

Samuel: background, intro, and birth

1 Samuel 1-2

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Welcome everyone to the first Relevant class of the new year!

Today we're starting a study of the life of Samuel, one of the most important, but somewhat obscure, characters in the OT.

I say "important" but "obscure" because while he plays a pivotal role in Israel, he often carries out his tasks in the background as a supporting character.

He was the one who, under God's supervision, transitioned Israel from a group of tribes into a united nation with a single monarch by anointing the first two kings of Israel: Saul and David.

Whenever we study someone in Scripture, we want to make sure we understand the historical, political, and theological landscape that person was born into, because those factors often weigh heavily into the purpose God has for that individual.

After we examine the background information, we'll cover the birth of Samuel and see some of the problems he will be addressing in his lifetime as we cover 1 Samuel chapters 1-2.

This is an overview of what we'll cover today:

- Historical, political, theological background of Israel at this time
- Birth of Samuel (1 Sam 1)
- Corruption of the priesthood, setting the stage for Samuel (1 Sam 2)

Historical, political, theological background of Israel

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Let's do a quick review of where Israel came from by going through a high-level timeline of major events in their history.

Note: See [notes on Genesis from Jan 2018](#) class for details of dating mechanism and why I hold to the Early Dates instead of the Later Dates.

BCE	Event
unknown - 4004	Creation, Adam and Eve
2348	Great Flood of Genesis
2166	Abraham is born
1875	Captivity in Egypt (430 years, Ex. 12:40)
1446	God sends Moses back to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of bondage (10 Plagues, events of Exodus)
1445	Israel travels to Mt. Sinai and receives the Mosaic Law
1444	Israel commanded to invade Canaan (Promised Land) but they refuse out of fear
1440 - 1404	40 years wandering in the wilderness until this generation dies out and a new one is born
1404	Israel finally makes their way to Canaan to initiate the attack
1395	Canaanite invasion complete (very general date, took about 9 years)
	Judges rule Israel (~350 years)
~1100	Samuel is born (last of the judges)
1046	Israel's first monarch, King Saul
930	United Israel splits into Northern Kingdom (10 tribes) and Southern Kingdom (Judah, Benjamin)
722	Assyrians destroy Northern Kingdom and the 10 northern tribes are essentially annihilated
613	Babylonians take Southern Kingdom into captivity for 70 years (Daniel, etc...)
539	Persian under Cyrus the Great defeat Babylon
538	Decree of Cyrus the Great (Persian ruler) allows Jews to return to Israel
460-420	Ezra and Nehemiah lead religious and political elements of Israelites to restore the nation of Israel

Judges: rebel, repent, restore

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The period we want to focus on is that 350 year span of the judges.

After Israel conquered and divided the Promised Land among the 12 tribes, they found themselves routinely at war with surrounding nations, partly because they didn't destroy all their enemies like they were supposed to, and partly because other nations moved in over the course of hundreds of years.

As part of the Mosaic Covenant between God and Israel, as long as Israel obeyed God and kept their end of the contract, God would bless them and they would be victorious over their enemies (Deut. 28).

However, if Israel did not follow after God and did not keep the Mosaic Law, then God would allow other nations to have victory over Israel until they repented.

The time of the judges is essentially a cycle of:

- Israel rebelling against God
- Foreign power invading and ruling them
- Israel repenting and crying out to God for help
- God raising up a leader known as a “judge” to lead the people back to God and defeat their enemies
- Rinse and repeat this cycle of **rebel, repent, and restore** for a few hundred years

While you could say that the judges “ruled” Israel, it was not an official “office”. People were raised up by God to address specific issues at specific times, and the people often continued to follow that judge until the judge died.

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Depending on how you count the judges, there was anywhere from 12-15 of them.

It is widely believed that some of these judges overlapped one another, and some may have only led part of Israel and not the entire nation during their time.

