

Lesson 2: The House of Eli

Text: First Samuel Chap. 1-2

In the early chapters of Samuel we learn a good deal of the background and the events that led to the birth and upbringing of Samuel. It is not surprising that in this story Hannah, the mother of Samuel, should be assigned a central role. She is the childless woman who is vexed sorely by her rival, Peninah, and her heart grieves. In the bitterness of her soul she weeps and prays to God, and makes a vow (1. 11):

And she vowed a vow, and said:
O lord of hosts if Thou wilt indeed
Look in the affliction of thy handmaid, and
remember me, and not forget Thy handmaid,
but wilt give unto Thy handmaid a man-child
Then I will give him unto the lord all the days
of his life and there shall no razor come upon
his head.

וַתִּדָּר וַתֹּאמֶר:
ה' צְבָאוֹת, אִם-רָאָה תִרְאֶה אֵלַי
בְּעֵי אֲמָתְךָ וּזְכַרְתָּנִי
וְלֹא-תִשְׁכַּח אֶת-אֲמָתְךָ
וְנָתַתָּה לְאֲמָתְךָ יָרֵעַ אֲנָשִׁים
וְנָתַתִּיו לְה' כָּל-יְמֵי חַיָּו
וּמִזְבֵּחַ לֹא-יֵעָלֶה עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ:

Her prayer is answered; she bears a son and she calls him Samuel (1, 20). After Hannah has weaned the child she brings him to the house of God in Shiloh, where the boy grows up “before the Lord” (2, 21) until he becomes a prophet (chapter 3).

But in the story of Hannah and Samuel there intrudes another person who is competing for our attention. From Hannah’s first appearance in the temple (1, 9) to the day that Hannah is last mentioned (2, 20) we continually meet the venerable priest Eli. he is venerated and honored by all. Sitting upon his seat by the doorpost of the temple, he reprimands Hannah when he suspects her of being drunk. Hannah’s reply is all humility and apology: “No, my lord... Count not thy handmaid for a wicked woman... Let thy handmaid find favour in thy sight” (1.14-18). And when Eli blesses the childless woman that God will grant her petition (1, 17), her sorrow and bitterness vanish. Serenely she leaves the temple, she eats and her face is no more sad (1, 18). Next day she leaves Shiloh and returns to her home in Ramah, and then the Lord remembers her (1, 19).

The importance of Eli in the Samuel story cannot be too much emphasized. The Bible depicts him as a man who is revered by the people and as a saintly priest whose blessing carries weight. But as the story moves on from Hannah and Samuel to Eli and his sons (chapter 2) the picture of Eli becomes rather tarnished. When we read of the behavior of his sons (2, 12-17 and 22-25) and his weak and ineffectual remonstrations with them, we cannot help but compare this

failure with his stern admonition to the childless Hannah whom he suspects of profaning the sacred temple and the Bible obviously wants us to draw the comparison. Eli is extremely anxious to uphold the honor and decorum of the temple, and he tells Hannah peremptorily (1, 14):

And Eli said unto her:
 'How long wilt thou be drunken? Put away
 thy wine from thee'.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ עָלֶי:
 עַד־מָתַי תִּשְׁתַּכְּרִין
 הִסְרִי אֶת־יַיִנְךָ מֵעַלֶיךָ:

But when faced with the sacrilegious and immoral behavior of his sons, Eli pleads with them almost apologetically (2, 22-25).

Now Eli was very old;
 and he heard all that
 his sons did unto all Israel, and how that they
 lay with the women that did service
 at the door of the tent of meeting.
 And he said unto them:
 'Why do ye such things?
 For I hear evil reports concerning you
 from all this people.
 Nay, my sons; for it is no good report
 which I hear the Lord's people spread abroad.
 If one man sin against another
 God shall judge him;
 but if a man sin against the Lord
 who shall entreat for Him?'
 But they hearkened not
 unto the voice of their father
 because the Lord would slay them.

וְעַלִּי זָקֵן מְאֹד
 וְשָׁמַע אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן
 בְּנָיִל לְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל
 וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׁכַּבּוּן אֶת־הַנְּשִׁים הַצֹּבְאוֹת
 בְּפֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד:
 וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם:
 לָמָּה תַעֲשׂוּן כַּדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה
 אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי שֹׁמֵעַ אֶת־דְּבָרֵיכֶם רָעִים
 מֵאֵת כָּל־הָעָם אֲלֵה:
 אַל בְּנֵי, כִּי לֹא־טוֹבָה הַשְׁמָעָה
 אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי שֹׁמֵעַ מֵעַבְרִים עַם־ד':
 אִם־יַחֲטֵא אִישׁ לְאִישׁ
 וַיִּפְלְגוּ אֱלֹהִים,
 וְאִם לַד' יַחֲטֵא־אִישׁ
 מִי יִתְפַּלֵּל־לּוֹ.
 וְלֹא יִשְׁמָעוּ
 לְקוֹל אָבִיהֶם
 כִּי־חָפֵץ ה' לְהַמִּיתָם:

Furthermore, in a remarkable passage in chapter 4 (12-18) Eli is described as being more anxious about the ark of God than about the lives of his sons. He hears of the death of his sons, but only when he is told that the ark was captured by the Philistines he falls from his seat and dies (verse 18).

