

# THE EXPOSITOR.

I. SAMUEL

AND THE SCHOOLS OF THE PROPHETS.

WITHIN the last few years there has been among students of the Bible a growing appreciation of the greatness of Samuel's character and of the unique position which he holds in the history of God's chosen people. In old time readers were content to see in him chiefly an example of early piety. This he is to us still; but the more exact and minute study of the Scriptures, inaugurated in Germany early in the present century, leaves the actors in the sacred drama no longer enveloped in the dim halo of general reverence with which our piety enshrouds them. One by one they step forth into clearer light, and we learn to recognize their personal characteristics, and to estimate the exact part which they played in the development of Israel's history, and the influence, for good or for evil, which they exerted upon the fortunes of their country. The grandeur of the character of Moses had rendered it impossible to forget that he was a hero and a statesman, a poet and a historian, as well as a legislator and a prophet; but the more brief records of Samuel's history, and the humility with which his personal services are kept in

the background, had prevented men from appreciating the fact that he was the second founder of Israel's greatness. Nor was it merely the political institutions of his country which he placed upon a sounder and more lasting basis; he gave it also intellectual life. The schools of the prophets rapidly raised Israel to a height of culture, regarded by neighbouring nations with such wonder, that the name and court of Solomon are to this day looked upon in the East as the symbols of more than human knowledge. And they wrought also for higher ends. The religious institutions of Moses had never possessed more than a superficial hold of the people till Samuel's time. It was the men trained in Samuel's schools who completed the work which Moses had begun, and gave life and energy to the principles of the Theocracy and to the legislative enactments in which those principles were embodied.

I purpose, therefore, before giving a minute description of this portion of Samuel's work, to cast a general glance at the state of things which existed politically, socially, and morally at the time when God raised him up for the renovation of Israel. His youth apparently was spent in a period of comparative prosperity for his country. At the commencement of the Book of Samuel we find the supreme power no longer held by one of those impromptu warriors, raised up from time to time by the Divine Providence, to maintain Israel's independence, and subsequently called to the helm of the State by the popular voice. Though men like Gideon may have possessed political aptitudes, as a rule the Judges were soldiers chiefly, fit to act in times of emergency;

but when the danger had passed away they retained probably but little authority except in their own district; and the tribes were governed by their local chieftains and the heads of the great houses. Samson, the last of these judges, was of all the least fitted by nature for the cares of government. His life was a series of acts of personal and individual prowess, by which he warded off for a time the growing danger of his country, then threatened with utter subjugation by the Philistines; but even to resist their encroachments we never find him uniting the people for a collective effort, nor shewing any of that constructive power in which lies the secret of a statesman's lasting success.

Yet he did accomplish much. His strength and energy, his ready wit, his joyous spirits in the presence of terrific dangers, his hardihood and self-confidence, all combined to make him a popular hero and to invest the struggle with the Philistines with a poetic interest. As men well understand now, the imagination plays a far vaster part in the formation of a nation, in its elevation to greatness, and in the maintenance by it of its rights and liberties, than was supposed in the prosaic commencement of this century, before we had seen how much a nation can and will do for an idea. And to this ennobling part of man's nature the feats of Samson appealed, and the contest with the Philistines—then growing daily in intensity, and which, till the times of David was a struggle not for supremacy merely, but for national existence—was carried on with higher courage and stronger hope because associated with many a tale of the merry-hearted and thoughtless Nazarite, whose

lot it was ever to be taken unawares, but always, with lightsome spirit and hardy vigour, to hurl back destruction on his foe, till at last he broke his vow and his strength departed from him.

He passes away, and we have a long break in Israel's history. When the narrative begins again we find ourselves in quite a different state of things. The office of judge is now united with that of high priest; but Eli, the high priest, is of the family of Ithamar, and though his grandson, Ahiah, and his great-grandson, Abiathar, inherited the priestly office, it quickly reverted, in the person of Zadok, to the line of Eleazar; and so contemptuously was the line of Ithamar regarded by the Jews that no genealogy of its chiefs is to be found in the Books of Chronicles. In spite of their services in David's days, and of their fearful sufferings in his cause at Nob, they seem to be treated like a proscribed race. What are we, then, to imagine? Was Eli a usurper, who had deposed the elder line from the priesthood? We think not. There is not a word in the denunciation of ruin upon Eli's house (1 Sam. iii. 11-14) which suggests any other reason for its fall than the iniquity of Eli's sons. His own character is always represented to us as that of a good and holy man.

