1 Samuel 1-16 (Bible Study Notes, 1984)

These stories about Samuel and Saul together form a key episode in Israel’s history. Old Testament books such as Judges, Samuel, and Kings are not self-contained wholes but successive major chapters of a much longer story. 1 Samuel begins where Judges leaves off. Israel is now a national com­munity, but it is still scattered (as twelve clans) over a wide area. There is no formal state to unite it: “everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). This led to moral and religious problems, of which we shall see examples in 1 Samuel. It was also sufficient reason (many people thought) for the introduction of some­thing Israel had not yet had, a monarchy. Yet one thing did hold Israel together: its commitment to its God Yahweh (“the Lord” in most English translations). Israel worships him at shrines such as Shiloh, which is the setting for the first scene.

# 1 Samuel 1—3

## 1 Samuel 1:1-28 The pain of childlessness

1 Samuel is mainly the history of a nation, but it opens with a scene from family life. The scene is in one sense far removed from anything modern Western readers encounter. Apparently Elkanah undertook a second marriage because the first was childless. Otherwise his family line could have died out and its land would have been lost. Yet Hannah’s story illustrates the troubles polygamy is almost bound to bring.

In the West, we treat infertility as mainly a physical problem. Hannah (without medical resources to call on) sees it as a religious issue. One advantage of this is that, if God is to blame for her infertility, she can at least call on him to do something about it. But the “natural” and the “religious” accounts are not incompatible: Hannah’s son is eventually born as a result of Elkanah and Hannah’s lovemaking and as a result of Yahweh’s “remembering” (v. 19).

Part of the point of these opening chapters is to in­dicate how Samuel came to belong to God in a special way, and how he came to be associated with Shiloh in particular. The explanation is offered partly by means of a punning re-use of a Hebrew word. The word means “to ask”; Eli uses it in this sense in verse 17, while Hannah uses it similarly in verses 20 and 28. But another form of it means “lend” or “dedicate,” and Hannah also uses it in this sense in verse 28. Samuel belongs to Hannah because of Yahweh’s loving response to her prayer, but he also belongs to Yahweh because of Hannah’s loving response to his mercy. Somehow she found as great joy in giving him back to Yahweh as she had found in receiving him from him.

Hannah utters her prayer and receives her answer at a time when she is worshipping with others. References to worship in the Old Testament focus more on annual pilgrimage festivals than on weekly attendance at a local meeting place for an hour or so. The ceremonial feast was an occasion of great joy; but for Hannah it was regularly one of pain, because it brought home the contrast between her aloneness and Peninnah’s large family.

The spirituality of the individual, as well as that of the community, focused on these festivals. If the sanctuary was the place where Yahweh could most certainly be met, then this was the place par excellence to bring one’s personal needs to him.

Eli sat at the entrance of the sanctuary ready to offer counsel to suppliants, attempting to judge whether rebuke or reassurance was Yahweh’s response to them. It is eventually the latter which Hannah receives and which lightens her heart. It constitutes God’s answer. The actual event (vv. 19-20) is merely the proof that the answer was real.

## 1 Samuel 2:1-10 Hannah’s Song

At some points, Hannah’s song of praise is a natural expression of her personal experience of God’s mercy (see v. 5). For the most part, however, it looks more like a song of victory after battle. There might be several (complementary) explanations for this. Did anyone know what Hannah had actually said in praise after her son’s birth? Israel’s story-tellers and historians brought together facts and imagination when they related the story of Samuel’s origins. Where they could not tell us what was actually said, they tell us the kind of thing that would appropriately be said on such an occasion. It is the way Samuel’s life turns out that tells them what would be the appropriate response of praise to his birth. Samuel will turn out to be a priest, a prophet, a judge, and a king-maker, a mighty figure in Israel’s history. Great wonders are presaged by his birth. By means of Hannah’s song, then, narrator and reader of the story can begin even now to praise God for what he is going to do through him.

The song’s reference is not even confined to what Samuel means for Hannah and will mean for Israel. It

speaks of life and death, poverty and riches, putting down and raising up, protection and punishment, and thus sets the birth of Samuel on an even broader canvas. It is a sign of the ultimate achievement of God’s purpose in the world. It is no coincidence that the Song of Mary and the Song of Zechariah (Luke 1) speak in similar terms on the eve of the birth of Jesus. He is the sign of God’s purpose being achieved in the world, but Hannah’s experience also points towards it.

## 1 Samuel 2:11-36 A contrast

The story of the growth of Samuel towards the priesthood (2:11, 18-21, 26; 3:1) is interwoven with the story of the degeneration of Eli’s sons in the priesthood (2:12-17, 22-25, 27-36), each of them highlighting the other. The present failures and the coming fate of Eli’s sons are thus characterized in three grim paragraphs.

The first shows their contempt for the offerings that people brought to Yahweh. As priests they had a right to certain portions of such offerings; these formed part of their livelihood. Israel’s religious laws regu­lated which parts of offerings were to be eaten by the worshippers themselves in the course of their festive rejoicing in fellowship before God, which parts were to be surrendered wholly to God by being burnt, and which were to be given to the ministers of the sanctuary. Eli’s sons ignored such considerations and took whatever meat they fancied.

The second paragraph (2:22-25) tells of sexual irregularities at the sanctuary. It is easy for things to go wrong sexually when men and women are involved in ministry together. Sexual or romantic involvement may even seem a gift from God. Eli makes it clear that behavior that people thought brought them nearer to God actually took them further from him.