	1	Othniel	Delivered Israel from King Cushan of Aram.
	2	Ehud	Killed (assassinated) King Eglon of Moab and led war against Moab.
	3	Shamgar	Great warrior who slew 600 Philistines with a poking stick.
	4	Deborah	Prophetess who directed Barak to fight against the Canaanites.
	5	Gideon	Defeated the Midianites with 300 warriors using trumpets and jars.
	6	Abimelek (maybe)	Bastard son of Gideon who slew his 70 brothers (except Jotham) and ruled for 3 years before being killed fighting his own people.
	7	Tola	Grandson of a guy named Dodo.
	8	Jair	Had 30 sons who rode 30 donkeys and controlled 30 cities.
	9	Jephthah	Bastard son of a prostitute, cast out of the family by his siblings. Great warrior who lived as a brigand and the elders of his homeland eventually begged him to lead them against the Ammonites.
	10	Ibzan	Had 30 sons and 30 daughters.
	11	Elon	From the tribe of Zebulun (not much else recorded).
	12	Abdon	Had 40 sons and 30 grandsons who rode on 70 donkeys.
	13	Samson	Nazarite with superhuman strength, killed 1,000 Philistines with a jawbone and destroyed a Philistine temple.

	14	Eli	Most likely high priest as well as judge, had 2 wicked sons who corrupted the priesthood. Raised Samuel.
	15	Samuel	Last of the judges, anointed the first 2 kings of Israel.

Shiloh: Religious center

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Something we also need to understand is that Jerusalem was not the capital of Israel at this time, and was actually called Jebus and owned by the Canaanite tribe of the Jebusites before King David conquered it.

So if there was no Jerusalem and thus no temple, how did the Jews worship God?

Remember that God instructed Moses to construct a large, portable tent known as the Tabernacle, which was essentially a mobile temple, where God would dwell with His people.

After the invasion of Canaan, the tabernacle was set up in a place known as Shiloh (Judges 18:1), about 20 miles north of Jerusalem, which became the religious center of Israel until the time of the temple built under king Solomon.

This was also the location where Joshua divided the land up among the 12 tribes and it acted as a central assembly place for the tribes when they all needed to meet.

Thus, Shiloh acted as the de facto capital for the tribes of Israel before they had a real capital.

No Prophetic Office

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Another thing to note during this period is that there were very few prophets.

Moses was a great prophet, but after he died, there wasn't a continuation of prophets or spokespeople for God.

There were definitely individuals selected by God (such as Deborah and a handful of others), but there was not a consistent office of prophet.

We find in 1 Samuel 3:1 that visions or communication from God was rare in these days, and Samuel is often referenced as "Samuel the Prophet", supporting the belief that he was the first of a distinct prophetic line that extended from him to the time of Micah, the period in which the majority of the OT Scriptures were written by the prophets (God's spokespeople).

While there were prophets during the time of the judges, they were extremely rare and did not seem to have any continuity to them.

Philistines

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A final thing we want to look at is the Philistines, a sea-faring people that occupied the coast of south-western Israel at this time, and it is from them that we have the name Palestine for the general area of Israel today.

We specifically call out the Philistines because they are Israel's major enemies at the time of Samuel, and probably the most well-known Philistine was the giant Goliath, who David killed in individual combat with a sling.

They were a highly advanced civilization, especially in the area of iron and metalworking, which gave them a significant military advantage over Israel, who used weaker bronze weapons.

As a side note, they were also apparently known to be very big drinkers.

Based on Biblical references as well as DNA testing done just several months ago, it is strongly believed that the Philistines actually originated from the island of Crete south of Greece, known as Caphtor in Hebrew (Gen. 10:14, Ex. 13:17, Deut. 2:23, Jer. 47:4, Amos 9:7), or possibly Iberia (modern-day Spain).

The Philistines seemed to have been in this area for hundreds of years, because Abraham and Isaac were both recorded to have had dealings with them over 600 years before (Gen. 21:32-34, 26:1-8).

At the time of Samuel, the Philistines were a loose confederation of 5 independent cities that would come together in times of war or common interest.

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In this map you can see the 5 cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath (home of Goliath, 1 Sam. 17:4).



These cities are important because they were the center of Philistine power in the area, and will play a big role in some of the events we'll cover in the next few weeks when Israel fights against the Philistines.

Summary of background

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To summarize the historical context, we find ourselves at the tail end of the period of judges, who were individuals selected by God to lead Israel and defeat their enemies.

The people routinely wavered between obedience to God and rebellion and idolatry.

There is no unified, national leader for the nation, only temporary leaders raised up for a time.

