

1 SAMUEL

Part One: Samuel (Chapters 1-7)

“The Books of Samuel are the centerpiece of a larger collection of narratives which span Israel’s history from their entrance into Canaan in about the twelfth century BC to the Babylonian Captivity (587-586 BC). They tell us about a time of transition in Israel—a transition from a *loose confederate* style of leadership to a *unified monarchical style*. The Book of Judges ends with the words: ‘*In those days there was no King in Israel; everyone did what he thought best*’(21:25).” (Collegeville Bible Commentary p.625)

In his introduction to 1 and 2 Samuel, Peter Ellis, C.S.S.R., writes:

The outward form of the kingdom of God changes with the coming of Israel’s kings, but the essence remains. This is the basic message of the books of Samuel, to which is added a significant development in the progress of the kingdom toward its climax and completion – the promise that the dynasty of David will be eternal and that through this dynasty God will work out the victory for mankind promised in Gen 3:15.

In the course of the eleventh century, the last three Judges of Israel, Samson, Eli, and Samuel attempt in vain to liberate their oppressed people from the domination of the Philistines. Toward the beginning of the century, Samson is captured and dies in the ruins of the temple at Gaza. Toward the middle of the century, the Ark of the Covenant is captured by the Philistines. Shiloh is destroyed. Eli dies (1Sam 4). In the last half of the century, Samuel—the holiest and most respected of the Judges—is nevertheless unable to throw off completely the Philistine tyranny.

Sick of oppression, envious of the independence of the Moabites and the Edomites with their hereditary kings and standing armies, the Israelites clamor for a king (1Sam 8). Convinced that Israel’s destiny lies in unswerving fidelity and obedience to God as her only king and that human kings will only serve to entice the people away from God by making them put their trust in “horses and chariots,” Samuel is nevertheless constrained against his will to accede and choose a king – Saul the Benjaminite (1Sam 9-10).

Samuel’s basic policy eventually prevails. God remains, as He must in this unique theocratic kingdom, the only true king of Israel. Israel will have

her human king as well, but he is not to be like the kings of the nations. He is to be a representative of God, the true King. He is to be the instrument through which God will work out the ultimate destiny of Israel. He must, therefore, be subject to the Mosaic Law and to the admonitions and guidance of God’s prophets.

Because Saul fails to subject his own ambitions to God’s demands, he is rejected (1Sam 15), and becomes forever in Israel the example and type of the human monarch who fails to live up to God’s expectations and demands. David, on the contrary, Saul’s successor, is a man after God’s own heart. He understands that God alone is Israel’s true king and that he himself, no less than the least citizen of God’s kingdom, is subject to God’s covenant with Israel; he must, accordingly, be guided by the word of God’s inspired prophets. As a reward for his fidelity to this design, God promises to David that his dynasty will be perpetual, that its kings will be adopted by Him as His sons, and that the covenant will now be bound up with David’s family (2Sam 7).(The Men and Message of the Old Testament, pp 195-196)

Samuel, Saul and David

We will find that most of the events described in 1Samuel center around Samuel, Saul and David.

Samuel. Samuel is the main transitional figure between the era of tribal life in Israel and the rise of the monarchy. Samuel is often called the last of the judges and the first of the prophets. He is also a priest who offers sacrifice to God, and a Kingmaker who anoints Israel’s first two Kings.

Saul. In 1Samuel, Saul is portrayed as a tragic figure. He does not want to be king. While out looking for his father’s donkeys, Samuel comes upon Saul and tells him that God wants him to be king. Initially, Saul does very well winning several great victories over Israel’s enemies. Then he ‘blows it’ by choosing his own way over God’s way.

David. David was chosen to be one of the Bible’s great heroes despite some big mistakes or sins. He is regarded as Israel’s greatest king. He makes Jerusalem the center of Israel’s worship life. In contrast to Saul, David understands that God is Israel’s real King. As a

reward for his fidelity, God promises David that his dynasty will last forever (2 Sam 7). This *promise* is remembered and celebrated in many of the psalms. Towards the end of the second Book of Samuel, David gives us a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving (ch. 22).

The Story. Samuel, the last judge, anoints Saul as first king of Israel. Saul begins well but ends badly, becoming obsessed with jealousy and hatred of David. Saul turns to occult practices and eventually commits suicide. David succeeds him on the throne and unites Israel into a powerful kingdom. Although he never abandons the Lord, David's own sins bring strife to his family and nation.

