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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 16: SAMUEL

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapter 9 “1 Samuel” in *Discovering the Bible*.

Read chapters 4 “Samuel” and 19 “Saul” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders* when indicated below.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read 1 Samuel 1-16 before studying the following material in this unit.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

In terms of historical significance as well as his personal dedication to God, Samuel stands head and shoulders above most other Old Testament figures. In fact, Samuel’s stature as a leader in God’s service is close to that of Moses – with whom he is directly compared in Jeremiah 15:1. Unlike Moses, however, Samuel is one of the very few Old Testament characters of whom nothing negative is recorded.

The events described in the book of 1 Samuel (see Note 1) took place over a period of some 110 years – from the closing days of the judges, when Samuel was born (c. 1120 BC), through the death of Israel’s first king, Saul (c. 1011 BC). As the leading figure of that era, Samuel not only shepherded Israel through its transition from amphictyony (rule by judges) to monarchy, but he was also the last judge of the earlier era and the kingmaker of the second. Samuel’s roles were many and important, and we summarize them here from chapter 4, “Samuel,” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

Samuel’s primary role was that of prophet or messenger of God, and he appears to have led an order of prophets (1 Samuel 19:20). In the New Testament he is even said to have been the foremost prophet after Moses (Acts 3:22, 24).

He was also a “seer.” While prophets conveyed verbal messages from God, seers saw visions which were also a form of divine communication. Samuel is called both a prophet and a seer (1 Samuel 9:11), and this dual role was significant because Samuel functioned at a time when both words and visions from the Lord were rare (1 Samuel 3:1).

Samuel certainly functioned as a priest. He may have been from the priestly tribe of Levi (1 Chronicles 6:27), and was certainly trained, and perhaps adopted, by the high priest Eli. He served in the tabernacle

as a youth (1 Samuel 2:18) and continued to fulfill many priestly roles, as we see in his anointing of Saul and David (compare 1 Samuel chapters 10 and 16 with Numbers 27:15-23), making burnt offerings and peace offerings (compare 1 Samuel 13:9-14 and Leviticus 1), and in other ways.

Samuel was also the last of the judges who ruled Israel between Moses and the institution of kingship with Saul. We are told that he regularly traveled on a judicial circuit, and “Then he would return to Ramah, for his home was there, and there also he judged Israel” (1 Samuel 7:17 ESV).

There is no evidence that Samuel himself fought, but he appears to have acted as a military leader – much as Moses also did. He is specifically mentioned along with the great fighters Jerubbaal (Gideon), Barak and Jephthah (1 Samuel 12:11), and his role as Israel’s leader must have necessitated his direct involvement in the nation’s security.

Samuel was also a scribe and author of several parts of Scripture. The book of Chronicles mentions “... the acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the Chronicles of Samuel the seer” (1 Chronicles 29:29 ESV), and Samuel clearly spent a great deal of time in recording the events of his own time and the period between Moses and himself. He is generally acknowledged to be the author of 1 Samuel as well as several other books of the Old Testament.

Like Samson, Samuel was a Nazarite from birth – never cutting his hair and maintaining several other ritual aspects signifying dedication to God (1 Samuel 1:11).

Perhaps above all, Samuel was an intercessor: The Old Testament gives numerous examples of Samuel’s work as a mediator and intercessor for his people. For example, when Israel was attacked by the Philistines, the people begged Samuel “Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines” (1 Samuel 7:8 ESV). Samuel’s tireless prayer for his people was evidently heard by God on numerous occasions, and his effectiveness as an intercessor is reflected in the book of Jeremiah where God states “Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people” (Jeremiah 15:1).

In a sense, Samuel combined the roles of Moses, Aaron and Joshua – as well as others – and it would be difficult to find a more pivotal and inspiring character in Old Testament history. His influence for good would be long remembered, and even in the time of King Josiah, hundreds of years later, it was said that such a great event had not been celebrated – since the days of Samuel (2 Chronicles 35:18).

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The book of 1 Samuel can be divided into four distinct sections: The birth and youth of Samuel (chapters 1-6), Samuel as judge and leader of Israel (7-8), the kingship of Saul (9-15), and the background to David’s kingship (16-31). Here, we will comment on some of the major events of the first three periods.

Out of all the hundreds of individuals the Bible records, only a few are discussed before birth – six in the Old Testament (Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Perez and Zerah, Samson, Samuel) and two in the New (John the Baptist, and Jesus). Not only is Samuel one of those cases, but we are also given a good number of details regarding how his mother Hannah could not have children, and that God heard her prayers and blessed her with a son (see Note 2). Although 1 Samuel deals mainly with the kingships of Saul and David and puts great stress on David, it is doubtless significant that it does not mention the birth of either of these rulers, but does describe the birth of the prophet Samuel – thus stressing his great importance.