The third paragraph (2:27-36) declares judgment on Eli’s family. The warnings are allusive; events to follow will clarify their meaning. Eli’s sons will die in battle, and Eli himself will die soon after (4:11, 18). Only one of his descendants will survive a subsequent massacre (22:11-23). Even he will be removed from the priesthood later for seeking to frustrate David’s purpose regarding who should succeed to the throne (1 Kings 1:5-8; 2:26-27, referring back to God’s word to Eli; also 2 Kings 23:8-9).

Ultimately Zadok’s line will succeed to this priest­hood; but in the meantime Samuel is to take the place of Eli and his sons. The one who grows in stature and in favor with God and with people (2:26) will be able to be the faithful priest who acts in accordance with Yahweh’s heart and mind (2:35).

Israel’s history is not the outworking of chance, but of Yahweh’s purpose. In some ways, the Old Testament’s belief that God’s sovereignty is at work in all the events of history is difficult to live with. Verse 25, for instance, declares that Eli’s sons failed to take any notice of their father because it was Yahweh’s will to kill them. It does not mean that God took away their freewill, so that they could not respond in the way that they might have wished. Old Testament stories assume that human beings make real decisions and act as they themselves wish - that is, they have freewill, and they are respon­sible for their actions. Yet the stories also believe that part of God’s being God is that what happens in his world (especially in the life of his people) is under his control and reflects his purpose. It is his will that is put into effect through these real human decisions. Eli’s sons decide for themselves not to repent, and bring nearer that judgment which eventually falls on them; but if God is God, in some sense his will must be fulfilled even by the stubbornness which leads to judgment.

## 1 Samuel 3:1-21

The enchanting story of Samuel’s call belongs closely with the previous two chapters, bringing to a close and to a climax the story of how Samuel came to be Israel’s priestly-prophetic leader. Eli is old; his eyesight is going. He has failed in his upbringing of his sons and his bankrupt priesthood is under judgment. Indeed, the entire religious institution at Shiloh seems to be bankrupt. Festivals are celebrated there, offerings are made, prayers are prayed, but God no longer speaks. Indeed, his representative can no longer perceive the voice of God; comically, Yahweh has to announce his presence three times before Eli recognizes him.

Yet there is once more a pathos about the description of Eli. When the penny drops, he knows how to advise Samuel on the way one opens oneself to the voice of God; when God’s word is addressed to him personally, he insists on hearing it; when it is a word of judgment, he accepts it with a magnificent reverent submission that might almost have averted it.

Despite what chapter 2 has told us about Samuel, he does not yet ‘know Yahweh’ (v. 7); he has not even had the chance to hear him speaking to others (v. 1). Apparently the experience now, just before dawn (v. 3), is so real that he could think the voice was another human being’s. In fact, it is God’s voice, establishing Samuel as a prophetic mediator of God’s word to his people. It brings a word of confrontation, disturbing the status quo of the religious institution and announcing something shocking and new.

## Reflections on 1 Samuel 1—3

1. In its portrayal of hurt, family tension and the pain of childlessness, Hannah’s story corresponds with one only too familiar in our world. How Hannah handles these experiences might be suggestive for the way we cope with the pains that come to us. Indeed, the story’s portrayal of a pattern of corporate worship and personal prayer in that context might have implications for our own regular patterns of spirituality as individuals and as churches.

Yet the more important feature of Hannah’s story is the vision it offers us of God himself, involved in his people’s everyday life and pains. Further, when we ourselves experience God acting in mercy to reverse expectations and give something we would never have dared expect, we too are invited to perceive such ex­periences as signs of his fulfilling his ultimate purpose, as Hannah’s psalm does.

1. Hannah’s story may also illumine issues that the feminist movement has raised for us. Traditional stereotypes shape much of Hannah’s life and give it its significance. She is presented to us as a man’s wife, under his lordship, an appendage to him; one who has to share even that “status” with another and bear the hurt that follows from this; one whose significance or worth is determined first by not having and then by having children (rather, sons).

The story works within these stereotypes, yet also works against them - like the story of Ruth, as well as those of Elizabeth and Mary. Hannah is a woman open with her emotions, direct in her words, forthright with her husband, bold in her promises, courageous in her acceptance of Yahweh’s promise, vindicated in her trust in him. In this way she was able to find a form of freedom within stereotypes that were hallowed by nothing but tradition, but which she could not demolish.

1. Jesus speaks enigmatically about using parables so that people may *not* understand and repent; he implies a similar set of convictions about the relationship between human stubbornness, divine warnings, and divine judgment to the ones that underlie the story of Eli’s sons.

They are rather overwhelming convictions, but they are also comforting ones. We ourselves are likely to experience puzzling, troubling events within the context of our own lives, our family’s, our nation’s, or our church’s. 1 Samuel invites us not necessarily to view these as outside the control of God. They may be part of his purpose, though we may not yet see how they can be. Again, sometimes the history of our nation or our church (or our history as individuals or as a family) over a long period may seem one characterized by disorder, scandal, or disobedience to God’s word. Yet that does not necessarily take it outside the realm of God’s concern and activity; via repentance (or via judgment) it may take its place once more in the con­text of his positive and gracious purpose.

1. The story of Samuel’s call, too, offers us both challenge and hope regarding the future of the church. It may often seem that life and vision have gone from it and that God no longer speaks to it. At such times, it may be tempting either to pretend that this is not so, or to abandon hope that things could ever be otherwise. But such situations are not final. They can be acknowledged, and we can plead with God to speak to his church once more. We may even find, as we do so, that God speaks to us and through us as he did with Samuel.

