

PARALLEL GUIDE 20

“No King in Israel”

Summary: This chapter concludes Judges and begins I Samuel. We see Israel as both antagonistic toward the notion of having a king and eager for the unity and safety implied in centralized leadership. With the introduction of Samuel, Israel’s greatest charismatic leader, a sequence of events begins which ultimately leads to anointing of Saul as king.

Learning Objectives

- Read **Judges 17-21** and **I Samuel 1-7**
- State the negative comment of the story of Micah and about the northern shrine of Dan
- Cite two parallels between the I Samuel story of the birth of Samuel and Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus
- State two ways Israel understands revelation in the story of the call of Samuel
- Cite three offices or roles Samuel filled for Israel that are similar to roles later ascribed to Jesus
- Cite the interpretation placed on the defeat of Israel and the capture of the ark
- State a problem with D’s simplistic theology of reward for faithfulness and punishment for sin
- State the major contribution of D’s theology

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Read over I Samuel 1-11 to sense the flow of Samuel’s life. Skim the section several times. Look at the Common Lesson material on spiritual autobiographies and record steppingstones for Samuel’s life.
2. If the steppingstone method does not work for you, use one of the other methods to look at the life of Samuel.
3. Take some time to think about Samuel’s call. How are you called? How is your EfM group called? How do you recognize a call, how do you test a call, and how do you respond to it?
4. What is the significance of the parallels between the life of Samuel and the life of Jesus?

Preparing for Your Seminar

“In the Deuteronomist’s view, events of human life become the basis for revelation. They are seen as constituting a purposeful dialogue of call and response between God and the world.” In what ways, if any, do you share this perspective? Have you had an experience that you believe to be “the basis for revelation”? Do moments of revelation occur in the life of your EfM group?

Additional Sources

W. F. Albright's *From Stone Age to Christianity* (Doubleday Anchor Book, 1957) is mentioned in this chapter.

Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1971) is an attempt to read the Old Testament with the eyes of a literary critic. Alter's aim throughout is, in his words, "to illuminate the distinctive principles of the Bible's narrative art." The study is accessible to the lay reader as well as the scholar.

John Bright's *History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Westminster Press, 1981) is still a standard in the field. We refer to Bright frequently in chapters to come.

Theodor Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (Harper and Row, 1969) and H.H. Rowley, *From Joseph to Joshua* (Oxford University Press, 1950).

Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE* (Orbis Books, 1981) and *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Fortress Press, 1985).

P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel*, Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday, 1980).

Chapter 20 "NO KING IN ISRAEL"

In Judges 17:6 occurs a statement that is repeated several times in the last few chapters of the book: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." In the last chapter we noted that Gideon refused to allow himself to be made king over Israel. By contrast, Abimelech, his son by a concubine, is cast in a bad light for accepting the kingship over Shechem. YHWH alone is to be king over Israel—this is what made Israel different from the nations. The "nations" (goyim in Hebrew, gentes in Latin, from which the word "gentiles" is derived) were all the peoples of the world with whom YHWH had not covenanted. To be like the "nations" was to reject Israel's special vocation as the people of God.

The idea that YHWH alone rules is a fundamental and lasting conviction which runs throughout the Israelite tradition. But another tradition long existed as well: that of the monarchy. The promises that God made to Abraham, that were renewed to each of the patriarchs, and that were extended to the people of Israel gathered at Sinai, were finally to be fulfilled in the establishment of the reign of King David. Only then would the land "flowing with milk and honey" be firmly established as the homeland of Israel "from Dan to Beer-sheba." This was the full extent of the territory governed by David. **But the monarchy began to decay even during the last years of David, and under Solomon it reached a level of tyranny which ran against all the moral principles of Israelite law. Still, under David it did achieve a degree of splendor which at the time must have looked like the fulfillment of all that Israel had awaited.** From the perspective of a much later time, in which Israel had no splendor at all, the reign of David must have looked like the "golden age" which God's Messiah would surely restore.

Both of these attitudes toward kingship—that it usurped the reign of YHWH, and that it ushered in the Golden Age—existed in Israel, and both are expressed in the narrative from Judges 17 through the accounts in I Samuel of the selection of Saul as the first king of Israel. In the story of Gideon the anti-monarchical viewpoint is expressed; in Judges 17-21, the evil times are explained in terms of the pro-monarchical view: "there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." The account of Saul's selection is, finally, told from both viewpoints.

Judges 17-18

By the time you have finished this chapter, you ought to have read Judges 17-21 and I Samuel 1-7. You may wish to read those passages now, or you may wish to read them in conjunction with the discussion in this text.

Micah and the Danites

Both this story and the following one (chapters 19-21) seem to be appendices to the Deuteronomistic history in the rest of Judges. They lack the traditional formula: “The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of YHWH. . . .” Furthermore, the story of Micah and the Danites, if it tells of the establishment of a shrine at Dan with Moses’ grandson as its priest, runs against the Deuteronomist’s insistence that the only legitimate shrine was in Jerusalem.