The young Samuel is presented to the priest Eli. Image: Archival.

In a similar way, Samuel is one of the few individuals who we are told were directly called by God (1 Samuel 3:1-10). Those individuals include the Patriarch Abraham, Moses, a few of the judges, and some of the prophets. In most cases, the individuals called directly in this way played very important roles in their own eras. Samuel's importance is stressed a third time in that we are told: "The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord" (1 Samuel 3:19-20).

The time in which Samuel took on the responsibility of leading Israel was a difficult one. As the last of the judges Samuel had to deal with the Philistines from the coastal area of Canaan who had become Israel's major enemy, even capturing the ark of God at one point (see Note 3). But after twenty years of oppression by the Philistines, Samuel summoned the people of Israel to Mizpah (meaning "watch-tower" or "look-out") a few miles from Jerusalem, to offer a sacrifice to God and ask him to forgive their sins. Samuel then led Israel against the Philistine army and decisively defeated it, after which he erected a memorial at the site, doubtless thanking God for Israel's deliverance.

Samuel's victory was followed by a long period of peace for Israel, but the need for strong leadership to deal with the Philistines continued. The aging Samuel had initially appointed his two sons to be his successors, but they proved themselves unworthy and were rejected. The tribal leaders of Israel then requested that Samuel appoint a king to lead them. God guided Samuel to comply with this request and the prophet anointed Saul as Israel's first king (1 Samuel 10:1-26).

Almost immediately, Saul successfully led a large group of Israelites against an enemy (see note 4). Soon after this, Samuel assembled the people at Gilgal (1 Samuel 11:14-15), which was the first place the Israelites camped after crossing the Jordan and where the people dedicated themselves to God (Joshua 5:2-10). There Samuel delivered a farewell speech in which he endorsed Saul. But although Saul grew in leadership (see chapter 19 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*) and proved himself a capable military commander, the originally reticent king soon showed that he could not be trusted to be faithful to God. First, when Saul was preparing to fight the Philistines, although not qualified to do so, he offered a sacrifice before the battle instead of waiting for Samuel as he had been instructed (1 Samuel 13:13). Then Samuel directed Saul to destroy the Amalekites but not to take their possessions (in fulfillment of the commandment in Deuteronomy 25:17-19), and Saul disobeyed God's command in this also (1 Samuel 15:34-35). As a result of his unfaithfulness, Saul was rejected by God.

Following Saul's rejection, we are told that "the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him" (1 Samuel 16:14). Although this might sound as though God directly sent an "evil spirit," the wording is entirely different from all the times God is said to have sent his own Spirit to influence individuals – including Saul (1 Samuel 10:10; etc.), and the sense seems to be that God *allowed* an evil spirit to influence Saul. In recording the fact that music calmed Saul, the Bible may be pointing out a partially physical aspect to Saul's condition, but it also shows the ultimate futility of attempting to treat a spiritual problem with a physical solution.

Saul's susceptibility to the influence of evil is also seen in that although he had earlier expelled the mediums and spiritists from Israel, after Samuel's death the king sought one out to try to gain advice from the deceased prophet. The section of Scripture in question (1 Samuel 28:3-25) does not say that Saul saw the "ghost" or "spirit" of Samuel, but that the medium saw such a vision.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

1 Samuel is a rich mine of theological concepts and lessons. From the birth of Samuel in the book's opening chapter to his death near its end, we can learn much from the life of this man of God. Samuel was a strong and selfless leader, but perhaps the main lesson we can learn from him is his unflinching loyalty to God. As a Nazarite from birth, Samuel is shown in great contrast to Samson – the last of the major judges before him. While Samson seems to have attached little importance to his Nazarite vows and exhibited great personal failings, Samuel faithfully maintained his vows throughout his life and became one of the most obedient and powerful servants of God in the Old Testament era. The same kind of contrast is made between Samuel and Saul – the leader who followed him, but who failed.

