

COMMENTARY

THE BOOK OF FIRST SAMUEL

I. THE PREMONARCHICAL PERIOD IN ISRAEL: SAMUEL AND THE ARK NARRATIVES (1:1—7:17)

A. The Birth of Samuel (1:1-28; 2:11)

BEHIND THE TEXT

The initial unit of 1 Samuel opens with the narrative account of Samuel's birth (1:1-28), includes Hannah's song of praise and thanksgiving (2:1-10), and concludes with the brief notice that Samuel *served Yahweh in the presence of Eli* (v 11b). The syntactical, literary, and thematic cues within the text indicate the opening scenes of ch 1 naturally conjoin 1 and 2 Samuel with the book of Judges; yet, they also suggest that an important shift within the plotline of Israel's narrative is taking place. On the one hand, 1 Samuel directly follows Judges in the Hebrew Bible, thus linking this book with the latter in terms of canonical arrangement. More substantial evidence indicates a stronger connection to Judges, however. The setting of 1:1—2:11 is situated at the sanctuary in Shiloh, the identical location where the men of Benjamin seized wives for themselves at the end of Judges (21:15-24). In addition, the adjectival phrase **there was a certain man** (1 Sam 1:1a) shows a close literary affinity with the introduction to Manoah, Samson's father (Judg 13:2), as well as the stories of Micah (Judg 17:1) and the Levite (Judg 19:1b). This canonical relationship is enhanced by the fact that the story of Elkanah and his family takes place in **the hill country of Ephraim** (1 Sam 1:1a), the same tribal territory that is mentioned in Judg 17. As a result of this evidence, the reading audience is left to deduce that the opening events of 1 Samuel follow naturally from the time of Judges.

Other grammatical and syntactical considerations, however, indicate that the story line is also moving in a new direction. The Hebrew syntax of 1:1a (**and there was a certain man**) indicates the beginning of a new scene within the overall narrative structure. Moreover, the formal introduction of a new set of characters in ch 1 (i.e., Elkanah, Hannah, Eli) signals the opening of a distinct narrative sequence. The emergence of Samuel, in particular, shifts the setting of the story from the time of the judges to the period of the monarchy. Samuel is essential for the development of Saul's kingship (esp. in chs 8—12), and he is responsible for the establishment of David's monarchy as well (1 Sam 16—2 Sam 24). Since Samuel is the man to whom Israel owes its monarchy, he becomes a pivotal figure during this transitional phase in Israel's history.

Even though the birth of Samuel functions as the climax of the first chapter (1 Sam 1:19-20), the information regarding Hannah's barrenness (v 2), Peninnah's cruel treatment of Hannah (vv 6-7), and Hannah's prayer and vow (vv 10-11) develops the palpable tension leading up to Samuel's initial appearance in the story (v 20). In addition to the two wives and the boy Samuel, this unit introduces the reader to four men who are critical to the story line: Elkanah, Hophni, Phinehas, and Eli. While Elkanah basically disappears from the story line after the birth of Samuel, Eli and his sons play more prominent roles throughout chs 1—3 in that they served as the main priests at the Shiloh sanctuary. As the main priests at Shiloh they also functioned as the primary caretakers of the ark of the covenant. The text also indicates that they largely contributed to the overall religious and moral decay of the priesthood at this time.

The story of Samuel in chs 1—3 is intimately tied to the sanctuary at Shiloh. Along with Shechem (Josh 24) and Gilgal (Josh 5), Shiloh served as one of the main religious centers in Israel's past. According to the OT, both the tent of meeting and the ark of the covenant resided there in premonarchical times (Josh 18:1-10; 19:51; 21:2; 22:9; Judg 20:26-28). Shiloh lay about nineteen miles north of Jerusalem, in the hill country of Ephraim. Recent archaeological excavation points to the remnants of a cultic site there with extensive architectural features that can be placed in the first half of the eleventh century B.C. (Halpern 1992, 1214). This dating would place it roughly at the time of Eli and Samuel (ca. 1050 B.C.). The Philistines, in all likelihood, later destroyed the sanctuary, an event that Jeremiah alludes to in his book (26:6, 9).

Elkanah made yearly pilgrimages to Shiloh in order to present offerings and sacrifices before Yahweh. It is possible that these pilgrimages were connected to the autumn festival known as the Festival of Booths or Succoth (Deut 16:13-15), but the text never directly says so. The text also notes that his wives, Hannah and Peninnah, and his children regularly accompanied him to the sacred site. While outlawed in modern western society, bigamy was not an unusual practice in the ancient Near East. In ancient cultures, if a man's primary wife was not able to provide a son, and thus ensure the preservation

of the family line and a direct heir to the family estate, he would take a second wife in order to produce a male descendant. Although allowed by Mosaic tradition (Deut 21:15), polygamous arrangements often presented a political, economic, and social threat to the barren wife (Schneider 2004, 46-61). These marital arrangements also had the power to enflame sharp tensions within the family unit. This appears to be no less true in the case of Elkanah's household. The bitter rivalry that developed between Hannah and Peninnah became particularly hard on the former. The pain and frustration over Hannah's situation eventually drove her to pray for a son, resulting in a vow to dedicate him as a Nazirite to Yahweh. Yahweh eventually answered the prayer of Hannah, who later fulfilled her part of the vow by returning the boy to Yahweh. Thus, one of the main purposes of this opening unit is to provide an explanation as to how Samuel became associated with the Shiloh sanctuary and later displaced Eli and his sons as the main priest there.

IN THE TEXT

I. Prologue (1:1-3)

■ I The prologue commences by introducing Samuel's family tree. Elkanah, Samuel's father, is described as a man from ***Haramathaim Zophim***. In Hebrew, this phrase literally means "the Double Heights (of) Zophim." Since this location is not mentioned anywhere else in the OT, many modern translations try to emend the text in order to make sense of this reading. Some have translated the text to read "Ramathaim of the Zuphites" (JPS). Another, and more attractive, way to translate this phrase is "[a man from] Ramathaim, a Zuphite" (NIV, NRSV) or "one of the Zuphites from Ramathaim" (Tsumura 2007, 107). The latter two options preserve Elkanah's Zuphite lineage (referenced in v 1b) and place him at Ramathaim, which is the plural form of Ramah. Ramah is designated as Elkanah's hometown in 1:19 and 2:11, and it has been associated with the ancient city of Rantis, which is located about sixteen miles east of Tel Aviv (also called Arimathea in the NT). The plural form of Ramah (Ramathaim, which can also be read "two hills") is utilized here because there were probably two hills associated with the site: one in the city and the other utilized as a "high place" (9:25).

