

Lecture #2 – Historical Background Leading into I Samuel

I. Review of Israel's History Before the Kings

In 1922 B.C., God called Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) to leave his father's house and to follow God's guidance to a promised land of blessing. God promised that Abraham would be the father of a great nation, which will be known as Israel.

In 1706 B.C., Abraham's grandson Jacob brought his family to dwell in Egypt while Joseph held power there (Genesis 47:27-28). Eventually his descendants became enslaved and began to cry out for freedom (Exodus 1:8-14, 2:23-25).

In 1491 B.C., Moses leads the people of Israel out of Egypt and bondage (Exodus 12:41-42). They are miraculously delivered and provided for. God gives them His Law, calling them to be a holy people dedicated to His service.

In 1451 B.C., Joshua leads the people through the Jordan River and into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:14-17). The land is conquered, and the children of Israel settle there.

After the death of Joshua and the passing of those he influenced (Joshua 24:29-31), Israel fell into its hardest times. This time, the period of the Judges, is one of spiritual decay and darkness. Judges 21:25 sums up the situation from 1420-1000 B.C.: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Gaebelein writes:

"The final statement with which the Book of Judges closes is the following: 'In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.' This shows that Israel was looking forward towards having a king; the need of a king was recognized, for the government by Judges had wrought no deliverance for the people. The ruin into which Israel had fallen, besides being described in the closing chapters of Judges, is also seen in the opening chapters of Samuel."¹

II. The State of the Nation of Israel Before the Kingdom

B.H. Carroll writes that the time of the Judges was marked by failure.

"The purpose of the book [Judges] is to show their general failure as a preparation for the messianic kingdom: (1) In turning from the central place of worship, as in the case of Gideon and Abimelech. (2) The failure of their priesthood, as in the case of the grandson of Moses setting up an image worship for the migration part of Dan at Laish, and still later in the case of Eli. (3) Their consequent loss of national unity, as in the case of a number of the tribes from selfish considerations refusing to help Deborah and Barak."²

The nation of Israel was in a state of spiritual and moral bankruptcy.

¹ *The Annotated Bible, Vol. II: Joshua to Chronicles* by A.C. Gaebelein. p. 132

² *An Interpretation of the English Bible: Numbers to Ruth*, by B.H. Carroll. p. 236-237

III. The Broader World of the Time

Leon Wood writes:

“Palestine was less disturbed by outside powers during the time of Israel’s united monarchy than during the period of the Judges. Egypt did not interfere while Saul, David, and Solomon ruled. After Rameses III (C. 1195-1164), no Egyptian king crossed the border of Palestine until the time of Rehoboam, Solomon's son.

“Assyria, mired in a dark age that lasted until after the time of Solomon, would not threaten Israel for nearly a century after the division of the kingdom. Prior to the monarchy, there had been only one significant extension of Assyrian power into the west-land, and it was temporary. Tiglath-pileser I (1116–1078) had brought his army as far as the Mediterranean, still far north of Palestine, but other interests kept him from maintaining a hold. No other ruler advanced as far for two centuries following. This means that Israel’s first three kings were quite unaffected by large powers, making possible in part the wide expansion of boundaries under King David.”³

IV. Anticipation of the Kingdom

Nothing ever comes as a shock to God. When He created mankind, He knew they would sin and the price that would be paid for their redemption. The coming Messiah is anticipated as early as Genesis 3:15.

In God’s divine plan for Israel, it was no surprise that they would demand a king. That a kingdom would be established was anticipated centuries beforehand.

The earliest reference to a king is found in the promise to Abraham: “...I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee” (Genesis 17:6)

Maybe the most important passage anticipating the monarchy is Deuteronomy 17:14-20. These words were written by Moses in 1451 B.C., some *350 years* before Saul would be crowned. The exact excuse of the people of the people is even recorded: to be “like all the nations” (I Samuel 8:5, compare to Deuteronomy 17:14).

The king must be an Israelite and not a foreign ruler (Deuteronomy 17:15).

The king is given three restrictions to his power. First, “he shall not multiply horses to himself” (Deuteronomy 17:16). In ancient times, horses were almost exclusively used warfare. The chariot was the M1 Abrams tank of its day. Thus, the king should not build up a military that would steal his faith away from God. We also see limitations on alliances with the command to stay away from Egypt. Solomon appears to have been the first to have many horses (I Kings 10:26). We also find the same warning in Isaiah 31:1.

³ *A Survey of Israel's History* by Leon Wood. p. 197.

The second royal restriction is: “Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away” (Deuteronomy 17:17). There are many reasons an ancient king might be tempted to have many wives, including to multiply alliances through marriage with foreign nations, to bring pagan influences into the royal house, to increase dangerous court intrigues, and to give themselves to pleasure in their company. Solomon famously violated this with his 700 wives and 300 concubines (I Kings 11:1-4).

