

From Samuel to Solomon

Part 1

I have begun this exposition of the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel with these thoughts because the book of 1 Samuel is about *leadership*. Mind you, what we will learn from this part of the Bible is very different from anything you will find in your local bookshop in the "Leadership" section. Much in these pages will take us by surprise.

Israel's Leadership Crisis

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-2

In 1 Samuel we find the story (which continues into 2 Samuel) of three great leaders of the nation of Israel, through a period when Israel experienced a massive leadership crisis that led to an historic change in the character of the nation's leadership.

The three leaders were: *Samuel* (whose story begins in [1 Samuel 1](#)), *Saul* (the first king of Israel, who will first appear in [1 Samuel 9](#) and whose death occurs at the end of 1 Samuel), and *David* (Israel's second and greatest king who will enter the story in [1 Samuel 16](#) but will not become king until the early chapters of 2 Samuel).

Let us briefly set the scene. The book of 1 Samuel takes us back more than 3,000 years. The date was about 1050 B.C. It was a time when the question of *leadership* was very much in the air in the small and relatively young nation of Israel.

There had been about 200 years of extraordinary social upheaval, verging at times on anarchy. These were the 200 years after the Israelites had come into the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. The era is often referred to as the period of the judges. Much of it is recounted in the book of Judges, which concludes with this summary: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" ([Judges 21:25](#)). In other words, there was no established and permanent political authority in the land. Anarchy reigned. There was a crisis of leadership in Israel. Or so it seemed.

What kind of leadership did this troubled society need?

We must, of course, remember that Israel was then different from any other nation in the history of the world. Israel was God's chosen people. They had become a nation because of God's promise to their ancestor, Abraham. The promise was that God himself would make them into a great nation and that through them he would bring blessing to the whole world ([Genesis 12:1-3](#)).

So the leadership question had a particular spin to it in those days at the end of the book of Judges and the beginning of 1 Samuel. What kind of leader did Israel, God's own people, need? Through the period of the judges God had again and again raised up a leader (a "judge") according to the need of the moment. But could that unpredictable arrangement be permanent? Could Israel survive lurching from crisis to crisis, as they had for the last two centuries? As we will see, threats from other peoples, especially the Philistines, were growing. We will also see that internal instability, even corruption in the nation's leadership, was threatening Israel's life. What was the solution for this special people whom God had made his own? What kind of leadership could provide stability and security to Israel? That is the question in the air as 1 Samuel begins.

Already we should realize that the Bible will introduce an important element to the leadership question: What does *God* have to do with leadership? As we follow the unfolding leadership crisis in Israel, we cannot avoid introducing this new element into the questions of our leadership crisis: what difference does *God* make to the kind of leader I should be and (more importantly) the kind of leaders I should follow?

The book of 1 Samuel is going to tell us the extraordinary story of the leadership crisis in Israel at the end of the second millennium B.C. In ways that will surprise us, it will point us to *God's* astonishing

answer to Israel's predicament. We will see that God's answer for Israel turns out to be his answer for the whole world and for each of us individually.

However, we must not jump ahead too quickly. In order to appreciate the important things that God has caused to be "written down for our instruction" ([1 Corinthians 10:11](#)) in 1 Samuel, we must listen carefully and patiently to precisely what is written and consider its significance in the context of the whole Bible.

We will begin with the opening paragraph, where we are introduced to a particular family that will play a very important role in the story 1 Samuel has to tell.

"A Certain Man" (v. 1)

The first few words of 1 Samuel are like the beginnings of a number of Old Testament books. There are names of people and places that seem to the modern reader to be quite obscure. These unfamiliar details do not exactly grab our attention. However, although the writer of an Old Testament book may not have treated his opening sentence in the way of modern authors, there is good reason for us to assume that the first few lines of a book are worth our careful attention.

In the case of 1 Samuel this expectation is rewarded in a surprising and paradoxical way. Remembering that the immediate background to 1 Samuel is the end of the book of Judges, we know that there were grave matters of national importance in the air: no king in Israel, everyone doing what was right in his own eyes. The book opens with details about "a certain man" from the hill country of Ephraim:

There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. ([v. 1](#))

Why are we introduced to this man, Elkanah? The details given to us about him are, to say the least, perplexing.

His Town, His Family, His Connections

Ramathaim-zophim (or Ramah for short, see [v. 19](#)) is not a town of great importance in the Old Testament story so far. It was at this time a relatively obscure town in the hills of Ephraim. There is no obvious reason that we should be interested in "a certain man of Ramah."

Neither are the family connections of Elkanah striking in any way. Jeroham (his father), Elihu (his grandfather), Tohu (his great-grandfather), and his great-great-grandfather Zuph are all relatively "insignificant and obscure people." The information in [verse 1](#) tells us only that this man was, as we might say, a "nobody" in Israel. Why, in these critical days, are we being introduced to this insignificant character?

Elkanah himself (or perhaps his great-great-grandfather) is described as an "Ephrathite." This could mean that he had family connections with Bethlehem (also known as Ephrathah).

We know, of course, that Bethlehem Ephrathah would eventually become very famous indeed. In the course of this book we will meet another Ephrathite who will make Bethlehem famous for all time. David was "the son of an Ephrathite" ([1 Samuel 17:12](#)), and Bethlehem is the town where his story began ([1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)). But he is still half a book away! About three centuries later, a prophet would say:

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,*

whose origin is from of old,

from ancient days. ([Micah 5:2](#))

That very prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus (see the citation of [Micah 5:2](#) in [Matthew 2:6](#)).

