

UNIT FOUR

1 SAMUEL 1-12: SAMUEL AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MONARCHY

OVERVIEW OF 1 SAMUEL AS A WHOLE

- **The book of 1 Samuel falls into four main sections:**
 - Chapters 1-3 describe Samuel being established as a prophet, summarised by 3:19-20.
 - Chapters 4-7 are about Samuel being established as a judge, again summarised at the end of the section in 7:15-17.
 - Chapters 8-12 are devoted to the transition from judgeship to kingship – they begin with the demand for a king and end with Samuel handing over to Saul.
 - Chapters 13-31 deal with Saul's reign, through to his death in chapter 31 – through this section Saul progressively loses control of the kingdom.

THE THEOLOGY OF 1 SAMUEL

- Throughout the book, Samuel is God's spokesman, the means by which God's word enters history and directs events – even after his death (chapter 28).
- The Song of Hannah (2:1-10) is important – of particular significance is the claim that it is Yahweh who determines the fortunes of people.
- This is seen in chapter 3 where Yahweh exalts Samuel and brings down Eli, and in chapters 13-31 he exalts David and brings down Saul.
- The divine rule by which people are raised up or brought down is not based on mere whim, but on clearly articulated principles – all are accountable.
- Samuel's action in appointing Saul is also guided by divine principles (Deuteronomy 17:14-20), and it is made clear that Saul will not be a king on the Canaanite model.
- Samuel's speech in chapter 12 sets out the terms on which kingship was accepted:
 - Samuel maintains that the people's demand for a king had been wrong and they acknowledge this.
 - The new arrangement will only have God's blessing if both king and people 'follow the LORD'.
 - Samuel retains spiritual leadership for himself as Yahweh's prophet – the king must remain subject to the word of God.
- By granting them a king, Yahweh was making a gracious concession to Israel, but was not allowing them to adopt the politics of Canaan.
- Only kingship within the guidelines spelled out by Samuel was acceptable, and the conflict between Saul and Samuel came about because of Saul's failure to keep to the guidelines.

SAMUEL AS A PROPHET (CHAPTERS 1-3)

- As noted, chapters 1-3 focus on Samuel being established as a prophet – he is prominent in these chapters and not mentioned in chapters 4-6.
- These focus on the capture and return of the Ark of the Covenant, and separate the account of Samuel’s early life from the rest of his career.
- The Song of Hannah explains the significance of Samuel’s birth – it will be his role to see that kingship is established on a proper theological basis.
- The focus falls alternately on Samuel and Eli:

The rise of Samuel	
2:11 Samuel (begins his service)	
	2:12-17 Eli (the wickedness of his sons)
2:18-21 Samuel (growth in the Lord)	
	2:22-25 Eli (continued rebellion)
2:26 Samuel (continued growth)	
	2:27-36 Eli (condemned by a man of God)
3:1-10 Samuel (Lord speaks to Samuel)	
	3:11-18 Eli (God’s judgement on the house of Eli)
3:19-4:1 Samuel (acknowledged as God’s prophet)	

- Samuel’s upward progress is matched by a corresponding downward progress of Eli and his household.
- Eli taking in Samuel as his protégé is similar to Saul’s later relationship with David, but whereas Saul subsequently tries to kill David, Eli accepts that he will be replaced.
- The setting for Samuel’s rise to prominence is the shrine at Shiloh – where worship is clearly in a debased state by the opening chapters of 1 Samuel.
- At Shiloh, priests were abusing both their privileges and the sacrificial order – taking whatever parts of the animals they liked and taking their portion of an offering before the LORD’s portion was given.
- The principal culprits were Eli’s sons, and as head of the family is was Eli who was ultimately held accountable.
- Although Eli disapproved, he was unable to stop drunkenness and sexual immorality – both characteristics of Canaanite fertility rites – making inroads into Israelite worship at Shiloh.
- In contrast to the corruption of the officials is the devotion of at least some of the lay people: Hannah submits to Eli when she is wrongly censured, recognising him as Yahweh’s representative.
- There are indications that several Israelites knew that the priests were acting improperly and objected, but were overruled.
- The prophetic movement to which Samuel’s ministry gave rise was predominantly a lay ministry.

- Samuel here is both a priest and a prophet, he will later become a judge and combine all three offices in one person.
- Chapters 1-3 focus on his establishment as a prophet:
 - A direct personal call and commission (3:10-14)
 - A messenger of Yahweh (3:11-18)
 - Wide recognition as a prophet (3:19-4:1)
 - A ministry of warning and the announcement of God's judgement.

