

OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES

**I SAMUEL – II SAMUEL – I KINGS
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I SAMUEL

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I. INTRODUCTION

The two Books of Samuel form a single book in the Hebrew Bible. When this Bible was first translated into Greek by the Seventy Scholars of Alexandria, I Samuel was separated from II Samuel, and both were grouped with I and II Kings, the four being called "The Books of the Kingdoms." The name of our Book is a most suitable one, since it not only contains the remarkable record of the life and works of this great prophet, but as well, it traces the manner in which the spirit of this rare man shaped the new Kingdom in Israel.

I Samuel comes out of the golden age of Hebrew literature, and is as beautiful in its prose form as the Psalms are in poetry. While no author for the book is named, the accuracy which the work manifests indicates that it embodies eyewitness accounts, and that the writer was concerned, first of all, with producing an accurate record of the founding of the kingdom. In I Chronicles 29:29, we read that "the acts of David the king, first and last, behold they are written in the book of Samuel the seer, and in the book of Nathan the prophet, and in the book of Gad the seer."

There is no reason to doubt that in the words "the book of Samuel the seer" we have indicated the source for the materials of Chapters 1 through 24. The materials cover a most important epoch in the history of the Jewish nation, an epoch of nearly eighty years. The opening events of I Samuel occur toward the end of the period of the Judges. Samson was no doubt Judge during the period of the birth of Samuel, and until Samuel was twenty-five years or so of age. It is important to remember that Eli, whose major office was that of High Priest, also performed some of the duties of a Judge while Samson was the major force in the affairs of the nation.

Jehovah had intended that His people, after their settlement in Canaan, should serve Him in obedience, so that He should be their King, with no necessity for an earthly monarch. The events recorded in the book of Judges indicate how unready they were for the direct government of God, without the intervention of a visible ruler. God in mercy had given them

Judges, men of unusual equipment and providential grace. But for two hundred years, Israel had lived through wearisome cycles of spiritual and political decay.

At this critical time, Jehovah raised up Samuel to give His people guidance in the period of transition which came as Israel, in faithlessness, requested a King, that they might be like other nations. God finally granted them their request, giving them (as someone has said) first a king after their own likes, and then afterward, a king after His own heart. But there was a period of fifty years in which Israel would need very special guidance and care: the care of a great and good man who should guide both altar and throne. Samuel was that man.

I Samuel can best be understood if we view it as a divinely inspired history or a divinely directed drama, upon whose stage four major characters appear. These men are: Eli, Samuel, Saul, and David. We will follow the works and words of these four men in these pages ahead, to see the part which each played in the drama which Jehovah was unfolding through and for His people of Israel.

II. THE LIFE OF ELI

The part Eli played in the events of this momentous period was twofold. First, he represented the fading-out of the ministry of the Judges of Israel. When Samson died (about the year 1100 BC), Eli was nearly ninety years old, while Samuel was about twenty-five years of age. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, had become so dissolute and so greedy that the whole work of Eli was falling into public disrespect. In the second place, the boy Samuel, born in answer to the prayer of his devout and dedicated mother Hannah, had been sent to Eli for training. So some or perhaps much credit for the subsequent and noble career of Samuel may belong to Eli. But throughout all of the events of Eli's life, there runs the blighting tragedy in his home life. His sons are rightly called "worthless fellows."

The career of Eli appears in I Samuel to indicate a man who meant well, but who was unable to rise greatly above the level of the events of his day. When he saw Hannah wrestling with God in prayer for a son (turn if you will to I Samuel 1:12-18), he seems not only to have been unaccustomed to seeing devout persons beseeching God in His house, but also to have been himself somewhat a stranger to such devotion. His two sons appear to have grown up without a trace of reverence, let alone any personal piety. It seems that they both

robbed the worshipers and defiled the sanctuary, without so much as a rebuke from their father.

