

Le
Samuel
A Biography



BY HAROLD R. MOSLEY

REMEMBER THE SCENE from my childhood. I was a young boy in a Sunday School class at a rural Baptist church listening as my teacher told the story of God speaking to the child Samuel. I imagined the thrill Samuel must have felt as he realized God was calling his name. The young child Samuel answered God's call, and he grew into adulthood to become one of Israel's greatest leaders. The story challenged my heart, just as it has challenged the hearts of countless others throughout the centuries.

Samuel's Heritage

The story of Samuel starts with his parents' example of faithfulness and prayer. The narrative of 1 Samuel 1-2 introduces his parents. Samuel's father, Elkanah, was a faithful worshiper of God. He fulfilled his obligations to God, as is evidenced in his pattern of faithful sacrifices before the Lord. Because the specific statement in the Hebrew text is an idiom, 1 Samuel 1:3 is translated somewhat differently in various translations.¹ However, the statement's intent is clear. Elkanah regularly went from his home to worship the Lord at Shiloh. Every Hebrew man was to appear before God three times a year during specific festivals (Deut. 16:16-17). Probably Elkanah sacrificed before God as part of his faithful attendance at these religious feasts.

Samuel's mother, Hannah, was also godly. The text first mentions her in the midst of the heartache of her inability to have children. Another wife of Elkanah,² Peninnah, had children, and Peninnah regularly provoked Hannah by reminding Hannah of her lack of children. Some aspects of the story, however, seem to be implied by the way the narrative is told. The text introduces the wives as: "the name of the one

Left: Ramathaim-zophim, hometown of Elkanah and Hannah.

Right: Razor, from Egypt. Hannah's vow included a razor not touching Samuel's head.



was Hannah, and the name of the second was Peninnah" (1 Sam. 1:2).³ This order in the introduction of the wives implies Hannah was the first wife. She also was the favorite wife, as the story relates in verse 5 that Elkanah loved Hannah. Elkanah may have married Peninnah for the same reason Abram married Hagar;⁴ that is, because his first wife was unable to bear children.

Peninnah's persistent attempts to provoke Hannah served to frustrate even more Hannah's intense desire for children. Hannah broke into bitter weeping as her heart ached. She prayed to God for children. On one occasion, Hannah prayed at Shiloh, where the priest Eli observed her. Her lips moved, but no words came forth. Eli, assuming such action could only come from a drunk person, rebuked her. However, after hearing Hannah's story, Eli assured her that God had heard her prayer. Hannah returned home with a renewed hope and faith in God.

Hannah's prayer to God included two vows. First, she vowed that should God give her a son, she would give him to the Lord all his life. This was more than an empty promise. Indeed, after she had weaned Samuel, she presented him at Shiloh, where he remained with Eli. The second vow was that "no razor shall come upon his head" (v. 11). This vow was in reference to the Nazirite vow.

The Nazirite Vow

Numbers 6:1-21 records the specific nature of the Nazirite vow. This vow could be taken by either a man or a woman (v. 2) and

could be for a determined length of time (vv. 6,13) or for a lifetime.⁵ The Hebrew word from which the name "Nazirite" derives denotes the idea of separation. The particular significance of the vow was that the Nazirite was separated or dedicated to God. A Nazirite made a commitment of separation from the ordinary life. Instead, the Nazirite led a life of consecrated service and obedience to God.

The vow actually consisted of three separate elements. The best known of the elements dealt with the prohibition of cutting the hair during the time of the separation. However, two other aspects were part of being a Nazirite. The Nazirite could not partake of any part of the fruit of the vine. Specific prohibitions included not only wine, strong drink, and vinegar derived from grapes, but also grape juice, grapes, raisins, or even the skin and seeds of grapes (Num. 6:3-4). The third aspect of the Nazirite vow prohibited contact with a dead body. Even if the contact with a dead body was unintentional, special steps were needed to restore the Nazirite to the state of separation (vv. 9-12).

Hannah's vow that her son would be a Nazirite from birth points to her intention to dedicate him to God for all his life. Hannah's prayer was answered when God blessed her with a son she named Samuel.

LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: 1 and 2 Samuel

Samuel's Early Years

Scripture does not record Samuel's exact age when Hannah brought him to Shiloh. The story seems to indicate Hannah brought him immediately after he was weaned. Although an age is not mentioned, the indication is that he was indeed still quite young (1 Sam. 1:24).

Eli served as Samuel's mentor during the early years of the boy's life. Apparently, Eli in many ways was honorable on a personal level. However, one glaring weakness caused his ministry to be ineffective: Eli honored his sons more than he honored God (2:29). Because of Eli's refusal to discipline his sons for their evil behavior, God said He would bring judgment on Eli's family and would raise up a "faithful priest" in Eli's stead (2:30-35). Samuel grew to fill that role for the nation.