Elkanah is further identified as the **son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite** (v 1). The name **Elkanah** literally means "God acquired (a son?)," and the inclusion of the patronymic formula after his name raises a couple of important issues. First, the inclusion of the rather long registry of names may indicate Elkanah was a man of some means (Gordon 1986, 72). Not only does the long pedigree indicate he came from a well-to-do family, but the fact that he could support two wives lends credence to this notion as well. It is ironic, however, that the men listed in his lineage are not well known and they do not play a prominent role in the OT. In spite

of this, the patronymic formula is the typical literary device used by biblical writers to formally introduce important figures such as prophets, priests, and/or kings. The fact that the text includes Elkanah's family tree as a prelude to Samuel's arrival is a subtle clue that Samuel would be special; maybe even anticipating his future role as a prophet and priest (Mauchline 1971, 42). Second, Elkanah's ancestor Zuph, who is only identified as an Ephraimite, did not descend from a prophetic or priestly family. This issue presented peculiar difficulties for later editors and interpreters of the story of Samuel. Since the text indicates Samuel performed prophetic and priestly functions at Shiloh, later traditions "compensated" for Samuel's nonexistent priestly heritage. First Chronicles 6:16-28, 33-38, in particular, addressed this issue by modifying Samuel's history line by listing Zuph as a descendant of Levi. This important genealogical shift thereby ascribed to Samuel Levitical (priestly) bloodlines. Moreover, the Chronicler placed Elkanah and Samuel among the Kohathite clan, whose major responsibility was to care for the ark of the covenant (Num 3:31). It is understandable why the Chronicler located Samuel among this clan, considering that he did have some affiliation with the ark (1 Sam 3:3).

■ **2-3** Verses 2 and 3a provide further information about Elkanah. Whereas v 1 refers to his ancestral history, v 2 provides information about his wives. In v 2a **Hannah** is listed first, thus indicating her personal importance to Elkanah and her status as the primary wife. The name **Hannah** may mean "charming" and thus would explain why she was favored by Elkanah (Klein 1983, 6). **Peninnah** is listed second, probably emphasizing her role as the secondary wife. The order of their names is inverted, however, in the second part of the verse. In v 2b Peninnah is mentioned first with the added notice that **Peninnah had children while Hannah did not have children**. The text positions Hannah after Peninnah in the second half of the verse to remind the audience of the latter's barren condition, which is crucial to the development of the story line (Alter 1999, 3). The name **Peninnah** may mean something like "prolific," thus it is a fitting appellation in light of the fact that she was able to produce multiple children for Elkanah (Klein 1983, 6). Hannah's name is also suggestive in light of her special circumstances, because it is etymologically similar to the Hebrew word for favor (*hēn*). Provided that she could not have children at the beginning of the narrative, Hannah's name later takes on new significance as Yahweh showed favor to her by not only providing Samuel but several other children as well (2:21).

The text also notes that Elkanah traveled to Shiloh *on a yearly basis to worship and to offer sacrifices to the Lord of Hosts* (1:3a). The grammatical construction of v 3a (*miyyānūm yāmūm* = "from year to year"), coupled with the two infinitives (*to worship and to offer*), is noteworthy, because it indicates ongoing action or consistent activity. The reference to Elkanah's regular pilgrimage to Shiloh suggests that he was a pious man who feared Yahweh. Verse 3b closes out the subunit by noting that when Elkanah went to the sanctuary

Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were *there*. The fact that the text does not read “Eli and his sons” points to the notion that the worshiper expected to encounter Hophni and Phinehas at the sacred site but not Eli (Frolov 2002, 140). This would indicate that Eli remained in the background while his sons took the lead role in officiating at the site. The reference to Eli’s sons in this verse also prepares the reader for the next chapter, in which they will be the subject of the editor/narrator’s focus.

2. Elkanah’s Family at Shiloh (1:4-8)

■ **4-7a** This section recounts what generally took place when Elkanah’s family visited the shrine at Shiloh. The unit opens at v 4a with the phrase *and it would happen on the day Elkanah sacrificed* and proceeds in vv 4b-7a to provide a parenthetical note describing Elkanah’s habitual actions at the time of sacrifice. These verses recount that he would give to *Peninnah and her sons and daughters a portion* of the sacrificial animal. However, to Hannah he would give her *one portion faceward*. The meaning of the latter phrase has perplexed scholars for generations. The Hebrew word that is employed is a dual form (*ʿapāyim*) and literally means “faces.” Some have translated it as a **double portion** (Hertzberg 1964, 24; NIV, NRSV), a “worthy portion” (KJV), or “in her face,” as in frustration over Hannah’s inability to provide children for Elkanah (Frolov 2002, 143). In light of the following phrase, which states that Elkanah **loved** Hannah (JPS, “Hannah was his favorite”), we may probably take it that Elkanah presented the portion to Hannah in such a manner, such as giving her a larger portion than was merited, or in a very personal or caring manner (thus “to her face”), so that it honored her (a “portion of honor,” Caquot and de Robert 1994, 33) above Peninnah. Second, the text recounts that *her rival wife would provoke her sorely in order to irritate her* (v 6). Peninnah’s harsh treatment of Hannah is captured more accurately by the Hebrew. Not only did she show hostility toward Hannah (thus **her rival**), but she did it purposely in order to “cause thunder” or to “agitate” her. In English, this phrase could even be rendered to “browbeat” or to “bully” her (Mauchline 1971, 46). The LXX does not contain a statement about the “rival wife” and how she provoked Hannah in v 6. Instead Hannah’s pain is caused by the Lord who prevented her from having children. Verse 6 in the LXX reads: “For the Lord gave her no child in her affliction, and according to the despondency of her affliction; and she was dispirited on this account, that the Lord shut up her womb as to not give her a child.” In the LXX, Hannah’s despondency is caused by her barrenness, not Peninnah’s provocation.

The embittered rivalry that the Hebrew text captures so poignantly existed because Peninnah was jealous that Hannah remained the favored wife of Elkanah, even though Peninnah produced children for him. The rivalry between Elkanah’s wives similarly recalls the contentious encounters between Sarah and Hagar (Gen 16:4-6) and Leah and Rachel (Gen 30:1-3). The echo-

ing of these traditions from the patriarchal history has an important bearing on the interpretation of this story. In biblical history, children born to a previously barren woman generally indicated something unique or special about the status of that child (i.e., Isaac, Jacob, Joseph). Since Hannah's child was conceived with the assistance of God, the reader is left to anticipate that Samuel would serve an important role in Israel's society. The following chapters (esp. 1 Sam 3—7) indicate that this is indeed the case. Verse 7a ends the parenthetical statement by noting that this scenario *would happen year after year as long as she would go up to the house of the Lord*. Thus, not only was Hannah's barrenness a source of pain and humiliation, but the repeated ridicule that she had to endure no doubt caused her unspeakable grief and heartache.