There is no continual office of prophet, only a few extremely rare individuals.

And the Philistines, an advanced confederation that controlled the south-western coast of Israel, are continually at war with the nation.

This is the time into which Samuel is born.

Any questions about this background before we open up our Bibles to 1 Samuel?

Birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 1)

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With that background, let's open our Bibles to 1 Samuel chapter 1 as we read about the birth of the prophet Samuel.

As we read the text, I want you to focus on the sacrifice of some of the people involved, specifically in the context of serving the national interest at the individual expense.

1 Samuel 1:1-3

- Elkanah was from the priestly tribe of Levi, but they were residing in the land of Ephraim.
 - The tribe of Levi wasn't given their own territory in the Promised Land, but were divided among the other 11 tribes because they were performing their role as priests and local officials across the nation.
- Also, we see that he was a polygamist and had 2 wives.
 - We don't have the time to dive into all of this today, but this was a routine practice at this time, often when the wife was barren and there was no male heir.

- Although polygamy was never directly condemned as a sin in the OT, Christ makes it clear that God's plan was 1 man for 1 woman from the beginning.
- In addition, every single instance of polygamy recorded in the Bible turns out terribly, and we'll see that play out in this chapter as well.
- The fact that it was tolerated does not make it right, it's just the way things were at this time.

1 Samuel 1:4-11

- Most scholars understand Hannah's statements to mean she would dedicate her child as a life-long Nazarite, which was a special vow of dedicated service to God outlined in Numbers 6:1-21.
- However, the passage doesn't explicitly state that the child would be a Nazarite, just that the hair would never be cut, which was one of the requirements of the Nazarite vow, along with avoiding alcoholic drinks and certain restrictions about contact with dead bodies.
- It is most likely and reasonable to conclude that Hannah was dedicating a child as a Nazarite, although the text never requires this reading.

1 Samuel 1:12-20

1 Samuel 1:21-28

- Typically it would take 2-3 years to finish weaning the child.
- Hannah probably wasn't in a hurry to lose Samuel, thus it's reasonable to assume that Samuel was finally brought to the temple as late as possible, around the age of 3.

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Discussion Questions

1. How was Hannah affected by her barrenness? Do you think her response was correct or not?
2. What personal sacrifice did Hannah have to make to honor her commitment to the Lord? How would you have felt if you were in her situation?

Setting the stage for Samuel (1 Samuel 2)

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1 Samuel 2:1-11

1 Samuel 2:12-17

- Why did they want the meat raw? Possibly to cook it another way instead of boiling, or to sell the raw meat for money. We aren't entirely sure why, just that they were clearly violating God's commands and were treating God's sacrifices with great disdain.

1 Samuel 2:17-26

- Eli is the current judge and high priest of the nation of Israel, and he tolerates this open wickedness from his 2 sons.
- But note that it's not just the sons that are wicked, but they are involved with others in their wickedness.
- It's an indicator that the spiritual environment in Israel may have been pretty lax at this time.

1 Samuel 2:27-36

- Here we have one of the rare instances where a prophet is mentioned before Samuel.
- Eli is a descendant of Aaron, who was Moses' brother and the first high priest of Israel.
- v30 During the time of King Solomon, Eli's great-great-grandson Abiathar (Eli, Phinehas, Ahitub, Ahimelech, Abiathar) was deposed as the high priest as a fulfillment of this declaration from God (1 Kings 2:27).
- Abiathar's father, Ahimelech, and his family was executed by King Saul for providing food and weaponry to David (1 Samuel 21:1-9).
- Thus, these prophecies by God were very literal: none of Eli's descendants made it to old age.

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Discussion Questions

1. What do you think the significance is that Hannah had 5 other children? (1 Sam 2:21)
2. What was Eli's sin (not the sons) and why was he judged so harshly by God?

Conclusion

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- At the end we see that the priesthood has been corrupted by Eli's sons, and Eli bears some of that responsibility.
- The nation of Israel is very "religious" in that they carry out the sacrifices, but they are spiritually dark and far from God.
- But God has promised that He will bring forth a new priesthood, one that will serve Him faithfully and minister before Him eternally, which is a bit of a dual prophecy because it refers to not only Samuel in the immediate, but also Christ in the future as our High Priest today.