Under Eli, the word from God to Israel had become infrequent.⁶ The problem was not that God had become distant. The problem was that Israel as a whole, and Eli and his family specifically as leaders within the nation, had become sinful. Thus, God ceased to speak through Eli. Samuel's experience, however, was different. Although Samuel was still a young man, God began to speak to Israel through Samuel (3:19-4:1). The statement, "the Lord was with him," indicates God blessed Samuel's life



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and his work and ministry as a prophet. Similar statements refer to God using Joseph (Gen. 39:2,21,23). God used Samuel because of his faithfulness and obedience. That none of Samuel's words fell "toward the ground" gives evidence both of the Lord's faithfully using Samuel and of Samuel's faithfulness to God (1 Sam. 3:19). Because he faithfully delivered God's words, Samuel's reputation as a genuine prophet spread throughout "all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba" (v. 20, NASB). "For the first time since Moses, Israel had a national prophet."⁷

Above: Nebi Samwil, the traditional birthplace of Samuel, as seen from nearby Gibeon.

Below: Excavated

area of Tel Shiloh (modern Seilun) in Israel. Samuel served God at Shiloh as a youth under the leadership of Eli the priest.

Samuel and the Monarchy

Samuel judged Israel for many years until he grew old. Unfortunately, Samuel's sons, like those of Eli, did not follow God (8:1-5). The people of Israel approached Samuel about establishing a king over them. The three specific reasons for this request were: (1) that Israel might be "like all the nations";





Above: This clay juglet from Ai was an ointment container and was decorated with a painted basket weave design. Samuel had the unique opportunity to anoint Israel's first two kings, both Saul and David.

Right: Silver plate representing a scene from Israel's history; shown, Samuel anointing David.

(2) that the king might govern the nation; and (3) that the king would fight their battles—that is, he would be a military leader (v. 20). The request displeased Samuel. However, God assured Samuel that the request was not a rejection of Samuel. Rather, it was a rejection of God's kingship over

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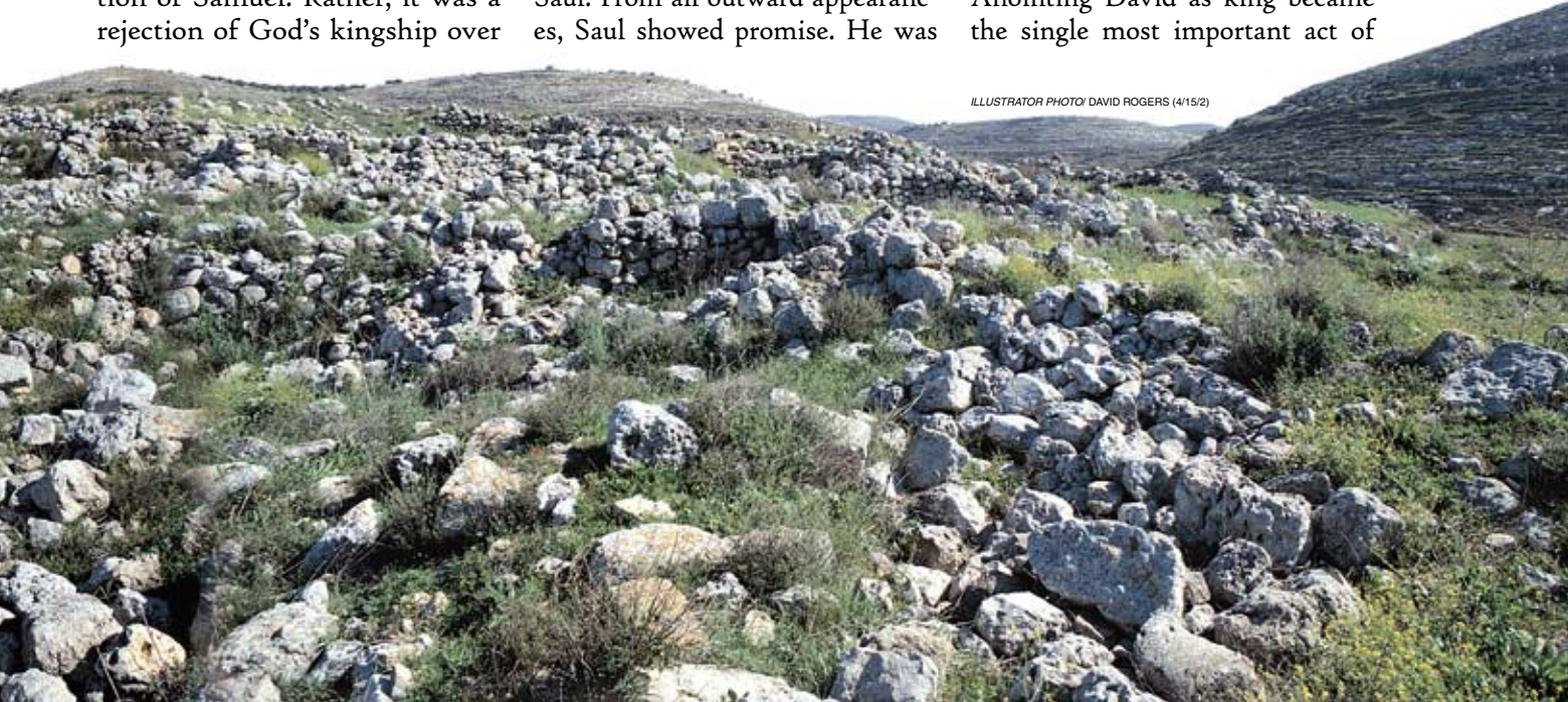
the nation and an embracing of idolatrous practices (vv. 7-8).

