

AN INTRODUCTION TO 1 SAMUEL

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There are two kinds of problem that confront the serious student of 1 Samuel. On the one hand there are the problems that arise from the nature of the historical record itself. The period of history covered by 1 Samuel is very complex and momentous. It is one of the most crucial epochs in the whole history of the nation of Israel. Such a period makes great demands upon all who would endeavour to grasp the vital issues which are at stake. Inevitably it presents problems in the realm of understanding and interpretation. The fact that there are substantial lacunae in the record serves initially to heighten these problems. On the other hand there are those problems which are due solely to the pre-suppositions of Old Testament scholars. They arise only as a consequence of assuming that the author of Samuel has endeavoured to combine into a single narrative accounts from different sources. Thus parallel accounts of the same events are found to be discrepant and even contradictory. In fact when the real problems of understanding and interpretation are satisfactorily dealt with, the allegation of divergent sources is robbed of any seeming plausibility.

The Importance of the Correct Approach

It is a mistake to focus first of all upon the problems. Many, if not most, of the problems are due to a mistaken overall view of this two-volumed history. The division between I and II Samuel, though convenient, is unoriginal and artificial. It became necessary as a matter of expediency when the Hebrew text was translated into Greek. The vowel-less Hebrew text took up far less space than the Greek translation. It was not until the early sixteenth century that this division was introduced into printed copies of the Hebrew Bible. It is essential, then, to approach I Samuel as but the first half of a carefully planned

and intricately-structured history-work. That the entire work should bear Samuel's name even though the narrative runs on some forty years beyond his death is an eloquent testimony to the outstanding importance of this great judge and prophet of Israel. Never did Israel's chances of survival seem more slender than when Samuel at God's bidding assumed the office of judge. His wise, vigorous and above all, God-directed leadership brought the nation back from the brink of overwhelming disaster. He steered Israel through the momentous transition from loose tribal federalism to the establishment of the monarchy. Both Saul and David were anointed by him. Though David came to the throne some years after Samuel's death, it is plain that the latter's influence upon him had been of a profound and lasting nature.

Doubtless the author of Samuel, whoever he was, had a number of written sources available to him from which he constructed his great history. It is, however, entirely wrong to regard the work as a mere compilation. There is unmistakable evidence of a definite plan underlying the Book as a whole. The author has used his sources to set forth the unfolding of God's great eternal purposes in all that transpired during this crucially-important period in the life of the nation of Israel. The method of the historian is not hard to discover. He rounds off each main section of the narrative with a summary. Samuel's judgeship concludes with the summary in chapter 7:15-17. Saul's reign falls into two parts separated by the summary of chapter 14: 47-52. The characteristic formula marking the official commencement of his reign is to be found in chapter 13:1 following the account of the founding of the monarchy in chapters 8-12. This means that chapter 15 stands by itself as a transitional chapter. It is here that the author describes the solemn circumstances of Saul's rejection by God for his wilful disobedience in connection with the extermination of the Amalekites. From this point

onwards, although Saul continues to reign over Israel, he ceases to represent Yahweh. Chapter 16 records the private anointing of David by Samuel as Israel's future king and from this point onwards David is principally the subject of the narrative to the end of I Samuel.

The same method, of course, is employed in II Samuel. Chapter 8 is a summary giving a survey of David's wars and concluding with a detailed list of his chief ministers of state. This in fact completes what may be termed the official account of his reign. Chapters 9-20 are more concerned with David the man than David the king. At the close of chapter 20 there is a second summary - verses 23-26 - and the last four chapters form an appendix comprising six distinct parts. Here important material is preserved which could not have been conveniently fitted into the preceding narrative. More than mere expediency lies behind this arrangement. While it is true that the main themes of this history are the establishment of the monarchy and the development of the prophetic office as a strong counter-balance against any tendency on the part of the king to rule despotically, the author is also concerned with the priesthood and the true worship of Yahweh. His narrative opens with a description of the deplorable state of affairs at the central sanctuary at Shiloh where Eli the high priest fails to check the sacrilegious and immoral behaviour of his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. It is fitting, then, that the last chapter of II Samuel should refer to David's consecration of the site of the future temple on Mount Moriah which God had promised him his son should build. In this masterly way, the end points back to the beginning.

