

A LOOK AT A BOOK: 1 Samuel, Pt. 1

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The period of Israel's history described in 1-2 Samuel and I Kings 1-11 displays a number of sweeping changes in political, social, and religious life. Beginning amid the chaos and degradation of that era under the Judges when there was no king in Israel, the period ends with Solomon's splendid empire. Israel begins as a twelve-tribe confederacy unified by certain ethnic ties but even more strongly by a common faith in Yahweh.

The story of these startling changes is largely the story of four people – Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon.

Originally one book, 1-2 Samuel probably were divided early in the Christian era. The tragic death of Saul marks the division between 1-2 Samuel, but the artificiality of the division is clearly indicated in that David's response is recorded in 2 Samuel 1. Jewish tradition names Samuel as author of these books, but they more likely bear his name because of his dominant role in the first twenty-five chapters. He may have been responsible for some of the material in I Samuel, especially the early history of David, as I Chronicles 29:29f suggests:

Now the acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the Chronicles of Samuel the seer, and in the Chronicles of Nathan the prophet, and in the Chronicles of Gad the seer, with accounts of all his rule and his might and of all the circumstances that came upon him and upon Israel, and upon all the kingdoms of the countries.

This passage is instructive in its reminder that the ancient editors of the historical books had several sources at their disposal.

1-2 Samuel refer to sources, although so cryptically as to be of little help. 1 Samuel 10:25 depicts the kingmaker Samuel recording the rights and duties of kingship in a book, while 2 Samuel 1:18 cites the book of Jashar, familiar from Joshua 10. When these stories were combined is a moot question, and the editor's identity is just as vexing.

THE RISE OF SAMUEL

1 Samuel 1-7

These chapters have Samuel as their lead character. They trace Samuel's rise in authority from his birth until he is established in Israel as the foremost leader. He is acknowledged as the bearer of God's word (3:19-21) and as the administrator of justice (7:17). Indeed, Samuel is characterized as responsible for the life of Israel in every respect.

1 Samuel 1:1-28. Troubled Israel, as the books of Samuel begin, is waiting. Israel is portrayed as a marginal community. We are soon to learn from the narrative that Israel is made marginal by the power and the pressure of the Philistines. Israel is politically weak and economically disadvantaged. But there is also a moral, theological dimension to Israel's trouble. By the end of the book of Judges, Israel is shown to be a community in moral chaos, engaged in brutality (chapters 19-21) and betrayed by undisciplined religion (chapters 17-18).

We discover that Israel is waiting for a king who will protect, defend, gather, liberate, and legitimate the community. Indeed, Israel is finally waiting for a quite particular king: for David! When David finally appears, Israel has the assurance that "this is he" (I Samuel 16:12). The story, however, does not rush to David. There is a long waiting; the object for which Israel waits is not known concretely beforehand. The narrative leads us, along with ancient Israel, through that long season of bitter, confused, uncertain waiting. It may be that the narrator knows, well ahead of the telling, what the outcome will be. But as in every good story, we are not told too much too soon. In a daring move, back behind "the great men," the narrative locates the origin of Israel's future and the source of its "great leaders" in the story of a bereft, barren woman named Hannah (1:2). The narrative of Elkanah-Hannah-Samuel (chapter 1) stands as our entry point into Israel's astonished waiting. The problem is barrenness; no child, no son, no heir, no future, no historical possibility. The resolution is worship, with a son given and a future opened.

1:1-2. The problem is clearly and immediately articulated. The man with his impressive genealogy (v. 1) is matched to a barren woman (v. 2). From his fathers, Elkanah has a proud past. With his wife, however, he has no future.

1:3-8. The outcome is a provoked woman, abused by her rival, Peninnah (v. 6), more vexed by Yahweh's foreclosure of her future. Hannah's response to her trouble is depression, grief, and loss of appetite (v. 7).

1:9-18. Hannah interacts with Eli, the priest at Shiloh. Her husband is absent in this scene. She vows that the son of her womb will be preserved for obedience only to Yahweh. At the beginning we have a clue about how and why Samuel became such a sturdy champion of Yahwistic faith. He is predestined by his mother to be such a champion.

