

Notes on I Samuel 1 – 8

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The book of *Judges* has described the tribes of Israel continually sliding into idolatry and being subjected to the fury of their enemies. All this was punctuated by their calling on God, and God, patiently, giving them further opportunities to rise to possess their inheritance. At the beginning of *I Samuel*, we are taken to where Israel's national life was focussed, the Ark of the Covenant and throne of God, and see that the priesthood had descended into self-interest. The story tells how God caused his word to be heard again, and how he raised up a king who loved his word.

Perhaps the Lord's reticence for Israel to have a king was because they were so unable to understand what manner of king he had in mind for his people.

Chapters 1 – 2

True piety had survived in Israel. Though much of the nation disregarded the Lord, Elkanah brought his offerings each year to the place where the ark was housed. Hannah, beloved, but childless and taunted, was brought to cry out to God for a child. She was brought also, to devote her child to the service of God. Her sufferings had led her to God, and there, she discovered the loving kindness of God. The old high priest was not very discerning in all of this but did know that God would grant the prayers of this distressed woman.

Hannah's worship, as she now revisited Shiloh, shows that she had been opened up to far more than her own circumstances. Like Mary after her (Luke 2), she had discovered through her own history that Israel had no need to fear their enemies. Her weakened state had been the occasion of God's great mercy to her. It was so for all who called on the Lord in truth. The arrogance of those who stood in the way of the godly had been weighed by God and their plans been thwarted. The prayers of the hungry and the barren had been heard. So, she was bold to ask that God would give strength to their king and to take the whole nation forward.

Because Israel had no king at this time, it is thought that this song may have been put into Hannah's mouth from a later time. Given that the word 'king' may have been added, the sentiment she expresses is entirely appropriate to this place in the book. Israel did not merely need a king but a people who knew that the Lord was their God and a people who called upon him. This faith was revealed in an ordinary member of the community. Later, God would raise up a king with a like faith.

While young Samuel grew up and served God with all the heritage of his godly parents, Hophni and Phineas raged out of control, doing as they wished with the people's offerings and the female helpers. Eli spoke to them but would not restrain them. He honoured his sons more than God and shared in their sin through inaction.

The family had become self indulgent, effectively forsaking God (Deut. 32:15). God had promised the priesthood to Aaron and his sons forever (Exod. 29:9), but within that, if part of the priesthood showed itself to be untrue, their line would die out. So said the prophet, and so it happened to Eli's part of the priestly family (I Sam. 22:11–23; I Kings. 2:26–27). As the story of Israel reveals, the Aaronic family of Zadok came to have responsibility for the priesthood (I Kings. 2:35). Survivors of Eli's family would beg for menial jobs to earn a living.

Prayer

Thanks be to you Lord God, that you have never ceased to lead us and to teach us to put our trust in you. Everything in our life leads to this that we may rejoice in the victories of your Son Jesus Christ. Therefore, our Father, we come to you in the midst of our trials and ask that you will exalt your Son among us. May none who trust in you be put to shame. Save us from presuming on your promises. Your love is upon us that we may live as your people and not laze in unconcern. This, we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Chapters 3 – 4

For Eli's sons not to know the Lord was an act of defiance (2:12), for Samuel, a lack of opportunity. He was in the temple (a more secure structure appears to have been built) where the ark was kept, but no one there was accustomed to the Lord speaking to his people.

The word of God that came to Samuel concerned the fall of Eli and his family. The young Samuel would soon be known as a prophet because this word would set people's ears tingling. As he matured, the Lord continued to speak to him and nothing that he prophesied failed to happen. Though Eli had been unfaithful, he knew he must acknowledge the word of God. Israel lived by every word from God's mouth (Deut. 8:3). The lamp of God still flickering in the temple before daybreak suggests that in the prayer of Hannah and the word that came to her son, God had tended the lamps by which Israel was brought through this dark night of the period of the judges.

Israel's disregard for their worship was such that they presumed to use the covenant box to serve their own ends. This had never happened in all the years the judges had ruled. Perhaps they thought they could revive the days of Joshua. They learned that God ruled by his word and could not be controlled by their use of his throne (the ark). This was intended to assure them of his presence and his nature.

On this day of battle, Eli and his sons died, together with thousands of Israel. His daughter in law believed the glory of God had departed from Israel. In fact, glory is never linked with the ark alone but with the tabernacle as a whole. God wanted Israel to see his glory, in Egypt, at Sinai and at the tabernacle, and to believe in him. By this witness, the whole earth would be full of his glory (Num. 14:21). The glory that had really departed was the moral glory of people living by the word of God. In this woman's personal loss, she may have had a glimpse of Israel's true situation. Whatever, the true glory of Israel, the Lord himself, merciful and gracious (Exod. 33:18 – 34:9), had not departed from Israel. His word, through Samuel, was being heard across the land and all his words came true. The nation was being prepared for the days of David.

