

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

*SAMUEL.*<sup>1</sup>

SAMUEL is often called the last of the Judges, but whether he or Eli be so reckoned, there can be no doubt that Old Testament history counts Samuel one of the very greatest figures in its panorama of heroical and noble statesmen. Whenever in the Old Testament you find the childhood of any character that figures in the drama elaborately described, you may take it for certain that the historians consider the man so depicted to be the maker of a new epoch. The story of the infancy of Moses is a familiar example. On reading the first chapters of the Book of Samuel you will instantly receive the impression that Samuel holds a place in the history of God's chosen people probably second only to that held by Moses, the creator of Israel and the founder of Israel's religion.

The history narrated in the Book of Samuel is not written by Samuel himself. It is not even put together at the time Samuel lived or immediately after. The book is manifestly a compilation of one, two, or three older masses of tradition. We can detect differences in the language and in the description of the pervading interests, political or religious, which betray the composite origin of these sections which, grouped together, make what we count the continuous story of Samuel. Moreover, Bible scholars are no doubt right in saying that these stories about Samuel that we possess in our book cannot be altogether reconciled to one another, as we have them. Sometimes a period in the life of Samuel is taken from one history, and then again the next from another; and we have not the proper beginnings of either narrative. Besides, one at least of those old histories has been decidedly coloured by the religious bent of the mind of the

<sup>1</sup> A Lecture.

man who wrote it. He tells the story of olden days for the purpose of letting you see the workings of Providence, the designs of God. He is not content to tell you of the mere germs, the beginnings, of impulse or of aspiration. He describes the development of new ideas in the light of what has issued from them: he works them out and shows you all that was contained in those germinal springs and fountains of new life and new faith.

It is, therefore, not altogether easy to settle in our own minds with certainty what were the actual events in Samuel's life. One thing, however, we can say with perfect confidence, and that is, that it fell to him to watch the very death-throes of one great epoch of Israel's history, and to usher in a new life, a remarkable reorganization of Israel's political and religious career. What we have deposited within the compass of Samuel's career is nothing short of the greatest revolution that took place in the story of Israel.

I must go back to the beginning of our course of lectures and ask you to recall what was the formative, the creative ideal, as later historians have worked it out for us, that shone before the eyes of Moses, and of Joshua, and of all the religious souls that were in Israel at the time of the conquest of Canaan. The ideal was this: to take possession of a chosen, specially adapted portion of this earth's surface to be the home and seat of a people absolutely devoted to the one true God. In the face of all modern criticism and questionings, I stand by that. I cannot otherwise account for the magnificent enthusiasm and might with which those wandering, nomad tribes of the desert seized upon Palestine, getting, ultimately, full possession of the land, I cannot otherwise explain the tenacity with which they resisted all the forces that played upon them, that tended to break down their religious faith, to destroy their own peculiar national character, and to cause them to sink to the level of the old inhabitants. I cannot account

for the extraordinary drama which their history presents except by the explanation that it had its deepest and ultimate root in great religious enthusiasm. It is quite possible that there was a great deal of ignorance, earthliness, fanaticism, superstition, and weakness in the mass of the people. That has been the history of the Christian Church through centuries; it has been the condition of Christendom itself. Only the leaders, the great outstanding thinkers and believers, may have grasped the inner heart and life of their religion; but they were able all the same to permeate the mass of the worshippers with an immense enthusiasm that stirred them to warlike deeds, which were in the designs of God, though as a mass they only half understood their religion, not having any grasp of what really lay at the heart of it.

The purpose, plan, and goal aimed at in the conquest of Canaan was to hold the land peaceably, to settle down in the farms, in the vineyards, in the sunny homes there, and live a happy, quiet life, secure under the protection of Jehovah. The original plan, as sketched out by Moses, and held before the people by Joshua and other leaders, must, humanly speaking, have secured them that. Had they been thoroughly loyal to Jehovah and to one another, tribe standing fast by tribe; had they carried to its complete issue the task of subjugating Canaan and driving out their enemies, then probably they might have held their own without being exposed to constant attacks. They might have developed material prosperity that would have been a platform for wonderful spiritual growth and progress. But in all these points they failed utterly.

The actual fact was very different from the ideal that had brightened the soul of Moses, and that had shone before the faces of the early leaders of Israel. The Hebrews failed to take thorough possession of the land. Everywhere they left cities in the hands of the old Canaanites.