God granted Israel's request by commanding Samuel to anoint Saul. From all outward appearances, Saul showed promise. He was

tall, handsome, and had a striking physical presence. However, the most important characteristics needed for Israel's king—faithfulness and obedience to God—were lacking. Saul's repeated refusals to obey God caused the Lord to cease using Saul.⁸ Because of this disobedience, the Lord sought a man after His own heart (13:14).

God then sent Samuel to the house of Jesse, where he was to anoint Israel's second king. Jesse's elder sons came before Samuel, but God had not chosen any of them. To the surprise of all involved, the youngest son was God's choice. The theme of God choosing David echoes the problem associated with Saul. Rather than looking on the outward appearance, God looks at the heart (16:7). Anointing David as king became the single most important act of

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The hill of Moreh as seen from Jezreel. Endor was at the foot of Moreh.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (19/1/8)

Samuel's ministry. David went on to become the standard by which later kings were measured. All the subsequent kings who obeyed God were said to be "like David."⁹

Samuel's Last Days

As Samuel came to the end of his ministry, he gave a farewell address to the nation (1 Sam. 12). He recounted God's gracious deeds of deliverance and provision throughout the years. He also admonished the nation concerning the blessings of obeying God and the disasters of turning from God. As proof of God's power and His displeasure over Israel's sinfulness, specifically the sin of requesting a king to rule over them in God's stead, Samuel called upon God to send thunder and rain during the wheat harvest (v. 17). The impact of this event was indeed a "great thing" (v. 16). The wheat harvest lasted from late May into early June. This was a time when the rains in Israel had already ceased for the summer months. Rain in Israel occurs normally from mid-October through mid-April.¹⁰ During the intervening months, no rain falls at all. The rare event of thunder and rain during the time of wheat harvest reinforced Samuel's warning concerning sin. This event also

illustrated Samuel's usefulness and power as God's servant to Israel.

Scripture gives us no details about Samuel's death. When he died, though, "all Israel had lamented him and buried him in Ramah, his own city" (28:3, NASB).

The last event in Samuel's ministry came after his death (1 Sam. 28). Saul was facing what was likely the most serious battle of his kingship—a battle against the Philistines. God had ceased to answer Saul because of Saul's disobedience. In a frantic effort to gain some word from God, Saul sought the advice of a medium he had earlier outlawed, the "witch of Endor." Saul asked the witch to bring Samuel from the dead.¹¹ When Samuel appeared, apparently to the great surprise of the witch, the message to Saul was not one of assurance. The message was the same one Samuel had earlier announced to the king: Saul's disobedience had caused God to take the kingdom from him. Saul would die in the battle with the Philistines, and David would become king. Indeed, Samuel's prophecy came true.

A Model of Faithfulness

Samuel undoubtedly was a man of great energy and ability.

Those traits, however, were not what made him a great leader. Rather, Samuel's faithfulness to God was the key to his usefulness. The model of faithfulness patterned by Samuel's parents had been followed by their son. The choice Samuel made to follow God as a child changed not only the course of his own life, it changed the course of the history of the nation.

God used Samuel as the key figure in the transition from the period of the judges to the era of monarchy in Israel. Although Samuel recognized Israel's failure in requesting a king, he was obedient to God in anointing Israel's first two kings. Samuel became the greatest leader for Israel since Moses. Samuel's faithfulness to God continues to make him a model for all who aspire to be used by God for service. **B**

1. The Hebrew literally reads, "And that man went up from his city from days to days." The idea of the idiom is that this was a pattern of regular observance in his life.

2. We as twenty-first century Christians must recognize the characters of the Bible were people of their time and of their culture. Although Elkanah was a godly man, he was not perfect. Culture in the patriarchal period allowed the plurality of wives, even though God never approved of the practice.

3. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are the writer's translation.

4. The story of Abram and Hagar is in Genesis 16.

5. Samson (Judg. 13:5) and John the Baptist (Luke 1:15) were to be Nazirites from birth, that is, for their lifetimes. See "Nazirite" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (HIBD), ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1178-79.

6. First Samuel 3:1 mentions the lack of "frequent vision" or "frequent revelation."

7. Robert D. Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel, vol. 7 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 89.

8. Two serious instances of Saul's disobedience are recorded. First Samuel 13 notes Saul's intrusion into the office of the priesthood, and 1 Samuel 15 relates Saul's refusal to destroy all of the Amalekites' livestock.

9. See for example, 1 Kings 9:4; 11:38; 15:11.

10. See Simon J. DeVries, "Calendar" in HIBD, 251-53.

11. This story has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Some argue the figure who appeared to Saul after the death of Samuel was not Samuel, but rather some demonic apparition representing the prophet. The story as it is presented is indeed difficult to understand. However, the fact that the text specifically mentions Samuel as the one who appeared should be taken at face value.

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