■ **7b-8** Verse 7b connects with v 4a by noting that in response to this situation Hannah *would cry and not eat* during the mealtime, thus underscoring her intense grief. On one occasion Elkanah responded to Hannah's plight by asking, *Why are you crying and why don't you eat, and why is your heart fallen? Am I not better to you than ten sons?* Elkanah in v 8 basically "hammered" Hannah with four short staccato questions to try and assuage Hannah's feelings (Fokkelman 1993, 31). Elkanah's response, though well-intentioned, essentially misunderstood Hannah's personal situation and clumsily overlooked the root of her problem. Although Elkanah tried, he was not able to provide the healing words that would have brought lasting comfort to her. In the ancient world, a woman's social status, financial security, and fulfillment in life were found in bearing sons (Alter 1999, 4). Elkanah's love and attention, no matter how important, would never be able to meet these specific needs in Hannah's life.

Taking these verses together, then, one realizes that Hannah's plight was an extremely frustrating and unimaginably difficult one; she was barren, her rival wife repeatedly and purposely antagonized her on account of her barrenness, and her husband was rather oblivious to her own needs and the source of her frustration, pain, and sadness.

3. Hannah's Vow to Yahweh (1:9-11)

■ **9-11** These verses recount Hannah's response to her difficult circumstances. On one specific occasion Hannah went into the sanctuary to pray and present her grief before the Lord. Since Yahweh had closed her womb, only Yahweh, the giver of life, could open it (Evans 2003, 16). While there, the text notes that *Eli was sitting on the seat next to the doorposts of the temple of Yahweh* (v 9). Even though Eli would not greet the people when they came to sacrifice, he did serve in some capacity (limited?) at the shrine. Most likely he was confined to the inner portion of the sanctuary where people like Hannah came to pray. The text in v 9 makes a reference to the *doorposts of the temple*, which may indicate that the Shiloh sanctuary was a more permanent structure and

not just a tent shrine like the tabernacle from the wilderness traditions (Klein 1983, 8; see Ps 78:60, which may indicate otherwise). While in the sanctuary Hannah *prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly*. The description of Hannah's crying is significant. The syntax includes the use of the infinitive absolute (*bākōh tibkeh*) in describing Hannah's emotional response. The grammar intends to convey severe crying (i.e., she "really cried") or heavy weeping on Hannah's part. Thus, the reader is given a glimpse into the intense grief she experienced.

Hannah's intense prayer in vv 10-11 also included a vow. She prayed: *If you will truly look upon the affliction of your maidservant and remember me and not forget your maidservant and give to your maidservant seed of men, I will give him to Yahweh all the days of his life and a razor will not come upon his head*. Two important issues are related to Hannah's prayer. First, Hannah's request, that Yahweh "look upon" her affliction and "remember" her, distinctly echoes the plight and the outcry of the Israelites when they were in Egyptian bondage (Exod 2:23-24; 6:5). The narrator thus carefully draws a comparison between Hannah's suffering and the painful memories of Israel's ancestors in Egypt.

Second, Hannah's vow is significant because it is not given in the usual quid pro quo fashion (i.e., if you do X, then I will do Y). Hannah basically said, If you give X, then I will give Y. Hannah's vow therefore indicates that Samuel would not only be a gift from God, but her son would be a gift given back to God (Hamilton 2004, 215). It is presumed that Samuel would be a Nazirite, since she promised that *his hair would not be cut* (Num 6:5; Judg 13:5; 16:17). The LXX and 4QSam^a further add the notice that he would "not drink wine" either. In examining this language, it becomes apparent that the narrator makes a connection with the book of Judges, particularly the story of Samson. Unlike Samson, who failed as a Nazirite and broke his vows at every turn, Samuel would be an exemplary Nazirite demonstrating great faithfulness to God as both prophet and priest. This "rearview" reflection on the story of Samson thus intimates that a new chapter and brighter future will emerge among Israel's religious leadership with the advent of Samuel.

Nazirite

The term "Nazirite" derives from the Hebrew word (*nāzar*) meaning to "consecrate" or "set apart." Nazirites displayed their devotion to God through distinctive behaviors such as observing prohibitions against cutting the hair, drinking wine or other fermented beverages, and touching the dead. Nazirites were either called by God or dedicated by their parents at an early age. In addition to Samson (Judg 13—16) and Samuel, men and women could vow to become temporary Nazirites for a designated period of time. The book of Numbers provides specific legislation pertaining to the terms and obligations of the Nazirite vow (6:1-21).

4. Eli and Hannah at the Sanctuary (1:12-18)

■ **12-18** This section of text records the rather lengthy interchange between Hannah and the priest Eli at the Shiloh sanctuary. While Hannah prayed, Eli carefully observed Hannah's behavior and body language. The Hebrew grammar in v 12 centers on and underscores the earnestness with which Hannah prayed: Hannah *continued to pray before Yahweh*. The meaning of the verb (*hirbetâ*) in this phrase can be translated "to be great or many." Thus, Hannah "multiplied" her prayers or she prayed "without ceasing."

Eli, who could not hear her speak and noticed only that her lips were moving, *considered her to be a drunken woman* and commanded that *she remove the wine from herself* (vv 13-14). Hannah quickly responded to Eli's gruff response and misguided accusation by stating that she was not a drunken woman given over to *wine* and *strong drink* (thus covering the gamut of intoxicating beverages), but rather, in her grief, *poured out her soul before Yahweh* (v 15).

The irony in this exchange cannot be overlooked. First, the ineffectiveness of Eli as a priest is apparent. As a priest, he should have been in tune to a supplicant with a heavy heart. Instead, he was unable to interpret effectively Hannah's actions and falsely accused her of wrongdoing. This is just one sign that points to the hapless condition of the religious leadership and the overall state of affairs at the Shiloh sanctuary.

Second, in Hannah's response to Eli, the text uses a verb that is usually used for pouring out a liquid as a description for her prayer (*šāpak*). The same term is a technical term that can be used in conjunction with a sacrifice or offering that is poured out (Deut 12:27) or as a sign of deep contrition (Amos 5:8; 9:6) and sorrow (Lam 2:19).

Thus, Hannah was not imbibing wine or strong drink but was pouring out her soul—the type of offering and outpouring that came from a distressed heart or troubled spirit. While Elkanah's sacrifices and offerings were of the traditional type, Hannah's sacrifice and offering included a type of lament. Moreover, Eli mistakenly accused the future mother of a Nazirite (who would be required to stay away from wine and intoxicants, see Num 6:3) of being drunk herself! The irony is rich, to say the least.