311

Judges 17:1-6 Micah’s Shrine

Micah confesses to his mother that it is he who has stolen her silver. She has uttered a curse on the person who stole it, and to redeem her son from the effects of the curse she consecrates some of the returned silver and has it made into “an idol of cast metal” (17:4). This is typical Hebrew parallelism. There are not two images; the word for “graven image”—one which was carved—is interpreted by the second expression, a “molten” or cast image.

Besides this image, Micah makes an ephod and a **teraphim** for the shrine. It is not known what either of these objects was. As we have indicated, sometimes an ephod seems to be a kind of garment, perhaps an apron, which is worn for ceremonial functions; sometimes it seems to be a box; still again it appears to be an image of some kind. Teraphim were apparently small images. (Rachel was able to conceal the ones she stole from her father by hiding them in saddlebags.)

Even though the image seems to be of YHWH (17:3,13), this is still in disregard of the second commandment of the Decalogue. It is virtually impossible to tell whether the commandment against images was known during the time of the judges and disobeyed, or whether at this time the Israelites, in common with the rest of the peoples of the ancient world, used images to express their relationship with YHWH. Whatever the case, the practice was prohibited when the evil results of syncretism were seen. And it is certainly regarded as defection from the will of YHWH in this story, at least in its present form. That such a thing can happen at all is attributed to the fact that “there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (17:6), although such a statement is not necessarily negative. One assumes from what follows, that in this case “what was right” in their eyes was not what was good.

Judges 17:7-13 The Levite

Micah installs his son as priest of the shrine. At that time anyone could be a priest, for the central temple cult had not yet been established. But apparently if one could have a Levite as one’s priest—or if a city had a levitical family for its priesthood, as in the “levitical cities” of Joshua 21—the cultic acts at the shrine would be of a higher order.

It seems to be a recurring feature of religious life that practices which at the outset are characteristic of the entire religious group tend eventually to devolve on a particular “professional” order within the group. This happened in Israel, finally culminating in the reform under King Josiah in 621 BCE in which the Deuteronomistic Code, ordering the destruction of all the local shrines and the centralization of cultic worship at Jerusalem, was enforced. It happened in the Christian church as well. In the Book of Acts the worship of

the Christian community included prayer and “breaking bread,” but there is no suggestion that this was done by a special “order” of people (Acts 1-2). **Eventually and inevitably, however, to combat distortions of the faith and irregularities in the practice of the Christian life, a hierarchy—literally, a “sacred rule”—was developed.** And even in the most radical reform movements within Christianity, those in which hierarchy is specifically repudiated, certain people very soon emerge as leaders and gradually acquire the status of a hierarchical

312

order. Such a phenomenon seems to occur when the original focal point of faith has become obscured for some, and when undesirable—sometimes bizarre—elements have arisen. The need for order, discipline, and stability seems to create the professional caste. It is probably a mistake to label the moments of diffused spontaneity as “good” and those of ordered regularity as “bad.” They represent a tension that is inevitable, and each has its merits and its dangers.

Here the professional order is represented by a young Levite from Bethlehem. Apparently because he is dissatisfied with opportunities there, he comes and sojourns in Ephraim, eventually coming to the house of Micah (17:78). Later this young Levite is identified as “Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses” (18:30). Micah offers the Levite a salary to be the priest at his shrine. The offer is accepted, and the Levite installed. Micah expects much greater rewards from the hand of YHWH now that he has a Levite as his priest (17:13).

Judges 18 The Migration of Dan

The tribe of Dan was located northeast of the Philistine territory on the coastal plain. Pressure from the Philistines forced them to move northward seeking another location. Eventually they were to settle far to the north. This is the setting of this part of the Micah story. On their way north, some scouts come to the house of Micah (18:3) and there meet the young Levite, recognizing by his accent that he is from Judah. They gain a favorable prediction for their mission from the young priest and go on their way, but not without first noticing the valuable images which the shrine of Micah holds.

After they returned from the northern territory with an encouraging report, the scouts lead the migrating party toward their future home. Passing by Micah’s house again on their way, they entice the young priest to join them with an offer of a more important position, and with him they steal the images from the shrine. Micah’s attempt to regain his possessions is put down by thinly veiled threats of annihilation, and the Danites proceed to conquer the northern territory and change the name of the main city—rebuilt after its destruction at their hands—to Dan. A shrine, which is to become one of the two main shrines in the later northern kingdom of “Israel,” is erected here. Thus the northern shrine was founded on treachery and theft—according to the viewpoint of a southern tradition, that of the Deuteronomic history. Indeed the story as a whole seems to have as its point the cultic anarchy and tribal disorganization that preceded Samuel. It was this that led to the necessity of establishing a central monarchy with the elevation of Saul. Though the picture offered may well be exaggerated, **there is evidence** that it is in its essentials accurate.

Judges 19-21 The Sin of Benjamin

The beginning of this story may well seem familiar to you. It is very similar to the account of the “men” (angels) who visited Lot in Sodom (Gen. 18). It shows all too clearly the state of morality in the cities, in which Canaanite ways of life have been thoroughly adopted. Once again, that “there was no king in Israel” is given as the context within which such a state of affairs could exist.