1:19-20. Yahweh does remember (v. 19). This is precisely what Hannah has asked, that Yahweh should remember and not forget (v. 11). Yahweh is a powerful rememberer; and when Yahweh remembers the partner and the promise, newness becomes possible.

1:21-28. Her offer of the boy is a faithful counterpart to her vow. Barrenness ends, by the power of God, in glad, trustful service. The reality of need, and explicitly barrenness, is not distinctly an Israelite problem. The narrative, however, invites a Yahwistic rendering of human trouble and its resolution. Yahweh stands at the center of each scene:

1. “The Lord had closed her womb” (v. 5, 6)
2. “The God of Israel grant your petition” (v. 17)
3. “The Lord remembered her” (v. 19)
4. “The Lord has granted me my petition” (v. 27)

1 SAMUEL 2-3

This narrative unit has two purposes: (1) to articulate the legitimacy of Samuel as “the leader” for Israel in the crisis to come and (2) conversely, to discredit the failed leadership of the house of Eli. We have seen in 1:3-28 that Samuel is a special gift from God (to Hannah) and a special gift back to God (from Hannah). The narrative of chapters 1-3 wants us to understand that Samuel’s origin and his destiny are both peculiarly in God’s hand and for God’s purpose. Part of the working of God’s intent in Israel is the nullification of the old priesthood, which is accomplished through his narrative.

1 Samuel 2:1-36. “The rise of Samuel” is narrated in counterpoint to the account of “Eli’s fall.” Samuel’s rise is punctuated by a series of carefully placed statements reporting his growth to manhood and his maturation in faith. There is irony in the fact that he is nurtured in faith by Eli, the very one whom he displaces.

Samuel’s growth and maturation are narrated in these statements: “The boy ministered to the Lord, in the presence of Eli the priest” (2:11); “The boy...grew in the presence of the Lord” (2:21). (Whereas the beginning is in the presence of Eli, the rhetoric is now escalated to the presence of Yahweh.) “The boy Samuel

continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord” (2:26). “Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground” (3:19). In the last three of these notice the verb “grew” is used. By the end of the narrative, Samuel arrives at manhood.

1 Samuel 3. The roles between the two are then reversed (vv. 15-18). Eli has forfeited the word of Yahweh, and it is given to Samuel. Eli is now dependent upon Samuel to learn the word of Yahweh. Earlier, Samuel is uncertain and must be guided. Now he confidently receives the oracle but is reluctant to tell Eli, because the oracle is against Eli (vv. 15-18).

I SAMUEL 4-5

THE NARRATIVE OF THE ARK

I Samuel 4:1b-7:1 is referred to as “the ark narrative.” Apart from the powerful, invisible working of Yahweh, the ark is the only “character” who acts in the story. Of special interest is the fact that Samuel, for whom chapters 1-3 have so carefully prepared us, is not present in this narrative.

I Samuel 4:1b-22

This narrative unit is divided into two parts, an account of two battles (vv. 1-11) and the report of the battle with a response to the report (vv. 12-22).

1 Samuel 4:1b-11. We know that Israel found the Philistines to be their most serious perennial adversary in the eleventh century, but the literature of Samuel has not given us any preparation for this conflict. Everything in the Samuel narrative runs toward David. Chapters 1-3 have introduced us to Samuel as the kingmaker. Chapters 4-6, a quite distinct literary unit, begin in a fresh place to give us a second reason for the emergence of David, the Philistine emergency. The emergence of the kingmaker and the Philistine emergency prepares us for the narrative of kingship that is to follow. There is a pattern of defeat, ark, defeat. It is remarkable that in that sequence the ark in fact makes no difference.

I Samuel 5:1-12

Chapter 4 is only the first episode in the extended dramatic narrative of the ark (chs. 4-6). Chapter 5, the middle piece in the ark narrative, contains the decisive inversion that is at the heart of the entire narrative. At the beginning of this chapter, Yahweh and the ark are captured and are therefore weak; the Philistines and their god, Dagon, are strong and have prevailed (v. 1). By the end of this

chapter, Yahweh's "hand" (power) prevails (v. 11) and the Philistines are reduced to a helpless cry (v. 12).

