

1 & 2 SAMUEL

INTRODUCTION

1) The Books of Samuel come after the books of Joshua and Judges, and before the books of 1st and 2nd Kings. They are intended to be a historical account of a key period in Israel's history. But they are also theological accounts of history, making important statements of faith about what is right and what is wrong in Israel's ongoing relationship with God, as well as who is good and who is bad in terms of the leadership. We will make our own judgments as we read these accounts.

2) Originally the books of Samuel and Kings were not divided into two books each. But because of the size of the scrolls, they were divided up. The division, however, is not arbitrary. The 1st book of Samuel tells the story of Samuel's birth and rise as the great prophet/priest of Israel and the man who anoints the first King of Israel: Saul. Before this, Israel was ruled by judges, of whom Samuel becomes the last one. The bulk of the book chronicles the rise and fall of King Saul as well as the rise of his future successor: David. It ends with the death of King Saul and his sons. 2 Samuel focuses on the reign of David who becomes the greatest King Israel ever had. It chronicles his adventures and misadventures, as well as the conflict between rival heirs to succeed him, culminating in the choice of Solomon, who inherits a kingdom at its peak.

3) Even though the books of Samuel would have been written later than 600 BCE, the events they point to are closer to 1000 BCE. According to some scholars, the death of Saul is said to have taken place at 1010 BCE and that of Solomon at 930 BCE.

4) These stories are meant to be read as history, but also as a confession of faith. God remains steadfast with Israel, even though the nation takes a path away from God (with a minority trying to remain faithful to God by criticizing the majority path). Even David, the celebrated King, is a tragic figure. Even though he is favoured by God and blessed in many ways, the books of Samuel are a judgment on the monarchical system of government. Even though David does his best, he is just a man who is caught up in events bigger than him, leading to sad consequences upon him and his family after him.

5) Ideas about God and God's will and working may be somewhat shocking in some sections of these books. The challenge for us is to try and discern the gospel in these stories and descriptions of God and God's faithful ones. There is killing and revenge, political intrigue, sexual exploits and treachery. Some people are treated generously while others seem to be treated unfairly. We will try to get inside the text and discover the God represented in Jesus. Let's see what we find.

1:1 - 4:1

THE STORY

The story begins with 3 characters: Elkanah and his two wives: Peninnah and Hannah (polygamy was still the accepted practice at that time). Peninnah has children but Hannah does not. To be unable to bear children for a woman at that time was very tragic. You were less of a woman for it. So much of your identity was tied up with your ability to have children and nourish the future of your family and Israel. To compound Hannah's grief, Peninnah reminds her of her inadequacy whenever she has the opportunity.

But Elkanah loves Hannah the best and is very supportive of and comforting to her. Elkanah is also a religious man, and he, his wives and the children make the yearly trip down to Shiloh where the temple of God is located (at this point it is a large tent, a temporary shelter, and only in the reign of Solomon is a concrete structure built). They make sacrifices there and offer prayers.

Hannah pours into her prayers all her grief. The head priest, Eli, sees her and at first thinks she is drunk, with all her intense swaying. Once Hannah explains to him what is happening, he is compassionate with her and wishes her prayers are answered. Hannah's prayer is for a son, and her promise is that should a son be born to her, she will give him back to God as an offering, to serve in the temple (He will be a 'Nazarite.'). As an aside, some argue that John the Baptist was also a Nazarite. Consider the description given in 1:11.

Hannah's prayer is answered and Samuel is born. When he is old enough he is brought to the temple. He becomes a personal attendant to Eli.

At this point, Eli's sons are mentioned: Hophni and Phineas. They are a disgrace to the office of the priesthood (it is an inherited office along bloodlines). Eli has not disciplined them in his raising of them and now it is beyond his ability to control them. They are set in their ways. But Samuel is a very different person - sincere, honest and willing to learn. Eli will do right by him.

We are told the story of how Samuel first learns to discern God's word to him. We also learn how God begins to speak to Samuel in a way that God has not spoken to anyone before him. The word of the Lord is doom and gloom upon Eli and his sons. They will fall and the lineage of the priesthood will be passed on to others.

Upon this difficult beginning, Samuel begins to be acknowledged as a prophet of God.

THE MESSAGE

1) Elkanah is a faithful man. Hannah is a faithful woman. Even though faithful people experience hardship like everyone else, they also experience special blessings in life, visible and invisible. The birth of Samuel is interpreted as a direct result of Hannah's prayer to God. What is most significant here is not the answer to Hannah's prayer, but the fact that she responds with generous self-giving to God. She is also committed to her promises. God is good to her, and she will give back to God her best, a true sacrifice.

It is no wonder that her song of praise is the pattern upon which Mary's song is recorded in Luke 1 (the Magnificat). It asserts the sovereignty of God. It also points to the way God works, a classic theme of the bible - God humbles the proud and mighty while vindicating and supporting the weak and powerless. Israel was always a small nation among great colonizing empires. But it professed a God who was creator and sovereign of all nations and the whole world. What a paradox that God would choose to work with a weak people. This is where the theology of the hidden power of God working through the apparently weak, powerless and simple ones shines through.

2) Peninnah is a cruel woman, who gloats over her success as a mother, and puts those less fortunate or successful down. She seems to have all the blessing outwardly. But Hannah receives an inner blessing from her connection with God and her sincere devotion, which, in the end, is the greater.

3) Samuel starts off small and lowly, but in the end, will become the most trusted and faithful prophet of Israel in this period of its history. God can trust God's word to those who do not have a "God-complex" themselves and are ready to listen attentively and humbly. Receptivity is a key virtue. Humble people are receptive. Proud people have greater difficulty so doing. They are too self-absorbed and too full of themselves.

4) Eli is a good Priest. Where he is being judged is in his lack of discipline of his sons while they were still young and able to be formed. Even though he criticizes them now that they are adults, it is too late. The damage is done. They abuse their office by demanding inordinate payment (taking the best of the sacrifices for themselves) and refusing to accept as sacrifice those who do not meet their requirements. This is a gross abuse of the office of the priesthood.

5) Samuel becomes the mouthpiece of God to Eli. At least Eli takes it like an adult and accepts the just consequences of his mistakes. God honours our honesty even if we have to pay a price for it and accept the consequences. It is always the better path than running away or denying the truth.