

1 SAMUEL 1

Introduction

The first book of Samuel continues the historical narrative after the book of Judges. The narrative of both 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel dates somewhere between 1100 and 961 BC. The books describe the transition from a tribal federation to a monarchy.

One of the important changes noted in the books of Samuel was the rise of the authority of prophets as opposed to that of the priests or judges. Samuel—both the book and the person—marks a transition into the Hebrew prophetic tradition. As the monarchy grew in power, God sent prophets to check the power of the kings and to warn the people when they forgot to worship the Lord.

Another important transition recorded in the books of Samuel was the house of God's move to the center of the kingdom. The tabernacle located in Shiloh housed the ark of the covenant (and was the site where Samuel's parents worshipped annually). The ark eventually made its way to the center of the kingdom, in Jerusalem. At the end of 2 Samuel, David purchased a threshing floor that was to become the site for Solomon's temple.

In general, the books of Samuel show the consequences of the abuse of power—particularly how it leads to unrighteousness and failure. The prophets provided a system of checks and balances to the power of the kings, and this story provides extraordinary insight into human nature and the constant struggle for God's people to remain righteous.

1:1

The history picks up just before the birth of Samuel. Although several individuals before Samuel were called by the Hebrew word *navi* (“prophet”)—for example, Abraham, Moses, and Miriam—it was with Samuel that the biblical prophetic tradition started. Jewish tradition also considers Samuel to be the first prophet. See for example, Peter’s speech in Acts 3:24: “Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days” (New King James Version).

Samuel’s father, Elkanah, lived in the hill country north of Jerusalem and was a descendant of Ephraim.

1:2

That Hannah had been unable to have children and her rivalry with Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah, is a motif that reminds us of other great women—Sarah and Rachel from the Old Testament and Elizabeth and Mary from the New Testament—known for becoming the mothers of God’s servants. From the start of the narrative, even before he is born, we know that Samuel will become a chosen man of God.

God’s covenant with Abraham included the promise of posterity for those who kept His laws and statutes. Since Hannah didn’t have children, people of the time interpreted that to mean that she would be cut off from the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. The author of 1 Samuel implied that the Lord had prevented her from having children, which would have been a common thought of barren women at the time of the book’s writing.

Another possibility, however, is to interpret Hannah’s lack of children as a biblical motif of righteous women who, for a time, were unable to have children. When they did bear a child, it was because God had a purpose and mission for the child. It is not that God had deprived the women of enjoying the blessings of the covenant but rather that God was blessing them and showing His power and love for His people through the women.

1:3

The city of Shiloh was in a central location among the tribes of Israel and had become a sacred place because of the tabernacle. The name is considered to be a prophecy of the Messiah. The name’s first appearance is in Genesis 49:10, which reads, “The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.”

1:5

The portions Elkanah gave to his wives and children are the parts of the animal sacrifice that were not burned on the altar. Hannah's double portion showed that Elkanah loved her over Peninnah. This account of Elkanah's preferring one wife over the other continues the biblical barren women motif, reminding us of the stories of Abraham with Sarah and Hagar and of Jacob with Rachel and Leah.

1:9–11

Hannah made a covenant that if she were to have a son, he would be completely dedicated to serving the Lord. Among the covenant people, all firstborn children and animals belonged to the Lord (see Exodus 13:2). This consecration or dedication referred to the Passover, when the Lord killed all the firstborns of Egypt. To remember the occasion, the Lord commanded Moses to dedicate all firstborn males to Him.

Hannah's prayer implied, however, more than fulfilment of the commandment. Her son would be dedicated, and she would "give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head" (1 Samuel 1:11). This is similar to the language of the Nazarite vow found in Numbers 6:5: "All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD, he shall be holy" (New King James Version).

Samuel's dedication would later be fulfilled as he became servant to the priest Eli at the tabernacle.

1:12–16

This sidenote to the story, in which Eli thought that Hannah might be drunk, gives us a glimpse into a more human and humorous part of the story. Hannah had just promised the Lord that her son would dedicate his life as a Nazarite and thus would not cut his hair nor drink wine as part of his vow.¹

Eli's accusation that Hannah was drunk would have been especially insulting after she had vowed to dedicate her son to live wine-free.

1:17

Eli, being the high priest in charge of the tabernacle, had the authority to speak on behalf of the Lord. Hannah was promised a child.

¹ See Numbers 6:3: "He shall separate himself from wine and similar drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from similar drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins."

1:19

The location of Ramah, Elkanah and Hannah's hometown, is not known. The word in Hebrew means "height" so could indicate any town set on top of a hill.

1:20

Samuel's name means "heard of God." Hannah's explanation in this verse for naming Samuel—"because I have asked him of the LORD"—develops a theme. God had heard Hannah's prayer and answered it. Later in the story, Eli, who became blind, helped Samuel to recognize when he had heard the voice of God.

1:22

Hannah waited until Samuel was weaned before presenting him at the tabernacle to serve the Lord. In ancient times, children weren't weaned from their mother's breast until they were two or three years old. That Samuel wasn't much older than that is emphasized in verse 24: "And the child was young."

1:24

When she took Samuel to Shiloh to serve at the tabernacle, Hannah brought "three bullocks, and one ephah of flour, and a bottle of wine." The young bulls or calves would have been offered as sacrifices to give thanks and symbolized Samuel's dedication or sanctification. The meat, flour, and wine would serve to feed to tabernacle priests.

1:27–28

Hannah reminded Eli of the day she had prayed at the door of the tabernacle for a son. The Hebrew word translated as "lent" can also mean "granted," or given as a gift. Samuel was lent to the Lord and would serve Him at the tabernacle.

The story of Hannah's bringing Samuel to the tabernacle echoes the story of Mary and Joseph's bringing Jesus on their annual trip to the temple in Jerusalem during the Passover. Perhaps Luke included the story to make a connection with the earliest prophetic writings and specifically to Samuel's consecration and service.

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