The Unique Character of Biblical History

All historians are necessarily selective in the histories that they write. Their selection of what to include and what to omit is dictated by the aims that they have set themselves. An historian reveals his own value-judgements, his point of view, his personal convictions in the selection he makes from the mass of material available. There is no such thing as purely

objective history. Biblical historians are no exception to this rule. There is this all-important difference however. They write under the constraint and direction of the Holy Spirit. What is reflected in their historical writings is not their point of view, nor their value-judgements but God's. Biblical history is thus entirely unique and does not conform to the secular view of history at all. It is because this basic point has not been grasped that Old Testament scholars have been so wildly astray in their appraisal of such histories as I and II Samuel.

We have clear evidence that the author of Samuel and his contemporaries were well acquainted with certain events which he has not included in his narrative. For example, he nowhere explains how the Mosaic tabernacle came to be located in Nob in the reign of Saul (I Sam.22:1ff) whereas it was in Shiloh in the time of Eli (I Sam.1:3,9). He draws a veil of silence over the fate of Shiloh after the Philistine victory at Eben-ezer. He makes a passing allusion to Saul's massacre of the Gibeonites in II Sam.21 and evidently makes the assumption that the episode was well-known though he has not included it in his record of Saul's reign. Saul's banishment of necromancers from Israel is referred to only in order to show why the witch at Endor was so reluctant to oblige Saul when he appeared in disguise at her house (I Sam.28:3,9).

The history recorded in the Books of Samuel is selective and not exhaustive and this must be borne constantly in mind when attempting to grapple with the problems that the narrative poses at various points. At the same time, the entire approach to history is vastly different from that of the secular historian. We expect historians to concentrate on events of major political and national importance - successful military campaigns, the extension of the boundaries of the kingdom, the material and economic state of society, advance in educational standards

and such like. Only two of Saul's many military campaigns during his reign are described in any detail - the Philistine campaign in chapter 14 and that against the Amalekites in chapter 15. The author's interest in these campaigns is due to the light they throw on Saul's character. They plainly reveal his conception of religion and his attitude to God. For the very same reason David's encounter with Goliath is narrated in almost minute detail (I Sam. 17). It is true that the sequel to his successful duel was the complete rout of the Philistine armies, but even so the expansion of this incident is out of all proportion having regard simply to purely historical considerations. The author intends to set David over against Saul in terms of his attitude to God. David's childlike confidence in God stands in the sharpest contrast to Saul's self-reliance. (Cf. II Samuel 8 where David's many military campaigns are briefly noted and the detailed account of the Ammonite War in chapters 10-12. The latter is expanded because of David's serious moral lapse and his whole-hearted repentance.)

It is also noteworthy that matters that might seem almost trivial judged by the canons of the secular historian are given considerable prominence in the narrative of the books of Samuel. For example, the rivalry between Elkanah's two wives, Hannah and Penninah, is described at length. The author even mentions the fact that Hannah made a little coat for her son Samuel every year and brought it to the tabernacle in Shiloh where Samuel was assisting the elderly Eli. The author is at pains to note Samuel's physical and spiritual growth through childhood and provides a memorable and moving account of his call to the prophetic office whilst still but a lad. These very personal and intimate details respecting Samuel's birth and spiritual development as also the extended account of David's life as an outlaw and later on of his family life when king lie in the forefront of the author's purpose and design. These two men of God have special significance for the whole history of Israel as the theocratic kingdom. C.F. Keil observes, "*Samuel*

was the model and type of the prophets; and embodied in his own person the spirit and nature of the prophetic office; whilst his attitude to Saul foreshadowed the position which the prophet was to assume in relation to the king." (Intro. to Com. of The Books of Samuel, p10) David, on the other hand became the ideal of kingship in Israel. In spite of his moral failure, he was "a man after His [the LORD's] own heart" (I Sam.13:14). He has much greater significance even than this. Jonathan Edwards with clear Scriptural warrant holds him to be "the greatest of all personal types of Christ, [he] did not only perfect Joshua's work in giving Israel the possession of the promised land, but he also finished Moses' work in perfecting the instituted worship of Israel". (Hist. of Redemption, Works Vol I, p552)

