

4:1 - 8:22

4:1 - 7:2

In these chapters, Samuel exits the scene and two new realities enter it.

First, there is the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was kept at Shiloh, but it also got moved around whenever necessary. It contained the Ten Commandments and was believed to bear the very presence of God. God was both everywhere and the creator of everything, but also, located in a special way in this sacred piece of sculpture with a chest. Where the ark went, God went. Where the ark was, God was. When the Ark was in Israel, God was in Israel.

Second, there are the Philistines. The origin of the Philistines is believed to be Crete and the Aegean region. Eventually they settled along the coast of Palestine, and the word 'Palestine' itself means - the land of the Philistines. Modern day Gaza is one of the Philistine cities. The Philistines were strong and fierce warriors, and they were a constant threat to Israel.

In a series of events, the Philistines defeat Israel in battle and capture the Ark of the Covenant from them. Among the many casualties are Eli's sons Hophni and Phineas. Eli and his sons have been functioning as Judges of Israel, and this is the structure of leadership in Israel. It is a charismatic office of leadership rather than a more structured monarchical system, which, as we shall see later, Israel will demand. When Eli hears of all the casualties, including his sons, but especially, the loss of the Ark, he collapses, breaks his neck and dies.

God is fighting Israel's battles (As we shall see, God is functioning in the role of King for Israel) by inflicting plague-like tumors on the Philistines. The Philistines are so intimidated by God (their god Dagon collapses before the God of Israel), and overwhelmed by their afflictions, that they organize its return to Israel.

7:3 - 8:17

The Judgeship of Israel falls to Samuel, and he with his sons leads the people. Samuel himself is a successful judge. He is able to bring the people to repentance, as there is much idolatry in the land. He is also able to bring the people confidence so that they take on the Philistines and win. We are told that during Samuel's rule, Israel is able to re-take its lost territories and peace prevails with some of its Canaanite neighbours.

8: 1-22

Eventually, Samuel gets old and cannot rule Israel on his own. His sons take more and more of the leadership. Unfortunately, however, his sons are like Eli's sons - unreliable, dishonest, greedy, and unjust. This precipitates a crisis of confidence among the people of Israel and they demand a meeting with Samuel.

They tell Samuel that his sons are not worthy successors to him. But they go one step further. They want to move beyond a loose confederation of tribes to a more centralized and structured form of governance led by a King. This is what their neighbours have. A King would have a palace and an army and would be able to make it his primary business to protect Israel and fight Israel's battles.

What follows is a fascinating dynamic between the people, Samuel and God. For a comparative view of God's will with regard to the establishment of kingship in Israel read Deuteronomy 17: 14-20. What is important here is that Samuel's attitude and God's attitude are not exactly the same. Even though God agrees with Samuel that establishing the Kingship is not an ideal and it questions God's sovereignty over the nation, nevertheless, God is willing to acquiesce to the peoples' demands. Samuel, on the other hand, tries to dissuade them and doesn't give them what they are asking for. He sends them home. He provides a long list of consequences that will come upon the people with the establishment of the Kingship, trying to make them change their mind. In the end, however, the people have made up their minds, whatever the consequences may be.

God is depicted as democratic and gracious. God will accompany the people whatever choices they make. Even though they will bear heavy consequences, God will support them. This is important to note because David becomes a favourite of God and an ideal image of a King. If God were resistant to working with the peoples' wishes, God would not support David or any other King. God's role here in relation to Israel is very much that of a parent. Even though as children grow they make more and more of their own decisions, we continue to love them and support them. Even when we warn them about consequences to certain decisions, we allow them to make their own choices and then we are there when they have to pick up the pieces. God is gracious with Israel even though God does not support their decisions.

What is also fascinating is that religion in Israel varies. There is the worship of God, this is true. But alongside this worship, many people also adopt the worship of local Canaanite deities, probably in imitation of their neighbours. Every faithful judge, prophet, priest and king will have to deal with this problem, and this is also why we see commandments and warnings throughout the Old Testament against it. If it wasn't an issue it would not be mentioned so often. In the stories of Samuel we see how many practices of the religion of the Hebrews were eclectic and mixed.