I Samuel 5:6-10. How odd it is, in the face of that expectation, that Yahweh, who sojourns with the pitiful peasants of Israel, can terrorize this formidable Philistine community. Dagon had lost his hands – that is, his power (v. 4). In verse 6 Yahweh is the one with the "strong hand." The inversion is complete. The "strong hand" of Yahweh had caused the initial Exodus (Deuteronomy 26:8), and now this same "hand" (power) is "heavy" against Ashdod. The heavy hand of Yahweh sends "tumors" among the Philistines. All the story needs is recognition that the tumors are a bodily affliction that causes enormous alarm among the Philistines.

The role of the Philistines is carefully articulated in chapters 4 and 5. They are the ones who discern the power and sovereignty of Yahweh. They unwittingly observe and testify that Yahweh is indeed God. Their care in getting rid of the ark is like the care exercised in defusing a bomb that might explode at any time. The strategy of the Philistines in moving the ark from city to city is not unlike the desperate negotiations between Caiaphas and Pilate concerning Jesus (John 18:13-19:16) or frantic negotiations to see where to dump our nuclear waste.

I SAMUEL 7:2-17

SAMUEL AS JUDGE

Samuel has been authorized (3:19-21), and Yahweh (through the ark) has prevailed (6:12-13). Samuel and the ark together embody what was authoritative and binding in the old covenant faith of Moses.

I Samuel 7:2-4. Samuel and Israel make a new beginning (v. 3). Samuel assumes the central role for which he is prepared in chapters 1-3. Israel began to mix its faith and its loyalty with other loyalties and alternatives seemingly more attractive, more compelling, and more productive. Samuel is summoned by Yahweh to call Israel back to its primary loyalty, to its single reliance, and to shun other modes of life, security, and well-being. The demand of Samuel is that Israel belong only to Yahweh and not be permitted any other loyalty. Israel must choose. Israel must always decide again about Yahweh and Yahweh's way in the world. Israel must always decide again for covenant and against other modes of peace and prosperity, which covenantal faith declares off-limits.

I SAMUEL 8

THE REPORTS OF SAMUEL

Samuel is an effective leader and no fault is found with him. Now, suddenly, everything is changed.

8:1-3. It is a long time between chapters 7 & 8. Samuel is suddenly old. He is still in charge, but now his sons are also judges, and they are failures. The failure of the sons of Samuel reminds us of the failure of Eli's sons (2:12-17).

8:10-18. This speech placed in the mouth of Samuel is the harshest, most extensive criticism of monarchy in the Old Testament (see also Deut. 17:14-20). It is one of the most important pieces in the Old Testament on the abuse of public power. The governing verb of Samuel's characterization of monarchy is the word "take" (vv. 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17). It is the business of a centralized government to "take," whether by taxation, confiscation, or the draft. The taking of sons (vv. 11-12) is for military purposes. The taking of daughters (v. 13) reflects a luxurious court that needs subservient labor to operate. The seizure of fields, vineyards, and orchards (vv. 14-15). The king will cut into Israel's labor and the means of production of tribal life (v. 16) and eventually will impose a usurpatious tax (v. 17). The monarchy, in Israel as elsewhere, lives by a confiscation and concentration of wealth and land. The end result of such a power arrangement (v. 17b) is that "you will be . . . slaves." The dread word has now been uttered. Israel, especially the old Israel of Samuel (v.8), still had vivid memories of the Exodus and the deliverance from slavery. Verse 18 ties chapter 8 to chapter 7 by contrasting the two. In 7:9 Samuel "cries" and Yahweh "answers." We have seen how cry-answer is a central construct and practice in Israel's faith (cf. Ex. 2:23-25). Now Israel is warned that when it "cries," Yahweh will not "answer" (v. 18). The monarch substitutes human power for the availability of Yahweh.

8:19-22. The dire warning of Samuel did not matter. The yearning of monarchy is driven by powerful fear and a hunger for security. Yahweh does not draw the conclusion we expect. We anticipate Yahweh's rejection of kingship. Instead, Yahweh grants permission for the monarchy. The narrative shows that Yahweh is in theological agreement with Samuel but, in the end, turns against Samuel sustaining the new request. The monarchy is left theologically doubtful by this "permitted-but-disapproved" status.

