

Books of Samuel

2. The Origin of Kingship in Israel

Samuel is the last of the judges, but he is also an atypical judge. In many ways, he anticipates the prophets in their relationship with the later kings of Israel and Judah.

The birth of Samuel is reminiscent of that of Isaac and more immediately that of Samson. His mother, Hannah was unable to bear a child, but the Lord answered her prayer. Consequently, the child is given as a gift to the Lord, to remain at the sanctuary, in Shiloh, and to live as a nazirite. Nazirites were supposed to refrain from alcohol and from cutting their hair, and were not to become ritually impure by contact with corpses. (See Numbers 6:1-21). When Samson is conceived in Judges 13, his mother is told to abstain from any fruit of the vine, from strong drink, and from any unclean thing. Samson, famously, does not cut his hair, and loses his strength when his hair is cut on the instruction of Delilah. The prayer of Hannah, in which she praises God for raising the lowly from the dust, is similar to the *Magnificat*, the prayer of Mary in Luke 1:46-55.

While Samuel is still a boy, he experiences a prophetic call, in 1 Samuel 3. At first, he thinks he is being called by the priest Eli. When Eli explains to him what is happening, the Lord reveals to him that he is about to destroy the house of Eli, because of the corruption of his sons. Subsequently, the sons of Eli are killed in battle against the Philistines, and Eli falls backward and breaks his neck when he hears the news. The extinction of Eli's family creates a vacuum in leadership. Samuel steps forward to fill the vacuum in chapter 7, when he calls on Israel, in good Deuteronomistic fashion, to put aside foreign gods.

The Ark

The story of Samuel is interrupted in 4:1b -7:1 by an episode in which he plays no part. This appears to be an independent source, incorporated by the Deuteronomist. It tells of the capture of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines. The ark is variously called the ark of God, the ark of YHWH, the Ark of the Covenant, or the ark of testimony. The association of the ark with the covenant is typical of the Deuteronomistic writers. In Deut 10:1-5, Moses is told to make a receptacle for the stone tablets of the covenant. The story in 1 Samuel, however, makes clear that it is no mere box. It is the symbol of the presence of the Lord. When it was carried into battle, it was believed that the Lord himself had entered the battle. So, the Philistines initially react with dismay, and declare that “gods have come into their camp.” In the Book of Numbers, 10:35, the chant uttered when the ark set out was “Arise O Lord, let your enemies be scattered.”

The Philistines, however, overcome their initial dismay and actually capture the ark. The capture of a people’s god or gods was not unusual in the ancient Near East. When one people captured the city of another, they typically carried off the gods, represented by statues as booty. Even the god of Babylon, Marduk, was carried off in this manner. This was meant to show the superior power of the gods of the victors. The vanquished typically claimed that their gods had let themselves be captured because of anger with their own people.

The story of the ark, however, has a positive ending for the Israelites. The Lord asserts his power by mysteriously destroying the statue of the Philistine god Dagon and inflicting the people with a plague. The Philistines promptly send the ark back. Nonetheless, it is significant that the Israelites begin to ask for a king shortly after this episode. The old charismatic religion of the Judges was not adequate for dealing with the Philistines.

The request for a king

After the story of the ark, Samuel emerges as a leader. Like Eli, he functions as a priest. He secures the success of the Israelites in battle by offering sacrifice. The Lord responds with thunder, and this is enough to put the Philistines to flight. This is the Deuteronomistic ideal of how to fight a battle. Compare the capture of Jericho, where the Israelites have only to perform a ritual and God wins the battle for them.

Samuel, we are told, judged Israel all the days of his life. He is not a military leader like the earlier judges, however. Rather, he is a circuit judge, who goes around from town to town and administers justice. His sons, however, like the sons of Eli, are corrupt, and take bribes, and so the people refuse to accept them as judges. So, they ask Samuel to appoint a king to govern them, like other nations.

Samuel's reaction is negative, and the initial reaction of the Lord seems to be negative too: "they have not rejected you, but have rejected me from being king over them." It will later be clear that the choice of a human king does not entail a rejection of the Lord at all. For much of the Hebrew Bible the king is the Lord's representative on earth. Samuel, however, does his best to discourage the people from asking for a king. He tells them what the ways of the king will be: he will take their sons for his army, their daughters for his service, the best of their lands and a tithe of their produce. But the people are not deterred, and Samuel proceeds to anoint Saul as king.

Anointing

There are two accounts of the anointing of Saul. In the first story, Samuel appears as a seer, which is to say a kind of prophet, who has second sight. Saul goes to consult him when he is trying to find missing donkeys. Samuel designates Saul as king by pouring a vial of oil on his

head. The king would be known as the Lord's anointed (Hebrew *mashiach*, which gives us the English word messiah). Anointing with oil had various connotations. It was thought to give strength and to purify, and it could also be done for pleasure. It is not clear why kings were anointed in Israel. Kings were not anointed in Mesopotamia or in Egypt, but they were among the Hittites, who lived in Asia Minor or modern Turkey. It is usually thought that the Israelite custom was taken over from the Canaanites, but there is no clear evidence of Canaanite usage. Other people are also anointed in the Hebrew Bible, most prominently the High Priest, and Elijah is told to anoint Elisha as prophet in his place, in 1 Kings 19:16. The king, however, is the Lord's anointed *par excellence*.