Division of chapters

Scholars divide 1 and 2 Samuel in different ways. As stated above, these books center around Samuel, Saul, and David. There is an overlapping of chapters that deal with these three lead characters. One way to divide 1 Samuel is:

PART 1: The last Judges, Eli and Samuel, and the Philistine oppression. (1Sam 1-7)

PART 2: Samuel and Saul, institution of the monarchy, and Saul's rejection. (1Sam 8-15)

PART 3: Saul and David; David is befriended at first by Saul and later persecuted. (1Sam 16-31)

COMMENTARY

PART 1: THE LAST JUDGES, ELI AND SAMUEL, AND THE PHILISTINE OPPRESSION (1Sam 1-7)

CHAPTER 1: Hannah's longing for a child

Hannah said: "O Lord of hosts, if you look with pity on the misery of your handmaid, if you remember me and do not forget me, if you give your handmaid a male child, I will give him to the Lord for as long as he lives." (v.11)

As we begin this period in Israel's history, she is threatened from within and without. Internally, the people have left the ways of God and turned to the gods of the Canaanites. Externally, Israel's neighbors, the Philistines, are much more powerful militarily. Israel is politically weak and economically

disadvantaged. She is waiting for something good to happen. Who would say hope for Israel's future would come from herself and a barren woman?

Verses 1-8—Hannah asks for a son. As is true for birth announcements in the Bible, this one begins with a short genealogy of Hannah's husband, Elkanah, who has two wives, Hannah and Peninah. Peninah has children while Hannah has none. Elkanah is a devout man who frequently goes to the sanctuary of Shiloh where the Ark of the Covenant is kept. At the Shrine, Eli and his two sons minister as priests. When the time has come for Elkanah to offer sacrifice, he shares a portion of the sacrifice meal with his wives, but gives a double portion to Hannah because of his special love for her and perhaps because of her pain and grief over her barrenness. The text mentions that the "Lord had made her barren." Remember in those times, people did not distinguish between primary and secondary causes. Today, we would attribute Hannah's barrenness to medical reasons. When it comes to dealing with Hannah's barrenness, Peninah is no help. Her attitude reminds us of Hagar's nasty treatment of Sara, Abraham's wife. On the other hand, Elkanah tries to console his depressed wife.

Verses 9-19—Hannah prays for a son. Here, we are privileged to witness Hannah pouring out her heart to God in prayer. "*In her bitterness she prayed to the Lord, weeping copiously*" (v.10).

This is the first time we hear "*Lord of hosts*" (v.11), a title for God that means "the One who creates heavenly armies." This title will appear five more times in 1 Samuel and reflect the belief that God is Israel's only true leader.

Hannah promises God that if he answers her prayer by giving her a male child, she will dedicate him totally to the Lord's service. As the priest Eli watches Hannah in deep prayer, he thinks she is drunk. Hannah responds, "I am not drunk, I am just a troubled, unhappy woman." Eli blesses Hannah and asks God to answer her prayer. Hannah leaves her place of prayer a much more peaceful woman. She is no longer downcast.

The next morning, both Hannah and Elkanah worship together and then return home. They are obviously a devout couple (like Elizabeth and Zachary, and Mary and Joseph) and worthy to receive the blessing of a special child.

Pause: Have you had the experience where you and your spouse longed for and prayed for a child and God was not answering your prayer? If so, what was that experience like for you? If not, what do you think this painful experience might be like? Do you ever find yourself becoming emotional, like Hannah, in your relationship with God?

Verses 19-28—Birth of Samuel. “When Hannah had relations with Elkanah, the Lord remembered her” (v.19). In Deut 7:12-14, the Lord promises to lift the barrenness of those who keep the covenant.

The barren woman giving birth to a child is an act of God, which alerts us to the inevitability that the child is going to be a special agent of God, like John the Baptist. Hannah names her son Samuel, which means “he who is from God.” The hopeless one (Hannah) is now given a future.

For the next few years, while Elkanah goes to Shiloh for his annual pilgrimage, Hannah remains at home weaning her beloved son. Once he is weaned, Samuel will be given to the Lord as a “perpetual Nazarite” (v.22). As we saw in the Book of Numbers (Ch.6), in and through a Nazarite vow, one can be dedicated to the Lord for a brief period or perpetually.

Hannah presents Samuel to Eli. She notes that Samuel is a gift from God, an answer to her prayer. Now she is ready to return to the Lord the blessing she treasures most.

Pause: Most parents today do not encourage their children to consider priesthood or the religious life as a vocation God may be calling them to. Do you believe this is true? If so, why is this the case?