# 1 Samuel 4—7

## 1 Samuel 4:1-11

With chapter 4 we encounter a transition from one kind of story to another. For a while Samuel disappears, as does the associated portrait of the sins of Eli and his sons. 1 Samuel 4:1—7:1 is the story of the ark of the Lord. With 2 Samuel 6, it tells the important story of how the ark came to reach the shrine David established at Jerusalem.

The ark played an important role in Israel’s religion from the time of Moses to the exile. The Hebrew word simply means box”; the ark was fundamentally a recep­tacle for the stones inscribed with the ten commandments. It symbolized Yahweh’s revelation of his will to Israel, and Israel’s commitment to obey him.

With the transition to the ark narrative, however, we also move from a religious crisis to a political one. The Philistines entered Palestine (this name for the country derives from their name) from the south-west and west, ultimately from across the Mediterranean, at about the same time as the Israelites entered from the steppe land to the south-east and east. The Philistine area and the Israelite area met where plains and vales meet mountains and hills. Thus the present battle took place north-east of modern Tel Aviv, where the coastal plain gives way to the mountains of Samaria in which Shiloh itself stands, and at a key town on the main north-south road from Mesopotamia to Egypt.

The irony of the story of Israel’s defeat is clear. Israel’s leaders are right to assume that it is Yahweh who has allowed Israel to be defeated in the preliminary battle and right to ask why, but they do not ask questions seriously enough. They are right to assume that they could be given victory by ‘Yahweh of hosts’ -the word for ‘hosts’ is an ordinary word for ‘armies’, and the title suggests the power of God to give victory -and they are right to take the ark as a symbol of God’s presence, an encouragement to Israel and a cause for fear to the Philistines. But they find that bringing up the symbol does not help them, and that fear can galvanize the Philistines even more than encouragement can galvanize the Israelites.

## 1 Samuel 4:12-22 The Glory and the Symbol

A note of pathos now replaces the note of irony. We know as Eli does not the nature of the news that is coming to him, but we have to watch in suspense as the warrior runs 25 miles to Shiloh like the famous runner from Marathon, to overhear the cry of anguish from the people whom the news reaches first, to listen to the interchanged introductions between the warrior and Eli, to feel the hammer blows fall one by one on the shoulders of the blind old priest. For both Eli and his daughter-in-law, the terrible climax was not in the death of son and husband, but in the fate of the ark. Its capture by the Philistines cancels out joy in the birth of a son, and the spiritual calamity denoted by its loss is perpetuated in the very name given to this child *(kabod* means “glory”; “Ikabod” in some way denotes that the glory has gone). In a sense the loss of the ark was only an outward indication that the glory had left Israel. The glory itself had left long before.

## 1 Samuel 5

The story of the ark’s adventures among the Philistines is told with humor: Dagon unable to resist bowing humbly before the ark, his devotees unable to keep him in his “rightful” place, unwittingly “commemorating” his defeat by a particular aspect of their ritual, embar­rassingly afflicted with boils, and anxiously shunting the ark from one Philistine town to another.

It may be that the humor in these stories is a sign that the storyteller and hearers understood them as legend rather than history: humor is a mark of many of the more clearly fictional stories in scripture, such Jesus’ parables or the story of Jonah. On the other hand, we must be wary of imposing on the Bible ideas of what must or must not be historical.

Either way, beneath the humor lies a deep serious­ness. The capture of the ark would seem to imply that in a decisive test Yahweh had been defeated by Dagon. This chapter complements the previous one, then, by reasserting that actually Yahweh is the only God worth bowing down to: even Dagon acknowledges that fact. Yahweh’s double triumph over Dagon, who loses head and hands (capacity to see, hear, and act), more than counter­balances the Philistines’ double victory over Israel.

The story of plague, scourge, and panic, of the hand of Yahweh being lifted to demonstrate his superiority over other so-called gods and their worshippers, reminds us of the exodus story, to which the Philistines have already referred (4:8). This itself underlines the serious­ness of Israel’s situation at the hand of the Philistines. The Israelites are slaves to the Philistines (4:9) as once they had been slaves to the Egyptians. But Yahweh is once more proving himself Lord. It is not the Israelites’ cry which reaches towards heaven (as in Exodus 2:23), but that of the Philistines (5:12).

## 1 Samuel 6:1-18 Chance or providence?

The Philistines now have two questions for their priests and diviners to face. One is whether it was really Yahweh and the presence of the ark that had caused these troubles or whether it was pure chance (6:2a, 9). If the former is the case, obviously enough the ark should be returned to its home, but the question follows how the Philistines should make restitution to Yahweh and seek his healing for themselves and for their land.

The second question is actually dealt with first (6:2b-5). The Philistines make models of the boils and rodents which were scourging them, so as to lay these before God as a form of acted prayer for the removal of the scourges. Further, they make them of gold, so that they also constitute a costly offering to make up for their offence in appropriating Yahweh’s ark, and an indic­ation that (like Israel’s earlier oppressors, the Egyptians) they are prepared to learn their lesson.

The way the offerings are to be made (6:7-9) will provide the answer to the other question. Beth-shemesh is an Israelite town in border country in the foothills, south-east of Tel Aviv. It would be remarkable if the cows led the cart in that direction: they were not used to pulling a cart anyway, and would naturally be more interested in going back to the calves they were looking after. It would thus need some extraordinary compulsion to draw them towards Beth-shemesh.