When Eli realized this grave mistake he quickly proceeded to pronounce the following blessing upon Hannah: *May the God of Israel give to you your request that you have asked from him* (v 17b). The construction of this phrase in Hebrew may also be taken as a promise that God would indeed act on her behalf: *The God of Israel will give to you what you have asked from him*.

It is also significant to note here that between vv 16-28 (including 2:20), words associated with the verb "to ask" (*šā'al*) occur no less than nine times. This can be seen from the following outline (Hamilton 2004, 215):

Verse 17: Then Eli answered . . . "the God of Israel grant your *asking* that you have *asked* of him."

Verse 20: “She named him Samuel, for she said, ‘I have *asked* him of Yahweh.’”

Verse 27: “And Yahweh has granted me my *asking* that I *asked* of him.”

Verse 28: “Therefore I have caused him to be *asked* for by Yahweh. All the days of his life he is the *asked-for* one.”

2:20: “Then Eli . . . would say, ‘May Yahweh repay you with children by this woman for the *asking* that she *asked* of Yahweh.’”

The constant reference to Hannah’s “asking” or her “request” has caused some scholars to see oblique references to King Saul, and thus conclude this opening narrative originally pertained to his birth (Stolz 1981, 16). Although Saul’s name derives from the passive form of the same verb (*šāûl*), there is no substantial evidence outside of this narrative to maintain this position. In Hebrew, the narrator/writer is using a grammatical construction called alliterative etymology, where both words begin and end with the same consonants. The narrator/writer of this text deliberately utilizes similar words to create a sharp dichotomy between Samuel, for whom Hannah asked, and Saul, for whom the people will ask in chs 8 and 12. The foreshadowing is even more patent: barren Hannah asked for the child she did not have; later, barren Israel would ask for the king she did not have (Polzin 1989, 24-25).

Immediately after Eli pronounced this blessing/promise on Hannah, the text notes that she *ate and went her way and her face was not fallen again* (v 18). The blessing/promise that Hannah received appears to have revived her spirits. Not only did she partake of the food she once rejected, but the phrase *her face was not fallen again* employs an interesting wordplay. The term for *her face* (*pāneyhā*) sounds very similar to the name Peninnah, thus a pun on her rival’s name intimating that she would no longer be an issue or concern to Hannah.

1:12-28

5. Samuel Is Presented to Yahweh (1:19-28; 2:11)

■ **19-28** The text moves quickly from Hannah’s prayer and Eli’s blessing/promise to the birth of Samuel; the answer to Hannah’s prayer. When the couple returned from Shiloh the text immediately notes that “Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and [*Yahweh*] remembered her” (v 19b JPS, NRSV). The term “to know” (*yādaʿ*) is used in the OT as a sexual euphemism (Gen 4:1). However, whereas Elkanah knew Hannah, as in a brief sexual encounter, Yahweh actually remembered her. That Yahweh “remembered” Hannah is a direct referent to her supplication in v 11, thus demonstrating that Yahweh “observed” Hannah’s suffering and never “forgot” her request. The allusion once again to the Exodus tradition, where Yahweh “saw” Israel’s affliction, “heard” the outcry of the people, and “remembered” the covenant he made with their ancestors cannot be ignored. The similarities of these two traditions remind the reading audience that God deeply cares for those who are vulnerable and experience suffering.

When Hannah's son was born she gave him the name **Samuel** because, *from Yahweh I asked him* (v 20). The name **Samuel** (*šemu'ēl*), however, is not etymologically related to the verb "to ask." Although a number of scholars have tried to explain the meaning of his name, Samuel can probably best be read as "God heard" (i.e., Hannah's prayer). Hannah cared for Samuel and weaned him (probably around age three or four; see 2 Macc 7:27) before she returned him to Yahweh. Once the boy was old enough Hannah came to the sanctuary at Shiloh and presented materials for two sacrifices. The first consisted of "three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a jar of wine" (1 Sam 1:24 JPS). Based on the information from the LXX, 4QSam^a, and the Peshitta, it may be better to read this as "a three-year-old bull and bread." These elements were probably meant for a votive offering in light of the vow she made earlier (Num 15:8-10).

The second offering was much more valuable and precious: the boy Samuel himself. Hannah **brought** (v 24a, b) Samuel to the sanctuary and offered him to Yahweh by relinquishing him to the care of Eli. Although two different verbs are utilized in v 24 to refer to Hannah's "bringing" Samuel (*vātā'ālēhū* and *vātibī'ēhū*), they are both causative verbs, thus underscoring her role in delivering the boy to God. In presenting Samuel to Eli, she had indeed fulfilled her part of the vow (v 28). Samuel, in essence, became a "living sacrifice" to the Lord as a result of Hannah's gesture.

The text never indicates how leaving Samuel at Shiloh affected her personally, but one can only imagine the heavy emotional price she paid by leaving her only child with Eli. The text notes that she would visit Samuel once a year (2:19); it is difficult to believe, however, that this would have allowed Hannah enough time to develop an intimate relationship with her son. The type of sacrifice and faithfulness demonstrated on Hannah's part rivals that of Abraham who also showed a willingness to sacrifice his only child (Gen 21).

■ **2:11** When the initial unit closes, the text reminds the reading audience that Samuel remained at Shiloh where he **served Yahweh before Eli the priest**. The verb in 2:11b is a participle (*mēšārēt*), thus denoting that Samuel continuously and faithfully served Yahweh under Eli at the sanctuary. True to the vow and intentions of his mother, Samuel became a living sacrifice in the service of God. This statement not only informs the reader of the moral integrity and religious devotion of the lad, but it also demonstrates how the prayer and dedication of a pious woman produced one of Israel's greatest leaders.

FROM THE TEXT

1. One of the things that we learn in examining the life of Hannah is that life is not always fair. God does not always spare us from unfortunate circumstances or situations. There are times, or seasons, in life in which we may experience hardships or face opposition that brings us pain or heartache. Along the journey we may even encounter people that aggravate our pain (as

in the case of Peninnah) or come across those who try to help but are oblivious to our situation and personal needs (as in the case of Elkanah).

During those times in life we learn a couple of important lessons through the story of Hannah. First, God is keenly attentive to those who are suffering. The OT consistently witnesses to the fact that God is on the side of the humble, hurting, weak, and oppressed. Like the Israelites in Egyptian bondage, God sees the pain of his children and hears the cries of those who are suffering. God is also at work in the midst of those situations to bring about his plan, even when we may not always be aware of God's intentions. Like Hannah, God remembers those who call on his name in times of distress and can even bring something wonderful out of our misfortune. As is witnessed in Hannah's song of praise and thanksgiving (see commentary on 2:1-10), God exalts the lowly and brings honor to the weak. Samuel represented one of God's greatest leaders in Israel's history, yet, like the children of Sarah and Rebekah, he emerged as a blessing in a time of uncertainty.

