**An Overview of the Book of Samuel**

The book of Samuel marks the end of the period of the Judges, a time when “Israel had no king, and everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Samuel is presented as the last of the Judges (1 Sam 7:15) and the first of the prophets (1 Sam 3:20). His leadership of the nation will only be temporary, as the people, again failing to see their call as a nation holy to the Lord, demand a king, that they may be like other nations (1 Samuel 8:5-9).

As the book of Samuel begins, we find that, as so often was the case in Israel’s history, the nation had wandered from God. The opening chapters of 1 Samuel recount how the priesthood, which was supposed to regulate the relationship of the nation with God, had become corrupt under Eli. Eli’s sons are described as having “no regard for the LORD” (1 Sam 2:12). The perilous spiritual state of the nation is noted in these opening chapters, when the author states that, “In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions” (1 Sam 3:1).

It is against this unpromising backdrop that 1 Samuel introduces righteous and devout Hannah. In her annual visit to Jerusalem, Hannah cries out to the Lord for a son, with the promise that, if God answers, she would “give him to the LORD for all the days of his life” (1 Sam 1:11). God does answer, and Hannah names him Samuel, which means “heard of God” (1 Sam 1:20).

Samuel’s rise to leadership of the nation occurs because God appears to Samuel, speaks to Samuel, and Samuel brings the word of God to the nation (1 Sam 4:1). But as Samuel rises, so Eli and his sons fall: the first message Samuel hears from God is a message of judgement on Eli and his wicked sons (1 Sam 3:11-14). The death of Eli and his sons occurs when Israel goes into battle against the Philistines, taking the Ark with them, resulting in the (temporary) loss of the Ark, the symbol of the presence of God with Israel. Having been defeated in battle by the Philistines, the tables are turned: the captured Ark leads to devastation amongst the Philistines, who quickly discern the presence and power of God against them, and they quickly return the Ark.

The loss of the Ark leads to a period of national mourning and seeking the Lord (1 Sam 7:2). At a national assembly, in which Samuel calls for the people to turn their hearts back to God, Israel comes under attack from the Philistines. As Samuel leads Israel in worship, the Lord fights for them, and the Philistines are defeated. A pattern is established, that both echoes back through Israel’s history and looks forward to the rest of Samuel and the book of Kings, in which as long as the nation has a leader who seeks the Lord, they too follow the Lord, and know blessing in the land and victory over their enemies.

However, shadows of Eli and his sons are cast over Samuel’s life, with Samuel being confronted in his old age by a people who recognise the danger: Samuel’s sons did not follow in his ways (1 Sam 8:3). Fearing for the future, the people ask for a king (a judge) “such as all the other nations have” (1 Sam 8:5). In so doing, Israel rejects the Lord as their king (1 Sam 8:7). Yet God accedes to their demand, but not before warning them of the consequences: the kings who reign over them will subjugate and exploit them.

It is Saul who is anointed Israel’s first king. After an unpromising start, things begin to look up. However, Saul’s continued inability to obey God leads to judgement: “You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel” (1 Sam 15:26), confirming Samuel’s early word to Saul, that God would raise up another king to rule, “Your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the Lord’s command.” (1 Sam 13:14).

That man is David, the youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem, a shepherd. Anointed in secret by Samuel (1 Sam 16:1-13), David enters Saul’s service. David’s famous victory over Goliath (1 Sam 17) is the first of many victories. However, David’s popularity leads to Saul becoming jealous and seeking to take David’s life. Fleeing into exile outside of Israel to escape Saul, David nonetheless continues to raid Israel’s enemies with his growing band of loyal followers. Saul’s descent – emotional, mental, spiritual and physical - continues. Despite opportunity and encouragement, David refuses to take the throne by force, saying “The Lord forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, or lay my hand on him; for he is the anointed of the Lord.” (1 Sam 24:6). Contrasting with murderous, duplicitous and terrified Saul is his son Jonathan – who is steadfast and courageous. Jonathan as heir has the most to lose but befriends David. The book of 1 Samuel ends with Jonathan and Saul killed in battle, and David still not king over the land.

While the picture of corruption of the nation, the priesthood and the kingship is discouraging, the key to the story, as ever in scripture, is the activity of God. To a nation who has forgotten God, who have stopped calling on his name, God speaks again. To a corrupt priesthood, which had become a barrier rather than a gateway to God, God brings reform. To a broken kingship, God appoints Israel’s greatest king. These are stories that remind us that in the midst of individual human failure and national neglect of God, God is always at work, to draw people back to him.

It’s worth pausing too, to consider the impact of the stories recorded in 1 Samuel on the wider Biblical story. The request for a king was a sinful idea: yet God works through the kingship. David’s reign is one in which God’s promise to Abraham that God would make him into a great nation certainly finds great fulfilment. But 1 Samuel tells us that human leaders fail: Eli, Saul, even, as 2 Samuel will show more fully, the great king David. For the solution to that particular problem, the book of Samuel ends still seeking a leader who will fulfil rather than fail in meeting God’s standards and carrying out God’s will. And it is from this imperfect nation, and this great but imperfect king David that the long-hoped for saviour will finally come: Great David’s great son, Jesus Christ. It is only in Jesus that God’s greatest promise to Abraham – made 2,000 years before Christ’s birth – will finally be fulfilled: “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3).