Right through the middle of the country there ran a wedge of Canaanite Pagan towns. Their selfishness rapidly severed the tribes from one another. Every man looked after himself, every community lived for its own interest. It was excessively difficult at any time to get them to take any action to realise their common brotherhood under the Divine Fatherhood of Jehovah, consequently it was impossible that as a nation they could come to any good. It has always been impossible to get a people, broken into separate communities, not welded into one great nation with a fixed authority and government and a throne held by a powerful monarch, to do anything great or magnificent in the world's history. In a crisis some great leader springs up, works upon their fears, welds them together into a powerful army, strikes a blow that destroys a wanton invasion. Then he plans to go and crush the danger at its seat; but that is impossible. The moment the danger is over, each tribe, regiment, community, sets off home to till their fields and make money again. And so everywhere, throughout the period of the Judges, great victories are achieved, splendid deeds are done; but all the same there is no large conquest of territory still held in alien hands, there is no extension of Israel's sway over the surrounding powers.

How came Israel to miss its lofty destiny and to lapse into this condition of impotence and weakness, this moral and religious paralysis, that we find at the end of the period of the Judges? No doubt it all came from its first blunder, its failure to reach the height of its Divine vocation. But that is not quite a complete account of it. Strangely enough, what of faithfulness to their high calling remained in their hearts worked most disastrously for Israel. Since they would not answer to their ideal wholly, they would have done better, humanly speaking, to cast it wholly away. For by their ineffective attachment to it

the best men, the inspired religious leaders of Israel, were set against those human expedients and measures, which if adopted at the beginning of that epoch, might have given to the Hebrews a powerfully developed national unity, organization, and government. All through that period there was a strong recoil from the idea of breaking down old tribal distinctions, a great repulsion against the idea of a king of a centralized government; and that dislike of a king and a kingdom had its root in their very magnificent religious ideal. They felt that it would be a declension from the grandeur of the Israelites' calling, if between them and their God there came in any human representative or mediator. They were determined to have no visible centre of government among them. Their grand idea was to do their duty to their country and to God at the direct bidding and inspiration of Jehovah Himself. Now that was a magnificent and majestic thought, a thought which we ought to keep before us still, in political government, and, above all else, in our Church life and Church government, as well as in our own personal religion. It was a grand conception that Israel was ever to be so passionately devoted to their God, to be so keenly sensitive to the appointment of His will and wish in every emergency of their national fortunes, that they should need no human rule or government to compel them to do the right thing. It seemed a grand and glorious thing to live every day in immediate intercourse with God, and dependence on God. And if they had been able to live up to that ideal, they would have needed no king and no centralized human government. If every epoch could have produced one great heart and intellect to grasp the necessity of the time, with an arm powerful to lift the sword or the sceptre, to gather by an impulse felt everywhere, and obeyed, the whole power, manhood, soul, and heart of the people around him, then that would have been an infinitely more

glorious life, more strong, more noble, more true to the ideal of God's kingdom on earth, than any earthly kingship could have given them. The Book of Judges shows us the breakdown of that lofty ideal. Israel was not noble enough to realise it; they came far short of their calling and fared worse in regard at least to the earthly things which drew them away from it, than if they had utterly rejected it at the first.

Accordingly, instead of a nation moving like one man at the Divine impulsion towards divinely ordained ends, we find a totally different state of things. In certain great crises, powerful military dictators are raised up, who for a time unite the people together through the prestige and influence gained by their deliverance of the nation, or parts of the nation. They establish a certain not official, but moral authority and rule, and during their lifetime the land has the benefit of increased centralization, entirely in the name of God. At their death, the old selfish dissension reappears and the same process has to be repeated, until, as years go by, the possibility of that grows less and less. And so we come to a point where, if the Hebrews are to be delivered at all, it must be done by individual men whose very personality is lifted above the ordinary natural level. Men utterly consecrated to God and Jehovah in their whole soul and their whole being. Such, for example, was Samson, with all his defects. His final victory was not one of force of arms, it was a religious victory. Jehovah had showed Himself mightier than their gods. Consequently though Israel became more and more utterly impotent to hold its own, though the history of the period of the Judges is the history of a steady, persistent, material and political decline in Israel; yet underneath that external material degradation there is a gradual development in the inner kernel of loftier moral and religious life of which Samson's triumph was a sign. As you reach the

end of that period in the Book of Judges, you find that moral and religious force is coming to the front. The course of things therefore was that there arose great warriors inspired by God, and winning victories for Israel. Then, when the people are no longer fit to help themselves, you have deliverance wrought by single inspired individuals like Samson the Nazarite.

