

Samuel the Prophet

3 – Samuel and Saul the King



Saul, Saul, my biggest mistake. And I do blame myself. My adopted Father Eli, who was the shrine Priest at Shiloh, had the same problem as I. His sons, when they became the shrine Priests in his stead, were not the men their father was and they insulted Yahweh by claiming the best cuts of sacrificial meat even before it was offered to Yahweh. My sons Joel and Abijah, I appointed as Judges, to help me in my work as I grew older. They were based at Beersheba. They are not the men that I thought they were, and I soon began to get reports of them accepting bribes for favourable judgements. I summoned them and retold them of the story of Hophni and Phineas, and reminded them that Yahweh deals harshly with those who do not deal honestly with his people. For a while things appeared to be well, but then I began to hear more rumours. I was not surprised then, when the elders of the people came to me to ask me to intercede with Yahweh, to ask for a king of their own.

Most of the time when the people ask me to intercede for them, I know whether it is the right thing or not. Deep in my heart, I knew that asking for a king to lead them, would deeply hurt Yahweh, and was most certainly not in his plan for us. He wanted to lead his people, to have them worship him and only him, to look to him for leadership. But he could not provide a physical presence to lead them in to battle, and I am no warrior to lead the people of Yahweh when danger threatens. A king to rule over them, and there is the rub. These are Yahweh's people, and unless the king follows exactly the path Yahweh wants, they will again be led astray, and the consequences will be severe.

I laid the peoples request before Yahweh, and admitted to him that I felt rejected, after all these years of interceding for them and leading them in the right way. Yahweh was gentle with me, which was more than I felt that I deserved. He pointed out to me that it was he that was really being rejected, and not I. I do not understand how the people can reject Yahweh like this, after all that he has done for them. I went back to the people with Yahweh's response. I outlined for them the consequences of asking for a King. I warned them, and I was very specific about passing on what Yahweh said to me;

“You have seen how the kings of the other lands live, how they treat their people. Your kings will treat you just the same. They will demand that your young men become warriors and chariot drivers. They will demand that you send men into their fields to reap and sow their crops, and they will leave you less time to grow food for yourselves. Your craftsmen will be turned from making ploughs for your fields, to make swords for the warriors. Your daughters will be taken into their houses to be perfumers, cooks and bakers. Rulers will make new laws, that are not the laws of Yahweh, and they will take ancestral lands from you, to give to their favourites. They will want to live in luxury, and they will tax you, taking portions of all your harvests to keep them and their friends, without them having to work for them. You will become their slaves and you will look on their idleness and your labour and regret ever having asked for a king. On that day I will not heed your cries.”

The people heard what Yahweh had said, and still wished for a king. Yahweh knowing their stubbornness sent me to appoint a man to be king. I first met Saul bar Kish on the road outside a town I was about to enter, to spend some time making sacrifices and giving judgements. Saul asked me where he could find the prophet of Yahweh, as he was hunting for his father's missing donkeys, and didn't know where to go next to find them. I have to say that I was impressed by Saul. He was the tallest young man I had ever seen in Israel, and well appointed. He seemed a pleasant young man as well. I knew this was the man appointed by Yahweh to be king, so I reassured him that the donkeys had already found their way home, and invited him to join me at the feast in the town. So he sat down at the feast with the elders of the town, and I ordered the prize portion of the sacrificial meat to be served to him.