Just as Samuel became Israel's leader instead of Eli's sons (1 Samuel 2:12-17; 3:12-13), Saul was chosen from the minor tribe descended from Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin (Genesis 43:29), and David was chosen as the next king though he was the youngest among his many brothers (1 Samuel 16:1-13). In all these cases, the expected patterns of success and succession were overturned by God who (as he did with the patriarchs) often reversed the normal order of things and worked through the youngest and the least important or least expected individuals – raising those who showed humility (in Saul's case, at least at first – 1 Samuel 15:17) to lead powerfully. This was certainly the case with David, as we will see more fully in the next unit of this course, but the most important theological issue in 1 Samuel is not the king's character or whether Israel should have a king (Israelite kingship was foretold by God as early as the time of Abraham – Genesis 17:6), but whether the monarchy would take Israel closer to God or further from him. More specifically, the combined book of Samuel asks how the people of Israel would maintain a theocracy – perfect rule by God – at the same time as a monarchy – flawed human rule. In this situation we see the diplomatic skill and spiritual dedication of Samuel who called the people of Israel to repentance and renewal of their allegiance to God *at the same time* that he inaugurated Saul as king (1 Samuel 12:20-25). This is a vital part of the message of 1 Samuel: by establishing Israel's kingship in the context of its covenant with God, rather than the strength or the qualifications of the king, Samuel placed it on a radically different foundation from kingship in other nations.

This meant that Israel's king would not hold absolute power but would be subject to both the law of God and the words of his prophets (1 Samuel 15:17-23). As such, Israel's king was to be an agent of God's rulership of his people, rather than a competing authority – and he was to be under exactly the same law of God as the people themselves (1 Samuel 12:14-15). In this way, the story of Samuel provided the intended blueprint for Israel's kingship for centuries to come.

Even more than that, Samuel's story contains the first explicit mention in the Bible of the concept of the Messiah – the king who would rule righteously under God. The word "messiah" means "the anointed one," just as Samuel anointed both Saul and David as kings of Israel by pouring oil on their heads (1 Samuel 10:1; 16:13). Thus, throughout the book, David refers to Saul as "the LORD'S anointed," or literally, "the LORD'S messiah." It is interesting, however, that the very first instance of this royal concept of the anointed king in the book – and in the Old Testament as a whole – is with Samuel's mother Hannah. At the beginning of the book, when Hannah gave thanks after dedicating the son God had given her to his service, her prayer actually ended with a prophecy made at a time when Israel had no king: "The LORD will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed" (1 Samuel 2:10). It is fitting that a prayer of dedication for the one who would anoint Israel's first kings would prophesy the messianic king who would later come from that line.

* Note 1: Our books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel were originally a single "book" in the Hebrew Bible, though when it was translated into the ancient Greek Septuagint version, it was too long to fit on a single scroll and was divided into two halves. This is because Hebrew was not written with vowels and the added vowels in the Greek words made the text far longer. The material in the book was compiled over some time. While Samuel himself may have written parts of it – up to his death as recorded in 1 Samuel 25:1 – he is not mentioned at all in 2 Samuel, which was obviously compiled later. It was only after the Reformation that these books (originally known as 1 and 2 Kings) were named "1 and 2 Samuel" after the prophet Samuel.

* Note 2: Samuel means "the name of God," but can also be understood as "God heard" and this is the meaning the Bible chooses in 1 Samuel 1:20 where his mother Hannah named Samuel to commemorate God's answer to her prayer for a son. This meaning is also connected to the Hebrew word for "asked" (*sha'al*) which appears seven times in the first chapter of 1 Samuel.

* Note 3: The numbers cited for those who died for improperly looking into the ark after it was captured and then returned (1 Samuel 6:19) require comment. The King James Bible (and its derivatives) says that 50,070 people were killed at this time, but it is generally agreed that there is a mistake in the text here. In the Hebrew Bible numbers were represented by letters rather than by numerals and could sometimes be misread for similar letters. In the verse in question, it appears that a correct reading was included with an incorrect one – the text is ungrammatical and the village of Beth-Shemesh cannot have contained 50,000 inhabitants. So, many translations (NIV, ESV, etc.) translate the number as "70," as do a number of ancient Hebrew manuscripts.

* Note 4: 1 Samuel 11:8 tells us that Saul led 300,000 Israelites and 30,000 men of Judah. But the Hebrew word translated thousands here and elsewhere in the Old Testament can mean divisions – so it may be that a total of some 330 groups of fighting men were involved rather than 330,000.

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

How many distinct roles did Samuel play in leading Israel?

What did Samuel ask the people of Israel to do before leading them into battle with the Philistines?

In what ways did Samuel make Israelite kingship different from kingship in surrounding nations?

Looking Below the Surface:

What are some of the ways Samuel differed from all the judges who led Israel before his time?

Everyday Applications:

Samuel personified "speaking truth to power" in his relationship with Saul. How might we apply his example?

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