Second, Hannah's own actions are instructive. In a time when she had few choices or options, Hannah did not lose faith in God and brought her complaint to him in prayer and tears. The text indicates that Hannah had to endure her suffering for a period of time, yet she brought her request before God, the One who could truly help her. It was out of her great anguish that she called upon God, and God looked upon her situation. God not only interceded for Hannah by providing a child but gave her several more children as well.

2. Hannah's faith and piety also emerge in the text. In asking God for a child, Hannah did not present her request as a bargain tactic in order to blackmail God: if you do this, I will do this. Hannah was not presumptuous in that manner but realized that if God provided a son, the son would be returned as a gift/offering back to God. There are times when people will make deals with God in order to ensure their request is granted. Such an attitude indicates that the supplicants are not truly concerned about seeking God's will but are more concerned about attaining or acquiring what is desired. Moreover, they mask their true intentions in pious language. Hannah proved that her heart and prayer were genuine in that when Samuel was given to Hannah, she returned him to the sanctuary as a living thank offering to God.

1:1-28;
2:11

3. We also learn an important lesson about the connection between worship and service. Samuel was a gift to God, and his life was characterized by continued service to God. Even when Samuel was a young lad the text notes in 2:11 that he served God in the presence of Eli. Another way of understanding this text is to say that Samuel served God by serving Eli. Many times our understanding of worship is too narrow, thinking that worship only takes place in a sanctuary or church. The example of Samuel reminds us that worship is also connected to fulfilling our family and work roles in daily life. This understanding of worship not only applies to adults but children and young people as well. Oftentimes our children have the mind-set that they cannot

do anything significant for God until they get older. However, it is important for them to understand that they worship God by obeying and helping their parents, by striving to do well in their schoolwork, and by treating siblings and friends with respect and kindness. Thus, worship is connected to the things they do on a daily basis. The same is true for adults. Adults also worship God by fulfilling their roles as spouses, parents, employees, and neighbors to the best of their abilities. Oftentimes people feel that their lives are just ordinary and that they are not doing important work for the kingdom of God. They may believe that by not serving God in a foreign country as a missionary or in a full-time ministry role in a church, their lives have little relevance or impact on the world. The text reminds us that we honor and worship God when we faithfully and wholeheartedly fulfill the roles in which we find ourselves, no matter how ordinary or mundane they may seem. Remember, *Whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name (and for the glory) of the Lord* (Col 3:17).

B. Hannah's Song of Thanksgiving (2:1-10)

BEHIND THE TEXT

Scholars would agree that Hannah's song of thanksgiving must have derived from a different literary setting before it was ascribed to Hannah and inserted here. First Samuel speaks of Hannah having six children (Samuel plus five others [2:21]) but the poem speaks of a barren woman who has seven children (v 5). The tenor of the poem is national, speaking of male enemies and military metaphors (v 4).

The prayer for the king (v 10) does not fit the story of Hannah since Samuel never served as a king and even spoke out against the institution of kingship. Also, v 11 joins 1:28 without difficulty, thus indicating that the song had been inserted into the text by the editor/redactor(s) of the books of Samuel. Scholars have noted the similarities of language and style to Ps 113 and other hymns of praise in the Psalter (Birch 1998, 980). Others have even commented on the similarities of this psalm with 2 Sam 22 and Ps 18 (Carlson 1964, 45-46). Even though this poem of thanksgiving may have been originally situated in a different literary and cultic setting, it is, nevertheless, appropriate to the context of the story of Hannah, because it centers on the theme of God's ability to intercede in human affairs and bring about a reversal of fortune. This message clearly resonated in the life of Hannah, who suffered from the pain of barrenness yet experienced the joy of motherhood as well. The words of this psalm of thanksgiving praise the God of Israel who is able to work miracles in the lives of the lowly and exalt the humble to a position of greatness.

■ **1-3** The opening phrase identifies the song initially as Hannah's prayer: **Hannah prayed and said**. As Hannah's private prayer, it is intensely personal and therefore conveys a first person perspective, especially in v 1. Phrases such as "my heart exults" (NRSV), **my horn is raised**, "my mouth derides my enemies," "I rejoice in my victory" (NRSV) convey the personal quality of this song. The suppliant in this song can rejoice based on the incomparability of God. There is **no one as holy as Yahweh, no one besides Yahweh, and no rock like our God** (v 2). The terms used here to describe God center on God's holy character and strength, the basis for God's greatness. As a result of God's sovereignty and purity, a warning is given those who are arrogant and proud since God is a God of knowledge who weighs human actions. Inherent within these verses is the idea that no one has the right to boast or be arrogant since God pays attention to human circumstances, judges them, and sets them in balance when necessary. Even though the song never identifies Peninnah per se, her taunting and ridicule of Hannah come to mind in these verses (see 1:6).

■ **4-8** These verses logically flow from the previous statements about God's ability to change the fortunes of the mighty and the lowly. They provide a specific catalogue of reversals brought about by God's own power. Verse 4a centers on the powerful who have been brought low ("the bows of the mighty are broken" [JPS, NRSV]) and then (v 4b) shifts to the weak who have been made strong ("the feeble gird on strength" [NRSV]). Verse 5a continues this series of comparisons by referring to those **who were full** and then **hired themselves for bread**, and "those who were hungry are fat with spoil" (NRSV). Verse 5b reverses the order by referring to the weak first and then the mighty. In this instance the woman **who was barren has borne seven** and "she who has many children is forlorn" (NRSV). Verses 4-5 especially echo God's intervention in the life of Hannah who was barren but later given several children.

Verses 6-8 recall that it is God who is the power behind these reversals of fortune. The focus shifts from the hope of those in need of God's help to a doxology of praise to God (Birch 1998, 981). Unlike v 1, which highlights the role of the suppliant, vv 6-8 magnify the power and activity of God. These verses confirm that it is God who "kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. . . . makes poor and makes rich; . . . brings low [and] exalts. . . . raises up the poor . . . ; lifts the needy . . . , to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor" (NRSV). The writer can state this theological belief because "the pillars of the earth are [**Yahweh's**], and on them he has set the world" (v 8b NRSV). In essence, the voice in this psalm underscores the notion of God as Creator, the One who has established the earth and set it in place. Since God demonstrated both the ability and the might to accomplish this amazing feat at creation, the writer is reassured that God also has the power to intervene in a time of need.