Prayer

Father, it is alarming to realise that we, your people, can live by the traditions of piety and not hear your word. We can use the institutions of faith in you for private advantage and actually be rebels. Grant to us again, the early freshness of Samuel's faith when he heard your word. Thanks be to you that your glory is the glory of your faithful love and mercy. Lord, speak to us again and always. Lead us always that we may rely on your Son and so reveal his glory in the earth, in his name we pray. Amen.

Chapters 5 – 6

The ark, which could not protect Israel from the Philistines, brought Dagon to the ground and its host cities to their knees. The ark was not a charm Israel could use to make things happen, but indeed, the throne of God. Israel had refused to be a light of revelation to Philistia, but the Lord caused his own light to shine among them so that they would fear him.

The superstitions of the Philistines suggested they needed to give a guilt offering to the Lord: they were in breach of his law and needed to make amends. Any belief that does not arise from the revelation of God's grace is likely to be confused and constrained by fear, but still reflects the fact that humanity is made in the image of God. In all things, God directs the nations of the world to himself. Diviners advised that Philistia not be like Pharaoh in Egypt who stubbornly refused to acknowledge Israel's God. 'Give him glory' they said, 'and gifts representing all the lords and cities of the land.' They also prescribed a test to ensure that their sufferings were the result of having the ark among them. Graciously, God met their requirements and relieved them of any doubt that they had acted appropriately in releasing the ark. In remembering this story, Israel's prophets drew attention to the purpose of the Lord to set his people free from all slavery so that they may truly worship.

The Levites of Beth-shemesh (Josh. 21:16) honoured God in their offering (although offerings were supposed to be of male beasts). Depending on which translation is followed, some residents (probably seventy) did not join in the celebration, or took the liberty of looking inside the ark and paid dearly for their irreverence. They no longer wanted the Lord among them and asked a Jebusite (foreigners assigned to menial tasks in Israel) city to take up the task.

There may also have been political or cultic reasons why Kiriath-jearim was chosen. Philistines still controlled Israel until David's time and they may have preferred this somewhat neutral territory with a cultic history.

God had brought his ark back to Israel, but Israel was far from free and spent a further twenty years in this state.

Prayer

Father, your witness among the nations proceeds through all the varied days of our testimony. Your love for them, as for us, remains. Grant that our worship and witness may be purified and made strong. May the grace that you have revealed in your Son be fully formed in us, your people, and be a witness among all nations. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Chapters 7 – 8

The return of the ark was God's doing but did not lessen the power of the Philistines. Perhaps it encouraged Israel, because, after 20 years of further submission, they were moved to cry out to God. Samuel then assumed a more public function as judge. He was not a military leader, as in the book of *Judges*, but a spiritual leader. He reminds us of the ministry of Moses as prophet, priest and judge. Samuel's predecessors may have been called judges because, by them, God called them to repentance and then gave judgment in their favour and against their enemies. The intercession of Samuel and his offering (a whole burnt offering signified total dedication to the Lord) led to such a total victory over their enemies that Israel should have been left in no doubt that their national life was safe in the hands of their covenant Lord.

Samuel signalled further victories by his memorial stone. The place where Israel lost to the Philistines and lost the ark of God (4:1; 5:1) was now the place of victory. Samuel then moved around and dealt with the personal life of his people, just as he had dealt with their national life. Israel had no reason to complain that God was not their King.

When Samuel's sons proved unworthy, Israel's request for a king seemed reasonable. However, it was not just the sons Israel wished to replace. They craved to have the security other nations appeared to have with a visible monarch. The Lord was not near enough!

Samuel approached the Lord with the request of the people. The Lord explained that he had always had to deal with a rebellious people; Samuel was just discovering what God had known all along. He must heed what the people said, but warn them of the increase in demands to cover the cost of human glory and power that a king would find necessary. How gentler they would have found the yoke that God put on them! However, 'So let it be' the people said. 'So let it be' said the Lord.

Prayer

Father, you have known our secret idols, and our fears, and our sinful longing to turn to something more secure than yourself. Yet all this did not stop you sending your Son to us, though you knew we would murder him. You knew the victory you would win through his offering and by your raising him up to be our King. Lord, we have been exposed, but so have you, and your reign is still gentle and kind. Gladly then, our Lord, we submit to him whom you have established as Lord. We bring to you the anxieties of this present day. May your peace keep our hearts and minds in Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.