

Samuel the Prophet

1 - Samuel is called by Yahweh



When people ask me when I became a prophet, I tell them that it was when I was a child. This is true. I was a child when I heard the voice of Yahweh calling me. Strictly speaking though, I was always going to be a prophet, as I was dedicated to Yahweh, long before I was even conceived.

This is the story of my beginnings, the beginnings of the Prophet Samuel. My father's name was Elkanah, bar, (that is 'son of') Jeroham, bar Elihu, bar Tohu, bar Zuph. He was of the tribe of Ephraim and lived in Ramah. He had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. My mother Hannah used to tell me, when she came to see me each year, that she and Elkanah fell in love when they were children. When it came time for her to be married, she pleaded with her parents to be allowed to marry Elkanah and no one else. My Grandfather must have been really indulgent, as,

seeing the love that they had, he allowed them to marry, even though he might have been able to get a better match for his daughter. He must have known that my mother would never be happy with anyone else.

After their marriage they built their house together and lived happy and content, except that my mother did not become pregnant. My mother's face would always take on a look of profound sadness when she talked about the day Elkanah came to her and said that he was going to take another wife. He needed sons to help him with the land, and that was the one thing that mother had not been able to give him. She was devastated, and wept for days. On the day of his wedding to Peninnah she did not eat, and her family thought that she would waste away. Her father reminded her that children were a gift from Yahweh, and that perhaps she should make a sacrifice to him for a child.

Mother was devastated when Peninnah quickly became pregnant and gave birth. She very quickly became pregnant again, and again gave birth. Mother said that she never lost any opportunity to rub her face in the fact that she herself did not have any children. If it were not for the great love that mother had for Elkanah, and the love he had for her, I do not know how mother would have coped with everything, in those years.

Elkanah was a devout man, so each year he and his whole family would make a pilgrimage to Shiloh, walking for two days from Ramah to make a sacrifice to Yahweh and to feast at the shrine. Shiloh, the first place of meeting for the Israelites after we had entered our land, following our long years travelling in the wilderness. The first place where the Ark of the

Covenant was laid to rest and stayed put. The place where we built a shrine to Yahweh, and an enclosure to protect the Ark from our enemies. Shiloh, the place where Joshua sat down with the leaders of the tribes and allocated the lands that were to be ours to live, to cultivate and to hold for Yahweh. Shiloh the place where we gather to make sacrifice and to feast together. Shiloh, my home for these many years.

So mother came to Shiloh each year to pray and to watch Elkanah make sacrifice. And each year Peninnah would rub her nose in her barrenness, claiming she was unworthy to even to be there, that she was not the real woman she herself was. A woman without children was lower than the animals and cursed by Yahweh. Elkanah tried his best to raise mother's spirits. He would give equal portions of the sacrificial meat to Peninnah and each of her sons and daughters, and to mother he would give a double portion to show his love for her. This only made Peninnah even worse, and each year mother would end up in tears.

Then one year mother stole away during the feast and went to the shrine on her own to pray to Yahweh for a child. She stood by the wall of the shrine crying, and mumbling her prayers and pleas to Yahweh. Eli, the old Priest, was sitting nearby. He watched her for a while and then stood up and went to rebuke her, for coming to the shrine drunk. Mother was completely taken aback, because she had been so provoked by Peninnah that she had neither eaten nor drunk at the feast. She told Eli that she was not drunk, but praying to Yahweh. Seeing her anguish he led her to a bench in the shade and sat her down to find out what was causing her distress. She told him the whole story and ended by telling him fiercely that she had made a vow to Yahweh, that if he opened her womb and gave her a son, then that son would be dedicated to Yahweh all the days of his life and that no razor would touch his head. Eli was so taken with the depths of her despair, that he blessed her and prayed with her that Yahweh would grant her what she requested. She left the shrine that year much more uplifted than she usually did.

The next morning the family again worshipped at the shrine and then returned home. Yahweh heard my mothers pleas and opened her womb, and she conceived me. When I was born she named me Samuel, because as she said, she had asked for me. She did not return to Shiloh for three years. She had explained to Elkanah what she had promised Yahweh, and he had agreed to allow her to fulfil her promise to Yahweh, but she wanted to wait until I was weaned and could manage on my own. I do not remember those years living with mother very clearly, but I do still remember the tension around the house. When my mother looked back on that time, she said that Peninnah became even worse, because she could no longer lord it over mother for not having a son. Now mother was not only the favoured and loved wife, but Peninnah could no longer hold barrenness over her.

The year my mother returned to Shiloh with me she brought with her a three year old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine. The bull was sacrificed and the feast eaten, before mother took me firmly by the hand and led me into the shrine to find Eli. When she found him, she reminded him of the time when they had met before, and of the vow she had made to Yahweh. Then she placed my hand into Eli's hand. She kissed me gently on my head, told me to be good, turned her back and walked away. I remember that I looked at mother and would have run after her, but Eli picked me up into his arms and I turned and looked into the face of the man who was now my father.

