



First and Second Samuel

Samuel: Judge and Prophet

What do we know about Samuel? Interestingly, he has two books of the Hebrew Bible named after him, but he appears in only one. He is the bible's only ghost (1 Samuel 28:7). He is one of a small number of significant pregnancies mentioned in the bible (Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Perez, Samson and Jesus being the others).

His name means "name of God". Hannah, his mother, promised him to God before he was born. Her story is significant - it illustrates the patriarchal view that so long as the man has children the woman doesn't really matter (Elkanah's speech in 1 Samuel chapter 1); the lack of pastoral skills of Eli the priest (1 Samuel 1); her song (1 Samuel 2) anticipates Mary's Song of Luke 1.

Samuel was a Levite and may have had Ephraimite blood too (1 Ch 6:33-38, 1 Sa 1:1), so he was qualified to serve in the temple, as a priest. His early calling by God is perhaps indicative of the fact that Samuel is much more than a priest, however. He is the last of the Judges to rule Israel, God's voice to His people, and the anointer of the first two Kings of Israel, Saul and David.

Apparently Samuel led the greatest ever celebration of the Passover, because in 2 Chronicles 35:18 King Josiah celebrates a huge Passover and we are told "No Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel".

Samuel is remembered for his prayers in Psalm 99, along with Moses and Aaron, and in Acts Peter mentions Samuel as a prophet who "proclaimed these days".

Samuel was born into a time of transition, the end of one era and the beginning of another. Israel moved from a time when God raised up judges every now and then to rescue the people and call them back to himself, to a time when God appointed a king - at the request of the people and so that they could be like other nations. Chapters 4-6 of 1 Samuel cover a period of about 40 years - a generation that hadn't known the works of God through Joshua and Caleb (Judges 2:10). The southern kingdom is dominated by the Philistines. Eventually Israel "went out to battle against the Philistines" (1 Samuel 4:1). Four thousand are killed in a disastrous loss. Israel turns not to God but to the symbol of His presence, the Ark of the Covenant. It is brought into the camp, the Philistines hear of it and are afraid, but they fight and Israel is defeated again, this time with the Ark of the Covenant being captured and Eli's two sons being killed. Eli dies when he hears the news.

The Philistines learn something about Israel's God while they have the Ark. They put it in the temple of the god Dagon, next to an idol of Dagon. In the morning, Dagon had fallen face downward. They replace the idol and next morning it has not only fallen but its head and hands were cut off. A plague of tumours breaks out in the town where the ark is held. The ark is moved to Gath, but the people there fare no better and the ark is moved again and eventually the ark is returned to Israel.

Samuel begins calling the Israelites back to God - gathers the people and prays for them at Mizpah, offering a burnt offering on their behalf. And "Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life". By 1 Samuel chapter 8 Samuel is an old man. He names his sons judges over Israel, but, reminiscent of Eli, his sons "did not walk in his ways". So the people ask for a king. They use Samuel's sons as an excuse, but the real reason seems to be that they want to be like other nations. Samuel is displeased and asks God about it. God points out that it is not Samuel who has been rejected, but God himself, as they have done previously.

'Appoint a king for them' God says, 'but warn them what a king will be like.'

Samuel predicts universal conscription, large armies, slavery, and taxation - all of which Solomon fulfils. The people are determined to hand over responsibility to a king, however, someone to judge for them, fight for them and lead them. A handsome, powerful man is chosen - "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people."

Samuel anoints Saul as king, and at first things look good.

1 Samuel 12 records Samuel's farewell address to the people. He reminds the people of all the wrong they have done, but promises that God will not forsake his them. He then goes into some sort of retirement while Saul reigns. When God decides to end Saul's rule Samuel is appointed to tell the king "the Lord has torn the Kingdom of Israel from you" (1 Sam 15) and to anoint David (1 Sam 16). David and Saul alternate between friendship and enmity. A political solution is tried in which David marries Saul's daughter. Saul plots to kill David, but his son, Jonathan, warns David and David flees. David is a great hero and does some noble things - like finding Saul in a cave and not killing him. But he also does some reprehensible things like raping Bathsheba, and covering up the rape of his own daughter Tamar.

Samuel's death is only briefly recorded "Now Samuel died. And all Israel assembled and mourned for him, and they buried him in his house at Ramah." (1 Sam 25:1)

Samuel was:

- a man of prayer
- single mindedly for God
- constructive

Gwen Knight, All Saints' Centre Tutor, 2015

Different Views of David

For John Collins, David was perhaps much more sinner than saint:

'It (*the story of David*) argues that David was chosen by the Lord and succeeded by divine providence, but it also paints a very credible picture of a young opportunist who could be quite unscrupulous' (Collins, 2004, p226).

Collins paints a very credible and persuasive picture of David as outlaw and mercenary, frequently engaged in nefarious activities and extortion. We see a picture of man who is more sinner than saint.

Birch et al (2005), in contrast, arrive at a different conclusion. They see David as the counterpoint to Saul and suggest that David appears as 'genuinely pious, praying to God for guidance' and suggest that he was perhaps more saint than sinner: 'He was a capable military commander and an astute politician and acted accordingly, but he was also the "man after God's own heart" and acknowledged the role of providence in his life' (p237).

These are quite contrasting views and demonstrate the complexity of David's character. Both views are persuasive in their own way because David was, like all human beings, a complex character whose actions were sometimes wise and godly and at other times sinful, both unloving and ungodly. My inclination is towards Collins' more dispassionate and object view, however for the me it is not so much a case of 'either/or' but 'both/and'. The character of David in the bible offers challenge, comfort and hope for all of us. He his flawed and complicated and makes a dreadful mess of things on many occasions, full of human pride and foibles, guilt and regret. Yet God sees the good in him and uses him anyway, flaws and all. In God's economy then here is hope for us too.

Dawn Glen, 2015

References

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