■ **9-10** The last two verses of this song flow out of the preceding section. The God who is able to change the fortunes of the powerful and the weak (v 9) is also the God who distinguishes between the faithful and the wicked and judges **the ends of the earth** (v 10). God “will guard the feet of his faithful” while “the wicked shall be cut off in darkness” (v 9 NRSV). The poem underscores the notion that it is not by one’s own power or might that a person prevails, but it is God’s power that transforms the social realities in which one lives. Thus, the faithful are those who put their faith in God’s power and allow him to work in their personal situations.

Because of this certitude, the writer of this song can confidently proclaim that God will shatter his enemies and give victory to his people. In the context of this psalm the writer in v 10 specifically identifies **his king** as the one who will receive this power, who is also called **his anointed**. Interestingly, the poem that begins as Hannah’s personal prayer ends with a statement about Israel’s king. The poem essentially anticipates the eventual arrival of a king, and Hannah’s son would play an integral role in anointing Israel’s first king and establishing the political office of the monarchy in Israel’s society.

FROM THE TEXT

1. Hannah’s song is instructive to modern believers at various levels. First, Hannah’s song is a reaction of thanksgiving and praise in light of the miraculous way God worked on her behalf. Hannah was mindful to thank God both in her actions (by presenting Samuel as an offering to God) and in her words of celebratory song. As a recipient of God’s grace, Hannah did not forget to show her gratitude in her excitement over Samuel’s birth, but she remembered the One to whom she owed so much. Hannah’s reaction is very different from the Israelites who wandered in the desert for many years. The generation who witnessed God’s miraculous power and experienced liberation from Egyptian bondage forgot what God had done for them during the intervening years between the exodus and settlement. As a result, that generation became known as ingrates and complainers who forfeited the blessings of the promised land because of their ingratitude (Ps 78). In the NT, Luke reminds the reading audience of the ten lepers who were made whole, but only one returned to worship and thank Jesus for the healing he provided (17:11-19). The Bible reinforces the notion that gratitude is a noble quality that should be evident within the life of every believer. Through gratitude, we proclaim our thankfulness to God for the way he has worked in our situations, and we acknowledge that we had to depend upon him for his help and strength. Gratitude should also be extended at a human level. It is important that we show our appreciation to friends, neighbors, family members, coworkers, members of the community of faith, and even strangers for the help, thoughtfulness, and care they displayed toward us. In doing so, we demonstrate that we did

not take their acts of kindness for granted and we affirm the significant impact they made on us.

2. The melody of Hannah is echoed in the song of Mary in the NT (Luke 1:46-55; see also commentary on 1 Sam 2:26). As both of these songs attest, God was able to work in seemingly impossible circumstances to bring about the birth of a special son. In the cases of Hannah and Mary, the child born to these mothers would have a profound role in transforming the religious situations into which they arrived. Samuel became the faithful prophet/priest/judge of the people of Israel through whom God purified the corrupted sanctuary at Shiloh. Jesus, who embodied the very being of God, humbly entered the world to purify the human race of sin and disobedience. It is significant that God did not select the most notable women to mother these significant sons, but the lowly and barren; the kind of women most people would overlook as insignificant. In the examples of Hannah and Mary, we are powerfully reminded that in terms of salvation history, God often works in paradoxes. God does not always seek out the most powerful, wealthy, or popular individuals to effect his salvific purposes in the world. Rather, he often works in and through unlikely circumstances and the unsuspecting individuals to bring his purposes to fruition.

3. In the song of Hannah we are reminded that life is subject to change and God is able to reverse the fortunes of both the feeble and the strong. As the life of Hannah illustrates, God can exalt the lowly as well as bring healing and happiness to the one experiencing pain. God can also humble the arrogant and lay low the powerful. The song of Hannah is instructive on this point, “For the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed” (2:3 NRSV). God is acutely aware of the actions of humans on earth, and he dispenses his justice and mercy where appropriate. As part his plan, God has also endowed people, institutions, and nations to be agents of his justice and mercy in the world. God is at work through a variety of means to provide aid and comfort for the weak, the sorrowful, the hungry, the destitute, and the vulnerable. God also works through various organizations and institutions to make sure that those who commit injustice and exploit the pain and suffering of others are punished. In light of this, it is our calling and obligation as Christ’s representatives to be instruments by which God enacts change in the lives of people and society.

C. Eli and His Sons (2:12—3:1a)

BEHIND THE TEXT

This unit centers on the activity of Eli and his sons at the Shiloh sanctuary. It is clear that the primary function of this text is to draw a sharp contrast or distinction between Eli’s corrupt sons and the faithful prophet/priest Samuel. Indeed, the entire unit draws attention to this fact by referring to the sons of Eli as *worthless sons* (v 12a) at the very beginning of this section. The

Hebrew phrase used to describe the sons (*bēnē bēliyā'al*) is very similar to the statement reiterated by Hannah in 1:16a, in which she implored Eli not to take her for a **worthless woman** (*bat bēliyā'al*). The wordplay on these texts is intentional and thus the writer/narrator is deliberate in creating a sharp dichotomy between the posterity of the two families. Hannah's son, Samuel, would be good and Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were wicked.

The deceitfulness of the priesthood is painfully evident in the actions of Hophni and Phinehas and those who officiated over the religious ceremonies with them at Shiloh. Not only did Eli's sons pervert and manipulate the sacrificial process for their own gain (vv 13-17), but they also engaged in sexual activity within the sanctuary's precincts (vv 22-26). The notice about the sons' sexual activity is troubling for a couple of reasons. First, the syntax employed in v 22 (the verb *šākav* + 'et) is similar to other places in the OT that refer to rape (Gen 34:2, 7; 2 Sam 13:14) or other forms of sexual abuse.

Second, the type of sensual activity that took place at the sacred site also smacks of Canaanite fertility practices. It becomes apparent in this section that the Canaanization of Israel's society, beginning with the period of the judges, had even permeated the most sacred spheres of life. The narrator, at the same time, strategically alludes to Samuel's piety among these uncomplimentary reports about Eli's sons (vv 18, 21b; 3:1), so that the reader is consistently reminded of Samuel's goodness and faithfulness to Yahweh and the abject failure and despicability of the Eliade priesthood. The favorable allusions to Samuel, however, remind the reader that a change in the religious status quo is imminent. These intermittent reports function to provide an alternative to the picture of doom surrounding the house of Eli. Thus, Samuel, in a sense, is legitimated in the eyes of the narrator while Eli's household is soundly rejected.

The scandals and sexual impropriety of the priesthood at Shiloh were met with a harsh word of denunciation from an anonymous **man of God** (vv 27-36). The unnamed prophet delivered a scathing judgment on Eli's household, which climaxed with the announcement that Eli's family line would come to an abrupt end. From a literary and narrative standpoint, the inclusion of this section is designed to prepare the reader for the eventual downfall of Eli's priestly line. It not only provides a theological justification for the eradication of the Eliade priesthood but also prepares the way for Samuel to emerge as Israel's main prophet/priest in Israelite society.