Knowing my mother's story as I do, I do not know how she managed to leave me. I know each year when she returned, she would bring with her a newly woven garment for me to wear. I knew somehow that I was deeply loved by her, but it was my destiny to be here and to be raised by Eli. I missed her, and when it came to the time of pilgrimage I would keep an eye out among the pilgrims for her. I would run to greet her and she would hold out her arms to me and hug me tight, a years worth of hugs in a few moments. As time passed she would introduce me to my brothers and sisters, and I would strut around showing them around the shrine.

Eli looked after me like a son. He was a kindly and patient man with me, but even at my young age I sensed a deep sadness in him. He taught me how to look after the shrine. Together we would sweep the floors and polish the big wooden doors. When I got big enough, he would send me to get rid of the animals which had just wandered in to the shrine. One of the sacrificial beasts regularly managed to get loose. Of course they always left their mark for me to clear up afterwards. I loved working with Eli and it was a joy to sit at his feet and listen as he told me the stories of our ancestors and of the goodness of Yahweh. Together we would sing praises to Yahweh in the place of the Ark of the Covenant, the place where Yahweh himself dwells. Together he would show me the rituals of the Tent of Meeting. At night I would sleep near to the Ark, close to where Eli himself slept. I was always ready to serve Eli should he call for help.

Although I was never told, I knew that Eli was disappointed in his two sons, Hophni and Phineas, who were the official shrine Priests now that Eli was old. They were of the house and lineage of Aaron and were the hereditary Priests of the people of Israel. They were not good Priests. They were arrogant men who would send their servant to collect choice cuts of meat from the offerings, before they had been offered to Yahweh. The people making the offerings were angered by this behaviour, and looking back on it, were also probably angry with Eli for not rebuking his sons. Eli had rebuked them, telling them that they might be interceding for the people before Yahweh, but who was going to intercede for them before him? They just ignored his warning and carried on with their evil ways. I learned later that they also used the women who worked at the doors of the Tent of Meeting for their own pleasure. Neither of these things, and maybe things that I never even learned about, made them a good example or worthy to be in the shrine of Yahweh, let alone his shrine Priests, leading the worship and praise of Yahweh for the people.

One day an old man came to see Eli. I was with him, sweeping the floors while he sat and watched me and we talked of Yahweh. When he saw the man he stood, and a look of fear came to his face. The man stopped and in a loud voice said;

‘The Lord says I chose your family to be my Priests. I promised them that they would have food and clothing, so that they would be free to make offerings and burn incense before my altar. Your sons have disgraced your family, and you have not rebuked so that they repented and changed. So it will be that your line will not live long lives and will not automatically serve at my altar, only those that I choose. As a sign, your sons Hophni and Phineas will die on the same day. I will raise up my own Priest to serve at my shrine, in their place. The line of Aaron will come to him to plead for food and clothes, because they have no land to grow food and support themselves.’

Eli's face was white with shock, but he bowed his head in acknowledgement of the rebuke. When the man turned and left, he sank down again onto his bench and put his hands over his

face and wept. I went over and tried to comfort him, I asked who the man was, and he just said, a Prophet of Israel. He did not want to talk about what had happened, so he sent me away. I did not see him again for the rest of the day. I wondered what it all meant.

Some years later, one night, as I lay on my bed near to the Ark, I thought that I heard Eli call out for me. He was by now almost blind and very frail, so I got up and ran to him to help him, but he was asleep. When I woke him he said that he had not called. So I went back to my bed and to sleep. A little while later I heard him call again, and again ran to him. Again he said that he had not called. When I heard him call a third time and ran to him, he was already awake, and had obviously been thinking and praying. He gently told me that he had not been calling me, but he thought that Yahweh was calling. He told me that if I heard the call again I was to say;

‘Speak Lord, your servant is listening’

I heard the call again, and as Eli said, I stood and said

‘Speak Lord, your servant is listening’

And I listened. It felt as if I was being filled by a rushing mighty wind. I felt as though I had been lifted up and set down again, and in between I had been changed. Time had passed.

Eternity could have passed, and I would not have known. I remember looking down at myself, but I could see no change in my body. I searched inside myself and found that I understood things I had not done so before. I looked closely again and wished I had not.

In the morning Eli called me and asked whether I had been called again. I told him that I had. When he asked me what Yahweh had said, I just mumbled something. But Eli rebuked me and told me that I should always tell the truth when Yahweh spoke to me. If I were to be a good prophet for Yahweh, I would be called to tell the truth of Yahweh to everyone, no matter who they were, starting with him. So with tears in my eyes I told my father that that day the words of the prophet, which he had already been given, would be fulfilled. When I finished Eli bowed his head and said;

‘The Lord’s will be done.’

By sundown both of Eli’s sons were dead. When the news of their deaths were taken to Eli, he himself collapsed and died. So the words of Yahweh were fulfilled. I buried my father with all the honour that I could, and I returned to my place at the Ark of the Covenant. Despite my young age, I was the new prophet of Yahweh and the new Priest of the Shrine at Shiloh.