

Samuel—Judge and Prophet

“Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went from year to year in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, and judged Israel in all those places.”

—*I Samuel 7:15,16*

as the second of the Old Testament prophets, Moses being the first. (Acts 3:22,24) Samuel was a faithful, God-reverencing servant of Israel, and was the last of their judges, for it was during his time that the nation began to be ruled by kings.

The circumstances leading up to Samuel's birth, as well as his experiences as a child, had an important bearing on his life as a servant of God. His father's name was Elkanah, and his mother's name, Hannah. Although married for some years, Hannah was childless. This greatly distressed her, and when she went with Elkanah to worship and offer sacrifice at Shiloh year by year, “she wept, and did not eat.”

SAMUEL WAS ONE OF

those who served Israel as a judge, as had Gideon, Jephthah and others. Samuel, however, was more than a judge in Israel. The record states that he was “established to be a prophet of the LORD.” (I Sam. 3:20) In the New Testament,

the Apostle Peter places him

Her husband loved her dearly and said, “Why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?”—I Sam. 1:3-8

Hannah could not be comforted. She went to the house of the Lord and there poured out her heart to the God of Israel. While Eli the priest was seated close by, Hannah “prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.”—vss. 9-11

At that time Eli was Israel’s high priest. He noticed from his vantage point the tenseness of Hannah while she was so earnestly praying, and he supposed she was intoxicated. He said to her, “How long wilt thou be drunken? put away thy wine from thee.” Hannah denied this charge and explained, “Out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto.” Eli then answered and said to Hannah, “Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him.” (vss. 13-17) The God of Israel did grant her petition. When her son was born she named him Samuel, which means “heard of God.” Explaining the name she had given him, Hannah said, “Because I have asked him of the LORD.”—vs. 20

Hannah was true to the promise she made to the Lord. As soon as her child was weaned she took him to Shiloh, to the house of God, and said, “As long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD.” (vs. 28, *New*

American Standard Bible) The boy Samuel became a servant to Eli, the priest. Eli evidently loved the Lord and desired to serve him faithfully as priest, but his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who would be the underpriests, were wicked. The record states, "The sons of Eli were sons of Belial [Hebrew: worthless]; they knew not the LORD." (I Sam. 2:12) Eli knew of his sons' evil deeds in connection with their service, but aside from severely scolding them, he seemingly did nothing further to rectify the situation.

The Lord then addressed the situation. First, he gave a message to Eli by an angel, referred to as "a man of God." It was a declaration of condemnation against the house of Eli, in which it was stated that the two wicked sons would die, "in one day." (vss. 27-36) The youth Samuel was ministering before Eli at this time. His first official assignment from the Lord was to confirm to Eli the message of condemnation and judgment which had been given by the angel. We read that the "word from the LORD was rare in those days, visions were infrequent." (I Sam. 3:1, *NASB*) This means that there was no prophet in the land at that time who could speak authoritatively for God. While the Lord had miraculously directed various of his servants such as Joshua, Gideon and others, none since Moses had been constituted a prophet. Now, however, the young man Samuel was about to be initiated as a prophet, and his first message would be far from a pleasant one.

Young Samuel began his service to God as a prophet in a very unique manner. From early childhood he had served Eli in the house of the Lord.

The account states, “It came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see; And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep; That the LORD called Samuel: and he answered, Here am I.”—I Sam 3:2-4

Samuel did not know that this was the Lord calling him. He supposed that Eli had spoken to him, needing some assistance. He was surprised to learn that Eli had not called. He went back to bed, only to hear his name spoken a second time, and again he reported to Eli. He had the same experience a third time, and Eli then perceived that it must be the Lord who was speaking to the boy. He told Samuel that if he heard his name called again, to answer, “Speak, LORD, for thy servant heareth.”—vss. 5-9

The Lord did speak to Samuel again, and he responded as Eli had instructed. Then the Lord gave this new prophet in Israel his first message to deliver. It was: “In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.”—vss. 10-13

This was a difficult message for Samuel to deliver to Eli, to whom he was loyal. However, the next morning Eli, suspecting that the young man had received a message for him from the Lord, insisted that he tell it all, which Samuel faithfully did. It was a blow to Eli, but he took it well, and said, “It is the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good.”—vss. 16-18

