

Samuel – Sarah Penfold

We all remember Samuel as the boy in the temple waking in the night. It is a story that we tell in 'Open the Book', and we have a grandson who likes it as a bedtime story. But what did he do when he grew up? I thought I would share his obituary from an old edition of the Israel Times .

Samuel – priest, prophet, judge.

Samuel was the eldest son of Elkanah and Hannah, of Ramathaim. He had been much longed for and his mother had promised that if she had a male child, she would give him to God. As a young boy he was apprenticed to Eli in the temple at Shiloh, where he went on to priesthood following the deaths of Eli's own sons. Samuel himself used to tell of an incident when, while still a boy, he heard someone calling in the night, and convinced that it was Eli went to see what he wanted. This happened three times and each time Eli denied that he had called. Finally realising that God was calling Eli instructed him to answer if he heard the voice again. Samuel did answer and God revealed to him the fate of Eli's family.

In adulthood Samuel was acknowledged as a prophet. In his role as judge he successfully led the fight against the Philistines who never entered Israel's territory again during his lifetime. This role continued after the institution of the monarchy with Samuel making an annual circuit of Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpah during which he sat in judgement before returning to his home in Ramah.

Discontent with their leaders resulted in the people lobbying Samuel to establish the monarchy. He was initially reluctant and warned them of their obligations towards a king but the public demand was for a king to lead them in battle as was the case in neighbouring nations. God directed Samuel to organise the selection.

The lives of Samuel and King Saul were entwined. Sent by his father to find some missing livestock and unable to find them Saul sought out Samuel to ask his advice. Having been alerted by God Samuel welcomed the young man, invited him to eat and to stay, and the following morning anointed him as destined to be the first king of Israel. The king was to be selected by lot and at the conclusion of the process it was Saul who had been chosen.

Throughout Saul's reign Samuel acted as his advisor and conscience interceding with God on his behalf. He later told a close friend that there were times when Saul's actions contravened the messages that he relayed from God. It had taken all his skill as a diplomat, and it gave him great sadness when God rejected Saul as the King.

A new challenge awaited Samuel. God sent him to Bethlehem to the family of Jesse in search of someone to succeed Saul as King. Jesse introduced him to his family of seven fine sons, but God rejected them all. 'Do you have any more sons?' Samuel asked. The youngest who had been with the sheep was sent for and so David, Jesse's eighth son, was anointed as God's chosen one.

Samuel returned home where to his distress he received news of the feuding between Saul and David – the two men that he had anointed as kings. It was with relief that he learned they had eventually been reconciled.

Throughout his life Samuel was regarded as a man of integrity with a public expression of his character made at the time of Saul's installation as King. People sought him out for his advice and judgement. From his ordinary beginnings, marked out by God Samuel became a much-respected priest, prophet and judge, instrumental in the establishment of the monarchy. He will be remembered as the man who anointed two future kings.

Samuel appointed his sons Joel and Abijah to succeed him as judges.

Following his funeral service attended by representatives from the whole of Israel, Samuel was buried close to his home at Ramah.