The Outrage at Gibeah

The story is about a Levite who leaves Ephraim, where he is sojourning, on his way to Bethlehem in Judah to

become reconciled with his estranged concubine. The

313

introduction (19:1-9) is rich in details, drawn out in the fashion of a well-told tale. The purpose seems to be dual: to set a standard of hospitality, open and giving, and to get the returning party—the Levite, his concubine, and his servant—on the road so late in the day that accommodations for the evening would have to be makeshift. The result of the hospitality is not an unmixed blessing. The party decides not to spend the night in Jerusalem, since that city is still in the hands of the Jebusites. (The account of the conquest at the beginning of Judges claims that it had been taken by Israel, but, as already noted, this is almost certainly in error.) Ironically—as we discover—the Canaanite city might well have been a better, at least a safer, place to stop. The sin in the story is not foreign but Israelite.

The party stops at Gibeah “which belongs to Benjamin” (19:14). Even though the man is a Levite and also a traveler—two reasons for extending hospitality to him—no one in the city offers him shelter except one old man, and he is a stranger, not a Benjaminite, but a sojourner from the Ephraimite hill country. As a hint of what is to come, the old man urges the Levite not to spend the night in the town square, implying that this would not be safe (19:20). But the hospitality of the old man himself seems beyond reproach.

Then, as in the story of Lot in the corrupt city of Sodom, rough men demand that the male visitor be sent out to them “that we may have intercourse with him”. To “know” a person, in the Hebrew idiom, has a wide range of meaning. It may mean “to have sexual relations with.” But the verb “is never used unambiguously of homosexual coitus Here [it] is deliberately ambiguous. [But] with the offer of the young woman (v. 24), the ambiguity disappears” (Boling, p. 276). As in the Lot story, the host offers the men his virgin daughter and the man’s concubine. The point of the story has to do with the fact that any of this could happen in Israel. For there is more: we are not told what happens to the daughter, but the concubine is abused so badly that she dies. **The Levite then divides her body into twelve pieces**, sending a piece to each of the twelve tribes as testimony to the abomination of the Benjaminites and calling for vengeance. “Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, ‘Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt . . .?’” (19:30)

The Capture of Gibeah

The second part of the story may also seem familiar to you. The campaign against the city of Gibeah by the assembled army of Israel is very similar to that waged against Ai (Josh. 8). Perhaps one account influenced the other, but which one was primary is impossible to say. The story in its present form has been reworked many times, as can be seen in the varying vocabulary of the Hebrew text. Probably the battle did not involve a united Israelite army as the present story would have it. More likely it was a localized intertribal conflict. Indeed, the story may even have been told as a face-saving device to conceal a devastation of the tribe of Benjamin at the hands of the encroaching Philistines.

Initial attempts at negotiations fail (20:12-14). The tribe of Benjamin rallies to the support of Gibeah. “The seven hundred picked men” of the Benjaminites (20:16)

314

who could “sling a stone at a hair, and not miss” are described as left-handed, as was Ehud, the Benjaminite judge who killed king Eglon (Judg. 3:15). Apparently this was a tribal characteristic, but it may mean that many Benjaminite warriors had developed the skill of using either hand equally well, a feat of great value in

using a sling.

Lots are drawn to see which tribe should lead the assault, and Judah is selected. (SheJudah is also selected to lead the invasion of Canaan, according to Judg. 1:3. Remember that this entire history was put in its final form by editors from Judah.) The account which follows is quite confused. Judah goes forth, but is defeated—twice. The LXX (the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament), disturbed by this, inserts the note that Judah trusted in her own might instead of in YHWH; it was for this reason she was defeated.

The Israelite troops seek YHWH's help at the shrine at Bethel. Bethel, Ai, and Gibeah are quite close to one another. An account of a single campaign at any one of these cities may have been repeated for the others—a battle at Bethel, for example, may have been transferred to Ai in Josh. 8 and to Gibeah in this story. Bethel was a pre-Israelite Canaanite shrine and one long associated with pre-conquest Israelite memories, as shown in the Jacob stories (Gen. 28). After the separation of the northern kingdom following Solomon's death, King Jeroboam established Bethel and Dan as rival sanctuaries to the Jerusalem temple.

With YHWH's promise of victory, an ambush, similar to that at Ai, is set (20:29). The account of the victory is told twice—20:29-36 and 37-46—indicating two traditions. Eventually only six hundred Benjamite men and no women are left from the *cherem*, the “ban.”

Replenishing The Tribe of Benjamin

The result of this civil war must have been disaster for Benjamin. For the final redactor, this cannot be the end. Having all but destroyed the tribe of Benjamin and leaving it with no women and therefore no possibility of replenishing itself, Israel remembers that Benjamin is one of the sacred tribes (21:3). A vow taken earlier, that no tribe would give its women to the Benjaminites, seems to make it impossible to save the tribe. But a way is sought to keep the letter of the oath and yet get around its consequences and—because of the quick-wittedness of Israel's elders—the way is found. Jabesh-gilead, a city in the Trans-Jordan tribe of Manasseh, did not respond to the call to arms. On this pretext, the city is attacked and all but “four hundred young virgins who had not known man by lying with him” are killed (21:8-12). Still, this is two hundred short of the wives needed for the six hundred remaining Benjaminites.

