

Lesson 5: The Nature of Samuel's Leadership

Text: First Samuel Chapters 7-8

Although the book of Samuel is mainly a book of personalities, there emerges from its pages a fairly clear picture of the time.

Eli and Samuel are the last judges in Israel. About Eli the Bible says (4, 18):

And he had judged Israel forty years

וְהוּא שָׁפֵט אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה:

And of Samuel we read (7, 15):

And Samuel judged Israel
all the days of his life.

וַיִּשְׁפֹּט שָׁמוּאֵל אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל
כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּו:

Their rule marks a turning point in Israelite history. The anarchic and primitive type of government that prevailed during the period of the Judges has given way to a more stable institution. In the book of Judges we read of leaders who arise during a crisis. The standard formula in Judges reads as follows (for instance, in Judges 2, 11-19): “And the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord...and God delivered them into the hands of their enemies...and God raised up judges who saved them...but when the judge was dead the people again turned away from God.” This formula, which is repeated throughout the book of Judges, implies that there was no stability in government during the period of the judges. But in the stories of Eli, and Samuel we discern a significant change. They are not leaders who are appointed to meet a crisis. Eli is certainly not a warrior type. He judges the people in times of peace as well as in times of war, and when he dies Samuel replaces him. The judge has by now become a permanent institution in the Israelite society.

At the same time the concept of leadership undergoes a profound change. Formerly, the judge was a valiant warrior whose main task was to save the people from the enemy. By now the judge is a ruler who deals with all aspects of the government of the people. This is borne out by a comparison of Samson with Samuel. The Bible applies the word וַיִּשְׁפֹּט (“and he judged”) to both. But in the case of Samson it is the “judgement” of the warrior, whereas Samuel offers an entirely different type of leadership (7, 5–6, and 15-17):

And Samuel said:
 “Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray
 for you unto the Lord”.
 And they gathered together at Mizpeh,
 and drew water, and poured it out
 before the Lord,
 and fasted on that day and said there:
 “We have sinned against the Lord”
 And Samuel judged the children of Israel
 in Mizpeh.

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל:
 קַבְּצוּ אֶת-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמִּצְפָּה וְאֶתְפִּלַּל בְּעַדְכֶם אֶל-ה':

וַיִּקְבְּצוּ הַמִּצְפָּה
 וַיִּשְׁאֲבוּ-מַיִם וַיִּשְׁפְּכוּ
 לִפְנֵי ה'
 וַיִּצְוּמוּ בַיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיֹּאמְרוּ שָׁם
 חָטֵאנוּ לַה'
 וַיִּשְׁפֹּט שְׁמוּאֵל אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 בַּמִּצְפָּה:

...
 And Samuel judged Israel
 all the days of his life.
 And he went from year to year
 in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh;
 and he judged Israel in all those places.
 And his return was to Ramah,
 for there was his house;
 and he built there an altar unto the Lord.

...
 וַיִּשְׁפֹּט שְׁמוּאֵל אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל
 כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּיו:
 וְהָלַךְ מִדֵּי שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה
 וְסָבַב בֵּית-אֵל וְהַגְּלָגַל וְהַמִּצְפָּה
 וַיִּשְׁפֹּט אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת כָּל-הַמְּקוֹמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה:
 וְהַשְׁבָּתוֹ הָרַמְתָּה
 כִּי-שָׁם בֵּיתוֹ
 וַיִּשָּׂם שָׁפֵט אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְבֹרֶשׂ מִזְבֵּחַ לַה':

The difference between Samuel and the earlier Judges is not limited to the character and the continuity of government. There is remarkable contrast in the personalities of the two periods. There is the case of Jephthah (Judges 11, 1-3):

Now Jephthah the Gileadite
 was a mighty man of valour,
 and he was the son of a harlot;
 and Gilead begot Jephthah...
 And there were gathered
 vain fellows to Jephthah,
 and they went out with him.

וַיִּפְתַּח הַגְּלָעָדִי
 הָיָה גִבּוֹר חַיִּל
 וְהוּא בֶן-אִשָּׁה זוֹנָה
 וַיִּלְד גְּלָעָד אֶת-יִפְתָּח...
 וַיִּתְּלַקְטוּ אֵל-יִפְתָּח
 אַנְשִׁים רִיקִים
 וַיֵּצְאוּ עִמּוֹ

It was not merely that Jephthah was “the son of a harlot”. Jephthah, according to the book of Judges, and some of the other judges, did not act by any means like holy men. They dedicated men of deeds who fought valiantly and who were led to success by the spirit of God with which they were inspired. But they were not free from grievous sins. Gideon made an “ephod” (an image used for divination), “and all Israel went astray after it, and it became a snare unto Gideon and to his house” (Judges 8, 27). Jephthah offered his daughter as a sacrifice (Judges 11, 30-40). Samson was a mighty warrior against the Philistines, but he easily succumbed to temptation.