Yet straight they go to Yahweh’s territory, complain­ing as they go (5:12), as if compelled by some unseen driver.

So it was Yahweh who had been bringing trouble on the Philistines. Their leaders watch what happens and acknowledge it (6:16). They had inflicted a defeat upon Israel, but the God of Israel has now defeated them. They had caused Israel to lament the departure of the glory from Israel (4:22), but now they give glory to the God of Israel (6:5). The Israelites, in contrast, are able with joy to welcome the symbol of Yahweh’s presence back into their midst, and to worship him.

## 1 Samuel 6:19-7:2 An act of God?

One more stage on the ark’s journey has to be related before it reaches a medium-term resting place. Appar­ently after the ark arrived in Beth-shemesh there was a disaster there, which was understood to be the result of some failure on the part of the people. As a conse­quence the ark was hurried on to Kiriath-jearim, a town further up in the hills on the way to Jerusalem, where it would eventually find its permanent home.

The cause of the disaster is obscure, but perhaps this indicates that the real point lies in the mere fact of its occurring. It parallels what had happened in the Philistine cities. It transpires that within Israel, too, the presence of God can mean trouble, not blessing. The return of the ark does not mean that Israel’s return to his favor is yet complete.

The belief that God’s presence can be dangerous and can bring judgment appears in some New Testament passages (see Acts 5; 1 Corinthians 11:27-32) as well as in the Old Testament. Such passages imply the assump­tion that God really is involved in our world, not only through the regularities of nature, but also through its unpredictable and extraordinary features, and that he is a God who judges as well as one who blesses; he is not one whose every action feels pleasant to those he is involved with.

The insurance companies’ talk of “acts of God” reminds us that the God of Israel who is also God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ can seem mysterious and unpre­dictable; he cannot be domesticated or treated as wholly explicable. Indeed, “who can stand before Yahweh, this holy God?” (6:20).

## 1 Samuel 7:3-17

Only David will finally resolve the Philistine question and bring the ark to its resting place (2 Samuel 5—6). Here we have a kind of preview of that solution under the leadership of Samuel. He first draws Israel into an act of repentance for the apostasy which brought it into this bondage. The “lament” of verse 2 is valueless unless it is accompanied by changes of attitude and behavior such as Samuel speaks of.

Defeat stems from apostasy, and restoration comes only as the fruit of repentance: Samuel’s assertions take up the convictions that shape the Book of Judges, and there is a sense in which 1 Samuel 1—7, which comes to a climax here, can be seen as the last episode in the Judges period. Samuel in fact fulfils both the major roles attributed to the Judges, the administration of justice (vv. 16-17) and the delivering of Israel from her enemies in time of crisis, which is Samuel’s role in the main part of this story.

Yet Samuel is not really a military hero. It is as a prophet that he challenges Israel to return to Yahweh, and his key roles in connection with Israel’s victory over the Philistines (to pray and to offer sacrifice) are those of a priestly figure. It is the religious gathering at Mizpah that leads to a further battle, apparently because the Philistines interpret it as a muster for war. (They are right that this gathering threatens their defeat—though not for the reason they think.) Samuel brings about his people’s deliverance by being a man who cries out to Yahweh (vv. 8-9). It is not Samuel who saves Israel (he only prays), nor Israel that saves itself (it only pursues fugitives); it is God who saves, who shouts, who confounds, who helps. The triumph of Yahweh over the Philistines which began in chapter 6 comes to a spectacular conclusion. “Ebenezer” no longer speaks of sin and defeat (4:1) but of God-given victory. After this, chapter 8 will make sorry reading.

## Reflections on 1 Samuel 4—7

1. The story of the loss of the ark shows how symbols can become dangerous and misleading. Something similar is true of creeds and buildings, of places and traditions. God-given means of blessing and guidance can become dangerous if we infer that there is some inherent power about them, that God is intrinsically involved with them and committed to them. He may have to prove his independence of them by letting them be discredited or destroyed. He himself is the truth, the reality, the power within history. The symbols must not be confused with the reality.

Praying fervently can no more be a means of ma­nipulating God than fetching the ark is. But when Samuel cries, Yahweh out of his freedom answers, and that is surely an invitation to believing prayer.

1. Is there such a thing as an ‘act of God’? In July 1984, there was a disastrous fire in York Minster, appar­ently caused by sheet lightning striking the building. The event came soon after the consecration of a new Bishop of Durham, whose appointment had met with protests  
   because of views he had expressed on the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ. Some of the protestors were quick to suggest that the fire was indeed an act of God, a judgment on the church for accepting the appointment of someone with known unorthodox views. Other Anglicans quickly repudiated any suggestion that the God they worship­ped acted in such ways.

The Old and New Testament passages referred to above suggest that it would be unwise to rule out the possibility of God sending sheet lightning upon York Minster as an act of judgment. It would, of course, be equally unwise to jump from such a theoretical possi­bility to a sure conviction that this must have been the case on this occasion (whatever we make of the new bishop’s views). We hardly have grounds for a confident opinion on the matter. Yet whatever we make of this event or that at Beth-shemesh, both events may con­structively bring us up short and draw us to repentance (see Luke 13:1-5). We may not be able to explain an act of God. We would be unwise to be merely on the defen­sive, or agnostic, or judgmental, instead of looking seriously for any possible implications for us.

