

The New International Commentary
on the Old Testament



THE FIRST BOOK OF
SAMUEL

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I. "STORY OF SAMUEL" — WITH THE EMBEDDED "STORY OF THE ARK OF GOD" (1:1–7:17)

The beginning of the First Book of Samuel is placed late in the period of the judges, which is probably the mid-eleventh century B.C. It is set against the background of "the grand finale" of the book of Judges, chapters 17–21, which gives "a disconcerting picture of cultic and moral chaos," as described in the formulaic expression: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 17:6; 21:25).¹ In this dark time in the history of Israel, Yahweh chose as his prophet Samuel, who was destined to appoint the first kings in Israel. Thus, the first seven chapters, chs. 1–7, constitute a unified whole, dealing with the transitional period from the end of judgeship to the new era of kingship.²

The story of the ark (4:1–7:1), which constitutes itself a unified episode, is embedded in the entire story of Samuel (1:1–7:17). Its embedding, however, is intentional and well planned, as the very first verse (4:1a) refers back to the preceding section (ch. 3). Recent scholarly emphasis on the unity and "interconnections" between the embedded story of the ark and its surrounding chapters in 1 Samuel 1–7 is a welcome feature, though one need not wait until the exilic era, as Polzin and Birch do,³ in order to write out this early event in the history of Israel. The present writer is inclined to take the account in chs. 4–6 as pre-Davidic, though its final editing into a wider section, chs. 1–7, could be during the early Davidic era; see "Introduction."

A. RISE OF SAMUEL AS PROPHET (1:1–3:21)

1 Samuel 1–3 deals with the rise of the prophet Samuel in contrast to the decline of the Shilonite priesthood. This is reflected in the alternating literary structure ABABBA.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. IV: *Vow and Desire (1 Sam. 1–12)* (SSN 31; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), p. 1.

2. For the essential unity of chs. 1–7, see J. T. Willis, "An Anti-Elide Narrative Tradition from a Prophetic Circle at the Ramah Sanctuary," *JBL* 90 (1971) 288–308; "Samuel versus Eli, 1. Sam. 1–7," *TZ* 35 (1979) 201–12.

3. R. Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part II: 1 Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp. 5, 55–79; B. C. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. II, ed. L. E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), p. 996.

THE FIRST BOOK OF SAMUEL

- (A) Birth of Samuel, with the embedded prayer of Hannah (1:1–2:11)
- (B) Sins of Eli's sons (2:12-17)
- (A) Samuel and his family (2:18-21a), with a note of Samuel's growth (2:21b)
- (B) Sins of Eli's sons (2:22-25), with a note of Samuel's growth (2:26),

followed by

- (B) A divine message to Eli through "a man of God" (2:27-36)
- (A) The prophetic call of Samuel (3:1-21).

There is a "resumptive repetition" of the expression, "the boy/Samuel was ministering to/before the Lord," in 1 Sam. 2:11, 18.

In this section, Hannah, Elkanah, and Samuel are sharply contrasted with Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. At that time the ark of God was still at Shiloh, the chief Israelite sanctuary, and was the symbol of Yahweh's presence in the midst of the covenant people, though it was soon to be carried away by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4). Such a dreadful thing had never happened in the history of the covenant people Israel. It was surely one of the darkest times of its history when Samuel was called to be a prophet of the Lord (1 Samuel 3). This teaches us that regardless of how desperate the situation looks outwardly, God is certainly preparing his chosen individuals in order to fulfill his plan and purpose according to his sovereign will and gracious concern for his people.

1 Sam. 1:1–2:11

The birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 1) inaugurated "a decisive period" like the birth of Moses (Exodus 1–2) or of Jesus (Luke 1–2).⁴ A new era — the era of the monarchy — was brought about by the birth of the kingmaker. The story is not just about a devout woman whose prayer was heard. In the midst of an ordinary family life situation, God directed Hannah's life so she played a crucial role as mother of the kingmaker. The one who was to be born to her was not only a prophet of Israel but the one who would establish kingship in Israel, appointing first Saul, then David. This Samuel takes the decisive role in the period of transition from the days of the judges to the monarchical era, leading to the establishment of the House of David and the beginning of the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. If an incident in a woman's ordinary family life could be such a significant step in the eternal

4. A. Caquot and P. de Robert, *Les Livres de Samuel* (CAT VI; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1994), p. 36.

plan of a saving God, each day can be no less significant to a believer for God's plan and purpose.