SAMUEL AS JUDGE (CHAPTERS 4-7)

- As noted, chapters 4-6 are often seen as a distinct unit dealing with the Ark of the Covenant.
- However, the defeat that led to the capture of the Ark in chapter 4 is not reversed until the victory under Samuel's leadership in chapter 7.
- For this reason chapter 7 can be seen as the climax of the next major unit – chapters 4-6 may be distinct but form part of a larger unit.
- **THE CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF CHAPTERS 4-7**
 - The eclipse of the Eli priesthood in chapter 4 records the deaths of Eli, his sons and his daughter-in-law, in a direct fulfilment of 3:11-14.
 - All of these deaths are associated with the loss of the Ark, and even the birth of a child gives no cause for rejoicing.
 - Chapter 5 is devoted to the fortunes of the Ark in Philistine territory – it was carried to Ashdod, then to Gath, then to Ekron.
 - Each place was smitten with tumours and panic, as the *god* of the Philistines (verses 1-5) and the Philistines themselves (6-12) were struck down – this is not magic but Yahweh's powerful, sovereign work.
 - Chapter 6 is in many ways similar to chapter 4, but in reverse – the Ark moves back to Israelite territory, taken first to Bethshemesh, but the people there are smitten just as the Philistines were.
 - The Ark has returned but Yahweh's blessing has not – the presence of the Ark does not guarantee divine favour.
 - At the beginning of chapter 7 there is a stalemate – the Ark is on the very edge of Israelite territory but its full return will not happen until 2 Samuel 6.
 - It is here that Samuel emerges as the man of the hour – under his leadership the Philistines are repulsed and there is a period of relative peace.
 - As judge he has roles as a leader in war and an administrator in times of peace – although he does not take to the field of battle, his leadership rallies inspire Israel.
 - By his saviour role he preserves Israel from outside destruction, as a circuit judge he preserves Israel from fragmentation.
 - Samuel embodies the theocratic leadership from the time of Moses, showing that Israel is firstly a religious community and only secondly a political entity.

- **EXODUS MOTIFS OF CHAPTERS 4-6**
 - There are a number of parallels between the events of chapters 4-6 and the Exodus from Egypt.
 - The plagues on the Philistines recall those visited on the Egyptians, and both the Philistines and the Egyptians are said to harden their hearts initially.
 - Both eventually come to the point of wanting to be rid of the presence of Yahweh's property on their territory.
 - The exodus of the Ark parallels the exodus of the Israelites, but this one is incomplete until the time of David.
- **THE THEOLOGY OF CHAPTERS 4-7**
 - The same concerns emerge here as will later surface at the time of the Babylonian exile – the loss of the Ark means that, in effect, Israel has gone into exile.
 - The fall of Shiloh was a disaster comparable in significance to the fall of Jerusalem – it meant the loss of the priesthood, the sanctuary and the Ark.
 - Shiloh's fall is interpreted as a judicial act of Yahweh rather than a defeat for him – he remains supreme over the nations even though his sanctuary is destroyed.
 - The loss of the Ark is viewed as national punishment for apostasy, an act of Yahweh rather than the Philistines.

SAMUEL AS KINGMAKER (CHAPTERS 8 -12)

- **THE DEMAND FOR A KING**
 - Samuel precipitates the demand for a king by falling into the same trap as Eli – appointing his sons as judges and failing to act when their failings become evident.
 - The demand for a king is not surprising in this context – tradition has already been broken by appointing judges on a hereditary basis rather than by divine appointment.
 - Samuel has implemented hereditary rule but his sons are unsuitable, so the Israelites demand someone more suitable.
 - Samuel's opposition was more than just protection of his sons, his concern was that the people were focusing on other nations, wanting to adopt the politics of Canaan.
- **WHAT KIND OF KING?**
 - Samuel's description of 'the ways of the king' (8:10-18) parallels almost everything we know about Canaanite kingship from archaeological evidence.
 - Even after this description, the demand for a king 'like all other nations' is repeated – clearly kingship on the Canaanite model is what the people want.
 - Yahweh tells Samuel to accede to the demand for a king, but the way this is done makes clear that the people are not getting the kind of king they were demanding.
 - Samuel tells the people 'the rights and the duties of kingship' – Israel gets a king, but Canaanite politics are firmly rejected.

- **THE APPOINTMENT OF SAUL**

- The appointment of Saul as king takes place in several stages:
 - Samuel anoints him privately (10:1)
 - Saul is presented to the people as the one God has chosen (10:24-25)
 - His status as king is confirmed after he has proven his ability in the battle against the Ammonites (11:12-15)
 - Samuel formally hands over military and administrative leadership to him (chapter 12)
- Before all this, however, comes the story of how Samuel and Saul are brought together and Samuel is made aware that Saul is the one whom God has chosen.
- Saul holds his position because of divine decision and nothing else, and Samuel makes it clear in chapter 12 that the decision is not irrevocable.
- In chapter 9 Samuel is told by Yahweh to anoint Saul 'leader over my people Israel, he will deliver my people from the hand of the Philistines'.
- The term 'leader' is used here – 'king' is used in other contexts but there is a suggestion that Saul will not assume the full trappings of kingship.
- When Samuel anoints Saul privately, he gives three confirmatory signs, which are duly fulfilled.
- The third sign, that the Spirit of the LORD will come to Saul, is of particular interest – anointing and empowerment do not always occur together in the Old Testament.
- Anointing appears to relate to authority based on appointment to a particular office, and is permanent.
- Empowerment relates to the power to act in certain ways, and is given occasionally depending on the demands of the moment.
- Anointing links Saul with kingship, empowerment links back to the leadership of the judges.

- **CONFIRMATION OF SAUL'S KINGSHIP**

- The public choosing of Saul in 10:17-24 has to be understood in terms of Samuel's earlier choosing of his own sons.
- This time it has to be clear that the man appointed has been chosen by Yahweh as stipulated in Deuteronomy 17:15.
- Saul's leadership in the Ammonite crisis shows him leading Israel in Holy War, like the judges, and leads to Samuel's enthusiastic confirmation of his kingship.