That method in its turn proved insufficient to preserve and recover the old religious and national idea. Then, as if instinctively the heart of the nation, all that is noble, living, all that has faith and fire in it, gathers round the central sanctuary; and so the next figure that appears on the scene, standing out in defence of God, is the high priest Eli at Shiloh, where the Ark of God is. Nazaritism has done its best and has come short. Now, priesthood, the professional embodiment of religion, is to have the opportunity to make its experiment, and see whether, through a priest of God, Israel can reach its proper ideal. History shows us that this also failed. Then appeared another new element and force. The strange, mysterious power of the prophet takes up the work and does mighty achievements, but it too is proved incompetent, not through its fault, but through the necessities of the situation, the actual facts and conditions of the problem. But prophecy, while owning itself defeated, and while laying down its claim to be Israel's deliverer, had yet creative might in it. It evolved from its own bosom that earthly instrument, office and power, that secures for Israel the perpetuity and dignity of its national existence, which though not in itself a fulfilment of Israel's ideal, is the condition of its final fulfilment in quite undreamed-of ways.

I will now sketch the character and career of Eli and Samuel. I first take the story of Eli, to show what Samuel had to work upon in making certain required changes. I have already given the key-ideas of the history, and need



only add that Eli is one of the most unfortunate men in the Bible. I think, if he could bring an action for libel against preachers and commentators, he would get enormous damages. We are all mentally so very indolent that we do not like complicated problems. As a matter of fact most men's characters, and most men's lives, are great mixtures. One of the most fruitful sources of our blunders just lies in the fact that we cannot face the honest truth of God ; that men have got evil in them. There are some men whose will votes for the evil, and they are against God ; but there are others whose heart and will, at least, side with the good and the best, and they are making for God. These men we may find in heaven at last, if we get there ourselves.

Eli was very far from being a bad man. It was his misfortune to reap the harvests of mischief that had been sown through centuries. He came at the end of a chain of impotent endeavours to realise a great good with imperfect instruments and imperfect methods ; and we blame him for all the faults of the centuries. We constantly hear Eli described as a weak, worthless father, full of corruption, allowing his sons to commit all kinds of sacrilege, blasphemy, impurity, and himself a mere worldling with no heart or soul in him. The Bible on the contrary holds Eli up as a great man of God.

He was a priest, and as a priest he had proved himself a true lover of God. As a judge of Israel, certainly, he had done good and noble service to his people, and fought battles for God. What had happened was this. When he got to be an old man, when his bodily strength was going, when his mental vigour and the energy of his will were sapped, then, under the terrible pressure of adverse circumstances, he held the reins of priestly rule and government with a slack hand. He was over ninety years of age when he died. It was in those last years that he

allowed his sons to perpetuate such abuses in their administration. But why do we forget the magnificent life that had gone before? There is many a man who has done a noble work when strong, brave, and clear-minded, to which the generation that sees him die does not do justice. Eli, when told that God's punishment must fall on his house, said to the lad that was to replace him, "It is God's will; let Him do what is right." That man was a good man, but broken for all effective administration. Again, when he heard of his son's death, his face blanched, yet he still sat erect. When he was told that the Ark of God was taken, he fell down insensible and died. That is not a man without heart, not a man without soul. That is a true man of God.

Eli, it is said, drove his sons to wickedness by the weakness of his personal management; his tuition was so bad and defective that they turned out ill. Is that fair treatment of Eli as a nurturer of youth? Who was it that trained the child Samuel? Who was it that taught Samuel his early religion, and those splendid dreams for Israel and of Israel's God? If you give him the discredit of his bad sons, at least honour him with the credit of bringing up the child Samuel. Besides, there were plenty of people to corrupt Eli's sons. Nor should it be forgotten that Samuel, whom Eli taught, became the strong, powerful Samuel who crushed abuses and corruptions, drove out idolaters, and won battles for Israel.

It is not, however, my purpose to be wholly laudatory of Eli, for there was a dreadful flaw in his character; this, viz., that as he grew older, he grew far too amiable. It is not a common fault, but all the same it is a worse fault than too great firmness in a man that holds the reins of government. We want our rulers to stand firm and strong. You cannot manage to rule the world by good nature: there must be justice and retribution as well as pity,

affection and love. Through his dislike to do painful things, through that amiable indolence that made him hope that all things might right themselves, he got himself entangled in the evil of other men's lives. The result was that the people were demoralized more and more. All zeal for God, all pride in their own national existence, were destroyed in them, so that, when they had to confront the Philistines in battle, they had no manhood left. The Philistines, after an immense massacre, captured the Ark of God, and immediately after that they pressed forward, took Shiloh, and utterly destroyed and left in ruin the Temple of God there. And so the end of Eli's government as high priest of Israel was the utter destruction and annihilation of anything that approached centralization, and of everything that gave unity and focus to the national and religious life and faith. In short, it was the utter downfall and destruction of that great experiment, the rule by Judges.