In due course the judgment fell upon the house of Eli, just as Samuel had prophesied in his confirmation of the angel's message which previously had been given directly to Eli. Thus was this young servant of God confirmed as a prophet. The record is that "Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the LORD."—I Sam. 3:19,20

SAMUEL DELIVERS ISRAEL

As a judge, Samuel wrought a great deliverance for Israel from the hands of the Philistines. However, this did not occur until these enemies of the nation had been permitted to destroy the sons of Eli and thus carry out the divine judgment against them.—I Sam. 4:1-11

True to the method employed by all whom the Lord raised up as judges to deliver Israel, Samuel's first step was to call the nation back to the true worship of God. The record states, "Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hands of the Philistines." The people heeded this exhortation, and then Samuel instructed them, "Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the LORD."—I Sam. 7:3-5

This was a great test of Samuel's faith. While the people were gathered at Mizpeh, they were surrounded by the Philistines. Samuel, however, offered sacrifice

to the Lord and continued to pray. Meanwhile, “the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the LORD thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel.”—vs. 10

“Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.” The Philistines were subdued, not only in that one encounter, but, as the record states, “They came no more into the coast of Israel: and the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel”—that is, all the days during which he served as judge.—vss. 12,13

THE PEOPLE ASK FOR A KING

Samuel’s judgeship was terminated before his death by the demand of the Israelites that they have a king to rule over them. Samuel had appointed his sons to succeed him as judges, but they were wicked. “His sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment.” (I Sam. 8:1-3) The elders of Israel saw this as an opportunity to present their request. They gathered together and came to Samuel, saying, “Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.” Samuel was greatly displeased with this request, perhaps feeling that his many years as judge of Israel was now being rejected. He also knew that only God himself should properly be considered Israel’s sovereign king.—vss. 4-6

Samuel took the matter to the Lord in prayer, and the instructions he received were: “Hearken

unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken me, and served other gods, so do they also unto thee.”—I Sam. 8:7,8

The Lord explained in comforting Samuel that the people had for centuries been treating him just as they were now treating Samuel. What a sad testimony was thus given by God concerning his covenant people. He told Samuel to consent to their ill-conceived desire, but also to “protest solemnly unto them, and shew them the manner of the king that shall reign over them.” (vs. 9) Samuel did this, and in verses 10-18 we have the prophet’s eloquent account of the burdens that would be heaped upon the people and the difficulties they would encounter under the rulership of kings.

“Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us.” (vs. 19) How much this is like the attitude of all whose hearts are not in tune with the Lord, and whose ears are dulled to the warnings which he so lovingly gives to those who are turning in the wrong direction. In effect, the people said to God’s prophet: We hear all you say, but we do not believe you are right; and in any case, we want a king.

SAUL, ISRAEL’S FIRST KING

While in reality the nation had rejected both Samuel and the Lord, the people did not go so far in their rebellion as to select and anoint their own

king. Superficially, at least, they looked to God and to Samuel to cooperate in their demand. In I Samuel chapters 9, 10 and 11 are recorded the circumstances leading up to the choosing and anointing of Saul as the first king of Israel. At the climax of these events, the record states, "All the people went to Gilgal; and there they made Saul king before the LORD; ... and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly."—I Sam. 11:15

It was shortly after these events that we discover the real stature of Samuel as a servant and prophet of the Lord. He had yielded obediently to God's instructions to anoint a king over Israel. He also knew that their demand for a king was a rejection of the Lord and of himself. Samuel then presented himself to the people. He asked them to bear witness if he had at any time, through his whole lifetime of service to the nation, ever defrauded or oppressed them in any way.

The people answered, "Thou hast not defrauded us, nor oppressed us, neither hast thou taken ought of any man's hand." Then Samuel continued, "The LORD is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that ye have not found ought in my hand. And they answered, He is witness." Then briefly, yet eloquently, Samuel reminded the people of the wonderful way God had cared for the nation from the time of their great deliverance from Egypt.—I Sam. 12:4-11

In this oration, Samuel stressed particularly the marvelous manner in which the Lord had delivered the people every time they cried to him for help and gave up their worship of false gods. On every such occasion the Lord provided one who, working as his instrument, delivered them from the hand of their

enemies. He brought the lesson up to date by reminding them that he himself had been used to deliver them from the oppressive hand of the Philistines.