The judges were leading warriors, and possessed virtues and shortcomings of the heroic fighter. They did not aspire to spiritual and moral leadership. On the other hand, Eli and Samuel are entirely different in both background and personality. Eli is the priest in Shiloh, acting as a kind of High Priest and spiritual mentor, a revered leader and judge of the people. Samuel is brought up in the temple of Shiloh, from his youth devoted to the service of God, and the people look upon him as a saintly prophet (2, 18 and 3, 20):

But Samuel ministered before the Lord,
being a child, girded with a linen ephod (a
skirt that was a distinctive part of the priests'
dress).

וְשָׁמוּאֵל מִשְׁרַת אֶת־פְּנֵי ה'
בְּעֶרְ חֲגֹר אֶפֻּוד בָּד:

And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew
that Samuel was established to be
a prophet of the Lord.

וַיֵּדַע כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִדָּן וְעַד־בְּעֶר שָׁבַע
בִּי נְאֻמָּן שָׁמוּאֵל
לְנָבִיא לַיהוָה

With Samuel, the system of judgeship reaches its highest stage. He embodies the fulfillment of the biblical idea of leadership, that the leader guides the people by the word of God through prophecy. This idea was propounded by the Judge Gideon when he was offered to become king, and it is repeated by Samuel (Judges 8, 23 and I Samuel 12, 12):

And Gideon said unto them:
“I will not rule over you,
neither shall my son rule over you”.
the LORD shall rule over you.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם גִּדְעֹן
לֹא־אֶמְשָׁל אֲנִי בְכֶם
וְלֹא־יִמְשָׁל בְּנִי בְכֶם
ה' יִמְשָׁל בְּכֶם:

ye said unto me,
Nay; but a king shall reign over us:
The Lord your God is your King..

וַתֹּאמְרוּ לִי
לֹא כִי מֶלֶךְ יִמְלֹךְ עָלֵינוּ
וְה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מֶלֶכְכֶם

Samuel hears the word of God and accordingly rules the nation. The government of Israel has therefore no need of a royal dynasty. Its principle is the rule of the prophet who brings the word of God to the people. And Samuel is eminently suited for this task. He is at once a “man of God” and a “man over the people” resembling the first and greatest leader of the people, Moses (Deuteronomy 33:1, Numbers 27:16).

In Samuel's lifetime the system of judgeship has lost one of its weaknesses: lack of stability. There is now continuity in government, and the judge is no longer a temporary leader in an emergency. Never in the history of Israel has this system worked to such perfection - and Samuel is aware of this.

And yet, it is at this time that the people want to change the system (8, 5 and 8, 19-20):

And they said unto him: "Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations".

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו הִנֵּה אַתָּה זָקֵן וּבְנֶיךָ לֹא הִלְכוּ בְדַרְכֶיךָ
עֲתָה שְׂיִמָּה לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ לְשֹׁפְטֵנוּ
כְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם:

But the people refused to hearken unto the voice of Samuel, and they said: "May, but there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations; and that our kind may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles".

וַיִּמָּאֲנוּ הָעָם לְשָׁמֹעַ
בְּקוֹל שְׂמוּאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ
לֹא כִי אִם־מֶלֶךְ יִהְיֶה עָלֵינוּ:
וְהִיָּינוּ גַם־אֲנַחְנוּ כְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם
וְשֹׁפְטֵנוּ מִלְּפָנָיו
וַיֵּצֵא לְפָנֵינוּ וְנִלְחַם אֶת־מִלְחַמֹּתֵינוּ:

Despite Samuel's stature as a great judge and prophet, the people were hankering after the days of the warrior-judges. They knew of the tales of heroism, of the prowess and military abilities of those judges.

And they compared them with Samuel (Judges 3, 10 and I Samuel 7, 10):

And the spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel and he went to war.

וַתְּהִי עָלָיו רוּחַ־ה' וַיִּשְׁפֹּט אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה

And Samuel was offering up the burnt-offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel.

וַיִּהְיֶה שְׂמוּאֵל מְעַלֶּה הָעוֹלָה
וּפְלִשְׁתִּים נִגְשׂוּ לְמִלְחָמָה
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

The Judges were military leaders who went to battle at the head of the army, whereas Samuel is a prophet and priest. The people revere their leader, but there are times when they make these comparisons with the old time fighting judges. When the people make their demand to change the system and appoint a king "like all the nations", Samuel understands that this demand implies a criticism of his prophetic type of leadership. Perhaps he is inclined to blame himself that his lack of military prowess is responsible for the downfall of the system of prophetic judgeship. He may feel that by presenting his own type of leadership - of a prophet and

priest - in place of the army leader, he undermined the people's faith in the system of judgeship.
But God assures him that the crisis of faith is more profound; it reaches the roots of the people's faith in God (8, 7):

And the Lord said unto Samuel:
Hearken unto the voice of the people in all
they say unto thee.
For they have not rejected thee,
but they have rejected Me,
that I should not reign over them”.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל
שְׁמַע בְּקוֹל הָעָם לְכֹל אֲשֶׁר־
יֹאמְרוּ אֵלַיךָ
כִּי לֹא אֶתְדָּף מֵאִסוּ
כִּי־אֶתִי מֵאִסוּ
מִמֶּלְךָ עָלֵיהֶם: