

# SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

F. B. Meyer, B.A

## CHAPTER ONE

### AN AGE OF TRANSITION

(I Samuel 1)

“The old order changeth, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,  
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.”  
- Tennyson

“**UPON whom the ends of the world are come**” i.e., the end of one age and the beginning of another. Such is our position to-day. In every direction the old order is giving place to the new. It was thus in the days of the Primitive Church, when the typical institutions of the Levitical system were being replaced by “**the heavenly things themselves.**” And it was also thus at the time when our narrative begins. The story of Samuel is a divine interlude between the days of the Judges and those of David the King.

Hitherto the High Priesthood had been the supreme authority recognized in the Hebrew Commonwealth. To Moses, its founder, there could be of course no successor; but Aaron was the first of an unbroken line of priests. No other office stood for the whole of Israel. The Mosaic era, however, was not destined to culminate in the rule of the Priest, who has seldom combined the sacerdotal functions with the special qualifications that constitute a great leader and ruler. Too often the reign of the Churchman has been warped by bigotry, tyranny, and the repression of the nobler aspirations of mankind.

The Priest was to make way for the King.

A suggestion that a fresh development of the Hebrew polity was near occurs in the closing verses of the Book of Ruth, with which this book is connected by the conjunction “**now.**” The genealogy, which is the evident climax of that sweet pastoral story, has no connection with Aaron or his line. It expressly deals with the tribe of Judah, of which nothing was spoken concerning the priesthood. Evidently the Divine purpose was moving forward but whither?

At the time its goal was not apparent; but as we look back on all the circumstances from the vantage-ground of accomplished fact, we can see that it was slowly moving towards the establishment of the kingdom under David; and veiled from all eyes there was the yet profounder movement towards the revelation of “that Proper Man,” as Luther calls Him, in whose nature, fitly known as Wonderful, the priestly, the prophetic, and the royal, blend in perfect symmetry and beauty.

## I. THE URGENT NEED FOR A STRONG MAN

Every age takes up and urges the cry Give us men; but if ever a strong man was needed, it was in the days of which the Book of Judges affords some startling glimpses.

Canaan had been conquered, but the ancient inhabitants were far from being subdued; they remained much as the Saxons under the early Norman kings. In the South, the Philistines held their five cities. The mountain fortress, which was afterwards known as Mount Zion, garrisoned by Jebusites, was proudly defiant so far forward as the days of David. Nearly all the sea-coast, and all the strongholds in the rich plain of Esdraelon, were in the hands of the Canaanites. The little kingdom of Gezer remained independent till it was conquered by the King of Egypt, and given as a dowry to Solomon's Queen.

On the northern frontier were the remains of those mighty nations which Joshua had overthrown in the great battle of the Waters of Merom, but which probably only gave a nominal allegiance to the Israelite suzerainty.

**“Therefore the LORD left those nations, without driving them out hastily . . . to prove Israel by them, even as many of Israel as had not known all the wars of Canaan . . . to teach them war, at the least such as beforetime knew nothing thereof”** (Judges 2:23-3:1-3).

Had it not been for the presence of these warlike tribes, we should never have heard of Gideon, of Barak, of Jephthah, of Samson, or of David. Without this discipline, Israel might have become an effeminate and molluscous race, lacking backbone and muscle. They would have dwelt in security, after the manner of the Zidonians, quiet and secure in a large land, a place where there was no want of anything that is in the earth (Judges 18:7, 10).

How often in our earthly discipline we come into experiences which are the counterpart of these.

- There are wars where we looked for peace;
- There is fret and chafe where we expected freedom from annoyance;
- There is pouring from vessel to vessel where we hoped to be allowed to settle on our lees.

Are not these clearly permitted to try us, that we may learn war; that we may know ourselves and know God; that we and our children may grow up into a nobler and healthier style of character than had otherwise been possible.

In Israel this incessant exposure to attack was aggravated by the absence of a strong central government. The priesthood had evidently fallen into the hands of weaklings from the days of Phinehas.

Of this there is striking confirmation in the fact that Eli sprang, not from the house of Eleazar, the eldest son of Aaron, in which the succession ought to have been continued, but from the family of the younger son, Ithamar.

There is a strong probability that the representatives of the elder branch had proved themselves so unable to cope with the disorders of the time that they had been set aside in favour of any one who evinced faculty enough to take the field and marshal the forces of Israel.

Perhaps Eli, in his young life, had done some stirring deed of prowess which raised him to the supreme position his fellow-countrymen could give; though, when we are introduced to him, he is pitiful in his senile decrepitude and weakness (I Chronicles 6:4-15; 24:4).

From time to time prophets had been raised up as a temporary expedient.

- **“He gave unto them judges . . . until Samuel the prophet.”**  
- **“And when the Lord raised them up judges, then the Lord was with the judge, and saved them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for it repented the Lord because of their groaning by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them”** (Judges 2:18).

The reign of a judge was, however, a very transient gleam of light in that dark and stormy age. At the furthest, his power was only recognized within his own and the adjacent tribes. Samson, for instance, was little else than the hero of the south country, whilst Jephthah was pre-eminently the captain of the trans-Jordanic tribes.

In many cases the office ceased with the special crisis that called it into being. Only in the case of two or three, such as Deborah and Gideon, did conspicuous service lead to a lifelong primacy.

Thus the nation was in danger of desolation by internal anarchy and external attack.

With no principle of cohesion, no rallying-point, no acknowledged leader, what was there to resist the pressure of the Canaanites from within, and of the hostile nations from without, its borders?

- **“In those days there was no king in Israel, every man did that which as right in his own eyes”;**  
- **“The children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord”;**  
- **“The children of Israel cried unto the Lord.”**

These three sentences, repeated frequently and emphatically, are the keynotes of the whole book. The religious ties, moreover, were very weak. We find, for instance, the name of Baal, a Phoenician deity, occurring three times in the names of members of the family of Saul (I Chronicles 8:30, 33, 34). The stories of Micah, of Ruth, and of the extermination of the Danites, supply graphic pictures of the disunion, independence, and wildness of the time; of wild license, and of exposure to attack.

It was necessary, therefore, to introduce a new order of things.

- To assert and achieve the national unity;  
- To make the best aspects of the rule of the judges permanent in the office of kingship;  
- To resuscitate and maintain the allegiance of Israel to the God of their fathers;

To carry over the whole nation from the time of the last judge to that of the first king was a task that demanded a pre-eminently strong man; and the want was superbly supplied, as we shall see, by the prophet Samuel, who conducted his people from one age to another, without a revolution, and almost without the excitement, which naturally accompanies so great a change.

## II. HOW THE NEED WAS MET

God's greatest gifts to man come through travail.

Whether we look into the spiritual or the temporal sphere, can we discover anything, any great reform, any beneficent discovery, any soul-awakening revival, which did not come through the toils and tears, the vigils and blood-shedding of men and women, whose sufferings were the pangs of its birth?

That which costs nothing is of small avail to the salvation and help of mankind. The souls that are set on saving themselves will never be the saviours of the race.

- If the temple is raised, David must bear sore afflictions;
- If the Gospel of the grace of God is to be disentangled from Jewish tradition, Paul's life must be one long agony;
- If the Reformation is to be rendered possible for Europe, men like John Huss and Jerome must be burnt at the stake;
- If great scientific discoveries are to be established, men like Galileo, Galvani, Faraday, and Edison must spend sleepless nights and laborious days through long years;
- If great religious truths are to be enunciated, as the priceless heirloom of pilgrim souls, men like Baxter, Bunyan, or Charles Simeon must be willing to undergo ostracism, misrepresentation, and contempt.
- Before Samuel could be given to his people, Hannah must be a woman of a sorrowful spirit.

Some few miles to the north of Jerusalem, on the confines of the territories of Ephraim and Benjamin, was situated the town of Ramathaim-Zophim. It was also known as Ramah, and has passed into New Testament history as Arimathea, the town from which Joseph came who begged of Pilate the body of the Lord. Ramathaim means the two Ramahs, as there were probably an upper and a lower city, to which reference is made in the after-story (I Samuel 9:13).

Zophim recalls the name of an ancestor of Elkanah, named Zuph, who appears to have been a man of considerable importance, and to have given his name to the whole district (I Chronicles 6:35; I Samuel 9:5).

In this mountain city a child was to be born who was to give it interest and importance, not only during his lifetime, when it became the focus of the national life, but for centuries of years.

Towards the close of Samson's career in Southern Judah, a family resided at Ramah consisting of Elkanah, a Levite, and his two wives, Hannah (*Grace*) and Peninnah (*Pearl* or *Margaret*).

He had formerly lived in Ephraim, and was therefore considered to belong to that tribe (Joshua 21:20). That he had two wives was not a violation of the Levitical law, which did not forbid polygamy, but carefully regulated the marriage-law, penetrating the home-life with such ideals as would gradually bring men and women back to the original institution of Paradise (Mark 10:4-9).

It is supposed that Elkanah brought a second wife into his home because of Hannah's childlessness; but, whatever had been the cause, the step had been fraught with misery. The house at Ramah was filled with bickering and strife, which was augmented as child after child fell to the lot of Peninnah, whilst Hannah was still childless. Apart from all else, her desolate condition was an almost intolerable affliction (Genesis 30:1); but that it should be made the subject of biting sarcasm and bitter taunts was the occasion of the most poignant grief.

The pain was not confined to Ramah, but seems to have reached its climax when, according to the Hebrew custom, the household went up to offer unto the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and Hannah was compelled to witness the many portions which fell to the lot of her rival, for all her sons and daughters, at the sacrificial feast, when, after offering to the Lord the victims they had brought, they retired to feast on the remainder.

Then it was that the needy sat upon the dunghill, and the poor in the dust; then it was that her soul was pierced as by the sword of the Lord, and drew near unto the grave; then it was that the hunger of her soul could not be appeased even by the consciousness of Elkanah's fond affection (1:5, 8; 2:5-8).

But out of this soul-travail the joy of her life and the saviour of her country were to be born.

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