The third restriction is “neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold” (Deuteronomy 17:17). John Gill comments: “he might increase his wealth, but not greatly, lest his heart should be lifted up with pride by it, and lest his subjects should be oppressed and burdened with taxes for that purpose; or he, being possessed of so much, should make use of it to enslave them, and especially should be so elated with it as to deny God, and despise his providence, and disobey his laws; see Proverbs 30:9.

One commandment that is also given is that he should have his own personal copy of the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 17:18). This would be a reminder and guide to the king. We may see hints of the obedience to the command with Joash (II Chronicles 23:11) and with Josiah (II Chronicles 34:18).

There is a prophetic warning about Israel falling into sin under a king in Deuteronomy 28:36. The people did indeed fall into sin so that they and their king were taken into foreign captivity.

There is a curious reference to a king in Deuteronomy 33:5: “he was king in Jeshurun”. Some believe this refers to Moses, but a better interpretation is that it refers to God being king over Israel.

IV. The “False Start” King

There is a sneaky answer to the trivia question, “Who was the first president of the United States?” Most will quickly answer that it was George Washington. But that answer is only true under the Constitution. Under the previous Articles of Confederation, there were eight men who served in the office of “President of the United States in Congress Assembled”. The first of these was John Hanson who served from November 5, 1781, to November 4, 1782.⁴

Gideon was offered the rule over Israel in Judges 8:22 but refused it in favor of the Theocracy. His son Abimelech (“my father the king”⁵) was not so principled. His hunger for power led to a conspiracy which saw the deaths of 70 of his brothers (Judges 9:1-5). He was crowned king by the people of Shechem in 1218 B.C. (Judges 9:6) and reigned for three years (Judges 9:22). His end came ignominiously, being killed by a piece of millstone thrown by a nameless woman in the stronghold at Thebez (Judges 9:50-54).

IV. The Four Offices

⁴ <https://www.constitutionfacts.com/us-articles-of-confederation/presidents-who-served/> Accessed 8-15-22.

⁵ Easton’s Bible Dictionary. Likely shows he based his authority at least in part on Gideon’s.

With the coming of the Kingdom period, there was a dramatic shift in how God interacted with His people. In the days since the passing of Joshua, God had raised up Judges to protect, deliver, and guide the nation of Israel. As will be seen in our study, this all changes with the ministry of Samuel. Samuel is the last Judge over Israel (I Samuel 7:15). He also served as a priest (I Samuel 2:18) and a prophet (I Samuel 3:20).

During the time of the Kingdom, the leadership of the nation rested on four offices: prophet, priest, king, and (to a lesser extent) poet.

Prophet

B.H. Carroll writes of the office of prophet:

“Let us distinguish between the prophetic gift and the prophetic office, and give some examples. Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, his seventy elders, Balaam, Joshua, and others before Samuel's time had the gift, but not the office; perhaps we may except Moses as in a measure having the office. After Samuel's time, David, many of his singers, and particularly Daniel, had the gift in a high degree, but not the office. Moreover, the high priests from Aaron to Caiaphas in Christ's time, were supposed to have officially the gift of prophecy – that is, to hear and report what the Oracle said – but Samuel is the first who held the office.

The distinction between a prophet and a son of a prophet is this: A son of a prophet was a candidate for the office, ministering to the prophet, a disciple instructed by him, consecrated to the work, and qualifying himself to perform the services of the office with the highest efficiency. A prophet is one who, through inspiration of the Holy Spirit, speaks or writes for God. In this inspiration he is God's mouth or pen, speaking or writing not his own words, but God's words. This inspiration guides and superintends his speech and his silence; what is recorded and what is omitted from the record. The gift of prophecy was not one of uniform quantity, nor necessarily enduring. The gifts were various in kind, and might be for one occasion only. As to variety of kinds, the revelation might come in dreams or open visions, or it might consist of an ecstatic trance expressed in praise or song or prayer. If praise, song, or prayer, its form was apt to be poetic, particularly if accompanied by instrumental music.”⁶

Alexander F. Kirkpatrick wrote about Samuel and the Prophetic Order.

“1. Samuel was the Founder of the Prophetic Order. Individuals in previous ages had been endowed with prophetic gifts, but with Samuel commenced the regular succession of prophets which lasted all through the period of the Monarchy, and did not cease until after the Captivity. The degeneracy into which the Priesthood had fallen during the period of the Judges demanded the establishment of a new order for the religious training of the nation.

“2. For this purpose Samuel founded the institutions known as The Schools of the Prophets. The ‘company of prophets’ at Gibeah (1 Sam. x. 10), and the scene at Ramah described in I Sam. xix. 18 ff., imply a regular organization. These societies are only definitely mentioned again in connexion with the history of Elijah and Elisha, but doubtless continued to exist in the interval. By means of these the Order was maintained. Students were educated, and common religious

⁶ *An Interpretation of the English Bible: The Hebrew Monarchy*, by B.H. Carroll. p. 31-32

exercises nurtured and developed spiritual gifts (1 Sam. xix. 20). But it was not all members of the Order who possessed special prophetic gifts; nor was it among them only that the gifts of inspiration were to be found (Amos vii. 14).