Shiloh was the major shrine of the earliest period of Israelite life in Canaan. The ark was kept there. (Mention in this story of Mizpah, Bethel, and Shiloh—all of which at various times were major shrines—indicates the long period of time over which the story was reworked.) At Shiloh there is to be the annual harvest festival in the vineyards. Later legal codes would associate the harvest festival with the history of Israel's deliverance, but at this time it probably included fertility dances as part of a

315

general harvest bacchanal. The Benjaminites who have not yet been provided with wives are told each to **carry off a woman** from among the dancers, the rest of the Israelite armed force standing by to discourage interference! These women, though Israelite, would not have been given to the Benjaminites, and thus the letter of the oath would have been observed.

To this whole tale is added, as an appropriate comment, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (21:25).

It is interesting to note that this comment has been interpreted variously. Generally, it has been understood as a negative comment on the lawlessness of Israel in that day. But in his commentary Robert Boling understands the statement to have here “a positive thrust after the ingenious solution of problems in the final scenes. Added to the book in a period perhaps as late as the Babylon exile, it meant that the time had arrived once again for every man to do what was right before YHWH without any sacral political apparatus [i.e., the

monarchy] to get in the way” (*Judges*, p. 293).

Samuel: The Last of the Judges

The Deuteronomic history continues in the books of I and II Samuel. The major part of these two books, which in the Hebrew Bible are one scroll or book, is devoted to the establishment of the Israelite monarchy under Saul and its consolidation and “golden age” under David. Both I and II Kings (also one book in the Hebrew Bible) continue the story of the monarchy, recounting the extension of the kingdom and its increasing tyranny under Solomon, its division into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, and the punishments which eventually befell each kingdom.

The first seven chapters of I Samuel, however, recount events during the time when “there was no king in Israel.” Around the figure of Samuel, who has been understood as both the last of the judges and the first of the great prophets, gather events that mark one of the great transition points in the history of Israel. During Samuel’s time the confederacy proves inadequate to unify the tribes against the advancing Philistines. Nor is it able to provide sufficient means for preserving the fidelity of the tribes to the covenant with YHWH. The almost inevitable result is the monarchy. Israel will become for the first time a nation—no longer a group of tribes whose unity consisted of a common allegiance to the covenant with YHWH. Like a giant, Samuel straddles both the period of the judges and the beginning of the monarchy.

I Samuel 1:2-11 The Birth of Samuel

Elkanah, an Ephraimite, has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. “Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children” (1:2). Once again, as in the story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, we meet the pattern of the barren wife and a rivalry that grows between the fruitful woman and the barren one.

Each year Elkanah and his family go to the shrine at Shiloh to sacrifice to YHWH of hosts. (The name “YHWH of hosts,” or YHWH Sabaoth, is an ancient expression meaning “YHWH of armies” or “YHWH of battles.”) When Elkanah makes his sacrifice—and note that he, a “layman,” offers the sacrifice, even though Eli and

his sons are priests at Shiloh—he gives portions of the sacred food to his wives and children. The Hebrew text is very difficult at 1:5. The NRSV translation reads “. . . but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb.” Another version of the text (a Syriac version) reads “. . . because he loved Hannah, he gave her a double portion,” or a portion equal to that of Peninnah and her sons, thereby making up for the fact that YHWH had closed her womb. This is more likely to have been the case, and would be one more source of irritation between Peninnah and Hannah.

Hannah, in despair after years as a childless wife, makes a vow to YHWH at the Shiloh shrine, promising to dedicate her son to YHWH, if YHWH will grant him to her. She promises, in fact, to make him a Nazirite from his birth (1:11). There is no further indication that the son, Samuel, was a Nazirite—this has led some scholars to believe that at least this part of the story has been influenced by another birth story, perhaps Samson’s— but Samuel is dedicated to the service of God at the shrine. Eli the priest, having learned from Hannah of her plight, responds, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”

The son is granted to Hannah, and she names him Samuel, “for she said, ‘I have asked him of the LORD’” (1:20). It may be that there is intended to be a play on the Hebrew word *sha’al* meaning “to ask,” “to borrow,” or “to lend.” We have seen before, however, that the derivations of names as given in the biblical stories are not based on scientific linguistics, but on similarities of sounds to convey particular meanings. There is a play on the word in 1:27-28; this is clear in the Hebrew, but is lost in the English: “For this child I

prayed [or asked, sha'al]; and the LORD has granted me my petition which I made to him. Therefore I have given [sha'al] him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is lent [sha'al] to YHWH." It is also clear that sha'al is **more closely related to the name "Saul" than to "Samuel."** We may have here an element dependent upon a story originally about the birth of Saul.