If Eli was weak as a priest, he was equally without convictions as a Judge. When Israel was suffering defeat at the hand of the Philistines, he raised no protest when his officers decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the battle, to desecrate it by using it as a magical object. It is not surprising that his vulgar sons would consent to have this sacred symbol of the presence of Jehovah treated as an object of superstition. Eli, on the other hand, should have raised a strong protest at such a suggestion.

Events followed one another with great swiftness. God's presence was withdrawn from the Ark. The armies of Israel fell apart, and the Philistines captured the Ark. Thirty thousand infantrymen from Israel were killed, including also the degenerate sons of Eli. A messenger came from the army to Shiloh, bearing to Eli the dreadful tidings. All this was too much for the aged Priest. The rout of his army, the carnage among the troops, the loss of his sons -- these were great enough. But the loss of the Ark was to him the greatest tragedy of all; and he fell from his seat at the door of the sanctuary at Shiloh and broke his neck and died.

III. THE LIFE OF SAMUEL

The hopeful features in the life of Eli were (as we have noted before) his influence upon Samuel, to which we may add his submissive attitude to the will of God. When the Lord gave to the boy Samuel the call to personal service, He revealed also the coming judgment upon the house of Eli. Samuel, upon request, relayed this tragic message to Eli, who showed no anger toward the lad. Rather he said (and this we read in I Samuel 3:18), "It is the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good."

We take leave of the record of Eli with the comment that his personal graces and winsomeness which shine through the pages of I Samuel, Chapters 1-4, are marred by the weaknesses which appear in his character. It is a tragedy that the neglect of parental discipline has come to be called "the sin of Eli."

In contrast, the character and career of Samuel are with one exception unmarred by weakness and indecision. Born to a devout mother, and dedicated to God's service from birth, his very name is richly significant, "because I have asked him of the Lord." When he

was three or four years of age, his parents brought him to the sanctuary at Shiloh, with the commanded offerings, and left him there to serve the aging priest Eli.

The account of Samuel's boyhood is one of the delightful features of Old Testament history. Although he was brought at a very early age, within range of great evil, namely that of the sons of Eli, named Hophni and Phinehas, he seems in no way to have been affected by it. Doubtless his training for his life work began before he was taken to the service of Eli, namely in his first three years or so at home. His childhood in the service of the sanctuary was in heartening contrast to the shameful scenes by which Hophni and Phinehas desecrated the holy place. Turn if you will to I Samuel 2:26. "And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favor both with the Lord, and also with men."

While he was yet a lad, he received his first revelation from Jehovah, a message of doom upon the house of Eli. What a tribute to his boyish faith, that God could entrust him with so solemn a revelation! Although he hesitated to bear the tidings to Eli, there is every evidence that he already knew enough of the ways of Jehovah, that he saw that judgment was due and perhaps even past due.

When the blow fell upon the house of Eli, and when the Ark of God fell into the hands of the uncouth and vulgar Philistines, there followed twenty years of despair and decline in the life of Israel. Our record of the national events is limited to the hint that they turned to worship Baal and Ashtoreth. The ark remained with the Philistines for but a short time, and as its presence among them was marked by a divine judgment in the form of a frightful epidemic, they returned it. For these twenty years it was stored at Kirjath Jearim, in the private house of a man named Abinadab.

The book of I Samuel indicates that this twenty years was a period of national apathy and despair. This does not mean that the prophet Samuel was idle during this time. No, he was active in laying the foundations for the prophetic office in Israel. He established three "Schools of the Prophets," one in Bethel, one in Gilgal, and one in Mizpah. These were something like our Bible Colleges or Theological Seminaries, and served the purpose of training young men for the service of Jehovah.

Finally, fresh troubles in the form of border raids by the Philistines brought the people to Samuel in distress of soul. He urged them to put away their idols, their worship of their Baals and Ashtoreths. As they did so, Samuel prayed, and the invasion of the Philistine

armies was supernaturally turned back. At this point, Samuel drove a strong stake of confidence before the people. Near Mizpah, he erected a pillar, and named it Ebenezer. In the centuries which followed, all who passed that way were reminded that "Hitherto hath Jehovah helped us." Read this remarkable account in I Samuel 7:1-12.