“3. The value of the Prophetic Order to the Jewish nation was immense. The prophets were the privy-councillors of kings, the historians of the nation, the instructors of the people. It was their function to be preachers of righteousness to rich and poor alike: to condemn idolatry in the court, oppression among the nobles, injustice among the judges, formality among the priests. They were the interpreters of the Law, who drew out by degrees the spiritual significance which underlay ritual observance, and laboured to prevent sacrifice and sabbath and festival from becoming dead and unmeaning forms. Strong in the unshaken consciousness that they were expressing the divine will, they spoke and acted with a fearless courage which no threats could daunt or silence. Thus they proved a counterpoise to the Despotism of Monarchy and the Formalism of Priesthood. In a remarkable passage in his Essay on Representative Government, Mr. J. S. Mill attributes to their influence the progress which distinguished the Jews from other Oriental nations. ‘The Jews,’ he writes, ‘had an absolute monarchy and a hierarchy. These did for them what was done for other Oriental races by their institutions—subdued them to industry and order, and gave them a national life. But neither their kings nor their priests ever obtained, as in those other countries, the exclusive moulding of their character. Their religion gave existence to an inestimably precious institution, the Order of Prophets. Under the protection, generally though not always effectual, of their sacred character, the Prophets were a power in the nation, often more than a match for kings and priests, and kept up in that little corner of the earth the antagonism of influences which is the only real security for continued progress.’⁷

Priest

The Tribe of Levi was set apart by God to be priests in His service. Aaron and his descendants were chosen to be the High Priests (Exodus 28:4).

Smith’s Bible Dictionary describes the duties of the priests:

“The chief duties of the priests were to watch over the fire on the Altar of Burnt Offering, and to keep it burning evermore both by day and night, Leviticus 6:12; 2 Chronicles 13:11, to feed the golden lamp outside the vail with oil, Exodus 27:20-21; Leviticus 24:2, to offer the morning and evening sacrifices, each accompanied with a meat offering and a drink offering, at the door of the Tabernacle. Exodus 29:38-44. They were also to teach, the children of Israel, the statutes of the Lord. Leviticus 10:11; Leviticus 33:10; 2 Chronicles 15:3; Ezekiel 44:23-24.”⁸

Thus, the role of the priest was that of a *mediator* between God and the people. However, there was no new revelation in their role (excepting the use of Urim and Thummim). Their mediatorial work was founded on prescribed methods and measures.

⁷ *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges: The First Book of Samuel* by A.F. Kirkpatrick. 1918. p. 33-34

⁸ *Smith’s Bible Dictionary*. E-Sword module.

Yet their role cannot be underestimated or deemed inferior to that of the prophet. This was an entirely different role from that of the prophet. The prophet was God's mouthpiece of proclamation, but the priest was God's hands of service.

King

This new role will define this period of Israel's history. There was prophecy before the first king and there was prophecy after the last king. The same is true for the priests.

Smith's Bible Dictionary:

“The original idea of a Hebrew King was twofold: first, that he should lead the people to battle in time of war; and, a second, that he should execute judgment and justice to them in war and in peace. 1 Samuel 8:20. In both respects, the desired end was attained. Besides being commander-in-chief of the army, supreme judge, and absolute master, as it were, of the lives of his subjects, the king exercised the power of imposing taxes on them, and of exacting from them personal service and labor.

“In addition to these earthly powers, the king of Israel had a more awful claim to respect and obedience. He was the vicegerent of Jehovah, 1 Samuel 10:1; 1 Samuel 16:13, and as it were his son, if just and holy, 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalms 2:6-7; Psalms 89:26-27, he had been set apart as a consecrated ruler. Upon his head had been poured the holy anointing oil, which had hitherto been reserved exclusively for the priests of Jehovah. He had become, in fact, emphatically ‘the Lord's anointed.’ He had a court of Oriental magnificence.”⁹

The role of the king was primarily concerned with the government and the military. But we will also see that he had a spiritual role. He was anointed by a priest (I Samuel 10:1), he offered sacrifices (I Kings 8:62-64), and his actions (both holy and unholy) affected the entire nation (II Samuel 21:1).

Poet

The Kingdom Era of Israel is also the golden age for Jewish poetry. It was certainly not invented in this time, as we see Jewish songs at least as early as Exodus 15.

David is responsible for the expansion of poetry and music in this age. We know for certain he wrote at least 75 of the Psalms and organized the musicians of the Temple (I Chronicles 23:5; 25:1,6-7). His son Solomon wrote in poetic form (see Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon)

The beauty and variety of poetical works of the period is astounding. Some are didactic or instructional (Proverbs), some are songs of praise (Psalm 150), some are narrative (Song of Solomon, Psalm 78), and some deeply introspective (Psalm 51).

To attempt to study this period without studying its poetry is like studying Christianity and never mentioning hymns or music.

⁹ *Smith's Bible Dictionary*. E-Sword module.