Samuel is dedicated to the service of God at the shrine at Shiloh. The song in 2:1-10, which is supposedly sung by Hannah at his dedication, must have been originally independent of this story. Its content has little to do with the story of Hannah and the birth of Samuel except for v. 5: "The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn." For the rest, it sounds much more like a national psalm, perhaps a coronation psalm: "he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed" (v. 10). As such it would be later than Samuel's birth. The theme of the psalm throughout is the eventual judgment that false pride or arrogance brings from God, but a secondary theme, the exaltation of the lowly, presages the entire Samuel saga. "We are [soon] to hear of the elevation of Samuel, of Saul, of David—indeed even of Israel herself—from humble circumstances to power and distinction. The Song of Hannah sounds a clear keynote for what follows" (McCarter, Samuel, p. 76). And, as a song of exultation and praise, it fits the mood of an exultant Hannah. It is very similar in tone and often in words to the song which Mary is said to sing (Luke 1:46-55) when she conceives Jesus—and surely the similarity between the two was intended. **Luke seems to have perceived** that Samuel, like Jesus, stood between two historical eras: he separates the days of the judges from the days of the kings.

317

The portentous story of his birth asserts his importance from the beginning of his story. After the dedication, the parents return home, leaving the child Samuel an apprentice with Eli the priest.

Samuel 2:12-36 Doom to the House of Eli

There are two stories interwoven in these verses: vv. 18-21 and 26 concern the boy Samuel and his mother, Hannah; the rest of the passage is about the improper conduct of Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, and the prophecy of doom which results. The meaning of the passages about Samuel and his mother is obvious. Note that the language of vv. 18-19 characterizes Samuel as a priest, dressed in priestly garments and ministering before YHWH. Here he stands in contrast to the wicked sons of Eli. The implication is clear: as they fall, he will rise. One might note also the similarity between v. 26—"Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people"—and Luke 2:52—"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." Once again Luke draws a parallel between Jesus and Samuel, both of whom God raised up for key missions in his work of salvation.

In the other story concerning the sons of Eli, we find that the young priests are taking advantage of their status. Not only does their servant dip into the pot in which the sacrificial meat is being boiled to remove portions for the priests (2:14), he also obtains portions of the meat before it is boiled so that the priests might cook it in a more flavorful manner (2:15-17). The first practice is in accord with the rules governing the priests at Shiloh—and the randomness of the selection process, thrusting a fork into the boiling pot, would seem to leave the priest's meal to chance or to the providence of YHWH. But Hophni and Phinehas go beyond the rules to take meat that is rightfully YHWH's. The practice is blasphemy (2:25), a sin against YHWH for which there can be no atonement.

The sons of Eli are, at any rate, not repentant. We read that "they would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the LORD to slay them" (v. 25). The Anchor Bible translation is even more blunt: "But they would not listen to their father (for YHWH wanted to kill them)." Here it is God's intention that the sons of Eli sin and die in their sin. **The idea may offend our sensibilities, but** here "as in the Exodus story, the writer's point is clear: the events of history are directed by YHWH with specific purposes in view" (McCarter, p. 84). YHWH rules the world in every detail that YHWH's intentions—in this case, the fall of

the house of Eli—might be accomplished.

“A man of God came to Eli . . .” (2:27), a prophet, speaking the words of YHWH. The message begins by reminding Eli that his house, the tribe of Levi, was selected as priests at the time of the Exodus. Because of Eli’s sons, his house is doomed. Hophni and Phinehas will die on the same day (2:34), and the house of Levi will be left destitute (2:36).

The prophecy also includes a prediction that God will raise up “a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed one for ever” (2:35). The

318

second part of this verse is not a reference to Samuel although it is obvious that he is to be the “faithful priest.” The passage must be interpreted as referring also to the rise of the priesthood of Zadok which supplanted the Levitical priesthood during the reign of Solomon. The key is I Kings 2:27. Here Abiathar, a descendent of Eli, is deposed in favor of Zadok, who favors the cause of Solomon and so becomes undisputed chief of the Jerusalem cult; to “go in and out before my anointed” means that he shall serve under the king. (The prophet Jeremiah will be identified as a descendant of the banished Abiathar, carrying this theme even farther.)

Samuel 3:1-4:1 The Call of Samuel

“The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread” (3:1). That is, God no longer sent God’s spirit upon the people so that they became seers (people who saw visions in which YHWH revealed a message for Israel) or prophets (those to whom the word of YHWH was given). Now, as the boy Samuel is lying in the temple before the ark, keeping watch in Eli’s place, he hears someone call him by name and he gives the characteristic reply: “Here I am!” In the Hebrew these first four verses of chapter 3 are one long sentence in which clause after clause rushes on, leading to Samuel’s reply as the climax.