Although Hannah's prayer for a son (1 Sam. 1:11) does not involve the need of an heir for her husband, C. H. Gordon is right: "Preoccupation with the birth of a son is part of the repertoire of what was worth recording down through the period of the Judges and Samuel, but not thereafter."⁵ But, the "song" (2:1b-10) that Hannah prayed is not so much a thanksgiving for the son as a "hymn" to the sovereign God Yahweh, a song which became the prototype of the Magnificat (Luke 1). Thus, the story of Samuel's birth reaches its climax with the "song" of Hannah in the story unit, 1:1-2:11.⁶

1. Birth and Dedication of Samuel (1:1-28)

A look at the discourse structure, based on the analysis of the "verbal sequence" of the text as it stands (see "Introduction" [Section VI, A]), shows that vv. 1-3 give the background information ("Elkanah and his two wives": SETTING) for the following two EVENTS, that is, "Hannah's prayer and vow" (vv. 4-19: EVENT 1) and the "Dedication of Samuel" (vv. 20-28: EVENT 2). And v. 28 is a transition leading toward the TERMINUS at 2:11, with the embedded "Hannah's song" (2:1b-10). It is noteworthy that the entire chapter begins (v. 3: *This man used to go up*) and ends (v. 28: *they worshipped*) with Elkanah's family worshipping God, and with a focus on Hannah, who will give praise to Yahweh.

a. Elkanah and His Two Wives (1:1-3)

- 1 *There was a man, one of the Zuphites from Ramathaim,
from the hill country of Ephraim;
his name was Elkanah,
son of Jeroham, son of Elihu,
son of Tohu,⁷ son of Zuph
an Ephrathite.*

5. C. H. Gordon, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 156.

6. For various views on the literary structure of this section, see Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, vol. IV; Caquot and de Robert, p. 36; S. Bar-Efrat, "Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative," *VT* 30 (1980) 159; M. Brettler, "The Composition of 1 Samuel 1-2," *JBL* 116 (1997) 607.

7. PN *tôhû*; *tôah* in 1 Chr. 6:19 is simply a shorter variant. See the variation of **thw* and **twh*, both meaning "desert" (D. T. Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Analysis* [JSOTSS 83; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989], p. 17, n. 3).

- 2 *He had two wives:
the name of the first was Hannah
and the name of the second was Peninnah;
Peninnah had children,
but Hannah had no children.*
- 3 *This man used to go up from his city annually⁸
to worship and sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts at Shiloh,
where Eli's⁹ two sons, Hophni and Phinehas,¹⁰
were [acting as] priests for the Lord.*

1-3 In terms of discourse grammar the first three verses constitute the SETTING. While vv. 1-2 introduce the major *dramatis personae*, Elkanah and his wife Hannah, v. 3 explains what this man used to do and where. The mention of Shiloh and the priestly family of Eli as well as *the Lord of Hosts*, the hidden but ultimate agent of the events, foreshadows the entire narrative to come.

1 Like the stories of Saul and of Samson, the story of Samuel starts with the expression: *There was a man* (cf. 1 Sam. 9:1, "There was a man from Benjamin," and Judg. 13:2, "There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites"). The MT *ʾiš ʿehād* is usually translated as "a certain man" (NRSV; NASB; NIV; REB) as in 2 Sam. 18:10. But with this translation, the plural of *šōpīm* (Zuphite) cannot be explained satisfactorily. Hence, most scholars take the pl. *mem* of *šōpīm* as dittography of the following *m* and read *šwpy mhr ʾprym*: for example, "a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from . . ." (REB).¹¹ Another suggestion is to take *šōpīm* without emendation as plural and to connect it with Ramathaim: for example, "Ramathaim-zophim" (KJV; NASB);¹² "Ramathaim of the Zuphites" (JPS). However, it is also possible to see here an instance of the AXB pattern, in

