

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 19

I and II SAMUEL

Overview

I. BACKGROUND

There are six books in the Old Testament that chronicle the history of Israel through the various ruling kings. We leave two of those books (I and II Chronicles) aside for now and look at the other four.

In our Bibles the other four books are titled I and II Samuel and I and II Kings. In the original Hebrew, I and II Samuel were only one book/volume. The same is true of I and II Kings. The division into two books occurred shortly before the time of Christ when Jewish scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek (the “Septuagint”). Most likely this division came about because the translation (with the Greek language having vowels which the Hebrew did not) was substantially longer than the original, hence the need to make it two volumes rather than one.

The Septuagint translators entitled the Books the First and Second Books of Kingdoms. (The books of I and II Kings were entitled “The Third and Fourth Books of Kingdoms”). It was in the Latin translation (“The Vulgate”) that the names were shortened from “Kingdoms” to “Kings”. For I and II Samuel, some versions will still give the alternate titles as “Otherwise called the First (or Second) Book of the Kings.

II. CONTENT

First and Second Samuel present an ongoing record of Israel’s history from the end of the Judges period to the last years of King David’s reign. The books detail the establishment of the monarchy and the role of Samuel in its institution. The books further detail that God was at work in Israel as it moved from a theocracy (a country ruled by God) into a monarchy (where the country is ruled by a monarch or king).

A basic outline shows:

1. Samuel as Judge (I Sam. 1-7)
2. Samuel and Saul (I Sam. 8-15)
3. Saul and David (I Sam. 16-II Sam. 1)

4. David as King of Judah and Israel (II Sam. 2-8)
5. Events at David's Court (II Sam 9-20)
6. Appendices (II Sam. 21-24).

III. THE STORY

The histories begin with the story of Samuel. Samuel is the first great religious reformer for Israel since Moses. We are unable to establish precise dates for Samuel's birth, but most likely he was born around 1105 B.C.

The birth and early life of Samuel are significant, touching, and instructive. The story begins with a woman named Hannah who was barren (the LORD had "closed her womb" I Sam 1:5). Although Hannah's husband was kind, for years the attendant criticism and ridicule of others caused Hannah to weep and left her unable to eat.

Finally Hannah conceives in answer to her prayers and a vow made to God that if God would give her a son, she would pledge him to God's service as a Nazarite. Hannah keeps her son, Samuel, with her until she weans him. She then fulfills her promise to the Lord and takes Samuel to the Priest Eli and gives Samuel over for service, "I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD." (I Sam. 1:27-28). Over the years, Hannah would continue to show her tender love for her son by making and taking him a special robe.

We are told that the sons of the Priest Eli were corrupt and destined for removal from office. In contrast, Samuel serves both Eli and God faithfully, even as a young boy.

Samuel hears God speaking to him in a detailed encounter one night. The history tells us that this was during an historical period when "In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions." (I Sam. 3:1). We see in the Bible and in church history in general that there are times where God's voice is much more pronounced than other times. It is apparent then that God has chosen Samuel as God's special mouthpiece to Israel for his day.

In I Sam chapter 4 we read of a military defeat of Israel by their Near Eastern rival the Philistines. Seeking some Indiana Jones miracle from the Ark of the Covenant, the sons of Eli take the ark out for battle

against the Philistines. God is not “manipulated” by magic then (anymore than He is today) and the Ark performs no miracles. 30,000 Jews die in battle and the Ark itself is captured by the Philistines. The sons of Eli are among the dead. Deaths in the family of Eli continue that day like falling dominoes in fulfillment of God’s prophetic word uttered earlier in the book.

Several interesting matters happen as the ark is retained by the Philistines. First we have what many consider the earliest written description of an outbreak of the bubonic plague. A number of Philistines suffer from inguinal buboes prior to dieing from the disease. The New International Version translates these buboes as “tumors” (I Sam. 5:6, 9, 11-12, etc.). Also interesting was the association by the Philistines of this plague with rats (I Sam. 6:4ff). The Philistines return the ark.

Years later, Samuel prompts religious revival among the people and then leads the Israelites in subduing the Philistines in a number of places.

As Samuel aged, he sought to pass on his role for Israel to his sons. The boys were not up to their father’s convictions or actions and the people were seeking a new kind of rule. The people were insistent on a monarchy. The people were not happy with God as their king; they wanted a human one instead. Samuel and God then give the folks what they asked for!

IV. POINTS TO TAKE HOME:

1. The church is a theocracy
2. God hears prayer
3. Much comes from devotion
4. God is always at work

V. NEXT WEEK: The rise and fall of King Saul.