Still it is not probable that he inherited the priesthood, and the judgeship was of the nature of an elective office, to which some hero was called by the national voice. He could have attained to his high rank only by his own personal merits; and just as afterwards the priestly office seems to have been combined by Samuel, though only a Levite, with

that of judge, so, probably, when Eli had become judge the high priesthood also came to him, upon some vacancy, as part of his general supremacy. As a descendant of Aaron he had the necessary qualification of priestly birth, and his foremost place in the national esteem made it impossible for any member of the elder line to compete with him. But the state of things disclosed in the narrative makes us feel sure that Eli won his power by political qualities. When the Book of Samuel opens, everything is quiet and peaceful. The people are reposing under the shelter of a vigorous ruler; and if danger is looming in the remote distance, it is because power and license have corrupted his sons. At Shiloh, in the leading tribe of Ephraim, where the Tabernacle had been set up by Joshua, Eli had evidently been long dwelling in safety, and the people came there from time to time in full security, both to take part in the holy rites of religion and to bring their suits before him as their civil ruler.

But as he advanced in years his power fell into unworthy hands. Not only did his sons not inherit his high mental qualities, but they were bad and unholy men. And far more depended then upon the personal qualities of the ruler than is the case now. There was none then of that apparatus of government which now will go on mechanically for a long time; all depended upon the force of will and character possessed by the ruler. Eli, it seems, had been careless in the training of his sons. Apparently he had married late in life; for his eldest grandchild Ahiah was but two or three years old when Eli died, at the age of ninety-eight. And

occupied with the cares of government, and with all an old man's fondness for the children of his old age, he restrained them not, but let them run wild in youthful riot and excess. And so, when they had grown to man's estate, and the strong arm of the father had become weak with increasing years, all things changed for the worse. Idolatry raised its head again, and with it discontent and disaffection spread throughout the land. The Philistines, ever on the watch, saw their opportunity, and gathered themselves together to take advantage of Israel's decay; and Eli's long reign ended in bitter disaster.

Yet even here we see proofs of his previous greatness. He had so welded the nation together that it gathers as a whole to repel the Philistine attack. It is no question of desultory efforts, such as Samson had made, but an army in regular order goes forth to the battle. It is defeated, and about four thousand men are slain (1 Sam. iv. 2). But even then we find nothing of that helpless feeling which had made the men of Judah reproach Samson for prolonging the struggle with the foe. They had said to him, "Knowest thou not that the Philistines are rulers over us?" (Judges xv. 11). Now the feeling is one of surprise at their defeat. It was something new, and they ask: "Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us to-day before the Philistines?" (1 Sam. iv. 3.) There must have been many a successful campaign in Eli's earlier days before he could have changed the temper of the people so thoroughly.

But now Israel fell. Dragging the Ark with them to the war, to raise their flagging spirits in the coming struggle, they contended with the Philistines afresh.

The combat was long and fierce; and we read that the Philistines fought, not as men used to victory, but as those who felt that their lot might be bondage to Israel, and Israel fought as men with memories full of deeds of ancient valour. But finally the Philistines prevailed. There fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen, the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli slain.

At this time Samuel was about twenty years of age, and probably had not gone in person to the war, but remained at Shiloh, as a minister of the sanctuary. And when the news of the national disaster reached him there, apparently it was owing to his zeal and diligence that the Tabernacle, with the sacred furniture and records, were all preserved. How he removed them from Shiloh we do not know; but after so severe a battle, the enemy would move but slowly. Very possibly it was in a subsequent campaign that Shiloh was utterly destroyed, with such barbarous thoroughness that it never again became one of the religious sanctuaries of the nation, but was regarded with a shudder of horror by the people for successive generations (Jer. xxvi. 9,) and its name never heard without pain.

In this terrible crisis of the nation Samuel became its deliverer. The death of Eli's sons had left no one round whom the people could gather, and for a long time the Philistines pushed their advantage to the utmost. Parts of the country they entirely subdued (1 Sam. vii. 14); the rest they compelled to pay tribute. At the beginning of Saul's reign we read that the disarmament of Israel had been so complete that they had not even been permitted

to retain such tools as were used in the armourer's trade (Chap. xiii. 19); swords were rarities found only in the hands of princes like Saul and Jonathan (*ib.* 22); and the Philistines had even garrisons in such positions as left the entire country at their mercy (Chap. xiv. 1).