Then, referring to a current situation in which the nation was in sore need of help, Samuel said, "When ye saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, ye said unto me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us: when the LORD your God was your king. Now therefore behold the king whom ye have chosen, and whom ye have desired! and, behold, the LORD hath set a king over you. If ye will fear the LORD, and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then shall both ye and also the king that reigneth over you continue following the LORD your God."—I Sam. 12:12-14

Samuel also warned, however, that if the people and their king did not continue faithful, "then shall the hand of the LORD be against you, as it was against your fathers." (vs. 15) With the object of impressing upon the people the fact of their great sin in asking for a king to rule over them, Samuel called upon God, who "sent thunder and rain that day: and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel. And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the LORD thy God, that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king."—vss. 16-19

Having received this confession of sin from the people, Samuel told them that, despite their previous sins, if they turned back to the Lord, he would be with them. "The LORD will not forsake his people for his great name's sake: because it hath pleased the LORD to make you his people. Moreover as for

me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way: Only fear the LORD, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you.”—I Sam. 12:20-24

SAMUEL’S UNPLEASANT TASK

From the time Saul became king in Israel, Samuel’s chief role was that of prophet. God’s ancient and holy prophets served not only as seers to forecast future events, but also to relay messages to the nation of Israel through its kings and religious leaders. It was in this role that Samuel gave Saul instructions from the Lord: “Go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”—I Sam. 15:3

It is only from the standpoint of God’s plan to restore all the dead to life and give them an opportunity to accept Christ, obey the laws of the Messianic kingdom, and live forever, that we can understand such instructions as coming from a God of love. Knowing this, we can appreciate that it was an act of divine mercy to destroy the women and children together with the men, rather than to leave them behind to mourn and to suffer privation and lifelong loss. What a glorious time it will be when they all will be raised from death and reunited, with the further opportunity of gaining eternal life upon the earth!

Saul did not fully comply with God’s instructions, allowing the Israelites to spare the lives of some of the Amalekites’ cattle. His excuse for disobedience was that the people had kept some of the best of

the cattle to offer in sacrifice, whereupon Samuel explained that “to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.” Then Samuel informed Saul that the Lord had rejected him from being king.—I Sam. 15:7-23

SELECTION OF SAUL’S SUCCESSOR

Following this unhappy experience, Samuel was used by the Lord to seek out and to anoint a successor to Saul to be king of Israel. He was instructed to go to the house of Jesse, in Bethlehem, for God had chosen one of Jesse’s sons to be the new king. Samuel learned another valuable lesson in this experience. Jesse had a number of sons, sturdy and kingly in appearance, but none of these was the Lord’s choice. David, the youngest of them, who was tending his father’s sheep, was the one God indicated as his choice. He explained to Samuel, “The LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.”—I Sam. 16:7

In conformity with the Lord’s wishes, Samuel anointed young David to be king of Israel. This, apparently, was Samuel’s last official act of divine service. From boyhood to old age he had served the cause of the Lord and of righteousness faithfully, and he is named by Paul as one of the ancient heroes of faith, one of those who endured much in order that “they might obtain a better resurrection.”—Heb. 11:32,35

I Samuel 19:18-24 reveals that David, when persecuted, fled to Samuel and together they “went and dwelt in Naioth.” This record indicates that the presence of Samuel, the aged prophet of the

Lord, served as a protection for young David, although nothing is said of any message which Samuel may have communicated under these circumstances. Finally, the record states: “Samuel died; and all the Israelites were gathered together, and lamented him, and buried him in his house at Ramah.”—I Sam. 25:1

In all that the Bible reveals of the experiences of Samuel, no flaw of character is manifested. He was loyal to God, even though called upon to render unpleasant tasks, as in confirming the judgments of the Lord against the house of Eli, and informing Saul that he had been rejected by the Lord. In these things his life of faith and faithfulness should be a great example to us, as in “this present evil world” we seek to know and to do our Heavenly Father’s will.—Heb. 11:37-39; 12:1; Gal. 1:4 ■