

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, 1 Samuel: Eli, Ark, Samuel, Saul's inaugurations Session 22, 6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

So how does a nation go from being led by judges and prophets for centuries to suddenly having a king? Well, it definitely doesn't happen overnight. And believe me, it is never simple. Today, we're jumping into the dramatic, kind of messy, and absolutely critical moment that created Israel's very first monarchy.

To really get just how huge a figure we're talking about, just look at this. This was written by the prophet Jeremiah about 500 years after Samuel was even alive. Think about that.

Five centuries later, and he's putting Samuel on the exact same level as Moses. Moses! This tells you Samuel isn't just some side character. He's a historical giant right at the center of this massive shift in the nation's identity.

All right, so let's set the scene. It's around 1100 BC. The pretty chaotic era of the judges is winding down.

You know, the time best described as everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The nation is scattered. They're under constant threat from enemies like the Philistines, and they are desperate for some kind of stable, unified leadership.

And right into this leadership vacuum steps Samuel. Now, what's so cool about him is that he wears a lot of hats. He's the last of the great judges.

He's a priest serving God, and he's a prophet who hears directly from God. But that last role, the kingmaker, that's the one that's going to change Israel's destiny forever. He's the guy who oversees this monumental shift from a loose group of tribes to a real monarchy.

But you know how it is. Before something new can really begin, the old way has to completely fall apart. And the old guard is basically personified by the aging high priest, Eli.

He's serving at the tabernacle in a place called Shiloh, but his own house is in total, absolute disarray. And wow, does this lay out the problem perfectly. On one side, you've got Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas.

These guys are just corrupt. They're abusing their power, skimming the best cuts of meat off the sacrifices, and treating the tabernacle like their own personal party spot. And on the other side, you've got the young boy, Samuel, a pure-hearted kid, totally dedicated to God.

The contrast couldn't be more extreme. And it's basically a spiritual crisis just waiting to happen. And then it all just explodes.

In this absolutely disastrous battle against their biggest rivals, the Philistines, the Israelites don't just lose the battle. They lose the Ark of the Covenant, the literal physical symbol of God's presence with them. This isn't just a military loss.

This is a theological and national catastrophe of the highest possible order. And right in the middle of all this national chaos, the tragedy gets incredibly personal. Eli's daughter-in-law gives birth and then dies in the mayhem.

And with her last breath, she names her newborn son Ichabod. The name literally means no glory or the glory has departed. It just perfectly captures this awful double tragedy: the personal loss of her entire family and the national shame of losing God's Ark.

The glory is gone. So let's just recap the damage here. In a single day, the entire old leadership structure is just wiped off the map.

Hophni and Phineas are killed in the battle. When Eli gets the news, and specifically the news that the Ark is gone, he falls backward off his chair, breaks his neck, and dies. The leadership is dead, the Ark is captured, and God has totally rejected Eli's priestly line.

It's a total system failure. But out of the ashes of that old priesthood, a new leader rises. Samuel, the boy who grew up winning the favor of both God and the people, steps in to fill that massive vacuum.

He is now the hope of Israel, the one chosen by God to lead them out of this mess. Okay, so to really get what happens next, you've got to understand this pattern that the book of 1 Samuel shows us over and over again. It goes like this.

An old leader fails; God picks a new leader. And then, and this is the key part, that new leader has to win a big military victory to prove they're the real deal and to cement their authority. This cycle repeats itself with Samuel, and then with Saul, and then with David.

And sure enough, Samuel follows the playbook to a T. He rallies the Israelites, gets them to face up to their sins, and then leads them to this huge, decisive victory over the Philistines. He names the place Ebenezer, which means stone of help. And with that military win, Samuel's role as the legitimate new judge and leader of all Israel is locked in.

So years pass. The leadership cycle starts up again. Samuel's getting old.

But this time, oh man, this time there's a huge game-changing twist. The people themselves step in, and they don't want another judge. They want something totally new, something that all the other nations have.

And here's the why behind their demand. Take a look at this. It's what I call the fathers and sons problem.

The good but maybe weak Eli had evil sons. And now, the great and godly Samuel, well, his sons Joel and Abijah are corrupt judges taking bribes. The people see this pattern, godly leaders having terrible sons, and they've just had enough.

They figure the whole system is broken and demand a different kind of leader altogether, a king. You know, Samuel takes this really personally. He feels completely rejected.

But God steps in and just reframes the whole thing with this heartbreaking line. He says, Samuel, it's not you they're rejecting; it's me. And here's why that matters so much.

Their demand for a king wasn't just some political strategy. It was a deep desire to be like all the other nations, to have a visible human leader they could see and touch. And in doing so, they were rejecting the invisible king they already had.

So God gives the people what they asked for. And that brings us to the introduction of Israel's very first king, a man named Saul. So on paper, Saul looks the part.

He's from a small tribe, so he's not a political threat. He's tall, handsome. He looks like a king.

Samuel anoints him in private during this chance encounter while Saul is just out looking for his dad's lost donkeys. But then, at his public coronation, when his name is called, crickets. He's nowhere to be found.

They literally find him hiding among the baggage. And this right here, this is the million-dollar question for Saul's entire life. Is this just genuine humility from a man who's overwhelmed by the calling? Or is it a deep, gnawing insecurity, a fear of leadership that's going to fester into paranoia and jealousy down the road? But before we can answer that, he has to complete the cycle, right? After that shaky coronation, Saul totally rises to the occasion.

He leads the swift, decisive military campaign against the Ammonites and rescues the city of Jabesh-Gilead. And with that victory, he proves his leadership. The nation finally rallies behind him, and the transition is complete.

Israel has its king. One, Israel now officially has its first king. The people got exactly what they demanded.

But let me tell you, this is just the beginning of a whole new turbulent drama. And it leaves us with this critical question that really echoes through history. What happens when a nation gets the leader they ask for instead of the one they truly need?