Samuel, thinking it is Eli who calls, goes to the old priest, who denies calling him. Only when this has happened three times does Eli see its significance and instruct the boy to respond, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (3:5-9). The reply of identification, “Here I am” changes to one of supplication—“Speak . . .” This describes a central feature of revelation as Israel understood it: it is a moment of confrontation by YHWH accompanied by a readiness and willingness to hear. What follows is also typical of YHWH’s revelation through the prophets: the word of God brings judgment. The message given to Samuel is that the is about to bring the promised punishment to the house of Levi (3:11-14). In this call Samuel becomes a prophet. The Hebrew word here is

nabi

, rendered

prophetes

by Greek translators of the Septuagint, hence our term “prophet.” As the great Old Testament scholar W. F. Albright has pointed out, the term as used here is by no means so restrictive (From Stone Age to Christianity, p. 303). In its origin the word seems to have meant “one called to a task by a god,” any task, not necessarily the specific one we think of as prophecy. As we have already begun to see, Samuel is called to be much more than prophet in the sense of oracle-giver; he functions also as priest, and will become as well one part warrior, one part judge, and one part governor.

Samuel is depicted as reluctant to report YHWH’s message to Eli, but when he is called to do so, he answers honestly and forthrightly. Eli can best be characterized as a tragicomic figure. The description of him as going blind (v. 2) is not extraneous information; it is an image of Eli’s character. He is not particularly perceptive. He misunderstands Hannah’s actions in I Sam. 1—he believes she is drunk, when in fact she is

praying. He is a long time in understanding that it is YHWH who is calling Samuel. But in both cases, once Eli has discovered the truth, he can be relied upon to do the right thing. He muddles through to declare that Hannah's prayer has been granted, to supply Samuel with the right words of supplication. While Eli is depicted throughout as a good man, he is also a weak one. He is not accused of the wicked

319

practices by which Hophni and Phinehas blaspheme God, but he does stand under judgment because he cannot restrain his sons. And Eli accepts the word that Samuel brings him without protest. "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him" (3:18) is his response. Finally, Eli is a submissive man—that is both his weakness and his strength. If his worst moments come when he submits to his sons, his best come, as here, when he submits to the will of YHWH. In this moment his role as God's priest is justified. It is clear from the high drama in which the writer has set this story that we are intended to see momentous significance in what is taking place. An old way of life is coming to an end. Israel has been **without the guidance of the word of YHWH for a long time**; Israel has constantly done evil in the sight of YHWH. Now even YHWH's own priesthood is defiling Israel's worship. YHWH has raised up Samuel, a man almost of the stature of Moses. Samuel is said to be known from Dan to Beersheba, throughout the entire realm which David would later administer; his word goes out to all Israel (3:20-4:1a).

I Samuel 4:1b-7:1 The Capture and Return of the Ark

In 4:1b-7:1, attention shifts from the affairs of Samuel to the increased pressure on Israel from the Philistines. In fact, Samuel disappears from the narrative for these three chapters, the hero of which is not a human but the ark of YHWH. Encamped at Aphek, the Philistines attack the Israelites and defeat them (4:10-11). To regain the support of YHWH, the Israelites send for the ark, which has been kept at the shrine at Shiloh where Eli, his sons, and Samuel are priests. When the Philistines hear of the presence of the ark, they are concerned about the possibility of increased supernatural aid for Israel. Their concern seems, at this point, unnecessary: again they defeat the Israelites. They capture the ark and kill the sons of Eli who are attending (4:5-11). Thus the prophecy of the doom of Eli's house begins to come to pass.

The judgment moves quickly to include Eli, his daughter-in-law, and, in a sense, his grandson. When Eli hears the news of the battle, of the death of his sons, and particularly of the capture of the ark—for this is his ultimate concern—he falls over and breaks his neck. The news causes his son Phinehas' wife premature birth pangs, and **she dies giving birth to a son**. Before she dies, she names the baby Ichabod meaning "the glory has departed"—the capture of the ark means that YHWH's presence, or "glory," has left Israel (4:21-22). Thus three generations are affected by the curse.

The Philistines take the ark to the city of Ashdod, one of their five strongholds on the coastal plain. It was not unusual for an army to take the gods of conquered peoples and incorporate them into their family of deities. The Philistines put the ark into the temple of Dagon, a god of cereal crops. This is certainly to symbolize the ascendancy of their national god over the national god of their enemy Israel. But YHWH has not been defeated or tamed by the victory of the Philistines over the people. The purpose of this story is to show that YHWH's fate is not to be identified with the fate of Israel. **Though Israel is defeated, YHWH continues to rule**. Indeed it was YHWH who brought judgment on the people, and it was YHWH's power rather than that of the Philistines which determined the outcome of the battle. Normally in ancient thought, if a people were conquered, their god or gods were shown to be

320

weaker than those of the victors. For Israel, however, YHWH's fortunes cannot be tied to the success or failure of the people. YHWH rules them. They prosper when YHWH blesses them, and they perish when

YHWH removes support.

The power of YHWH is felt even within the territory of the Philistines: the morning after the ark is installed in Dagon's shrine, the image of Dagon is found lying face downward on the ground in a position of adoration "before the ark of the LORD." This is no accident. When the image is replaced, it falls again, and this time it is dismembered by the power of YHWH (5:4-5).

