

Old Testament Personalities

SAMUEL



Illustration by G. Dore

About 1140 B.C., when God still ruled Israel through judges, there was a Levite named Elkanah who had two wives. One, Hannah, was favored of her husband, but had no children. The other was Peninnah.

Each year the family journeyed to Shiloh to worship the Eternal. This is where Joshua, about 300 years before, had placed the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant containing the Law of God. And each year Peninnah would chide Hannah for having no children.

Praying for a son

When the time came once again for the trip, Hannah was provoked to tears.

While at Shiloh, she prayed earnestly to God for a son, vowing that if God would grant her petition, she would make the child a Nazarite, dedicated to serving the Eternal all the days of his life (see Num. 6:2-8). And as she silently prayed, Eli the priest thought she was drunk, for she was moving her lips but making no sound (I Sam. 1:13).

He rebuked her, but she explained her grief. And Eli said, "May the God of Israel grant you your prayer." That day Hannah went out from the tabernacle with complete faith that God would give her a son. And God did.

She named the child Samuel (meaning *asked of God*), and when he was weaned, about 3 years old, she took him to Eli. There he grew up ministering to the Eternal God (priestly duties). He wore the linen garment of a priest, and each year his mother made him a new coat.

Eli's wicked sons

Now Eli was not a young man. He had already judged Israel nearly 30 years and had given most of the administrative duties over to his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. But they were corrupt.

Whenever the people came to make an offering, Hophni and Phinehas took the best portion of the meat for themselves. The leftovers

were presented to God. They also committed fornication with the women who served at the door of the tabernacle.

Eli scolded them about their behavior, but he was too old and weak to administer discipline. They paid no attention. By the law of Moses, they should have been taken out and stoned to death for polluting the tabernacle and sinning against God.

God sent a prophet to Eli, condemning him for allowing his sons to behave so wickedly. The man prophesied that Eli's priestly line would be destroyed except for a remnant, and that Hophni and Phinehas would die on the same day. In the place of this Levitical line, God would raise up a new priest, one who would be faithful.

God speaks to Samuel

Samuel was yet a child, but he was loved by both God and the people he served. Unknown to him, he was being groomed by God to take over the priesthood after Eli's death.

What happened next was remarkable, indeed. God had not spoken directly with men for many years, and even the word of a prophet was rare. But now He spoke directly to young Samuel (I Sam. 3:1-4).

God called to Samuel just after he and Eli had gone to bed for the night. Upon hearing his name, the boy thought Eli was calling and ran to his room. But the old priest told him he hadn't called and sent him back to bed. This happened twice more before Eli realized the voice may have been from God. He advised Samuel to await God's message.

The lad did as he was told, and the Eternal God came and stood by his bed. There He pronounced again the punishment on the house of Eli. He told Samuel that Eli had sinned by not taking action against his own sons, and now nothing could make the house of Eli clean (verse 14).

In the morning Samuel obediently related to Eli all that had happened. Eli simply said, "It is the Eternal: let Him do what seems good to him."

Through the years that followed, God continued to appear and speak to Samuel in Shiloh, and the young man grew to adulthood holding God's word in high esteem. All Israel

knew he was appointed to be a great prophet.

Philistines capture the ark

Now the Philistines were oppressing Israel and slew about 4,000 men in one battle. Bewildered, the elders of Israel asked Hophni and Phinehas to carry the ark of God into battle, hoping this would give them the victory.

But the Philistines won the battle, captured the ark and slew Hophni and Phinehas (on the same day, as prophesied). When Eli heard the tragic news of the ark, he fell over backwards off his bench and broke his neck. He died at 98 years of age, leaving Samuel in charge of the priesthood.

The Philistines, after rough treatment by God, eagerly sent the ark back to Israel seven months later (see I Sam. 5 and 6). After a brief and unfortunate stay at an Israeli town called Beth-shemesh, the ark was taken to Kirjath-jearim, to the house of Abinadab, where it remained until the time of King David.

Samuel preaches repentance

The Philistines had now oppressed Israel for about 20 years, and the people lamented to God for deliverance. (Samson evidently had just begun his own private war against them in the southwest.)

Samuel knew God had shown Israel no mercy because of the wickedness of both the people and the priesthood under Eli. The people were bowing down to the false gods, Baalim and Ashtaroth, and the priests had made a mockery of the office, intent only on serving their own pleasure (I Sam. 7:3-4).

So Samuel spoke to all Israel. He told them to *change* — to purge the land of false gods and to turn to the Eternal God, serving Him with all their hearts. Then, he said, God would deliver Israel from the Philistines.

The people obeyed Samuel and destroyed their idols.