According to the second account of the election of Saul, he was chosen by lot (1 Sam 10:20). The procedure is paralleled in Joshua 7, in the story of Achan, who was found to have violated the divine command by taking booty. First, the lot is cast among the tribes, then among the families in the designated tribes, then among the individuals in the designated family. When Saul was indicated by lot, he could not be found, because he had hidden himself in the baggage. When he was discovered, he was seen to be head and shoulders taller than everyone around him. Then he was acclaimed by the people. The qualification of height, and sheer size is quite credible in the selection of a popular, tribal, leader.

Saul as leader

Saul is soon given an opportunity to prove his mettle. Nahash of Ammon besieged Jabesh Gilead, east of the Jordan. When the people asked for terms, he demanded that he gouge out the right eye of every man, to inflict disgrace on Israel. When this news reaches Saul, he is coming from his field behind his oxen. He may have been designated king, but he had not yet assumed the trappings of royalty. Saul cut the oxen in pieces and sent pieces throughout Israel, threatening

to do the same to the oxen of anyone who did not come out to support him. He then mustered an army to defeat the Ammonites. At this point in his career, Saul may have the title of king, but his *modus operandi* is no different from that of the judges. He is a charismatic figure, who derives his authority from the force of his personality rather than from institutional office.

The ascent of Saul is now confirmed by the apparent retirement of Samuel. “See, it is the king who leads you now,” he declares, “I am old and gray.” Samuel protests his innocence of the kind of corruption of which his sons were accused. He has taken no one’s donkey, and accepted no bribe.” He then sets out the conditions under which the monarchy is acceptable: “Here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked . . . If you fear the Lord and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king” (1 Sam 12:13-15). This formulation, which clearly subordinates the kingship to the Law, is quintessentially Deuteronomistic. Another Deuteronomistic motif is found in 1 Sam 10:25: Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship, and wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord. All of this recalls the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17: 14-20. The people are told that when they would come into the land and ask for a king like all the other nations, they may indeed have a king, but subject to certain restrictions. He must not be a foreigner, and he must not acquire either horses (for warfare) or wives in great number. (The contrast with Solomon is implicit). Moreover, “when he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he

may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes. . .”

This is the Deuteronomic ideal of kingship. It was not the historical reality. Several psalms celebrate the king as God’s representative, with no hint that the arrangement is conditional. Psalm 2 is typical in this regard. There God tells the king: “you are my son, today day I have begotten you” (Ps 2:7). God has set the king on Zion, his holy hill, and laughs at those who would challenge or attack him. This psalm, to be sure, was composed long after the supposed time of Samuel, possibly after Jerusalem survived the siege by the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701 BCE. But the Books of Samuel also were composed, or at least edited, long after the time when Samuel was supposed to have lived in the tenth century BCE.

An older generation of scholars thought that the kingship in Israel was originally conditional, as described in 1 Samuel. They reasoned that kingship was adapted from the leadership of the Judges. But even though Saul originally acted much like a Judge, the institution was fundamentally different. The main difference was the right of succession. Judges did not pass their leadership on to their sons. Another difference that would develop early on was the presence of a standing army, so that the king did not have to rally the tribes for every crisis. Even from an early point, kingship was understood by analogy with the kings of other nations, more than by the precedent of the Judges.

Moreover, the terms in which the conditional character of the kingship is described in 1 Samuel are clearly Deuteronomic. The way of the king set out in 1 Sam 8 is clearly informed by hindsight. The *corvée*, or forced labor, was an issue already in the time of Solomon. In Deuteronomic theology, the downfall of the kingship was due to failure to keep the law. The Books of Samuel claim that this principle was clearly enunciated at the beginning of the

monarchy, most clearly by Samuel in 1 Samuel 12. But in fact, the Deuteronomic law was first formulated in the reign of King Josiah, one of the last kings of Judah. The idea that all kings were judged by their fidelity to that law was anachronistic and only formulated in retrospect.

1 Samuel, then, lays out a theology of kingship in conformity with Deuteronomy. But the stories are also interesting as a study in human psychology, even if they fictional. Samuel initially takes the demand for a king as a personal rejection. Even when the Lord explains to him that he should not take it personally, he seems to resent the new authority conferred on Saul. His self-justification in chapter 12, in which he pleads his innocence of corruption, does not address the misdeeds of his sons, which are mentioned in 8:3. Despite his apparent retirement in chapter 12, Samuel continues to meddle in the affairs of Saul in the following chapters, like an unwilling retiree who is unwilling to let go of his power. This story may be a fiction, like an historical novel, but it is an intriguing study in the psychology of leadership in a time of transition.

Questions for reflection:

The stories of Eli and Samuel illustrate the tendency for families who inherit leadership roles to succumb to corruption. Is this problem endemic to political leadership?

What were the pros and cons of kingship? Why did the people opt for it, even when they were warned of its costs?

Is Samuel's objection to the kingship based on concern for the people or on his own reluctance to relinquish power?

Further reading:

McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 49-221.

P. D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the 'Ark Narrative' of 1 Samuel*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977