I SAMUEL 9

THE AUTHORIZATION OF SAUL

In chapter 8, kingship is given reluctant authorization by Yahweh. Israel has by chapter 9 answered the question of monarchy with a reluctant yes. With that decision, it has now to identify the one who would become king. There is the idyllic account of the young boy who appears before Samuel and is secretly anointed (9:1-10:16), the public recognition of Saul (10:17-27), and the battle crisis during which the spirit rushes upon Saul (11:1-15). This founding of monarchy is a theological-liturgical act, making clear that Saul's authority is rooted in the will, word, and purpose of Yahweh. Throughout the narrative Saul is given "another heart." He has become another man. As he becomes so, he opens the way through which Israel might become a new people. For this moment of the narrative, there is no criticism of the new institution, nor yet any premature usurpation of attention by David. Saul is permitted his narrative of power and transformation.

9:1-4. This story is framed as a narrative about the recovery of lost asses. The theme of lost asses is introduced at the outset (vv. 3-4) with a threefold refrain, "did not find them," "were not there," "did not find them." The key actors in the kingship theme are Yahweh and Samuel. Saul is only a passive recipient and takes no active part in coming to power. Saul receives the throne but he does not grasp power.

9:5-14. The narrative provides a long, slowly paced account of Saul coming to the presence of Samuel. The search of the lost asses is the only reason Saul journeys to Samuel. The narrative skillfully holds our attention to this theme for as long as possible.

9:17-21. The two themes of kingship and asses play off each other masterfully. Saul comes to Samuel with his mind set on the asses; Samuel wants to set Saul's mind on kingship (vv. 19-20). "Here is the man." There is no ambiguity. Nor is there any rationale about why this is "the one." God's electing power is unqualified. The exchange between Samuel and Saul is delicate (vv. 19-20). Samuel guides the exchange; Saul understands very little. Samuel knows what is on the mind of Saul (v. 19). However, Samuel invites Saul to get his mind off the donkeys for the sake of the "desire of Israel": that is, kingship (v.20). Samuel asserts that everything desirable in Israel is for "you and for your father's house" (v.20). Even the uncomprehending Saul seems to catch the point. He quickly demurs, in a manner reminiscent of Gideon.

I SAMUEL 10-11

10:1-8

Samuel anoints Saul, precisely as mandated by Yahweh in 9:16. There the commission of the new king was to “rule” and to “save.” Now Samuel reiterates both words, “Save” and “rule” (10:1). Saul will not only save but will reign. Saul will not only do what a judge does but also what a king does. Saul’s office exists for the well-being of “his people Israel.” The act of kingmaking is *to save*. It is for the sake of the *community*. Saul is to save and to make this community freshly possible.

The new mandate and transformation of Saul is so drastic that it requires verification (v. 1b). Samuel offers three signs, which in verse 9 are said to be fulfilled. The first is that Saul will meet men who will give assurances about the lost asses (v. 2). The second sign will be the appearance of two men who will give food to Saul (vv. 3-4). The third sign will be a “band of prophets” with whom Saul will prophesy (vv. 5-6). The promise of this third sign is that Saul will be “turned into another man,” a new creature empowered for God’s special purpose. In his final instructions, Samuel asserts once more that he himself is in charge (cf. 9:13) and Saul must defer to him (vv. 7-8). This last assertion is made in modest tones, but it is an ominous signal that will bear heavily on Saul’s future. Samuel’s prominence may be modestly stated, but it is aggressively enacted in time to come.

The initiative of Yahweh over the life of Saul, a man who thought he was on a donkey hunt, is staggering.

Yesterday God said, “I will send you a man” (9:16)

Today Yahweh said, “Here is the man” (9:17)

Saul (and the monarchy) is Yahweh’s work, Yahweh’s initiative, Yahweh’s plan, Yahweh’s choice. The initiative of God continues when we are invited to notice the effect on Saul:

God gave him another heart (10:9)

The spirit of God came mightily upon him (10:10, cf. v. 6)

This narrative is a study in what happens to one man when he is caught up in Yahweh’s powerful rescue and new governance.