1. There is a certain stylized atmosphere about stories such as that of Samuel’s great victory: at least, we do not experience God’s action quite so independent of human action, nor can we rejoice quite so unequivoc­ally in the destruction of other human beings. Yet the black and white story highlights the certainty of God’s victory over forces that threaten the security or the blessing of his people, a victory that need not be dependent on human initiative or the availability of human resources.

# 1 Samuel 8—12

## 1 Samuel 8

Chapter 7 portrayed what God can achieve by means of a leader such as Samuel. But Samuels are the exception, not the rule. Israel soon discovers that such gifts of faithful leadership are not hereditary (vv. 1-3). As one who succeeded Eli in a leadership role in Israel, Samuel has not escaped the problem Eli had (3:12-17).

There are good grounds for the elders of Israel asking Samuel to take urgent action about the further crisis Israel faces. What they ask for, however, is more than a measure to meet the particular need.

Their request for a king, and Samuel’s taking it before God, is reminiscent of a series of stories in Exodus and Numbers where the Israelites complain about their lot to Moses. People address their complaints to a human leader, but they really concern the way Yahweh himself has been dealing with his people. The complaints to Moses often involved a longing that the exodus could be reversed, a desire to repudiate Israel’s position as Yahweh’s chosen, redeemed people. A similar feature is here: Israel wants to be like other nations (vv. 5, 20).

The exodus from Egypt and the covenant-making at Sinai had made Yahweh Israel’s king. He is the one who has led them effectively in battle (see 7:10-11). To ask for a king to govern them and to lead them in battle is to repudiate his kingship over them (vv. 6-8, 19-20).

The trouble with kingship is not only what it says about their attitude to God. It is also what it will cost them in their ordinary lives. They are daydreaming about what a king will give them. They are ignoring what he will take from them (see vv. 11-17).

## 1 Samuel 9:1-14

A new scene in the drama opens. The fresh beginning here reminds us of the opening of chapter 1. The reader knows very well that the new major character intro­duced here is to become famous as Israel’s first king, and he is described appropriately. He has the right social standing and the right looks. Perhaps there is just a hint that he has been wondering whether he is the right man to become Israel’s leader (v. 19). Overtly, however, Saul believes that there is nothing to point towards this (v. 21). The story has a strong element of surprise.

A search for some lost property “happens” to take Saul and a servant on a journey through the territory to the north of Benjamin. They “happen” to come to the land of Zuph, which the reader knows is connected with Samuel (1:1). They are prevented from giving up the search for their donkeys only because the servant “happens” to suggest consulting a “man of God” in the nearby town. (It will turn out to be Samuel, but he remains dramati­cally unidentified yet.) They are prevented from feeling unable to approach him only because the servant “happens” to have the necessary financial consideration. On the way into the city they “happen” to meet girls coming to draw water at the city’s spring. The girls tell the two men that the seer “happens” to be just about to preside at a festive meal at the sanctuary, the high place at the highest point in the city.

It is when they meet the seer that the story reveals who he is. The three terms used to describe him are worth noting. “Man of God” denotes not so much some­one of remarkable holiness or piety (though no doubt he was that) as a man of supernatural power, such as Elijah and Elisha were. The term overlaps with “seer,” which suggests someone of supernatural insight. This latter term, verse 9 apparently suggests, came to fall out of use and be replaced by the more familiar term “prophet.” The original meaning of this word draws attention to the prophet’s being called by God and commissioned by him.

## 1 Samuel 9:15-25

There is a further note in the drama that the storyteller has so far omitted. We, the readers, know (as Saul did not) that the search for his father’s donkeys was leading somewhere unexpected. It transpires that Samuel also already knew this: the seer’s insight went further than Saul dreamt. Samuel is expecting to meet someone whom he will anoint, as a sacramental sign that he is one whom God has designated (this is the meaning of the word translated “prince”) to reign over Israel and to save them from their enemies. So Saul asks the way of a man who seems to be a casual passer-by, and it “happens” to be Samuel on his way to a feast at which he makes the unwitting king-designate the honored guest.

For Samuel to commission Saul to save Israel from the Philistines is rather surprising. Chapter 7 spoke of God as the one who would do this, and he did so. Chapter 8 condemned the subsequent generation’s plea for a king to fight for them. In contrast, much of chapters 9—11 takes an entirely positive view of the monarchy, picturing Saul as chosen by God’s initiative and anointed in God’s name.

It has been suggested that 1 Samuel thus includes material from more than one earlier version of the story. The more negative one would be later, reflecting dis­illusion with monarchy in the light of experience of it at work. And doubtless the book does include material from several earlier versions of the story; this may ex­plain some “untidy” features of the final version. Further, 1 Samuel may sometimes have used folk-tale motifs to express the historical fact of Saul s emergence from obscurity to power by God’s providence. Yet the ambi­valent attitude to the monarchy which 1 Samuel takes reflects the fact that it was a “mixed blessing.” It is entirely plausible to see Samuel as able to perceive the negative side to it before it happened. The story invites us to see both sides of a complex question.

## 1 Samuel 9:26—10:24

That God is choosing Saul as king is established in several ways. The series of “coincidences” which bring Saul to Samuel is one indication. The word that Samuel receives from God is another. Now Samuel promises signs for Saul himself.

Only time will furnish final proof of Yahweh’s calling (v. 1 - the “sign” is the actual event of Saul’s delivering Israel). But he is also promised some preliminary signs (v. 7). The asses will have been found. Saul will meet some men on the way to another sanctuary for another festive meal, and they will also give portions of their offer­ings to Saul. Then thirdly Saul will have an extra­ordinary religious experience which will offer further evidence that supernatural forces are at work in his life.