IN THE TEXT

I. Eli's Sons in Action (2:12-26)

■ **12-21** In addition to being called worthless, the text notes that Eli's sons **did not know Yahweh** (v 12). The Hebrew term used here (*yāda'*) can denote intimate knowledge of an individual or even God. It is evident from their actions that Hophni and Phinehas neither knew Yahweh nor revered him.

Verses 13-17 give clear evidence of this by providing a summary statement regarding their inappropriate activity at the shrine. This section starts with a notice detailing the acceptable and/or customary *manner of the priests* (v 13) who officiated at the site. According to priestly code of conduct, when the worshipper came to the sanctuary the meat that was offered would be boiled first and then the attendant of the priests would take a **three-pronged fork** and stick it in the **pot** or the **jar** or the **caldron** in which the meat was being prepared. At that point, whatever the fork brought up would be regarded as the priest's portion to consume. This routine was considered acceptable, because it emphasized the role of the divine in determining which portion would fall to the priests ("all that the fork brought up" (v 14 NRSV), and it ensured that the fatty or premiere portions of the meat would be consumed as an offering to Yahweh first.

Eli's sons severely breached the sacred elements of this protocol, however. At Shiloh the attendant, who is unnamed in the text yet operated on behalf of Hophni and Phinehas, literally threatened the worshippers to hand over the meat. If the worshipper refused to give the meat to the attendant, he would take the meat from the worshippers' hands by force. The purloining of the sacrificial meat thus took place before the fatty and premiere portions of the animal could be completely cooked. Moreover, the priests picked the best portions of the animal for themselves to be **roasted** and not boiled. Thus, the sacrificial animal became the priests' personal meal instead of a sacrifice reserved for Yahweh.

2:12-21

This behavior was not only contemptible in the eyes of the people, but it disregarded acceptable practices according to priestly law (Lev 7:23-25, 31; 17:6). These actions also pointed to the fundamental avarice of the priests as they showed contempt for Yahweh's offering. It is not surprising then that the narrator points out that the actions of these young men constituted a **very great sin before the Lord** (v 17). In essence, they treated Yahweh and **Yahweh's offering with contempt**.

The scandalous actions of the priesthood are immediately juxtaposed with a favorable report about young Samuel in vv 18-21. Whereas Eli's sons despised the Lord's sacrifice, Samuel, who himself represented a living sacrifice, **ministered** faithfully before Yahweh (v 18a). The verb in v 18a, as in 2:11b, is a participle (*mēšārēt*), which indicates ongoing or uninterrupted service to the Lord. According to the text, Samuel ministered by wearing a linen ephod along with the robe his mother brought him (v 19). The ephod represented an important part of priestly apparel. It was probably a short skirt or apron bound around the waist (Mauchline 1971, 52). Although Samuel was not the main priest at Shiloh and we do not hear of any priestly functions he carried out at this point in the narrative, his role as a priest is anticipated by the ephod he wore. Samuel would serve a priestly role later, especially as it related to his responsibility in offering sacrifices (7:9).

The favorable impression of Samuel is solidified further with the closing statement in v 21b, which states, *the young boy Samuel grew up in the presence of Yahweh*. The text reinforces the dichotomy between Samuel and Eli's sons through the use of a wordplay in this statement. The verb used to describe Samuel's "growing up" and maturation (*gādal*) before God (vv 21, 26) is similar to the adjective used to identify the sins of Eli's sons in v 17 (*gedōlā*). Thus, it becomes evident that while Eli's sons moved further away from God, Samuel continued to remain close/faithful to Yahweh, even growing up in his presence. Here the reader is reminded once again of Samuel's piety in the face of ongoing priestly decadence.

■ **22-26** The favorable statement about Samuel in v 21 is immediately followed by this section that highlights the malfeasance of Eli's sons. According to the text, Hophni and Phinehas were *laying with the women who were standing at the opening of the tent of meeting* (v 22). Eli heard about his sons' actions from the reports of *all the people of Israel*, and he later condemned their escapades as evil deeds. He warned them that sins against another person could be mediated, but if they sinned against God, no other higher authority could intercede for them (Klein 1983, 26). The reference to the women who served at the site appears to recall Exod 38:8, which also alludes to women who performed menial duties at a sacred site (the tent of meeting). As mentioned above (see Behind the Text), the language and syntax used to describe the actions of Hophni and Phinehas in relationship to the women speaks to the illegitimate nature of these encounters.

The grammar of v 22 leaves open the possibility of a couple different interpretive options. First, the language may indicate that Eli's sons forced themselves upon the women, such as in the case of molestation or rape. If this is what is meant, then it underscores the wickedness of the sons and their penchant to abuse their power and position. In this case, the women would be seen as victims not only of their lustful intentions but of their "ecclesiastical" authority as well. Second, it is also possible that the noted sexual activity was associated with fertility practices and thus the women functioned more like cult prostitutes. If this meaning is intended, then it would provide evidence that the religious complexion at Shiloh took on a Canaanite appearance. Such activity is similar to that which is reported to have taken place at the time of Abijah (1 Kgs 15:12) or Josiah when cult (male) prostitutes were associated with times of worship (2 Kgs 23:7).

Although Eli chastised his own sons, the fact remained that he was old ("ninety-eight years" [4:15]), his health was failing, and it was quite apparent his sons had little regard for his authority or his warnings. It is significant that the verbs that refer to the actions of the sons in 2:12-26 are stative in aspect, which means that they denote the sons of Eli repeatedly committed these violations. Thus, their actions at the shrine did not represent one-time occurrences but established or routine behavior. Eli's denunciation of Hophni and

Phinehas therefore held little chance of reforming his sons. In light of their habitual and brazen acts, it was no surprise that even the people of Israel knew what Eli's sons were doing. This state of affairs represented a sad commentary about Eli's household as well as the religious climate at Shiloh.

In the midst of this gloomy report about the religious conditions at the time of Eli and his sons, however, the writer/narrator includes another positive statement about Samuel: *he grew in stature and in favor with Yahweh and men* (2:26). While Eli's sons were losing favor with God and the people, Samuel was gaining the support of both. The note about Samuel's piety also sounds very similar to the statement Luke made regarding Jesus when he was a young boy: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and men" (2:52). Evidence for the connection between Samuel and Jesus is further strengthened after careful consideration of the details surrounding their births. In both cases, a devout Jewish woman conceived a (special) son through divine intervention (1 Sam 1:19; Luke 1:26-37). Moreover, both women sang a song of praise and thanksgiving extoling the God of Israel who is able to exalt those that are humble and humble those who are exalted (1 Sam 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55). Such evidence indicates that one of Luke's underlying theological purposes was to emphasize Jesus' role as a prophet of God (Ehrman 2008, 132). That Luke found in Samuel a model by which to compare Jesus says something important about the status of Samuel and how he was perceived in the ancient Jewish community.