The real crisis had been reached: there was no sanctuary; the Ark was gone; Israel had lost its God, lost its own national existence. It was at this stage of moral and religious paralysis, when all existing machinery had broken down, that Samuel came upon the scene. As to Samuel's childhood, mark how the historians depict the combination in him of all that was hopeful and loving that came out of that great epoch. Though there had been in the mass declension, nevertheless, there was an inner kernel of the people who, impressed by the spectacle of failure and decay, were driven nearer to God, and were discovering that only in living and direct contact with God was there any hope for Israel. Of these Samuel from his youth was the representative. First of all, Samuel in his birth was a Nazarite, and so one that will be recognised as a brother and rightly claimed as a brother by those rigid ascetics who were pledged

against idolatrous indulgence within God's land. Then Samuel is taken early to the sanctuary, he is received into the priesthood, though not born to that office; especially received, out of regard for the vow of his mother. He performs, at all events, certain priestly functions. He, after the great disaster, remains hand and glove with the priesthood: so that he is once again allied to another powerful class and factor in the national and social life. But the supreme thing about Samuel is that he stands out transcendentally as a prophet of God. As such he re-created the national life and constitution. Samuel stands out as a prophet of the very first rank: a man possessing a knowledge of God at first hand, knowledge of a supernatural character, and therefore he appears vested with new and creative powers. There is a great deal in the history to justify that conception of Samuel: a great deal to induce us to say that the new period of national progress and success initiated by Samuel has its root in a sudden outburst of original prophetic power and capacity among the Hebrews. Samuel was a man taken into the secret council of Jehovah, and he found the nation broken to pieces, utterly shattered, trampled beneath the feet of the Philistines; the nation's God degraded, the sanctuary gone, all national organization, rule, and authority utterly demolished. His commission was to restore, but he could only begin slowly. His great power lay in his character as God's prophet. Probably for twenty years he wielded that power only. Not as a military dictator, not as a great deliverer, not as a priest, nor even as a Nazarite did he work, but as a man who knew the will of God, as a man in whom God's spirit dwelt. He went about among the people, everywhere fanning the flame of old memories of Israel's greatness, everywhere making men, in spite of all the external shipwreck and ruin, feel a strange inner certainty that God had not forsaken them, but that He had

great things in store for them, and that the way to reach God's heart was to come back to God Himself.

Everywhere Samuel, Nazarite and prophet, led a crusade against heathen worship, against sensual practices, against idolatry: everywhere he fanned a great fire of absolute religious enthusiasm in the people. Then, at last, a day came when his hold of the nation was strong enough to justify the experiment, and he raised the standard of revolt against the Philistines. The Philistines, in the midst of a providential storm, are thrown into confusion, and he wins an easy victory. It was God's deed: it for ever confirmed Samuel's claim to be God's prophet; it renewed, by a visible token, Israel's confidence in God's presence among them. A new era in national growth begins.

I think the likeliest reading of the later history is this. When the first enthusiasm had died out the measure of prosperity regained produced the old engrossment in material pursuits, and the mind of the people began once more to sink into apathy and weakness. Bit by bit the Philistines recovered their hold upon the people. Precisely because Samuel had stirred the life in the core of the national existence, precisely because he had shown them the possibility of a great career, precisely because inside that mass of apathetic, worldly-minded men he had established great and powerful classes of men devoted to religion, to patriotism, to God,—the Nazarites and the schools of the prophets; men of ecstatic fervour, an inspired brotherhood, with a wild zeal like that which animated the monks of the early Christian ages: precisely because he had formed within the nation that inner core of vitality, of religion, of patriotism, the nation did not succumb as soon as this new danger made itself thoroughly felt. On the contrary the leaders, the elders, the chiefs of all the towns and the districts consulted together. The firm conviction had grown up within them that, if they were to hold their

own, then they must have a more closely-knit national organization, a more intense centralization of public spirit and of public government: in short, they must cease to be tribes, cease to be small communes united together only in the presence of a common enemy for a common advantage; they must become a military nation, and for that they must have an elective hereditary monarchy. And so they come to Samuel. "The whole system has been found wanting," they said; "a king ruling in the name of Jehovah we must have, if we are to hold our own against the neighbouring nations." But Samuel disapproved. First of all, that demand was a moral and religious declension. It was a confession, on the Israelite's part, that they could not realise the full grandeur of their destiny. It meant a deliberate acceptance of the second best, instead of the very best. The details of what happened is worked out fully in the narrative of the eighth chapter.