The prophesying that verses 5-6, 10-13 describe is apparently different from prophecy as we normally think of it. It involves singing and dancing, and perhaps resembles phenomena such as speaking in tongues more than verbal proclamation. The point about it is that it is patently unusual; it takes people out of themselves and makes them behave in extraordinary ways. This will not necessarily impress everyone (10:11-12 – cf. the reactions in Acts 2:12-13). (We do not know the sig­nificance of the question in 10:12a.) Yet the experience is a sign, because Saul would never have behaved in this way had he not met these prophets in Gibeah. It is an indication that the spirit of God has come upon him.

All these are signs for Saul only. His choice by God is a secret between him and Samuel (9:26-27; 10:14-16). This is so until the matter is finally revealed to Israel as a whole (10:17-27). We revert here (at least for vv. 17-19) to the negative slant on the monarchy.

Yahweh had proved himself in the past as Israel’s deliverer, as the one who could save her in any crisis. In insisting on a king, she was therefore rejecting him. Yet Saul is God’s choice: the procedure of drawing lots clinches that, because it allows for no human manip­ulation (cf. the choice of Matthias, Acts 1:26). Nor does it allow for any human reticence, whether false or true modesty (vv. 21-23).

## 1 Samuel 10:25—11:15

We have already seen that there could be more than one right answer to the question “How did Saul become king?” He became king because God revealed to his prophet that he was the one to anoint; he became king because he was chosen by lot from among the people. He also became king because he proved himself to be the stuff of which such leaders are made; the sign pro­mised in 10:1 is now given.

It seems likely that another importance of sanctuaries such as Shiloh was that they preserved and developed the material which eventually comprised the Old Testament. There priests promulgated, taught, and applied Israel’s laws: see 10:25, at Mizpah. (Deuteronomy 17:14—20 is one example of scripture teaching “the rights and duties of the kingship.”) There they preserved the messages of a prophet such as Samuel. They apparently also gave us many of our accounts of Israel’s history, too—hence the fact that each account of Saul’s being marked out as king mentions or involves one of the sanctuaries. So the present story shows the tradition that was preserved at

Gilgal.

The “Gilgal story” has a slightly different theological atmosphere again from chapters 8—10. There is no hint of disapproval of kingship, except on the lips of some doubters who have their folly exposed but their lives magnanimously saved. On the other hand, the story stresses that deliverance belongs to Yahweh; what Saul achieves, he achieves because of what God does. The story thus further enriches the resources the chapters offer us for understanding leadership in state and in church.

Entirely credibly, the story portrays Saul as proving his auth­ority in the same way as the deliverers in the Book of Judges. When a situation is hopeless, God breaks into Saul’s life. Once more (but in a new sense) he gives Saul a new heart (a new inner dynamic; cf. 10:9), once more Saul is turned into a different man (cf. 10:6), once more he is possessed by a supernatural energy that reflects the rushing power of the divine wind or the divine breath (cf. 10:10).

## 1 Samuel 12

After the unselfconscious but perhaps strongest vindi­cation of Saul’s kingship in chapter 11 comes the most systematic and strongest condemnation of it. First, Samuel compares his own position with a king’s. They have to admit that he has been a morally faultless leader. He has “taken” nothing from them: the verb once again recurs in a telling contrast with the warning of 8:11-17. Yet it is the leadership of a judge/prophet like him that they now surrender in favor of a king (vv. 1-5).

Samuel is still a man of divine power, as will be proved later in the story (vv. 16-18—wheat is harvested in May or June, well into the dry season). He no longer “walks before” Israel—the king now does that—but he still stands before Israel as its teacher, and he still stands before God on its behalf as its intercessor. Samuel’s affirmation of the role he can yet play sets a program not just for him but for future prophets in Israel.

Samuel’s analysis of Israel’s life is also both retro­spective and forward-looking. It comes at a key point in the story of Israel as the books from Deuteronomy to Kings tell it. These books mark major turning points in the story with sections of theological comment and assessment, sometimes put on the lips of the key character at each point. They thus look back from the time when the work as a whole was finished, and hint at the direction the story is taking.

## Reflections on 1 Samuel 8—12

1. The dilemma that Israel confronts after two hundred years of being led by “judges” is one that has often faced the people of God over the centuries. We can see it within the New Testament. The excesses described in a letter such as 1 Corinthians stem partly from the church having no formal structure of leadership, and in later letters such as Timothy and Titus a firmer structure of leadership is developing.

In Israel people insisted on the kind of leadership they wanted, even when the reasons to the contrary had been explained to them; Yahweh acquiesced in their insistence and worked with the monarchy they insisted on. Can the same insistence on the part of people and the same accommodation on the part of God be identified in the church’s life? Have leadership patterns developed which can replace the authority of God by the authority of human leaders?

1. Part of the solemnity of Samuel’s warnings in chapter 8 is that the reader knows they will come all too true. That could give a fatalistic air to the “sermon.” Are the challenge and the promise of mercy emptied of meaning if we know that the challenge was not met and the mercy was refused?

The opposite might be the case. When these books were put in their final form, it was for readers who had been taken into exile. They, too, stood before the challenge and the promise, invited to take them even more seriously now that the story of disobedience had been so calamitously lengthened. There is ample proof here that the way of disobedience is the way of trouble and that the only resource of the people of God is the mercy of God. Will they (and we) not listen to Samuel, who being dead yet speaks?