2. Condemnation of the House of Eli (2:27-36; 3:1a)

2:22-36

■ **27-36** On the heels of the previous two sections a **man of God** came to Eli personally. The term **man of God** is one that is essentially synonymous with "prophet" (2 Kgs 1:9). Many scholars are in agreement that this announcement is either the work of the Deuteronomistic editor(s) or it could even be a post-Deuteronomistic insertion into the text. There are a couple of reasons for this opinion. First, the anonymous man of God is often understood to be the mouthpiece of the Deuteronomistic Historian (Gordon 1986, 84). Second, the prophet's message speaks of events that were fulfilled considerably later in Israel's history, particularly at the time of the Davidic monarchy. The contents of his address specifically anticipate the establishment of the Zadokite priesthood during the united monarchy (see below).

The message of the man of God is couched in typical prophetic speech form. The address proper begins in v 27 with the standard message formula, *thus says Yahweh*, and continues by recalling God's action in selecting Eli's ancestral *household* to be priests who would *go up to my altar, to burn incense, and to wear the ephod* (v 28). According to this prophet, God had selected one household to perform these priestly functions from the exodus/wilderness period. Ironically, the text never records the occasion when God selected Eli's ancestors for this task. Most likely, the household alluded to in

v 28 either refers to the Levites (Deut 33:8-11) or to the Aaronite priesthood (Lev 8:12, 30). How Eli's family became associated with the prophet's statement remains unclear.

The man of God continued his address by levying specific charges against Eli and his sons: (1) they looked with a "greedy" (NRSV) eye at the Lord's sacrifices and offerings, and (2) Eli honored his sons more than God by taking the choicest parts of the offerings from the people of Israel. Unlike vv 12-17, which only indicted Hophni and Phinehas for participating in sacrificial abuse, v 29 extends the indictment so that Eli is included with his sons. After the man of God specified the charges against Eli and his sons (vv 27-29), he then pronounced a judgment oracle (vv 30-36) that detailed the punishment for their sin. In terms of their punishment, the man of God emphasized two things: first, Eli's household would be cut off (i.e., destroyed) with only one member of his family allowed to survive; and second, God would establish "a faithful priest" and "build him a sure house" (v 35 NRSV). This priest would replace Eli's household, and, according to the man of God, would do that which is in accordance with God's heart and God's soul. He would also *walk before the Lord's anointed for all times*.

It is tempting at first to believe that Samuel fulfilled the words of the prophet, especially in v 35. Samuel is called a "faithful" (*ne'ēmān*) prophet in 3:20, which is similar to the term used in v 35 for the **faithful** (*ne'ēmān*) priest and the "sure" (*ne'ēmān*) house that was promised. Moreover, Samuel also played a crucial role in anointing Israel's first kings: Saul (9:16; 10:1) and David (16:13). As enticing as it may seem, the distinction between the "priest" (2:35) and the "prophet" (3:20) cannot be overlooked. In addition, the judgment oracle of the man of God came to fruition at two distinct periods in Israel's history: first in Eli's lifetime and then in the days of David and Solomon. The decimation of Eli's house occurred when Hophni, Phinehas, and Eli died when the ark was captured in battle (4:17-18) and again when Saul massacred the priests of Nob (1 Sam 22:11-23). The one priest who survived the massacre, Abiathar, became one of David's main priests. Solomon, however, expelled Abiathar to the town of Anathoth (1 Kgs 2:26-27), which allowed the Zadokite priesthood to become the dominant priestly family in Jerusalem. Thus, at the time of Solomon, the Zadokite line replaced the line of priests descending from the house of Eli. The former became the faithful house who ministered before the king in Jerusalem, and the descendants of Zadok served as the main priests at the Jerusalem temple until the destruction of the city in 586 B.C.

■ **3:1a** As in the previous sections, an unfavorable report about Eli's household is followed by a positive statement regarding Samuel: *and the young man Samuel served Yahweh in the presence of Eli*. The verb, as in 2:11 and 18, is a participle thus denoting Samuel's continuous, faithful service to Yahweh at the sanctuary.

The constant comparison/contrast with Eli's sons and Samuel helps to organize and bind this unit together from a literary standpoint. By structuring the material in this manner, the unit contains an element of symmetry so that the three negative statements about Eli's sons are counterbalanced by three positive remarks concerning Samuel.

- 1a. Eli's Sons: manipulated the sacrificial process (2:12-17)
- 1b. Samuel: grew in the presence of Yahweh (2:21b)
- 2a. Eli's sons: had sex with/raped the women at the shrine (2:22-25)
- 2b. Samuel: grew in favor with God and men (2:26)
- 3a. Eli's sons: would die by the sword (2:27-36)
- 3b. Samuel: ministered before Yahweh in the presence of Eli (3:1a)

An examination of the text indicates that as this textual unit comes to a close, the reader or audience anticipates the coming prophetic/priestly role of Samuel at the sanctuary. Samuel, who has been consistently faithful to God and Eli, would also be the faithful prophet/priest of the people of Israel.

FROM THE TEXT

In this unit we see an important message about the direct relationship between the quality of religious leadership and the effectiveness of the ministry of religious institutions. Throughout chs 1—3, the text indicates that the religious leadership at Shiloh left much to be desired. The descriptions of Eli as a father and priest indicate he was ineffective, and his sons did not honor God. Yet, these were the people who were serving as God's ministers to the people. The story of Eli and his sons powerfully reminds us that just because a person works in ministry, it does not ensure that the individual walks closely with God or is sensitive to the people who come to worship. Even though Eli, for example, served as the priest at Shiloh he still could not perceive the actions of a hurting individual who was praying before God.

In the story of Eli and his sons, even the laity appeared to be more pious than the leadership. When quality leadership is lacking in a community of faith, the people "in the pews" can spot the deficiency. Moreover, if godly leadership is lacking, there can be much activity that takes place at a sacred site, yet God's presence is absent. In the case of Shiloh, all kinds of religious activity was going on; however, the "word of [God] was rare" there (3:1b). In religious parlance, that is the same as saying the church was dead. However, when a genuine and pious leader such as Samuel arrived on the scene, the conditions at the sanctuary changed dramatically. The word of God, which was rare under Eli, appeared again to Samuel and to the people. Moreover, the people knew that Samuel was a true prophet who led them into the proper worship of God. Thus we learn that when God's people are in the right places of leadership, the community of faith has the potential to come alive and flourish.