

November 9, 2003
St. Binen of Armagh

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Samuel's lifetime, virtually all of the second half of the eleventh century before Christ, was an age of transitions, in two of which Samuel himself was directly involved. These were the destruction of the shrine at Shiloh in his youth, and Israel's establishment of the monarchy during his declining years. In both cases Samuel, the last of Israel's Judges, was obliged to be the bearer of bad news.

He was a mere boy when, shortly before 1050 B.C., Samuel was taken to Shiloh, consecrated to God, and placed under the guidance of that shrine's last priest, Eli (1 Samuel 1:24-28; 2:11,18-20). Shiloh had been a central shrine of Israel for about a century and a half, ever since Joshua fixed it as the meeting place of the twelve tribes (Joshua 18:1) It was from there that the tribal representatives went forth to survey the Promised Land, and back to Shiloh they returned to cast lots for the division of the land (18:8-10; 19:51). During the ensuing period of Israel's Judges, 1200 to 1050, Shiloh remained a regular place of pilgrimage (Judges 21:19; 1 Samuel 1:3,7). At some point during that period, the Ark of the Covenant, previously placed at Bethel (Judges 20:26-27), was moved to Shiloh. It was near the Ark, within the shrine, that the boy Samuel slept, at least sometimes (1 Samuel 3:3).

One such night, indeed, provided what is perhaps the best known scene in Samuel's life. Three times the sleeping lad, hearing his name called out in the night, rose and went to learn what Eli wanted of him. Eli, however, had not called him. Finally, this aged priest, suspecting the truth, instructed Samuel, should he hear his name invoked again, to answer, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears" (3:3-9). Samuel, yet abiding near the Ark, did so, and the Lord did speak to him, giving the boy his first experience of prophecy. It concerned the coming destruction of Shiloh and the end of Eli's priesthood (3:11-14). Samuel was obliged to bear the bad news (3:17-18).

Shiloh's destruction followed shortly after, when the Ark of the Covenant, carried into battle against the Philistines, was

seized by them, and Eli himself fell dead at the news (4:1-22). Thus, "all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet of the Lord" (3:20). Although some prophets continued to dwell at Shiloh (cf. 1 Kings 14:2,4), its priests settled at Nob (1 Samuel 14:3; 22:11). Samuel moved back to Ramah (7:17), his birthplace, and the Ark, though returned to Israel, was never again installed at Shiloh. The Lord had abandoned the site (Psalms 77 [78]:60), making it a symbol of the fate awaiting any city that forsakes His covenant (Jeremiah 7:12,14).

Israel's movement to monarchy occurred some thirty years later, around 1020, and here again Samuel served as the bearer of bad news. Though his own instincts opposed the idea of kingship, regarding it at first as a rebellion against God's covenant, it is possible that Samuel bore some of the blame. His failure to discipline his sons, after all, was the immediate reason given for the need of a king (1 Samuel 8:1-5). There is an irony here. Samuel himself had witnessed how Eli's failure to discipline his sons had earlier led to the destruction of Shiloh (1 Samuel 2:12-17,22-25). It is no little paradox that Samuel, ever the visionary of the future, should be suddenly confronted with *déjà-vu*.

As in that earlier case, however, Samuel prayed (8:6), and once again God spoke to him, instructing him to accede to the people's clamor for a king (8:7-8). Indeed, Samuel was the man God wanted to anoint that king (10:1). Nonetheless, as Israel's "seer" (9:9), he was also directed to foretell to the people the dire consequences of their choice, and the sad list of evils that the seer predicted as attendant on the institution of kingship (8:11-18) was a prophecy amply fulfilled in the following centuries. It was truly bad news.

Even though Samuel's hopes for the kingship had never been high, Israel's first king, Saul, was especially disappointing. Samuel endured him for twenty years. In the Lord's final word to His prophet, near the end of the century, He commanded Samuel to stop moping about the problem and to anoint David as the new king (16:1). He obediently did so (16:2-13), though he died before David could assume the throne (25:1). In Holy Scripture Samuel thus appears as the prophetic link joining Israel's kings to its earlier history.

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