At this point, we see the one event in the career of Samuel which saddens us. In his old age he delegated some of his tasks as Judge of Israel to his sons, Joel and Abijah. These men failed to remember the word of Jehovah in Exodus 23:6,8: "Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause" and "thou shalt take no gift" (spoken to judges). They yielded to the temptation to bribery and sold justice to the highest bidder.

Although this is a most unfortunate circumstance, it is not to be compared with the failure of Eli's sons. First, the type and degree of abuse was not at all the same, and the conduct of Samuel's sons did not bring the Sanctuary into disrepute. Second, Samuel's sons were located in the southern part of Israel, while Samuel lived and worked in the north. So his sons' irregularities were not performed under his own eyes. Jehovah knew this and judged it so, inasmuch as there was no judgment pronounced upon the house of Samuel.

Nevertheless, the effects of this circumstance soon became known. The people, especially those in the south, came to despair of anything better under judges, and began to agitate for the appointment of a king. This seems to have been done behind Samuel's back, so that he knew little or nothing of it until a delegation met him at Ramah. Now, it was not easy for Samuel to be told that he was getting old and that his sons were no credit to him. But he took his hurt and perplexity to Jehovah -- this was the pattern of his life and tells us so much about him.

Jehovah's message was also what we would expect of a loving God. To be sure, the people were rejecting Samuel; but the deeper rejection was of God Himself. God further showed his tender regard for Samuel in that he told him just what to do next. As a prophet, he was to warn Israel of the consequences of their choice: there would be conscription of their sons; there would be crushing taxes; there would be labor drafts, so that not only sons but daughters would be taken from home to serve the top-heavy government. There would be waste and bureaucratic red tape until finally the people would groan under the burden of the monarchy.

However, the people reacted as was expected; and to Samuel was committed the great trust of the choice of a king over his people. Although this was Jehovah's "second best" for his people, no detail was overlooked. God caused the chosen man, Saul, to be at the appointed place so that Samuel met him under circumstances which enabled them to talk in confidence.

We note at this point that Saul had many good points in his character. He was a man who honored his father, and who was trusted by him. Although his errand was a lowly one, namely the searching for lost donkeys, he spared no pains to carry out his task. He was also willing to be advised by his own servant. But best of all, he was a humble man. When Samuel indicated to him the great calling which was to be his, and when that call had been confirmed by his election, he was nowhere to be found. Later, he was found to be modestly retreating from the crowd amid the baggage of the people who had come to Mizpah from a distance. (Read I Samuel 10:17-23).

IV. THE LIFE OF SAUL

From this point onward, it is the person and work of Saul which carry the narrative of I Samuel. We turn, then, to the details of his career.

Samuel Wilberforce, in his book Heroes of Hebrew History, says of Saul, "Amongst all the noble creations . . . there is no single figure more vividly portrayed than that of Saul the son of Kish, as he stands before us in the inspired records of Israel." The narrative makes him to live before our eyes with a wealth of picturesque detail. We see the bright promise of his youth, symbolized by his nobility of stature, his quick generalship, and his ability to command the loyalty of men.

After his anointing, he returned for a brief time to his former occupation. In the meantime, he was elected by lot, and very shortly the armies of the Ammonites came in from the south and east under the leadership of Nahash. The Ammonites had been quiet since their defeat by Jephthah, but now they deliver a savage ultimatum to the men of Jabesh, offering peace provided each of the men of Jabesh consent to have his right eye put out.

Saul could not allow this to pass; and he came to the rescue of Jabesh. This confirmed his title to the kingship; and we see from reading I Samuel 11:15 that Israel went to Gilgal to make a final declaration of their allegiance to Saul. He entered his duties with a

unanimous vote of confidence. What a wonderful beginning for the young man from the tribe of Benjamin.