The Bible elaborates upon the sin of Eli, devoting almost half of chapter 2 and the whole of chapter 3 to this subject. An anonymous man of God (2, 27) announces to Eli a dire future.

Speaking in a style that is reminiscent of the Deuteronomic chastisements (Deuteronomy 28) and the harsh prophecies of the later prophets, the man of God warns (2, 31):

Behold, the days come
that I will cut off thine arm,
and the arm of thy father's house,
that there shall not be an old man in thy
house.

הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים
וְגָדַעְתִּי אֶת־נְרָעָךְ
וְאֶת־נְרָע בַּיִת אָבִיךָ
מִהָיֹת זָקֵן בְּבֵיתְךָ:

Subsequently the Bible describes in detail God's revelation to Samuel of the downfall of the house of Eli (3, 11-14). Why does the Bible accord such importance to the history of the house of Eli and the prophecies of its fall? The reason is found in a revealing sentence in the prophecy by the anonymous man of God (2, 30):

Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel saith:
I said indeed that thy house,
and the house of thy father should
walk before Me for ever but
now the Lord saith Be it far from Me;
for them that honour Me, I will honour,
and they that despise Me
shall be lightly esteemed.

לְכוּ נְאֻם־ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
אָמַר אֲמַרְתִּי בַיִתְךָ
וּבַיִת אָבִיךָ
יִתְהַלְכוּ לִפְנֵי עַד־עוֹלָם
וְעַתָּה נְאֻם־ה' חָלִילָה לִּי
כִּי־מְכַבְּרִי אֲכַבֵּד
וּבִזְי
יִקְלוּ:

The idea expressed in this sentence is not exceptional in the book of Samuel. It is used by Samuel himself to explain the downfall of King Saul. God intended to establish Saul's kingdom forever, but since Saul has not kept the commandment of the Lord He decided to take away the kingdom from Saul (13, 13-14 and 15, 28). The tragedy of King Saul is the dominant story in the first book of Samuel. It is the tragedy of a courageous warrior and a well-intentioned man who is not suited for the business of government. And this is where Eli resembles Saul. Eli is a revered elder who fears God and humbly confesses the truth, but he does not realize that a leader must at times be firm and unyielding. A leader who is incapable of using the authority at his command inevitably becomes an utter failure, and he must make room for a better man.

The story of King Saul is the story of a chosen leader who is put to the test and is found wanting. Eli too is a chosen leader who fails in his task. The story of Eli is a kind of prelude, foreshadowing the great tragedy of Saul.

In chapter 2 (verses 27-36) an anonymous prophet foretells the doom of the house of Eli. but nothing is said there about Eli's reaction to this prophecy. It is only in chapter 3, in the course of describing the first prophetic revelation to Samuel, that we hear of Eli's reaction to the prophecy of doom (3, 11-14 and 16-28):

And the Lord said to Samuel:

'Behold I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of everyone that heareth it shall tingle,

In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from the beginning even unto the end.

For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever, for the iniquity, in that he knew that his sons did bring a curse upon themselves, and he rebuked them not.

And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated with sacrifice nor offering for ever'.

Then Eli called Samuel and said:

'Samuel, my son.' And he said 'Here I am.'

And he said: 'What is the thing that Hath spoken unto thee? I pray thee, hide it not from me; God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide anything from me of all the things that He spoke unto thee.'

And Samuel told him all the works, and hid nothing from him.

And he said: 'It is the Lord;

let Him do what seemeth Him good.'

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל:
הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי עֹשֶׂה דְבָר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר
כָּל־שְׁמָעוֹ

תִּזְעָזְעוּן וְאֲזַנֵּי:

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶקְרָא אֶל־עֲלֵי

אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ,

הַחֵל וְכִלָּה:

וְהִגַּדְתִּי לוֹ כִּי־שֹׁפֵט אֲנִי אֶת־בֵּיתוֹ

עַד־עוֹלָם בַּעֲוֹן אֲשֶׁר־יָדַעַ

כִּי־מָקַלְלִים לָהֶם בְּנֵי

וְלֹא כָהָּן בָּם:

וְלָכֵן נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְבַיִת

עָלַי אֶם־יִתְכַפֵּר עָוֹן בֵּית־עָלַי

בְּזֹבַח וּבְמִנְחָה

עַד־עוֹלָם:

וַיִּקְרָא עָלַי אֶת־שְׁמוּאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר

שְׁמוּאֵל בְּנֵי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

וַיֹּאמֶר מָה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר

דִּבַּר אֵלַיךְ אֶל־נָא תַכְחַד

מִמֶּנִּי כִּי יַעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים וְכִי יוֹסִיף

אִם־תַּחֲחַד מִמֶּנִּי דְבַר מִכָּל־הַדְּבָר

אֲשֶׁר־דִּבַּר אֵלַיךְ:

וַיַּגִּד־לוֹ שְׁמוּאֵל אֶת־כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים

וְלֹא כִחַד מִמֶּנּוּ

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הוּא

הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינָי יַעֲשֶׂה:

Eli's reaction is characteristic of both his greatness and weakness. In the face of distress he hold onto his faith in God and humbly submits to the divine judgement. But his resignation to the will of God (צידוק הדין) is of no avail. For some time he knew that his sons' behavior will inevitably bring about a calamity, but he did nothing to prevent it. He fears his licentious sons; he is anxious about the imaginary honor of his family. He is a weak man. And for a leader weakness is a sin.