After the feast was over, I took Saul up on to the roof of the house where I was to sleep the night, and with the stars overhead we talked almost until daybreak. When we finally woke up, we broke our fast, and I led Saul to the edge of the town. I asked his servant to go on ahead and then when he was far enough away, I turned to him, took a horn of oil from my belt and poured it over his head. I kissed him, and then said;

‘The Lord has appointed you as king over Israel. In order that you know that this is what is ordained, when you leave here you will go to Rachel's Tomb at Zelzah. Two men will be waiting there for you. They will tell you that the donkeys have returned home, but that your father is now worried about you. Go then to the great tree at Tabor, where you will meet three men on their way to make sacrifice at Bethel. They will have with them their offerings of three goats, three loaves of bread and a skin of wine. They will offer you two of the loaves of bread. Take them. Go then to Gibeah, which is a Philistine outpost. When you arrive you will be greeted by a procession of prophets, singing and dancing. Join in with them. At that time the spirit of Yahweh will come upon you. You will become a changed man, full of the wisdom of Yahweh. Do whatever seems right, for you will be being directed by Yahweh. When the time seems right, leave Gibeah and travel to Gilgal. Wait there for me for seven days. I will then come and we will offer sacrifice together to Yahweh.’

Saul turned to me quite bewildered. But I am only a man of the tribe of Benjamin. How can this be happening to me. We are the least of Yahweh's people.

I said to him;

‘Today you are not the least among Yahweh's people, today you have been chosen to be king under Yahweh, so go now, and in a few days I will see you again at Gilgal, and I will reveal all you will need to know.’

As I watched Saul set off to become the king of the Israelites, I felt reassured that Yahweh had chosen well, and that Saul, who was such an unassuming young man would make a good king under the guidance of Yahweh. When I saw him again on the appointed day, I knew that he was a changed man. He had the same aura about him that I think that Moses had, when he has been speaking with Yahweh; as I am told that I have when I spend time in the presence of Yahweh, hearing what he wants me to say to his people, and interceding for them.

I might have known that he was a changed man, and that he had been set aside by Yahweh, but the people needed to know as well. So I summoned the tribes together to choose a king. I had the men of the tribes pass by me, but I picked no one out, until the tribe of Benjamin, the least of all the tribes. Then in the clan of Matri, I spotted Saul who stood taller than any of the other Israelites. I called him forward and made him turn to face the tribes before him as I announced;

‘This is the man that Yahweh has anointed to be your king. See how tall and well appointed he is. Here are the rules that will govern you and your king. Saul is to sign it in your presence as a covenant with you, and the elders of the tribes will sign for you all.’

At that the people began to shout;

‘Long live the king’

I then dismissed them to their homes. Saul returned to Gibeah with a number of young men whom Yahweh had appointed to be his companions and advisors. However not all the people were happy with Yahweh's choice.

The next while was a strange time, as Saul had never been king before, and the people had never had a king before. Neither seemed to know what to do next. There were no fine houses to move into, no servants to organise, just a young man who had been subject to his father, and had not even managed to find the lost donkeys, although they had as promised returned of their own accord.

It was Nahash the Ammonite who actually moved things along. He decided to besiege the city of Jabesh Gilead. When the people of the town became desperate, they asked Nahash for term of surrender. He said that if they surrendered he would gouge out the right eye of everyone in the city, men, women and children, and that would bring complete disgrace on the people of Israel.

News of the siege, and the terms, were brought to Saul, who was out in the fields ploughing with his father's oxen. He was absolutely incensed, and put out a call for the warriors of the tribes to gather at Bezek. Saul put the fear of Yahweh into the people, and altogether three hundred and thirty thousand men marched on Jabesh Gilead. Saul sent messengers on ahead to tell the citizens of the town that they would be relieved the following day. At first light of dawn Saul divided the men into three divisions, and they entered the enemy camp before the besiegers were fully awake. They slaughtered those who were still asleep, while the rest fled.

The Israelites would have liked to have gone after them and killed every one of them, but Saul stayed their hands, saying that Yahweh had saved them, and that there would be no more killing that day. This was the first time that Saul showed the people what it meant to be king.

I had watched the battle from afar, and was pleased with the way that Saul won the battle and stayed the hand of his people. I decided that now was the time to cement Saul as king of the Israelites, so I summoned the people to Gilgal to renew the kingship promises. We made friendship sacrifices and offerings to Yahweh, then Saul and the people sat down to a great feast together. This was the real beginning of the kingship of Saul bar Kish.