8. Lit., "from days to days"; also Exod. 13:10; Judg. 11:40; 21:19; 1 Sam. 2:19.

9. "Eli" is possibly a short form of *yhw'ly* (Samaria Ostrakon, 55:2) "May the Exalted One preserve alive" (?); see RSP 3 (1981), p. 457; also on a Hebrew seal, N. Avigad and B. Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1997), no. 181. See 1 Sam. 2:10 on *ʾlw*, which might be a divine epithet, "the Exalted One." However, the divine element usually drops from theophoric names like *Nathan*, *Baruch*, etc.

10. The sons' names are probably Egyptian names; see Y. Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic* (SBLDS 173; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 211, 222.

11. E.g., P. K. McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (AB 8; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), p. 51; also Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry*, vol. IV, p. 558.

12. Caquot and de Robert, p. 33.

which AB: *'ehād šôpîm* (one of the Zuphites) is interrupted by the insertion of X: *min-hārāmāyîm* (from Ramathaim) while keeping the relationship between A and B; hence, X modifies A . . . B as a whole; see "Introduction" (Section VII, C). With this explanation, the pl. form of *šôpîm* causes no problem, and the phrase is translated *one of the Zuphites from Ramathaim*.

This man is described as *one of the Zuphites*, a description in harmony with the *son of Zuph an Ephrathite* of the end of this verse. It is also in keeping with 1 Sam. 9:5, which places Samuel's home town in "the land of Zuph." Zuph is the ancestor of a local clan, while Ephraim is the tribal ancestor.¹³

The location of *Ramathaim* is a matter of dispute. McCarter identifies it with modern Rentis, about 16 miles east of Tel Aviv on the western slope of the hills of Ephraim.¹⁴ Later in the book it is called *Ramah* (1 Sam. 1:19; 2:11; 8:4; 25:1; 28:3), the usual name for Samuel's home town (7:17), which is presumably "the city where the man of God was" (9:10), the Zuphite Ramah (9:5). Eusebius associated it with Arimathea of the NT and identified it with the village of Rempthis, whereas Jerome located it in the region of Timnah, about 9 miles northwest of Bethel. On the identification of Ramah, see on 1:19. The city was called *Ramathaim* (lit. "two hills") probably because there were two hills associated with it; one for the city itself and the other for a high place. According to 1 Samuel 9, the high place, which was presumably on a hilltop (see 9:25), was located outside the city, which was itself on the top of a hill (see 9:11f.).

Elkanah ("God created"; cf. Gen. 14:19) must have been from a well-to-do family (see on 1 Sam. 1:24), as suggested by his pedigree and his dual marriage.¹⁵ The phrase "the Ephrathites" can refer either to "those hailing from Ephrath" (i.e., Bethlehem) or "Ephraimites," members of the northern tribe of Ephraim (Judg. 12:5; 1 K. 11:26).¹⁶ According to Haran, *'eprāt* or *'eprātāh* is an "appellative" of the city Bethlehem (Gen. 35:16; 48:7; Ruth 4:11; Mic. 5:2; etc), whereas the gentilic *'eprāti* denotes either a member of the tribe of Ephraim (Judg. 12:5; 1 K. 11:26) or an inhabitant of Bethlehem (1 Sam. 17:12; Ruth 1:2).¹⁷ Elkanah might have been of Bethlehemite stock rather than being an "Ephraimite," even though he dwelt in *the hill country of Ephraim*.

13. See on 1 Sam. 10:21 for the relationship: "people" — "tribe" — "clan" — "family."

14. On *Ephraim*, see S. Herrmann, "Ephraim," in *ABD*, II, pp. 551-53.

15. On *qnh "to create," see *HALOT*, pp. 1111-12. Cf. "a man of means" (R. P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1986], p. 72).

16. See R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 90-91; L. M. Luker, "Ephrathah," in *ABD*, II, pp. 557-58.

17. M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1985), pp. 307-8.

The New International Commentary on the Old Testament

Robert L. Hubbard Jr., general editor

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