# 1 Samuel 13—16

## 1 Samuel 13:l-15a No sooner chosen than cast off

The pattern of Saul’s story follows in part that of Eli and Samuel. Eli appeared as a somewhat tragic figure, unfortunate to see his priestly line cast off because of his sons’ failures, yet honorable in his acceptance of Yahweh’s will. Samuel seemed to go straight from his preparation and call (chapters 1—3) to his old age (8:1) with little in between (chapter 7). Now Saul is no sooner appointed as king than his kingship is rejected. Through­out, 1 Samuel is pushing on to a climax in the reign of David. Saul’s chief significance in the drama as a whole is as a foil for David, the king whom David replaced, the one who opposed the man of God’s choice.

Why was Saul rejected at this point? Perhaps the story tells here of Yahweh rejecting Saul in favor of David so that the reader knows where the story is heading. In a similar way, in Luke’s Gospel we are told about Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth rather before it actually happened (as we can tell from Matthew and Mark), to prepare us for the fact that this is where that story is heading. Saul was unable to found a dynasty, and this fact hangs over his reign. These opening paragraphs prepare us to pick up successive hints that this must be. Apparent indications to the contrary (such as his son’s eminent suitability to be his successor) must not mislead us.

The reasons for Saul’s rejection perhaps also lie later, in the story; at least, we would expect there to be more to it than verses 8-12 indicate. Indeed, the narrative suggests a certain sympathy with Saul. After all, he did wait for the time Samuel specified (cf. 10:8), he acted out of a desire to seek Yahweh’s favor, he had to make the hard choice between supervising the sacrifice himself and watching his army melt away entirely as the Philistines prepared to attack.

## 1 Samuel 13:15b—14:23 The strategic situation

The scene is for the most part a few square miles in the central hill-country just north of Jerusalem, centering on the head of a deep valley which leads from the ridge of these hills down to the Jordan and Gilgal. The Philistines have now penetrated deeply into the hill-country. 13:19-22 shows the extent of their control of Israelite life. Their front line is to the north of the ravine at Mikmash, from where they can also make forays into Israelite areas north, west, and east (13:17-18). Saul’s forces control an area south of the ravine, includ­ing a small town called Geba on the edge of it, and another called Gibeah a little further away. (Following the story is complicated by the similarity between these two names, which is even more marked in Hebrew than in English, and has sometimes led to their being confused.)

The story of Jonathan and his armor-bearer would make a splendid scene in a Western, but of course the participants see more in it than that. The Philistines are “the uncircumcised,” heathen oppressors of Israel, and Jonathan’s foray is a venture of faith. He combines courage and daring with the realization that it is Yahweh who saves, and combines initiative and imagin­ation with an awareness that he needs to know whether what they are doing is God’s will (hence the “sign,” vv. 8-12). The victory would never have been won without Jonathan’s boldness, but nor would it have been won without Yahweh’s involvement, turning an adventure that could have ended as a suicide mission into a cause of supernatural panic in the Philistine camp as a whole. (In v. 15, the last phrase is literally “a panic of God,” and the verse as a whole suggests the aware­ness of supernatural forces being involved.) Saul hesi­tates to attack without seeking divine guidance by means of the ephod (a priestly garment which contained some means of drawing lots in order to discover whether Yahweh was for or against something). In the end he does so under the pressure of events—and is entirely vindicated

(v. 23).

So even if rejection hangs over Saul, Yahweh gives him real victories.

## 1 Samuel 14:24-46 So much achieved, so much missed

In the event, the battle which began so well fizzles out; the Philistines are seen off, but not defeated as con­vincingly as they might have been. The causes are the same high-spirited, uninhibited style of Jonathan and the same committed religious instinct of Saul which we have seen at work earlier in the day.

Saul had laid an oath on his men that they were not to eat until evening, as an expression of commitment to achieving full victory. The well-meant oath is broken by Jonathan, who knew nothing about it because he was causing mayhem among the Philistines at the time it was issued. The unfortunate consequence will emerge later. In the meantime, when Jonathan learns about the oath, he points out it is pious, but impractical. More would have been achieved if people had been refreshed than is achieved when they are famished.

A third result is that when evening comes and they can eat, they throw piety to the wind and gorge themselves without taking any notice of the practice of allowing the blood to drain from an animal before cooking its meat. Underlying this practice is the feeling that, since shedding blood or losing blood means death, blood itself symbolizes life. Life belongs to God, the life-giver, so blood, as its symbol, should be disposed of carefully and reverently, not eaten (see Genesis 9:4, and Deuteronomy 12 for some relevant legal regulations). In their hunger, however, the exhausted army forgets such considerations, and Saul has to set up emergency procedures to see that the meat is treated in a kosher way.

His men refreshed, Saul can open up the possibility of plucking the full fruits of victory. But divine guidance is withheld. To one rash oath Saul then adds another, that the man who caused God’s silence must die. It is, of course, his own son. Jonathan is saved only by the army’s common-sense insistence that God can hardly require at this point the death of the one who has achieved so much that day by God’s help.

The analysis or critique of Saul here is less direct than that in the chapters on either side, though it may seem in the end more penetrating.

## 1 Samuel 14:46—15:15

The real achievements of Saul are clear from 14:46-52. The dire pressure of the Philistines has been relieved. Saul also deals with Moab, Edom, and Ammon to the east and south-east, with Amalek to the south, and with Zobah, an Aramaean state to the north.

