of Israel, in places such as Bethel and Gilgal, for the remainder of his life (1 Samuel 7.15-7.16).
Unlike the role of a prophet, which was bestowed upon him while under Eli’s mentorship, the role of a Judge was something that Samuel took up on his own, without any influence from God himself. Furthermore, Samuel did not abandon this additional role following the Philistines’ attack. Rather, he continued to act as a Judge over all parts of Israel for the remainder of his existence, and thereby cemented it as a permanent part of his identity. Since God, the only one who Samuel takes orders from, did not initially assign Samuel the role of a Judge, it is clear that Samuel took on the role of a Judge as a result of his own personal interests. Perhaps Samuel felt that simply being a prophet was not enough to guide the people of Israel; the Israelites were in need of a figure (a Judge) who could help them distinguish between right and wrong. Or maybe, Samuel was simply trying to appear more powerful by adding a second role to his name. Regardless of what his intentions may have been, Samuel strayed from being strictly a prophet, and therefore showed that like those around him, he is not a perfect individual.

In his old age, instead of patiently waiting for God to give Israel new judges, Samuel arbitrarily gives Israel two new judges, in the form of his two sons: Joel and Abijah. Unfortunately for Samuel, and the rest of Israel, Joel and Abijah do not grow up to follow in Samuel’s divine footsteps. Rather, the two of them chase superficial gains through blasphemous and perverse justice (1 Samuel 8.3). Regardless of how Samuel’s two sons turned out to be, the fact that he himself simply made them Judges without analyzing their judicial traits (or lack thereof) beforehand, and without God’s assistance, shows that he was not thinking things clearly and his judgment was most likely clouded by some sort of personal agenda. Samuel could have been trying to preserve his reign as a Judge through his children. On the other hand, he could have been attempting to cement the role of a Judge into his children’s identity as well as his own.
Either way, handing over the role of a Judge to two blasphemers (Joel and Abijah) was not a wise decision on Samuel’s part, and it was definitely not something that an idealistic prophet would have done, if he was truly following God’s commands verbatim that is.

Samuel’s anger is kindled by the Israelites’ demand for a king, suggesting that he believes himself to be the true ruler of Israel, and therefore sees no need for a king. The fact that his fellow Israelites think otherwise angers him. Following the disaster of having his two sons as Judges in Beer-sheba, Samuel is approached by all of the elders of Israel at Ramah. They inform him that he has grown too old to keep doing his prophetic duties, and that his sons’ incompetence has spoken for itself. As a result, the elders ask that Samuel appoint them a King to govern them. However, the idea of having a King as the primary figure of authority over Israel angers Samuel, and he seeks advice from God (1 Samuel 8.6). God reassures Samuel that he has done nothing wrong to stir this sort of behavior from his people, and that the Israelites have rejected God, not him (1 Samuel 8.7). The fact that Samuel is distraught after hearing the Israelites’ request for a new ruler shows that he holds himself to be of a high, almost divine standard. God’s reassurance to Samuel reveals that God himself knows this to be true. Samuel expects the people around him to treat him as a person of that standard for his entire life; simply being regarded as a messenger of God is not enough for him. It’s likely that Samuel himself wishes to be a King, with no other form of authority ruling beside him. With this mindset, Samuel is not a pure prophet in the strictest sense. Rather, he is a man who is aware of his status yet desires an untouchable status like kinship in order to fully separate himself from the common man, to be in a league of his own per say. Ironically, this desire to be the sole authoritative figure of a great nation (Israel) is a
common, human tendency that makes him even more similar to the Israelites whom he wishes to rule over indisputably.