“Another heart” (10:9) suggests a total revisioning of the world in a way that shatters old perceptions, invites new commitments, and requires new actions. In the old wilderness memory of Israel, Caleb is marked as a man with “a different spirit” who will therefore live and prosper in the land (Numbers 14:24). In the exilic prophecy of Ezekiel, it is asserted that those with conventional “business as usual” hearts will not save Israel and will not return home or enter the land. God will give a “new heart” and a “new spirit” (Ezekiel 11:19). A new heart and spirit will replace the heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:26).

He is transformed in ways that others find embarrassing (vv. 11-12). This experience of the rush of the spirit is an odd moment in the total narrative of kingship. Surely those who requested a king in chapter 8 were sober and realistic. They wanted a planner and a budgeter who would manage the economy and the army. They surely did not intend a king who would be moved by the wind of God out beyond their own hoped-for vision of Israel. But Saul is seized! He is made new!

10:21b-24

Saul is found. He is tall (v. 23; cf. 9:2)! That is Saul’s only distinguishing trait. We are told nothing else that commends him. “There is none like him” (v. 24). It is a formula reserved for Moses (Deuteronomy 34:10-11) and Josiah (11 Kings 23:25). The people swear their allegiance and receive Saul with enthusiasm (v. 24). There is in this act no reservation and no recognition that monarchy itself is problematic (cf. v. 19). The acclamation of Saul bespeaks a wondrous innocence concerning the problems elsewhere about Saul and kingship.

I SAMUEL 12

OLD COVENANT, NEW MONARCHY

This chapter deals with the tension between the old covenant and the new practice of monarchy. Central in I Samuel 12 is the question, “Can the categories of covenant be made pertinent and effective, even in the midst of the monarchy?”

12:1-5. Samuel addresses “all Israel” (v. 1). The urgency of the meeting indicates that Samuel would like to settle this vexing question of kingship once and for all. Samuel’s own leadership is the issue in these opening verses. We were told in 8:5 that Samuel is old. Perhaps Samuel wants to vindicate his personal career. More plausibly, however, he wants to vindicate his kind of leadership – the leadership of the great tribal covenant mediator who functions variously as seer, prophet, and judge and who has been entrusted with the very word of God (3:19-4:1). Samuel

quickly enumerates five characteristic charges against exploitative leadership: to seize an ox, to seize an ass, to defraud, to oppress, to accept a bribe (v. 3). Perhaps Samuel can remember the charges brought against the sons of Eli (I Samuel 2:12-17). Three of his five proposed charges use the verb “take.” By using this verb, it is likely that Samuel contrasts himself and his kind of leadership with the anticipated king of I Samuel 8:11-18, who will “take, take, take.” The king “takes.” Samuel has not taken. Samuel is on sure ground. He may be cantankerous, quarrelsome, and authoritarian, but no one can say he is using his office for his own benefit.

I SAMUEL 13

THE REJECTION OF SAUL

In chapters 9-11 we have seen how Saul was established as king in a threefold sequence of secret anointing, public acclamation, and military victory at the behest of the spirit. Now in chapters 13-15 we shall observe the undoing of Saul and the end of his royal power. We shall see that Samuel plays the decisive role here as he did in the establishment of Saul. Thus we move from the *establishment of Saul* (ch. 9-11) to the *nullification of Saul* (ch. 13-15). In chapters 13 and 15, there are two confrontations with Samuel in which Saul is indicted for having usurped power rightly belonging to Samuel and the old order.

The purpose of the monarchy is to fight the Philistines. That is what kings in early Israel had to do. Thus, it should not surprise us that upon his acclamation as king (11:15) our next glimpse of Saul is in combat against the Philistines.

13:8-15a. Saul’s army is not a regimented body over which he has control. It is, rather, a volunteer militia. Because morale is low, the volunteers begin to “scatter.” In an attempt to halt the disintegration of his army, Saul proposes a liturgical act that will gather the troops and contribute to the morale of the army. Saul, however, is not authorized to offer sacrifice (cf. 9:13). He is authorized to act as judge and warrior, but not to act as a priest. That crucial social role has been retained by Samuel for himself. Samuel did not give everything away. Saul waited in the midst of the crisis for a full seven days (v. 8), as he was instructed to do (10:8). The threat to Saul’s leadership of his troops grows more ominous, because he is immobilized. Immediately, as soon as Saul has finished the offering, Samuel arrives (v. 10). He comes so quickly that the reader can only marvel at the timing. Saul, in innocence, goes to meet Samuel (v. 10). Saul is not uneasy about his own action, nor is he suspicious about Samuel’s timing. But we wonder. “What have you done?” (v. 11). The tone of the question implies that a great wrong has been perpetrated. Saul gives an extended and reasoned explanation of