The record is very brief concerning the first ten or twelve years of his reign. But he began these years with a stirring address of Samuel sounding in his ears. This was a sort of a valedictory for the old prophet, and is worth a most careful reading. Turn, if you will, to I Samuel 12. Note that Samuel recognizes the two reasons for Israel's request for a king: (1) he himself is old and gray; and (2) his sons are "with them." No doubt it cost him a great deal to make this reference to his sons, whose acceptance of bribes had been discussed so thoroughly and critically throughout the land.

The most touching part of this address is that in which Samuel puts himself on trial before them and by them. He says (verse 3): "I have walked before you from my childhood until this day." His entire life has been an open book. He calls upon any who can accuse him of any fraud, injustice, bribery or deceit. How wonderful to live so that one can with safety throw out such a challenge! And what a tribute it was that not one person could find fault with him, although he had been among them for more than eighty years.

He next takes his readers over the history of the period of the Judges, and points out the numerous deliverances which Jehovah had wrought through Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon), Bedan (probably the same as Barak), Jephthah, and Samuel. He next mentions Israel's request for a king. There is but a small trace of disapproval in Samuel's words here; but he does recognize that what has been done is done. Therefore, he turns to the future and declares that the new order has not done away with God's righteous commands. He makes it clear that the King is just as bound to do righteously as his people (see verse 15). God's demands for obedience remain unaltered; and sin will, as in former days, bring punishment.

What a solemn event it was, as Jehovah gave a sign to confirm His servant Samuel's message. In Palestine, there is no rain between April and October; but in this case (it was in July, the beginning of harvest) Samuel declared that rain would come as a sign and certification of his word. In verse 18 we read that "Samuel called unto the Lord; and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day."

We can well imagine the effect of all this upon Saul. I Samuel 10:9 tells us that Jehovah had already given Saul "another heart" -- that is, that Saul received another outlook and a new sense of mission. So marked was this that men marveled and asked "Is Saul also

among the prophets?" It is difficult to imagine a man beginning his kingship under better circumstances. Therefore, we feel it the more keenly to read that when the Israelites rose in a war of independence against the Philistines, Saul began to show the signs of rashness which should prove to be his ruin.

Forgetting that in the Kingdom the king was to be subject to the will of Jehovah as delivered by the prophet, he did not wait until Samuel came to Gilgal to give him "marching orders." His uncontrolled self-will led him to act as his own priest and to make an offering, whereupon Samuel came to him with the solemn words: (I Samuel 13:13-14) "Thou hast done foolishly. Thy kingdom shall not continue." But as if to give Saul one more chance, Samuel (in I Samuel 15) commissioned him to deliver Israel from Amalek (that is, from the Amalekites), and to destroy their king Agag and even the flocks and herds of this proud enemy.

Here, Saul's failure became complete. He added deceit to stubbornness, as he came rejoicing to Samuel, professing to have been completely obedient. This was the last straw. Samuel pronounced the final decision of Jehovah in I Samuel 15:26. "The Lord hath rejected thee from being king over Israel."

From this time onward, Saul's career is a downgrade course. In I Samuel 16:14, we read: "But the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a distressing spirit from the Lord troubled him." This was a fearful judgment. Samuel visited him no more. Saul became demented and at times insane. Deserted by God, he turned to fortunetellers; hearing nothing from heaven, he tries to move hell to speak to him. His fortunes went from bad to worse, and finally we see him committing suicide upon Mount Gilboa. His body, with those of his sons, were disrespectfully hung upon a wall at Beth Shan. Soon after, his men took them down, cremated them, and buried the bones and ashes at Jabesh so the Philistines would not dishonor them further. Read I Samuel 31:1-13 for the account of this tragic end of a man who in youth showed such bright promise.

V. THE LIFE OF DAVID

Against this dark background, there comes into view the fourth character of the book of I Samuel, David. This hero of faith appears first in I Samuel 16, as Samuel is sent by Jehovah to the house of Jesse the Bethlehemite, to anoint another king. One by one, the sons

of Jesse passed before Samuel, but Jehovah found no crown prince among the seven sons who were at home. Finally, Samuel sent for the youngest, a shepherd lad. This David, now anointed, was to be the king after God's own heart.