CHAPTER 2: Hannah’s song of praise; wickedness in Eli’s house

“My heart exults in the Lord, my horn is exulted with my God.” (v.1)

After consecrating her son to God, Hannah prays a beautiful song of praise to God, one that reminds us a lot of Mary’s Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). In the song, Hannah praises God for reversing fortunes by bringing down the mighty and raising up the lowly, for making

the barren fertile, and for defending the weak and the lowly. Two comments:

- Metaphors and figurative expressions frequently used in poetic language should not be taken literally. For example, it is not true, and never was, that every once-barren woman bears precisely seven children, or that every mother of a large family languishes (v.5).

- The real enemies referred to in verse 1 are the Philistines whom we shall meet in Chapter 4.

Verses 12-36—Prophecy of doom for Eli’s wicked sons. In these verses, two stories run side by side. One tells of the growth of Samuel, and the other speaks about the wickedness of Eli’s sons.

Eli’s sons are notorious for having no respect for God. All they care about are themselves. They have no regard for the laws connected with sacrificial offerings. They are greedy and sexually promiscuous. Their father Eli rebukes them: “Why are you doing these things?” (v.23) but his rebuke is too little too late.

An unnamed man of God comes to Eli and casts a stinging denunciation of him and his household. While Eli is a good priest in ways, he is now condemned for failing to manage his household. He is accused of loving his sons more than God (v.29). In contrast to Eli and his household, verses 18-20 paint an idyllic picture of Samuel and his parents—a family totally dedicated to God.

Hannah’s fidelity to God is rewarded with some more children. Verse 30 is the governing principle in the contrast of the two families: “The Lord declares... ‘I will honor those who honor me, but those who spurn me shall be accursed’” (v.30).

Pause: Some good parents have children that grow up to be anything but good. What words of consolation would you offer to such parents? How should one deal with adult children who are rebellious and difficult to handle?

CHAPTER 3: Call of Samuel

“Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” (v.9)

Revelations from the Lord were not common at that time. The picture of Eli asleep and practically blind describes Israel’s situation in relation to the Lord. The lamp of God’s word is almost extinguished through the unworthiness of the priests.

When God calls Samuel, he initially does *not* recognize the Lord's voice for he was "*not yet familiar with the Lord*" (v.8). Even though he has been working in the Lord's house, it seems that he has not yet developed a personal relationship with the Lord which would help him to notice his call to him. But with Eli's help, Samuel hears God's voice, to which he responds: "*Speak, Lord, your servant is listening*" (v.9). *Hear/response* is one of the central themes in all of Scripture. In the previous books of the Bible, we see this *hear/response* dynamic play out in the lives of the patriarchs and in the lives of Moses, Joshua, and some of the Judges.

God's first word to Samuel is a tough one to deliver because it is a strong condemnation of his mentor Eli and his household. God has chosen Samuel, the faithful young priest, to replace the aging priest who failed to manage his own household. Later, a similar drama will be played out between the rejected first King of Israel, Saul, and the chosen King David.

"Samuel grew up, and the Lord was with him, not permitting any word of his to be without effect. Thus all of Israel from Dan to Beersheba came to know that Samuel was an accredited prophet of the Lord" (v.20). The young priest has now adopted a second role—that of prophet—one who hears and responds to God's word.

Pause: Was there a time when you only had a 'head knowledge' of God? If so, what helped you to develop a 'heart knowledge' or a personal relationship with God?

CHAPTER 4: The Philistines take the Ark

"Gone is the glory from Israel." (v.21)

We will notice that Samuel disappears from the story until Chapter 7. The author may have wanted to dissociate Samuel from the reverses Israel experiences in her battles against the Philistines.

After losing the battle with the Philistines, the Israelites conclude that their defeat is due to the fact that they had not brought the Ark with them into battle. So they fetch the Ark from Shiloh and bring it with them in their next battle against the Philistines. Surely this great symbol of God's presence will win the day for them. The Philistines are terrified upon seeing the Israelites carrying the Ark. They know that

the God of the Israelites was instrumental in their victory against the powerful Egyptians. But despite their initial fear of the Ark's presence, they muster up courage and inflict a heavy defeat on the Israelites. Worse still, the Philistines capture the Ark and kill Eli's sons.

Verses 12-22—Bringing the bad news to Eli. After the Israelites' crushing defeat, an unnamed man runs to Eli with news of a threefold tragedy: the loss of his two sons and the capture of the Ark by the Israelites. The news bearer shows visible signs of mourning (torn shirt and dirt-covered head) so that all who see him will know that he is bringing bad news.