YHWH also sends a plague on the city of Ashdod: the people become afflicted with "tumors" (5:6). The reference to "mice that ravage the land" (6:5) may suggest that the city is struck with an epidemic of bubonic plague. More likely we should interpret this as two manifestations of the power of YHWH—first over the people and second over their produce. That it is YHWH's doing is the conclusion of the Philistines themselves, and not simply an editorial comment by the Israelite storyteller. They determine to get rid of the ark, sending it to the city of Gath. The plague strikes that city also, so the ark is sent to Ekron. The citizens of Ekron have no desire to reap the questionable benefits of this visitation, and insist on a council of the Philistine leaders in order to get rid of the Israelite cult object altogether (5:7-12).

To solve the problem, the Philistine priests and diviners prescribe a plan that combines a remedy with a test. They put the ark in a cart, to be drawn by two milk cows, animals who would be unaccustomed to pulling a cart and to following any particular route from the city. Along with the ark go five gold figures shaped like the tumors caused by the plague, and five gold mice. If the cows pull the cart in the direction of Israelite territory, it is presumably because YHWH is so directing it. In that event, the gold figures will carry away the plagues as well as appease YHWH. If the cart stays within Philistine territory, it will demonstrate that YHWH was not the cause of the plagues—"it happened to us by chance" (6:1-9).

The cart with the ark in it heads directly to the Israelite town of Beth-shemesh. The Levites, the only ones permitted by the Law to handle the ark, take it from the cart and offer sacrifices to YHWH on an altar made from a great stone. The Philistines, seeing the destination of the cart, return to Ekron satisfied that it was indeed YHWH who had caused their troubles and that the troubles will now cease.

The ark has not yet found its resting place, however. Some of the "men of Bethshemesh"—presumably not Levites—"greeted the ark of the LORD" (6:19), and YHWH slays seventy of them. Some commentators have speculated that the ark was infested with the disease which had plagued the Philistine cities, and that it was this disease that killed the men of Beth-shemesh. For the storyteller the significance of the incident is that the power of the divine holiness causes the deaths. The awesome holiness of YHWH cannot be approached by ordinary people; to "see" God or even to come too close to God's presence is more than any mortal can bear. But the storyteller also has to account for the ark's further movement, for it moves one more time: it is brought to Kiriath-jearim and a priest is ordained to care for it properly. The ark will remain at Kiriath-jearim until David has it brought to Jerusalem

Chapter 20 I Samuel 7:2-17 Samuel, the Judge

to establish that city as his cult center.

It is impossible to be sure what is meant by the expression ". . . and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD" (7:2). The Hebrew is very difficult at this point. It may mean, although the text itself cannot be made to say this, that Israel turned from YHWH to other gods; this would fit with Samuel's plea (7:3) for Israel to put away the Baals and the Ashtaroth (feminine fertility deities). As the text stands, it apparently means that the house of Israel begged YHWH for twenty years with laments and wailing to come to its aid.

Following Samuel's instructions to put away the foreign gods, Israel gathers at the shrine of Mizpah for a

purification ceremony (7:5-6). Nowhere else in the Old Testament is there a ceremony like this, in which water is used as the symbol of purification from sin. We should not read into this account a connection between the Mizpah ceremony and baptism, though the cleansing symbolism of water may be common to them both. No such connection is made in the New Testament.

The Philistines hear of the gathering. They seem to assume it is for political purposes, and certainly then as now a religious gathering could easily ignite a political revolution. But the Israelites have no military ability to defend themselves. They turn in fear to Samuel. He acts as their general, but a general who makes war by prayer and sacrifice. The story makes it quite clear that the people have no part in the defeat of the Philistines. The victory is entirely YHWH's. YHWH answers Samuel's prayer, thundering "with a mighty voice" and the Philistines flee in terror (7:7-10). The Israelites have but to pursue to secure what they previously had lost.

Samuel erects a stone as a shrine or marker and calls the place Ebenezer (literally, "stone of help"). In 5:1 Ebenezer was the place at which the Israelites, an apostate people represented by the doomed house of Eli, were defeated. Now YHWH himself has brought victory under Samuel, and naming the place Ebenezer symbolizes the reversal of Israel's fortunes. According to the ending of this story, the Philistines are completely subdued, Israel regains its lost territory, and there is no more trouble from Philistine conquest as long as Samuel judges (7:13-14). The Amorites (Canaanites) also live in peace with Israel during this time. All this is possible because of the presence and leadership of Samuel, judge over all Israel—the picture is of an annual circuit that includes Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, as well as Ramah, Samuel's home. At all these places Samuel "judges" Israel and portrays one who rules in both sacral and political capacity over a land at peace. A major crisis—represented by the military power of the Philistines—has been met. All is well in Israel under Yahweh and his prophet, Samuel. Thus ends this first part of I Samuel; the stage is set for what will happen next. Into this harmony will come the people of Israel with a demand. As one scholar puts it, "at this point in history the people of Israel could perpetrate no greater breach of trust, no more arbitrary exercise of self-will, no more senseless deed of vanity than to demand for themselves a human king"

(McCarter, p. 151).