It is needful, therefore to see the Books of Samuel in the context of the unfolding of God's eternal purposes not only for His people but for the world as a whole. Before God gave His covenant law to Israel on Mt. Sinai, He had already disclosed His purpose regarding their adoption - that they should be "a kingdom of priests" (Ex.19:5,6). Israel were to be not only a priestly nation - set apart from all other nations as the congregation of the Lord - but also a royal nation, the kingdom of God. Keil, therefore rightly stresses, "The establishment of the earthly monarchy ... was not only an eventful turning-point, but also an epoch-making advance in the development of Israel towards the goal set before it in its divine calling". (op. cit. p9) This kingdom ruled over by God through the Davidic king was to be transformed into a spiritual kingdom, the Church, whose kingly Head is great David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. It was God's purpose all along that Israel should have a king. Hence in Hannah's inspired song at the birth of Samuel she is led up to the triumph of God's kingdom through "His king ... His anointed" (I Sam.2:10). The prophecy in her hymn was

initially fulfilled in David, but this was a pledge of its ultimate and complete fulfilment in the triumph of Christ over all His foes. This is confirmed in the covenant that God made with David in II Samuel chapter 7. When this is borne in mind, it makes for a much clearer understanding of the important chapters relating to the founding of the monarchy in Israel under Samuel. As a man in intimate touch with God who was well acquainted with the Mosaic Law (Deut.17:14-20) and who had doubtless pondered his own mother's hymn of praise, he could not conceivably have been opposed to the monarchy as such. R.K.Harrison reveals a shallow and inadequate grasp of Samuel's response to Israel's demand for a king to be appointed over them when he says, "... Samuel was unalterably opposed to the idea of kingship in Israel, presumably for the very good reason that it conflicted with his concept of the theocratic ideal" (Intro. to the O.T. p707). Such a view can be maintained only by setting aside the evidence that the Books of Samuel are a carefully-planned history in which the author presents God's unalterable purposes coming to pass through this eventful and crucial period. It is surely significant that Samuel does not demur when God sends him to Bethlehem to anoint David to be Israel's future king. His only hesitation arises from the danger to which he exposes himself in so doing (I Sam.16:1ff).

The Clarification of the Chronology

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of a proper understanding of the chronology of the Books of Samuel. Here lies the key to a solution of a number of the most pressing problems that have in part given rise to the claim that independent and divergent accounts have been woven together by a compiler.

A careful and unprejudiced study shows that there are substantial lacunae in the narrative of I Samuel. On one occasion this is explicitly noted by the author. Having described the return of the ark to Israel after its capture by the Philistines and its subsequent removal to a private house in Kirjath-jearim, he observes,

"And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjath-jearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years" (I Sam.7:2). This long period is passed over in silence. All we know is that at the beginning of the period Israel shows not the slightest signs of turning back to the Lord, in spite of the severe chastisements that she has suffered, but at the close of this period the nation as a whole has been brought to a truly penitent state - "and all the house of Israel lamented after Yahweh". Is it a wild assumption to conclude that this spiritual volte-face is to be attributed to Samuel's nationwide prophetic ministry? Only by making this assumption can we explain the unquestioning acceptance of his leadership both as prophet and judge which made possible the national convention at Mizpah leading to Divine intervention and the overwhelming victory over the Philistines at Ebenezer. The sequel to this victory was a long period of peace with entire freedom from Philistine aggression. Yet the author has provided us with no more than the briefest of summaries (I Sam.7:13-17). He resumes his account when Samuel is old and entrusts some of his responsibilities to his sons in the hope that they may eventually succeed him (I Sam.8:1). It is impossible to estimate accurately how many years lie between the victory at Ebenezer and the commencement of chapter 8. It may be considered that twenty years are barely sufficient to bring Samuel from his prime to the threshold of old age. When this hiatus is taken into account it is not difficult to reconcile the statement of chapter 7: 13 - "so the Philistines were subdued, and they came no more within the border of Israel, and the hand of Yahweh was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel" - with that of chapter 9:16 - "thou shalt anoint him to be captain over my people Israel that he may save my people out of the hand of the Philistines: for I have looked upon my people, because their cry is come unto me".