Once again we are jumping ahead too quickly! There is much for us to learn by following the path that begins here with the obscure Elkanah the Ephrathite. At the time of [1 Samuel 1:1a](#) connection with Bethlehem was no claim to fame.

His Important Unimportance

The very obscurity of the names and places in the opening sentence of the book is what should strike us. Their importance lies in their unimportance! In this case the obscurity is not a consequence of our being modern readers with little familiarity with the world of the Old Testament. These names were little known at the time referred to in [1 Samuel 1](#). From the point of view of social standing, fame, or power within the nation, Elkanah and his family were "nobodies."

This is the first hint of a theme that will develop in the course of 1 Samuel. The solution to Israel's leadership crisis will not be found in the expected places. We do not begin this story with the prominent and the powerful in Israel, but with an unheard of "certain man" from the hill country of Ephraim, possibly with remote family connections to the equally obscure town of Bethlehem. This book is about a God who makes something out of nothing, life out of death, rich out of poor, somebody out of nobody. This theme will be played out in a grand poetic prayer in chapter 2 (see especially [vv. 6-8](#)). The obscurity of Elkanah is the starting point of the book.

Elkanah's Domestic Situation (v. 2)

From Elkanah himself, introduced in all his obscurity in [verse 1](#), our attention is turned to his unfortunate domestic situation:

He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. ([v. 2](#))

Although the problem of childlessness can be a major crisis for a couple experiencing this difficulty, and perhaps particularly for a wife, we are again struck by the ordinariness of the situation that is brought before us in this book's second sentence. With a national crisis in the air, our attention is drawn to the sad circumstances of one woman in Israel, the childless Hannah.

There are two reasons, however, that the introduction of Hannah and her troubles should catch our attention.

Where Is the Blessing?

The first is that Hannah's predicament raises a question about God's promised blessing on Israel. "There shall not be male or female barren among you," God had said ([Deuteronomy 7:14](#)). If we were wondering about Israel's difficulties in these days when everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes, Hannah's troubles were *a representation of Israel's troubles*. This nation had been promised blessing. Where was the blessing in their threatened existence? Where was the blessing for Hannah as a member of God's people, Israel? Her name, ironically, means "grace." What grace did she know?

The Beginning of Something?

The second reason that Hannah's predicament should arouse our interest is that the Bible has told us of a number of other women in her situation. In each case the woman concerned experienced a particular act of God's grace, by which she did bear a child, and the child played an important role in God's purposes. Sarah "was barren; she had no child" ([Genesis 11:30](#)). But God promised Abraham that she would bear a child, and she bore Isaac ([Genesis 17:16](#); [21:1-7](#)). Isaac became the bearer of the great promise of God to bring blessing to the nations of the earth ([Genesis 22:16-18](#)). Rebekah

"was barren," but Isaac prayed for her, and she conceived and bore Esau and (more importantly, as it would turn out) Jacob, the father of the Israelite nation ([Genesis 25:21-26](#)). Jacob's wife, Rachel, too, "was barren," but "God listened to her and opened her womb," and she bore Joseph, through whom God saved many lives ([Genesis 29:31](#); [30:22, 23](#); [50:20](#)). More recently (from the point of view of [1 Samuel 1](#)) a woman who "was barren and had no children" was visited by an angel, was promised a son, and gave birth to Samson ([Judges 13:2, 3, 24](#)). Samson delivered Israel from the Philistines and ruled Israel for twenty years ([Judges 15](#)). Each of these women had shared a sadness like Hannah's, but in each case a child was subsequently born who was God's answer to the crisis of the time.

We are therefore justified in thinking that the very unimpressiveness of the beginning of 1 Samuel may be the beginning of something that God was about to do. Certainly we are right to think that only God could bring something important out of the unimportance and "barrenness" of [1 Samuel 1:1, 2](#).

Perhaps as we conclude this introduction we might be excused if we look ahead just a little. Indeed, there is no need to apologize for looking ahead. The Bible has a very important story to tell about what God has done to meet the leadership crisis, not just of Israel's day, but of the human race in all of history. First Samuel is a crucial part of that story, but it will only be fully appreciated when it is seen in the light of the story's astonishing end.

Many years after Hannah, there was yet another barren woman. Her name was Elizabeth, and by God's grace she bore a child, whose name was John (see [Luke 1:7, 57-60](#)). At about the same time, the sequence of barren women who gave birth came to its climax. There was a woman who was not barren but had not given birth to a child for the more simple reason that she was a virgin. Her name was Mary. While still a virgin, she conceived and gave birth to a child, who was given the name Jesus (see [Luke 1:26-38](#); [2:1-7](#)). It happened in Ephrathah, that is, Bethlehem (see [Luke 2:4](#); cf. [Matthew 2:1, 5, 6](#))!

The lesson for us from [1 Samuel 1:1, 2](#) is that God's answer to the crisis in Israel, like God's answer to the crisis of the world, comes from the most unexpected quarter. If we insist on looking to the powerful, the influential, and the impressive of this world, we will miss it. It began for Israel with a childless woman with family connections to Bethlehem. That is where we must look if we want to see God's answer—just as we must look to the child of another woman, born in Bethlehem, if we are to see God's answer for the world. The story of 1 Samuel eventually leads to the one whom God has exalted "at his right hand as Leader and Savior" ([Acts 5:31](#)).