Moreover there were a great many drawbacks, which I will merely catalogue, to be set against the advantages. The advantages were that undoubtedly Israel would gain in mass and force to withstand attack, that it would be able to develop the internal resources of its own country by this step. United under a king, Israel would moreover be able to seize territory that hitherto had not been conquered by other communities and tribes; it would have an intenser sense of its own national spirit; it would form a wider idea of its own place in the world. Undoubtedly Israel would gain in many ways. But, on the other hand, Israel would lose. Instead of the old independence, the rank and file of the citizens would be reduced to comparative insignificance. That is the great evil always of a strong centralized government, as distinguished from decentralization; and undoubtedly the aim of all social existence should always be to preserve the advantages of

a powerful central government, but at the cost of as little sacrifice as possible of local home rule. That is a problem which our own country still has to work out. With a king, court and metropolis, the equilibrium of the land would be disturbed. A king must make his state magnificent, and taxes must be imposed on farmers and merchants everywhere to support that royal dignity. A standing army, too, must be maintained, and the cost of that, too, would fall on the land. The natural effect of having a king would be to develop large towns; not merely the metropolis, but towns everywhere; also to establish a class of professional governors, of high-born military leaders, of local governors, of tax-collectors. Invariably it has been seen that a people broken up into tribes maintains a considerable uniformity in the distribution of wealth; and that, wherever empires or kingdoms are formed, and a central government is established, you have at once a large development of all activities, material, industrial, and physical; but at the same time you have a rapid increase of wealth in a few hands and of impoverishment in the hands of the mass of the people.

Now do justice to the grandeur of Samuel. Mark what the request for a king meant! It was a public declaration that Samuel had failed, and no great man likes to hear that verdict pronounced upon him by his countrymen, the men he has worked with and fought for, before he lies down and dies. It was heart-breaking to Samuel, and yet I think that, with his statesmanlike eyes and intellect, he saw the necessity of it. He had tried so bravely, so magnanimously; and the people now came to him in his old age and told him that he had failed utterly. They asked him, as it were, to dethrone himself, to set himself aside, and to give them something new, and something different.

I think that one of the most magnanimous, and majestic,

and heroic deeds ever done in our world's story was done by Samuel, when, convinced that it was the will of God, he set himself to do what no other man could do: to forsake all his past, to abandon all the lines of action on which he had worked through the best years of his life, and to put into other men's hands fresh possibilities. That meant the condemnation of all his efforts. Think what it was for this great statesman to have seen what was the ideal of his country's greatness, moral and material, to have struggled for a life-time to give effect to that ideal, to have done a good deal to have established it, and then to have the grandeur, the honesty, the detachment from self and pride, to come forward publicly and confess that his whole policy had been a failure; not because it was wrong, but because, through ancient evils making the realisation of his high ideal impossible, the only thing that could be done was to accept something inferior. Quite willingly, cordially, and heartily, without himself becoming the leader of the new movement and unsaying all his past, he was ready to do what in him lay, loyally, with God's might and strength, to make the new departure a great success.

I call that conduct magnificent. But Samuel had been providentially prepared by God to make that dangerous transition. Think what it meant; if Samuel had stubbornly said, "I cannot do it," it could not have been done. But though grieved in his soul, and recognising that there was a moral declension in this new departure, foreseeing too that it would be but a partial success, he yet saw it was the one thing to do, and generously, nobly, used that marvellous, unprecedented position of his, as Nazarite, priest, prophet, judge of Israel, to abdicate his own position, to give up the struggle of his whole life, and to give birth to a wonderful new epoch in which he would have little or no part, but to which he looked for the realisation



of what he could not himself do ; and this for God's glory and for Israel's welfare.

I ask those who know Hebrew history to recall the wonderful part the kingship played in Israel's history : Saul, David, Solomon ; Solomon with his immense wealth, prestige, wisdom, and with a happy nation around him. Look at the period of the Judges, with its poverty, its sordidness, its helplessness, its impotence. Samuel was the creator of Israel's monarchical glory. Several kings, one after another proved failures ; but all the same through those centuries of monarchical government, the prophets gained time to rise from the material into the spiritual, the true idea of God's kingdom on earth. And that was not all. This second best, the demand for which had grieved Samuel, became the symbol and promise of that divine Kingship which was to meet the desire of all the nations. Israel learned that God's kingdom was one which never could be won by sword nor built up by legislation ; that it was a spiritual kingdom, which must be in every man's heart and soul. They learned too that the true king must be the Son of God, with the whole heart of God in Him ; not a warrior, not a priest, not a prophet, not a hero-judge, but righteous, pure, sinless, doing the will of God perfectly, because God is in Him, as God was in Jesus Christ our Lord.

W. G. ELMSLIE.