Summary

The picture of life in Canaan immediately after the entrance of the tribes of Israel into the land comes clear in the Book of Judges and in these early chapters of

322

I Samuel. Loosely bound together under covenant to a common deity, a group of nomads moved in and settled among the agricultural inhabitants of the land. There were battles, in many of which the vigor and mobility of the desert people overcame the more sedentary settled peoples. The more highly developed political, cultural, and economic way of life of Canaan was viewed with distrust by the newcomers, but more and more they adopted it as time went on. Eventually it became difficult to distinguish between the newly arrived Israelites and their Canaanite neighbors. Inevitably someone, moved by one or more of the problems and difficulties which developed, would issue a call to return to the old ways once followed in the desert, rallying the people around the covenant and the god of former times. **It was impossible to maintain the level of commitment which such "reformations" called forth since there was no central authority either to symbolize or to enforce unity and identity;** there was no king in Israel.

World history has witnessed many such occurrences. Crude but vital "barbarians" living outside the circle of "civilization," that is, of city life, overcome a settled people, only to be overcome themselves by a way of life that is "higher" in terms of successful dealing with the circumstances of the city. Young Rome conquered ancient Greece, and was converted to Greek culture; **Germanic tribes conquered Rome, and became Latin-speaking Europeans.**

Common though this sequence is, the Israelites forged from their experience of it a novel interpretation: it showed YHWH's continuing direction of the course of history. In Israel's relation with her neighbors, if Israel was faithful to the covenant, YHWH gave prosperity; if Israel forgot its terms, YHWH brought oppression at the hands of enemies. This pattern is easily trivialized into a mere formula for success: good religion brings good business. This distortion, however, misses the emphasis that the Deuteronomic writer makes: **it is not that faithfulness brings success** so much as that YHWH, as Lord of history, wills that YHWH's people be distinct from their neighbors. If we understand this theology of history as a formula, we find the picture it paints too simplistic. It suggests too much that good fortune always follows from fidelity, and that evil deeds always bring forth punishment. That is hardly an accurate picture of life in all its complexities. So the suffering of the innocent and the success of the unrighteous became problems with which Israelite theology would wrestle at great length, with no clear simple resolution. Still, as a central belief, the conviction that YHWH rules history is a necessary aspect of Israel's belief that YHWH is Lord.

YHWH's control over events in history, however, is never understood as one of complete and unrestrained manipulation. Israel's response to YHWH, whether positive or negative, has an effect. At times the biblical writers seem to be saying that YHWH actually causes Israel's response—as in I Sam. 2:25 when the sons of Eli do not repent, “for it was the will of the LORD to kill them.” In spite of such passages, it is clear that Israel's sin is a matter of choice, and that YHWH responds to Israel's actions. It is a relationship of dialogue: YHWH calls Israel to live under the covenant; Israel responds with faithful obedience, or with apostasy; YHWH responds with blessing or punishment; Israel responds again to YHWH with faith

323

or apostasy; and the cycle continues.

In the Deuteronomist's view, events of human life become the context for revelation. They are seen as constituting a purposeful dialogue of call and response between God and his world. This insight allows the biblical writers to depict history as under the purposeful direction of God without negating the freedom and responsibility of humankind. The world is no puppet theater with humans reduced to playthings for the gods or mere victims of fate. Rather, as God has given to men and women the freedom to respond with a “yea” or “nay,” so God retains the freedom of reaction (“yea” or “nay”) to their response. Creation and sin, encountering the divine responses of judgment and salvation, move history toward its redemption.

324

End of chapter

To combat distortions^{back}

A charitable explanation.

There is evidence^{back}

What evidence?

Abused so badly^{back}

There's more. She crawls back to the house, and dies with her hands stretched out on the threshold. In the morning the Levite come out, sees her lying there, and says "***Get up, let's be going.***" Discovering that she's dead, he slings her body over a donkey and carries her home, before dismembering her.

Carry off a woman^{back}

Sort of like the rape of the Sabine women in Roman legend.

More closely related^{back}

But didn't you just say that the reference is to Samuel, and that Old-Testament etymologies aren't worth much anyway? How I miss John Ciardi and his half-baked etymologies on NPR in the morning!

Luke seems to have perceived... [back](#)

So is Luke's account historical or literary? Actually that isn't a fair criticism. Ancient writers of history felt much less compunction about making up what they thought ought to have happened.

Offend our sensibilities, but... [back](#)

In other words, it's none of our business..

The word of the Lord was rare^{back}

Compare Plutarch, who was a priest of Apollo at Delphi in the early second century AD. He wrote an essay explaining why the oracle wasn't producing much lately. Among other things, he says that since the population of Greece has fallen since Classical times, there wasn't so much need for oracles.

[back](#)

Which came first, the lack of guidance or the corruption of the priesthood?

she dies giving birth^{back}

There's an old joke that ends "...the dog came out and cold-nosed him, and he fainted and broke his arm."

YHWH's power^{back}

Nice theory. God rules, win or lose.

Tumors^{back}

The KJV says "emerods," hemorrhoids.

central authority^{back}

Some of us aren't real big on having a central authority to enforce religious conformity.

and became Latin-speaking^{back}

oder nicht

Not that faithfulness brings success^{back}

Just for fun, let's read or re-read the [Recording Angel's letter to Abner Scofield](#), coal-merchant of Buffalo.

