
Lesson 1: A Book of Personalities

Text: First Samuel Chap. 1-2

The books of Joshua and Judges present an Israelite history on a wide canvas. We read of the conquest of the Land of Canaan, the division of the country among the tribes, the struggles of the Israelite settlers with the neighboring peoples, the successes and the failures during the difficult years of settlement. The subject of all the stories in Joshua and Judges is Israel: the people conquer the land, Israel settles in the country according to its tribal divisions, Israel suffers at the hands of its enemies and at other times subjugates them, Israel is saved by the Judges.

These stories abound in heroes, but none are fully described. Few details are given about Eleazar the Priest (Joshua 14, 1) or Othniel the son of Kenaz (Joshua 15, 17 and Judges 3, 9-11). We know little of Caleb the son of Jephunneh (Joshua 15, 13) and we can only guess what happened finally to Ehud the son of Gera (Judges 3, 14-30). Some of the leading personalities are barely mentioned by name. We learn from the Bible that they existed, but we know practically nothing of their lives and activities. The history of the Israelite nation dwarfs the stories of the Judges, and even the personality of Joshua the great conqueror appears shadowy and opaque beside the bold strokes in which the national history is painted.

The book of Samuel is wholly different. Here the stage is occupied by outstanding personalities; the Bible elaborately describes their characters, their activities, and the fate that affected their families. On the other hand, the book of Samuel is sparing about general background, and unlike Joshua and Judges it narrows the scope of the narrative to the lives of its heroes.

A striking illustration of the differences between Samuel and the earlier books is provided in the opening passages of the stories in the three books. The book of Joshua begins its stories with the following phrases:

<p>Now these are the Kings of the land, whom the children of Israel smote.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Joshua 12, 1</u></p>	<p>וְאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הִכּוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>יְהוֹשֻׁעַ יב, א</u></p>
<p>And these are the inheritances which the children of Israel took</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Joshua 14, 1</u></p>	<p>וְאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר־נָחֲלוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>יְהוֹשֻׁעַ יד, א</u></p>
<p>But the children of Israel committed a trespass concerning the devoted thing</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Joshua 7, 1</u></p>	<p>וַיִּמְעְלוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעַל בְּחֶרֶם</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>יְהוֹשֻׁעַ ז, א</u></p>
<p>And all these kings met together and they came and pitched together at the waters of Merom, to fight with Israel</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Joshua 11, 5</u></p>	<p>וַיַּגְעִדוּ כָּל הַמְּלָכִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיָּבֹאוּ וַיַּחְנֹּוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל־מִי מְרוֹם לְהִלָּחֵם עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>יְהוֹשֻׁעַ יא, ה</u></p>

The theme of “the children of Israel” or “Israel” is repeated throughout the book of Joshua, and it also runs through the book of Judges. A few quotations from Judges illustrate this point:

<p>And it came to pass after the death of Joshua, that the children of Israel asked of the Lord</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Judges 1, 1</u></p>	<p>וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיִּשְׁאַלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּה'</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>שׁוֹפְטִים א, א</u></p>
<p>Now these are the nations which the Lord left to prove Israel by them</p>	<p>וְאֵלֶּה הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר הֵנִיחַ ה' לְנִסּוֹת בָּם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל</p>

<u>Judges 3, 1</u>	<u>שופטים ג, א</u>
Only that the generations of the children of Israel might know to teach them war.	רק למען דעת דורות בני ישראל ללמדם מלחמה
<u>Judges 3, 2</u>	<u>שופטים 2, 3</u>

The opening sentences of Samuel mark a clear change from the narratives in Joshua and Judges. Here the Bible presents the story of one Israelite family.

<p>Now there was a certain man of the Ramathaim Zophim, of the hill country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph the Ephraimite. And he had two wives:</p> <p>The name of the one was Hannah, And the name of the other Peninnah, And Peninnah had children, But Hannah had no children.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>First Samuel, 1, 1-2</u></p>	<p>וְהָיָה אִישׁ אֶחָד מִן־הַרְמַתִּים צֹפִים מִהַר אֶפְרַיִם וּשְׁמוֹ אֶלְקָנָה בֶן־יִרְחָם בֶּן־אֵלִיהוּא בֶן־תּוֹחוּ בֶן־צֹפִי אֶפְרַתִּי:</p> <p>וְלוֹ שְׁתֵּי נָשִׁים שֵׁם אַחַת חַנָּה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פְּנִינָה וַיְהִי לפְנִינָה יְלָדִים וְלִחַנָּה אֵין יְלָדִים</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>שמואל א, א-ב</u></p>
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This is a story of a man and his family, his wives and children, the love and jealousy within the family, the sorrow and the joy of a woman (Hannah), and the fate of a boy (Samuel). We read of the annual pilgrimage of Elkanah's family to the sanctuary, in Shilo (1,3). In the second chapter we are given a candid and critical picture of life at this ancient sanctuary, the pilgrims who came to offer their sacrifices and the priests who misconduct themselves (verses 12-17 & 22-25), and the chapter concludes with a prophecy that foretells the doom of high-priest Eli's house (27-36). But it is significant

that these two long chapters tell us nothing about the national situation. Was it a time of peace and prosperity? Was Israel free and independent or was it subjected to a neighboring people? And what were the intertribal relations at the time? Were the tribes united or were they still afflicted by rivalries and animosity? It must be admitted that these chapters do not satisfy our curiosity about all those questions.

This biblical book is intent upon telling the story of the prophet Samuel, his parents, his background and environment, and his advent as a prophet in Israel. Unlike Joshua and Judges, the book of Samuel is a book of personalities. All the stories center around three outstanding persons: Samuel, Saul and David.