Then he called all Israel to Mizpeh for prayer. He spoke before the people and poured water out upon the ground before God as a symbol of His Holy Spirit (see John 7:37). Then the people fasted and prayed, repenting of their national sins. They

SAUL'S BLESSING (opposite page) by Samuel marked God's choice of the first king of Israel. From I Samuel 9, 10.

God told Samuel to do as the people requested, saying, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (I Sam. 8:7). So on that day, the people rejected God as their king.

began to serve God once more, and He heard their prayers.

The Philistines sent a great army toward Mizpeh, intending to smash any possible uprising, but God sent powerful thunder and lightning directly into the Philistine camp. They were thrown into confusion and defeated.

This marked the first military victory for Israel in 20 years. They even recaptured some of their lands along the Mediterranean Sea. The Philistines didn't dare to fight against God's people as long as Samuel governed.

Samuel, in the meantime, worked tirelessly serving all Israel. He traveled a regular circuit — from Ramah, his home, to Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpeh — each year to make judgments for the people. For God was king in Israel, and Samuel was his administrator (I Sam. 7:15-17). As long as the people obeyed God, there was no oppression by the Philistines or Amorites.

God's government rejected

Samuel served Israel long and well. Besides making his circuit every year, he also apparently taught a group of prophets at Geba (I Sam. 10:5, 10). He was dedicated to keeping the people directed toward God.

As he grew older, however, the rigorous duties of his office were more than he could handle alone. He made his two sons, Joel and Abiah, judges in the south of Israel, but they began to misuse the office by taking bribes and polluting justice.

Worried about the future, the elders began to wonder who would rule after Samuel's death. He couldn't live forever, and his sons were corrupt. There was also some fear about a possible invasion by Nahash, king of Ammon.

Up to this time — from Moses to Samuel (nearly 400 years) — Israel had been a *theocracy*. God had been their king. When they served Him, times were good. When they disobeyed and served other gods, He

abandoned them to foreign oppression. Now many of them began to reason that it was time to have a *monarchy*, a human king of their own who would provide constant protection against anyone at any time who threatened their security.

The elders, lacking faith in God, decided this was in the best interests of all Israel. So they met with Samuel to make their request official. He knew what they wanted was wrong, but prayed to God about it.

God told Samuel to do as the people requested, saying, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (I Sam. 8:7). So on that day, the people rejected God as their king.

Through Samuel, God told the people what to expect under a human king. Their young men would be made into soldiers and laborers for the government. Their daughters would be drafted into service as military cooks and suppliers.

There would be heavy taxes to maintain the government and armies. Their servants and animals would be taken for any work the king desired, and eventually the people would all end up servants to the government. Then they would cry out because of oppression, expecting God to hear.

Nevertheless, the people refused to listen to Samuel, and were promised a king.

Samuel establishes the monarchy

God, in reviewing all Israel, told Samuel that a young man named Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, would be king. Through a series of events, Saul was introduced to Samuel and anointed. Later, at a great public gathering, Saul's office was confirmed.

Some didn't like the choice and openly spoke out against it. But later, after God gave Saul his first military victory, Samuel called another meeting of all Israel, and all the tribes were united under Saul's leadership.

At this meeting, Samuel also made his very moving farewell speech to the people (I Sam. 12). He pointed out that God, when He had been their king, had always served them faithfully. And so had Samuel administered fairly.

He also told them they had behaved foolishly in wanting a human king, but if the people and the king obeyed God, all would be well. Disobedience, however, would surely bring God's wrath.

Then, calling on God to confirm his speech, he asked for thunder and rain. Black clouds suddenly gathered in the heavens. Thunder clapped, and it poured down rain. The people were amazed and frightened of both God and Samuel, for it was the dry season, harvest time, and what they were seeing was a miracle. They admitted their sin. Yet they wanted Saul as king and asked Samuel to pray to God on their behalf.

Now Saul was humble in God's sight at first, but later he repeatedly sinned and disqualified himself from being king. While he yet held office, God chose the young shepherd, David, as his replacement. Samuel anointed him as God's chosen king when he was but a youth. It was years later, after the death of Saul, that David took control of the kingdom officially.

His last years

Samuel continued to judge Israel during this transition from a theocratic government to a monarchy. He worked hard to make the new government a success, consulting God at every turn. After the anointing of King Saul, he even wrote a book about how the kingdom ought to be run, for the benefit of both the king and the people (I Sam. 10:25).

Samuel died during the reign of Saul, and all Israel mourned him. He was buried at his home in Ramah, the last judge of Israel and faithful to God all the years of his life. — *By Art Ferdig* □