This solemn summary of Saul’s achievements, and the list of his family which follows, would normally be given at the *end* of a king’s reign. That is precisely the narrator’s point. He has hinted in chapter 13 that the writing is on the wall for Saul from the very beginning. He is now to describe Saul’s personal rejection by Yahweh. Outwardly Saul will continue to reign until his ignominious, lonely death. Theologically his reign is coming to an end now. Yahweh is about to depose him. The summary at the close of chapter 14 tolls the bell for him.

The end comes about through the very triumph over the Amalekites in which 14:48 rejoices. The attack initiated by Samuel in Yahweh’s name was not merely an act of vengeance. On Israel’s view, at least, Amelek was guilty of crimes against God and humanity which had to be punished, now that Israel was in a position to do something about them (see 15:18, 33; Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19). The principle of destroying the whole of an enemy community and its property was accepted in Israel’s world, though perhaps more in theory than in practice. A possible value of the principle was that it gave expression to a black and white repudiation of moral evil and all that opposed God’s purpose; in connection with that expression of com­mitment, Agag and Amalek perhaps appear in the story more as symbols of evil than as flesh and blood his­torical realities.

## 1 Samuel 15:16-35 The repentance of God and of a man

The rejection of Saul involves the repentance of God (v. 35). How can God repent? Does he make mistakes? Can he change his mind?

Samuel himself assures us that God, the glory of Israel, does not lie or repent the way a human being may (v. 29). He is consistent and reliable, faithful to himself and faithful to human beings. God is not fickle, saying one thing today and another tomorrow because he feels different.

But if human beings take real initiatives and make real responses to God, God interacts with these. He is prepared to change his mind and his way of acting in response to the actions of human beings. Let us allow that he knows ahead of time how he will need to change his mind in response to human words and actions. The flexibility is still real. In this sense he does repent.

Can a human being repent? In contrast, the answer might seem an obvious “yes.” This same passage puts a question mark by that assumption. Saul seems to seek to repent (vv. 24-29), but God does not restore him.

There may be several senses in which repentance may be impossible or unacceptable. One is that people may reach a point where they cannot bring themselves to repent; the problem is not God’s unwillingness to accept them, but their unwillingness to come (cf. Hebrews 6:4-8?). Another is that a repentance which is only a matter of feelings or words, not of mind and will, is not acceptable to God. A third is that repentance can­not undo the consequences of sin or reverse a revelation of character, and even repentant sinners are not by their repentance placed in precisely the same position that they occupied before their sin.

## 1 Samuel 16 David: the beginnings

1 Samuel 16 is really the opening of a new section of the story. The account of David’s rise and his conflict with Saul begins in a way closely parallel to the opening of Saul’s own story.

This is true about the literary form of the stories. Once again the author of the book is bringing together a variety of older stories and letting any untidiness stand. Thus David is too young to attend a festive meal in verse 11, but he is a warrior in verse 18; he is well-known to Saul by the end of this chapter, but unknown to him in chapter 17. The story of David was inherently so important that it came to be presented in many ways, utilizing historical reminiscence, creative imagination, and the motifs of folk tale. All come together in 1 Samuel’s rich narrative.

The story of David’s anointing comes here to make a theological point. Yahweh in his sovereignty chose David from the beginning. Samuel, Yahweh’s prophet, once anointed Saul, so now he anoints David. Once he held a festive meal for Saul, now he holds one for David. Once Saul was not present to be identified as Yahweh’s chosen, so now David is not present. Once Saul came from the least significant family of the smallest tribe, now David emerges as the unimpressive youngest of a family of brothers (though v. 12 indicates that the narrator is not afraid to have it both ways). Yahweh’s spirit once came upon Saul, now it seizes David. In both stories such motifs make clear that the man involved is God’s choice.

The fact that David is now God’s choice sets the theological context for the rest of 1 Samuel. Yahweh’s spirit takes hold of David and leaves Saul; Saul is no longer God’s man. He remains a man of dynamism and energy, a man possessed by spirit. The trouble is that the dynamism apparently becomes mis­directed or out of joint: it is no longer effective against Israel’s enemies and it directs itself instead against Saul himself or (later) against his beloved David or his son Jonathan. Supernatural spirit is certainly still there, but it is bad spirit.

It belongs to Saul’s fate that his self-directed frenzy leads to the introduction to the court of the young man whose music can now soothe him but whose own energy will in due cause drive Saul deeper and deeper into jealousy, enmity, and isolation.

## Reflections on 1 Samuel 13—16

1. In Chapters 13 and 15 there is something of a mys­tery to the will of God. Saul claims to be doing his best to do the right thing, but he discovers it is the wrong thing. Perhaps we have had that experience ourselves. There is a mystery here which the story does not pretend to resolve, though it invites us to begin to come to terms with it in the context of other evidences in Scripture (most of all the cross) that behind enigma and mystery is love.
2. In chapters 13 and 15 there is also, however, an irresolvable ambiguity about Saul’s behavior and the account he gives of himself. In the latter story, were Agag and the cattle preserved for sacrifice later at Gilgal, or for Saul’s glory and self-indulgence? Is Saul sincere and unfortunate, or sincere and self-deceived, or dis­ingenuous and calculating? Where biblical stories leave the answer to such questions open, they leave readers to learn about themselves by considering what would have been true of them in such circumstances. What kind of person is Saul if I am Saul?
3. In a similar way, we may not be able to discover in what sense Saul found no repentance. But here, too, we can allow his story in its allusiveness to probe our lives. What does my repentance mean? What response from God is appropriate to it?