When Eli hears the bad news, he falls back on his chair, breaks his neck, and dies. The loss of the Ark must have impacted him much more than his sons' deaths. For forty years, Eli has been the priest and guardian of the Ark at Shiloh, and now this great symbol of God's presence is gone. It is as if the glory of God has departed from Israel, which is echoed in the name given by Eli's daughter-in-law, Phinehas, to her son, Ichabod, that means "*gone is the glory of Israel*" (v.21). With the Ark gone, so too has God, and Israel is bereft of his presence.

Pause: In Chapter 4, one feels for the old man Eli as he receives terrible news. What is the saddest news you have ever had to deal with?

CHAPTER 5: The humiliated is exalted and the exalted is humiliated

"Now the Lord dealt severely with the people of Ashdod."(v.6)

In ancient times, it was the custom of victors in battle to carry the gods of their defeated enemies and place them in their temple to show that their god was much more powerful.

On this occasion, the Philistines are in for a big surprise. Despite the capture of the Ark, the God of Israel is very much in control. This is pointedly and even humorously demonstrated when on two consecutive mornings, the god Dagon is found lying on the ground as if in worship before the Ark (vv 3-5).

After the Philistines defile Israelite's God, the Ark is causing so much havoc amongst themselves that they

decide to return it to the Israelites. The scene in each of the cities reminds us of the plagues in Egypt, and how they gradually made the Philistines realize how much more powerful the God of Israel is than their gods. In this chapter, we see clearly that those who thought themselves to be powerful were humiliated, and the humiliated God of Israel proved to be very powerful.

CHAPTER 6: Return of the Ark

“Who can stand in the presence of this Holy One?”(v.20)

Realizing the power of the Ark to wreak havoc in their lives, the leaders of the Philistines call in their fortune tellers for advice on how to return the Ark. They are advised to return it with gifts. Hemorrhoids and mice are given as offerings to fend off additional plagues. But to be certain of the true origin of their trouble, the Philistines set up a test. They decide to send the Ark back on a cart pulled by milk cows (animals are never used in this way). At the same time, they goad the newly born calves in the other direction. Getting the milk cows to overcome their maternal instinct to go in the opposite direction of their calves, having them overcome their lack of experience pulling a cart, and making them return the Ark to its exact proper location, will prove to the Philistines the superior power of the Ark. God passes the test with flying colors. The Ark is returned to Beth-Shemesh, a town on the border of the Philistine and Israelite territories. All the while, the Philistines monitor the journey to make sure that the Ark leaves their territory. The Ark is greeted with joy by a large group of Israelites out in the fields. They offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. But tragedy strikes when seventy men who fail to join in the celebration are struck dead by the Lord.

This is another of the difficult incidents in the Bible where God might seem to overreach in his punishment for the violation of his laws. The *Life Application Study Bible* imputes the death of the seventy men to their insolence when they *“looked into the Ark of the Lord”* (v.19). Only the Levites can approach the Ark (Num 4:20). This incident has scared the locals so much that they, like the Philistines, have decided that they do not want to keep the Ark. *“Who can stand in the presence of the Holy One?”*(v.20). Without divulging their reason, the people of Beth-Shemesh send word to the people of Kiriath-Jearim to come and

get the Ark. The Ark remains there until David brings it to Jerusalem.

Pause: The people of Beth-Shemesh became fearful of God's awesome and powerful presence and, as a result, sought to put a distance between God and them. What might cause us to put a distance between God and us?

CHAPTER 7: Samuel calls the Israelites to repentance

“We have sinned against the Lord.”(v.6)

It had been twenty years since the Ark was returned to Israel during which time the people are turning back to the Lord. But Samuel tells them that true repentance must include putting aside all worship of Canaanite gods. If they do that, they will not need to worry about attacks from the Philistines. Then Samuel calls all the people together for an act of public repentance at Mizpah.

Verses 7-17—Defeat of the Philistines. The Israelites' trust in God is tested when they hear that the Philistines are about to attack them. They ask Samuel to implore the Lord to save them. Samuel in his priestly role offers sacrifice to the Lord. In answer to his prayer, *“the Lord thundered greatly against the Philistines and they were thrown into great confusion...”* (v.11). Obviously, this victory cannot be attributed to the fighting skills of the Israelites, but to God's great power. In the next chapter, the Israelites will demand that Samuel give them a king. The point of this story is that their real need is not for a king, but to learn to place their trust in God, who is their king.

Pause: Can you recall a time when you found it hard to place your trust in God?