Perhaps the greatest difficulties in the chronology are connected with Saul. He is described on his first meeting with Samuel as "*a choice young man*". He is very much dependent upon his servant for the knowledge of his whereabouts during his search for his father's asses and is willing to be beholden to him for the money-gift - a quarter of a silver shekel - which they propose to give to "*the seer*" for his help in enabling them to recover the asses (I Sam.9:6-9). Here is a young man unsure of himself with a pleasing modesty about his gifts and abilities (I Sam.10:22) which some misconstrue as evidence of his incompetence to lead the nation successfully (I Sam.10:27). It is a very different Saul that confronts us in chapter 13. Here we meet a very self-possessed man showing great courage in a time of serious crisis who is prepared to act independently of Samuel, if not in defiance of him. He has a son, Jonathan, who is adult enough to take command of a section of Saul's army in a time of national peril. If we accept that the author has given a consistent record of these events, we are bound to acknowledge that many years must have elapsed to make conceivable these obvious changes. This long period of time is more than sufficient to account for the great deterioration of Israel's position in relation to the Philistines. The kind of strangle-hold which the Philistines have over Israel in chapter 13 would have rendered impossible the national assembly which Samuel convened in chapter 10 which issued in Saul's election as Israel's king. Likewise Saul's march to the relief of Jabesh-gilead at the head of 330,000 Israelites in chapter 11 presupposes that the Philistines were by no means in a position of control over Israel. An understanding of the chronology of this period largely removes the problems which at first sight might seem insoluble.

It is recognised that the Hebrew text of I and II Samuel has not been as well preserved as the majority of the books of the Old Testament. In particular the statement regarding the length of Saul's reign in chapter 13:1 has evidently suffered in transmission.

The literal translation of the Hebrew is: "Saul was a year old when he became king ..." If the author's original statement had been accurately transcribed we should have been relieved of the necessity to resort to conjecture with regard to the chronology of his reign. We must not overlook, however, that the apostle Paul gives the length of Saul's reign as forty years (Acts 13:21), As Ishbosheth, his fourth eldest son, is stated to have been forty years old when he commenced his reign over the ten north Israelite tribes five years after Saul's death (II Sam.2:10,11), this would well agree with Saul's having been Israel's king for forty years.

Samuel's Apparent Opposition to the Monarchy in Israel

We have now established that the author of Samuel was no mere compiler, but the author of a finely-conceived and skilfully-executed historical work. He was without doubt a prophet who perceived behind and in all the events that he records in his book the eternal purposes of God coming to fruition. There is no question of God's hand being forced by circumstances. It might appear at first sight that the introduction of the monarchy into Israel was an unforeseen and undesirable development, obscuring if not destroying the nature of Israel as a theocratic nation. But this is a superficial impression which reverent and careful study does not sustain.

What emerges clearly in the narrative in chapters 8-12 is that the people are tired of the theocracy. They consider themselves to be at a disadvantage to the surrounding nations in not having a king. Their idea of the monarchy was based entirely upon what they had learned from their contact with the nations round about them. Yet God, through Moses, had laid down that a future Israelite king must be fundamentally different from the kings of the Gentile nations (Deut.17:14-20). He must not rely upon military power, he must not have a harem, he must beware of the temptation to amass wealth, and above

all he must be entirely subservient to Yahweh seeking at all times to conform his life to the law of God.

Samuel's deep displeasure at the people's demand for a king was partly due to his sense of the nation's ingratitude, but chiefly because he understood that this demand reflected their dissatisfaction with the theocracy as such. God confirms that this is so when he tells Samuel, "they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me that I should not reign over them" (I Sam.8:7). When God intimates to Samuel that He will send him a man from Benjamin, He instructs him to "anoint him to be captain over my people Israel" (I Sam.9:15). When Saul arrives, Yahweh confirms to Samuel, "Behold the man of whom I spake to thee. This same shall reign over my people Israel" (v.17). God's avoidance of the term 'king' and 'reign' was to mark off Israel's kings as Yahweh's representatives, His viceregents and not kings in the absolute sense. The rupture between Samuel and Saul and Yahweh's rejection of Saul was precisely because Saul was unwilling to be king in the מֶלֶךְ sense but was determined to be king in the מֶלֶךְ sense. When the term מֶלֶךְ is used by Yahweh in (I Sam.16:1) it is to be understood in the restricted sense reflected in the word מֶלֶךְ . One of the aims of the author of Samuel is to set forth the uniqueness of the monarchy in Israel. He does so by comparing and contrasting Saul with David. It is a sad sequel to the history of the Books of Samuel that so few of David's successors were content to be kings in the מֶלֶךְ sense.

We have by no means tackled all the problems of I Samuel. We have endeavoured to deal with the major ones. Chiefly we have indicated that the satisfactory resolution of these problems can be made only when this great historical record is recognised for what it is - not only a self-consistent and skilful composition, but history written from God's standpoint and revealing the outworking of His immutable and eternal purposes.

(The author has agreed to provide an exposition of a selected passage of I Sam. for the next issue of The Journal)