Samuel seemingly penalizes Saul in an unfair manner, as if in a deliberate attempt to make the latter seem unfaithful, in order to better his own image. Before a large-scale battle with the Philistines, Samuel instructs Saul to wait for seven days and meet him at Gilgal for a blessing of some sort. Once the Israelites start to see the Philistines approaching, the soldiers begin to flee and hide. Saul does exactly as he was told, by waiting seven full days, but the Israelite numbers begin to dwindle rapidly and Samuel is nowhere to be found (1 Samuel 13.8). With seemingly no other options at hand, Saul takes matter into his own hands and offers the burnt-offering in order to receive God’s blessing, just as Samuel arrives at that exact moment (1 Samuel 13.9-13.10). Samuel asks Saul to explain his actions and after hearing his alibi, dismisses his intentions as simply being foolish and a direct violation of the commandment of his Lord (1 Samuel 13.13). It is worth noting that Samuel had never specified an exact time for his arrival; he had only instructed Saul to wait seven days, which is exactly what Saul did. It’s unreasonable for Samuel to criticize Saul on the basis of ETA because Samuel’s parameters were never fully established in the first place. Furthermore, Saul’s Israelite numbers were dwindling rapidly with the Philistines approaching and no Samuel in sight, so it is understandable why he began to take matters into his own hands just like a King should. In addition, Samuel chastises Saul by informing him that he has violated God’s command, even though in a sense Saul didn’t truly violate anything. Taking into account Samuel’s untimely arrival in a dire situation, along with his questionable reason for berating Saul, it is possible that Samuel was simply looking for a way to make Saul look like an unfaithful and somewhat incompetent leader, possibly in order to
enhance his own image. Samuel’s stubbornness may have prevented him from accepting Saul as the new authoritative figure of Israel; Samuel likely continues to see himself as the lone ruler of Israel. Whatever the reason may have been, Samuel’s small act of trickery was most certainly not done as a command from God. Outside of a potential bit of personal gain on Samuel’s part, nothing else truly got accomplished from this strange predicament.

Samuel unleashes his vengeful side upon Agag while Saul watches, in order to show him exactly how God wants his commands to be carried out, and remind him that he was incapable of doing so. Prior to his encounter with Samuel, Saul was commanded by God to go to the land of the Amalekites and wipe out every living thing within the land. Rather than follow God’s command verbatim, Saul spares King Agag and some valuable cattle. God orders Samuel to go down to Saul and inform him that as a result of failing to heed to his orders, he has dethroned him. After doing as instructed, Samuel commands Saul to bring King Agag to him (1 Samuel 15.32). Agag predicts his demise in advance, but instead of simply beheading him, Samuel reminds Agag of the sheer number of people that he has murdered in his lifetime, and proceeds to slice him into pieces in an act of vengeance (1 Samuel 15.33). It’s important to note that God never commanded Samuel to dismember Agag. Samuel chose to do so because he felt that it was a justified act, primarily because God had originally ordered Saul to kill all of the Amalekites including Agag. By brutally executing Agag in front of Saul, Samuel is showing him how God’s orders are meant to be carried out (no matter how vengeful), and in a sense reminding him that he was incapable of doing so, hence why he has been dethroned. In addition, Samuel was most likely attempting to remind Saul of why he was the original undisputed ruler of Israel, and why his status had remained that way for so long. Since there wasn’t truly a need for Samuel to do
such a thing, he was once again acting outside of his prophetic duties, this time in an attempt to make himself appear superior in the eyes of the King.

Samuel weeps over Saul’s dethronement, showing that his own sense of humanity conflicts with the mindset that he is conditioned to have as a prophet. Shortly after giving Saul the news of his dethronement and dismembering Agag, Samuel returns to his home in Ramah and weeps over Saul’s fall from grace for an extended period of time (1 Samuel 15.35). God eventually steps in and commands Samuel to dry his tears and find the next King (1 Samuel 16.1). The fact that Samuel grieves over the dethronement of the man who essentially took his position as ruler of Israel, shows just how humane of a prophet he truly is. For all of the stalwart deeds that Samuel has done, as well as the high standard that he has held himself up to, at his core he is very much like his fellow Israelites and possesses the same human tendencies as them. A flawless prophet carries out the will of God without any hesitation, and by weeping over a past failure (Saul), Samuel shows that there is a discrepancy between the will of God and what Samuel believes is right. Therefore, Samuel inadvertently reveals that he is not an idealistic prophet in the strictest sense, for no such contrast would exist if that were the case.

Often mistakenly thought of as an idealistic, perfect prophet from the Old Testament, Samuel is depicted as having desires to further his personal interests while being prone to having the same human tendencies as the Israelites below him. Samuel goes out of his way to take matters into his own hands, without being commanded to do so, while also doing things for personal benefit. Although these small imperfections substantially affect Samuel’s status as a perfect prophet, they simultaneously make Samuel a character that all readers can relate to. Human beings, no matter how high or low they may be in status or power, can never be perfect
all the time. One needs to look at famous figures of power throughout history to see that people make mistakes, often times alarming ones. What truly matters, in the end, is that the individual is remembered by his accomplishments and not by his shortcomings.