his action in offering the sacrifice. He acted for pragmatic reasons, because the troops were scattering (v. 11). He acted because he did not want to begin battle without a proper religious gesture (v. 12). Above all, the time limit on Samuel's arrival had elapsed (v. 11). And besides, "I forced myself" (v. 12). Saul did not offer the sacrifice greedily, eagerly, aggressively, or to preempt the power of the old priesthood. Saul could hardly be more deferential. Samuel immediately gives his verdict: "Foolish!" (v. 13). "You have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God!" (v. 13).

Verse 13b states a promise to Saul "that might have been." The strategy of Samuel is ruthless, designed to brutalize Saul with what might have been but never was, and now can never be. On all these grounds it appears that Samuel plays a daring, brutal game with Saul's faith, Saul's career, and eventually Saul's sanity.

I SAMUEL 14-15

THE REJECTION OF SAUL

This complicated narrative presents three themes: (1) Israel continues to fight the Philistines, and Yahweh is present in the midst of the battle; (2) Jonathan is presented as a daring, winsome character, in contrast to his father, Saul; and (3) Saul is a well-intentioned, pious man who emerges as a pitiful, disappointing contrast to Jonathan.

14:1-15. Jonathan appears abruptly in the narrative and emerges as a threat to the leadership and destiny of his father. Jonathan takes an astonishing initiative against the Philistines. He proposes that he and his armor-bearer alone assault the Philistines (v. 1). Jonathan and his trusty colleague go up against the Philistines and are completely effective (v. 14). They manage to put the entire Philistine camp into confusion, a confusion typical of the strategy of "holy war" in which the confusion itself is a mode of combat (cf. Judges 6:19-21). Jonathan is presented as a believing warrior, knowing that his proposed assault on the Philistines is willed by Yahweh.

Jonathan's faithfulness is evident in three parallel statements. First, he says, "It may be that the Lord will work for us; for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few (v. 6). Second, Jonathan establishes a criterion for knowing if the attack is the will of Yahweh (v. 10). Third, the sign is implemented and Jonathan concludes that the attack is intended by God (v. 12).

15:1-3. The king is not a free man with policy options. He is under the tight mandate of Yahweh's will, mediated only through Samuel. The old, old debt

Israel has against the Amalekites is now to be settled. Samuel authorizes a vengeful settlement of a memory centuries old. The concrete warrant is the law of Deuteronomy 25:17-19, which mandates destruction of the Amalekites. The will of God, as articulated by Samuel, is that the Amalekites must be exterminated (“utterly destroyed”) and none must be “spared.” Saul is not permitted to distinguish between loyalty to Yahweh, loyalty to Samuel, and destruction of the Amalekites.

15:4-9. Saul and his troops “utterly destroy” what is worthless (v. 9). Thus far the mandate is enacted. They do not, however, “utterly destroy” the best of what was captured, and they spare Agag, king of the Amalekites (v. 9). The key words, “utterly destroy” and “spare,” words from Samuel’s initial command (v. 3), are used to establish that Saul and the people knowingly and willfully departed from Samuel’s charge.

15:10-16. “I repent that I have made Saul king.” Yahweh regrets the choice of Saul and nullifies that choice. The reason for Yahweh’s repentance is Saul’s disobedience. Here, in contrast to 13:13, the disobeyed command is clear. The commandment of “utterly destroy” has been violated. Saul reports that the best sheep and oxen were spared and the rest utterly destroyed. The illicit sparing is justified on the grounds that the best of the livestock are intended for sacrifice “to the Lord your God.”

15:17-31. These verses are among some of the most pivotal in the Old Testament for shaping the life and faith of Israel. Saul has not listened; therefore he will no longer be the anointed. Where there is no listening, there will be no anointing. Rebellion by Saul inevitably leads to rejection by Yahweh. Because he has not listened, Saul has forfeited his election and his throne. The argument is devastatingly simple, and ruthless in its conclusion.