Now Samuel does not appear to have been a great warrior. His arms were not those of physical force, but of justice and piety. And as the overthrow of Eli's house and the disastrous issue of his reign had been caused by the spread of that moral corruption of which his sons had set the example, so it was by working a reformation among the people that Samuel raised the nation again to comparative independence. But it was a slow process. For twenty years the people groaned beneath the yoke of Philistine oppression; gradually, nevertheless, the teaching and example of Samuel wrought upon their consciences, and at length the time had come when they on their part were ready to abjure their idols, and return by an act of national repentance to Jehovah; and Samuel was ready on his part to face the political consequences of what the Philistines would regard as an act of rebellion.

At Mizpah, in the tribe of Benjamin, not far from Jerusalem, the national convocation was held, and after twenty years of death Israel revived again. It was a sad and tearful meeting, and as Samuel pleaded with the people, and shewed them that their misery was the result of their sins, they determined with unanimous consent to put away their idols and to cleave wholly to the Lord. And as they fasted and poured out water upon the ground, the



mutterings of distant warfare began to be heard. The Philistines were gathering their hosts to punish their refractory subjects; and Israel, unarmed, broken in spirit by long bondage, and unused to war, trembled at the sound. But they remained steadfast to abide the issue. Gradually, by slow degrees, Samuel had won their confidence; but it was his piety and religious character which had made them trust him. They urge him to pray for them incessantly, and so, spending their days in the same spirit as that in which the Scots prepared for Bannockburn, they awaited in fear the issue. We are not to suppose that Samuel had neglected his duties as a general. Doubtless he had posted the Israelites in a strong position, had armed and drilled them as well as he could, and prepared them for the attack. Nor were the Philistines neglectful on their side. When we read that their "lords went up against Israel" (1 Sam. vii. 7), we are to understand by it that the whole confederacy, united in common council, had marshalled their forces to crush, by a combined effort, the sturdy peasants who dared to strike again for freedom. And so, it may be, some weeks were spent in preparing for the fight; and well did Samuel know how to employ them. At last the Philistine host appears in sight. Samuel, at once the priest and the general of the revolters, offers a lamb as a whole burnt offering, and pours forth earnest prayers to God. As the flames mount heavenward the Philistines rush forward to the attack. But a tempest gathers, and a crash of mighty thunderings breaks forth over their heads. Panic-stricken they hesitate: it seems as if the voice of God forbade their advance.

To Israel the thunder was the symbol of Jehovah's presence, the token that Samuel's prayers were heard; and as he gives the signal for the onset, they dash forward. Armed only with clubs and stones and the implements of agriculture, their exulting spirits gave them an easy victory over the foe, and Israel recognized in Samuel the hero whose prayers had given them the victory. By general acclaim Samuel became Israel's judge, and the land had rest all his days.

Of the way in which he judged Israel we have but one general record, which shews, however, the conscientious manner in which he discharged his civil duties. Once in each year he went on circuit, not indeed through a large extent of country, but through the chief cities of Benjamin (1 Sam. vii. 16). The other tribes probably were governed by their local chiefs, but with a general acknowledgment of Samuel's supremacy; for when, in Chap. viii., after the lapse of a lengthened period, the history is resumed, we find the elders of all Israel assembled unto him, urging him to choose one who should reign over the whole nation and unite its disjointed energies into a firm and compact mass.

The reason given was the degeneracy of Samuel's sons. If not licentious, like the sons of Eli, they were corrupt and avaricious, and perverted judgment for bribes. Now, probably, Samuel had noticed this long before. Naturally he had looked to his sons to aid him in his duties, and had been disappointed. Probably, also, he had felt the responsibilities of his office weigh heavily upon him, and, with that conscientiousness which had made him go in person

from place to place to determine the lawsuits of the people, he looked round for aid from others. But where was he to find such aid? Up to this time the safety and progress of Israel had depended upon irregular and spasmodic efforts; but ever when needed most the champion had arisen whom the exigencies of the time required. But at the death of each of these brave soldiers all lapsed back into its old chaotic state. With Samuel this anarchy and confusion ended; and one of his noblest and most important efforts for the public good was the institution of the schools of the prophets. With them a new era dawned upon Israel, and never again did the people fall back into the state of lawless turbulence which had prevailed during the centuries which followed immediately upon their settlement in the land of Canaan.

In my next paper I propose to gather together the scattered notices of these schools which are to be found in the Scriptures, in the hope of presenting such a complete view of them as may enable the reader to form an accurate idea of their general nature and of the great influence which they exerted upon the national progress. The notices are indeed brief, and leave much to be desired, but when combined together will be found far more numerous than a casual reader might suppose, and will suffice to give us a competent idea of the very important place which they held in Israel's internal history and in the gradual bestowal of that revealed truth which it was Israel's high office first to attain to itself and then to bestow upon the Gentile world.