The life and work of David are given to us more fully than the lives and works of any other of the Old Testament characters. In I Samuel we have a very full account of the outward details of his life, while in the Psalms he pours out before us his inner life with its struggles, its triumphs, and its deep tides of devotion.

We are given, first of all, a brief glimpse into his life as a boy in Bethlehem. He saw the heavens, which declare the glory of God, and the firmament which showeth His handiwork. He learned the precious lesson of dependence upon Jehovah, and experienced danger from wild animals. In him came to full stature the heart of the shepherd, no less than the disposition to obedience and to devotion to duty.

Shortly he was called to give up this pastoral life for life at the court, with all of its attractive temptations. He was in succession, court minstrel, armor bearer, and military leader. In course of time, he became son-in-law to King Saul. So well did he fill all of these roles that the people were soon more fond of him than of Saul, so that the demented King soon tried to take his life. He was compelled to flee for his life and to live as a refugee.

This period in his life was one of intense loneliness and of rigorous discipline. After a brief time with Samuel in the school of the prophets at Ramah, he gathered a group of underprivileged men together at a cave called Adullam, and from the distressed, the discontented and the indebted, he hammered out an army. Read about this in I Samuel 22:1-5. All the while, he feared the murderous hand of Saul. As the career of Saul neared its end, David established a sort of a small-scale kingdom in Ziklag. There he underwent fiery trials, including the loss of his family. (I Samuel 30:1-6). Even his followers were ready to turn against him. In his grief and difficulty, he began to show what sort of man God had made him to be. He takes no revenge upon those of his men who turned against him, but rather, "encouraged himself in the Lord his God."

As his sun was rising toward noon, the sun of Saul was slipping behind the horizon. Long since, the voice of the prophet had ceased to come to him. Samuel had died some time before, and was buried at Ramah or Ramathaim (probably the same as Arimathea in later

times.) And as we noted earlier, Saul's end was a tragic climax, not only to his own career, but to the events of I Samuel.

As we take leave of this remarkable Book, it is well that we note three events described in it, which tell us the kind of a David whom we will meet in II Samuel. The first is that of the slaying of Goliath. I Samuel 17:40-54 give us the record of this remarkable occasion. It is not the details of the event which are pleasant; war is never so. But we rejoice to see the humility and the faith of David, as he moves with firm tread to accomplish the task to which he had set himself, in confidence that the Lord who had so often delivered him from wild beasts would, once more protect him.

The second narrative to which we turn our attention is that of David's friendship with Jonathan. In spite of the complicated nature of this friendship with the son of his mortal enemy, David displayed his deeper qualities of unselfishness, loyalty and tenderness. This friendship was based upon a common faith, and was unmarred by self-seeking suspicion or jealousy. In all of the trials through which this friendship passed, both young men showed themselves as giants of faith. When Jonathan fell at Mount Gilboa, David pronounced the most touching requiem of all literature. We will notice this in more detail in the study of II Samuel, Chapter 1. In this friendship, we see more and more clearly that David was a man after God's own heart.

This same quality of soul is revealed in I Samuel Chapter 24. Saul had taken refuge in a cave near En Gedi. David and his men had come upon the cave, and the King was within his grasp. Surely his army of freebooters expected David to emerge from the cave with dripping sword. It was a surprising sight which they beheld instead: David came out with only a section of Saul's robe which he had hacked off in the dim light. Why did he allow his foe to slip from his grasp? The answer is not far away: although he knew that the unhappy Saul had been rejected, and although he had suffered much at his hands, he would not take the law into his own hands. He would not violate the unction which had been given to Saul at the hand of the Lord's prophet.

What a lesson we have here! David was disciplined to let the Lord work out His purposes in His own time and way. So, we come to the end of I Samuel: II Samuel will tell us how those purposes were unfolded in the life and career of David.