

# The Life Situation of

# SAMUEL

THE BOOK OF SAMUEL, 1 and 2 Samuel in the English Bible combined as one book in the Hebrew Bible, is Israel's historical record spanning approximately one hundred years from the final years of the judges to David's last years. This brief period is one of the most significant eras in Israel's entire history. During those years, the loose tribal confederation gave way to a centralized, monarchical government, patterned after the countries surrounding Israel. Samuel, Saul, and David are the three main personalities featured in the book. The book's writer provided details regarding how they became leaders and influenced Israel's national development. The book bears Samuel's name because of his prominence in the historical events recorded by the author. The life situation of the Book of Samuel can be understood by examining Samuel, the man and his roles, Israel's transition from a tribal confederacy to a monarchy, and political and social influences on Israel

from surrounding countries.

The story of Samuel's birth, boyhood, and adolescence is told with inspiring simplicity. Samuel's mother, Hannah, prayed for a son, promising to dedicate him to the Lord's service for all of his life. After the Lord answered her prayer, Hannah presented Samuel to Eli, the priest ministering in the sanctuary at Shiloh. Samuel became Eli's assistant, carrying out duties assigned to him by the aging priest.<sup>1</sup>

Samuel demonstrated his attentiveness to his mentor when he mistakenly thought he heard Eli calling him during the night. After the third awakening, Eli perceived the Lord was calling Samuel. Samuel followed Eli's instructions to respond to the Lord's voice. He received the announcement of the Lord's judgment on Eli's house. With reluctance, after persistent questioning from Eli,

Samuel conveyed the Lord's message and gained his first experience as the Lord's prophet. This encounter with the Lord constituted Samuel's call to be a prophet. The Lord established Samuel's prophetic ministry by continuing to speak to him. Samuel's reputation as a spokesman for the Lord spread throughout Israel.

Samuel functioned as prophet, priest, judge, and king-maker during his lifetime. Although he performed priestly responsibilities of carrying out sanctuary rituals, offering sacrifices, counseling worshipers, and caring for the ark of the covenant, Samuel excelled in the prophetic office. Because the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel at Shiloh, Samuel contributed to a revival of the Shiloh

**Below:** Bethel  
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (18/27/18)

by *James Newell*

**Lesson Reference:**  
**EBS: The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel**



sanctuary. Samuel, through his faithfulness to God's leadership, founded a new prophetic office for Israel. Samuel exerted influence as a prophet in a manner unlike anyone before him. Subsequent prophets maintained and enhanced Israel's spiritual life by following Samuel's example of making known God's purposes for His people.

Samuel's service as judge in Israel took place during the years following the deaths of Eli and his sons.

**Mizpeh, modern Tel En-Nasbeh, one of the towns where Samuel administered justice.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHATZ (9/21/13)

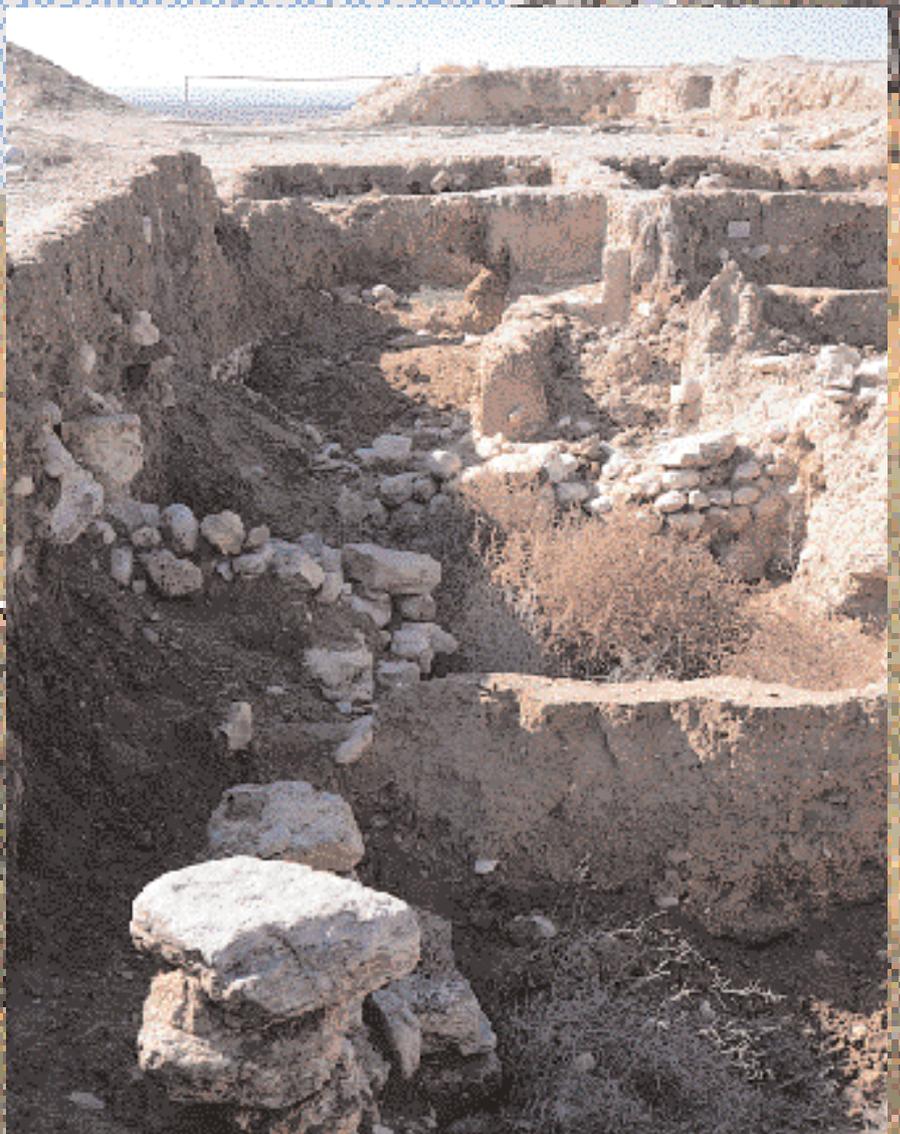
**Lower right: Excavations at Beersheba. Samuel's sons, Joel and Abijah judged here.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO DAVID ROGERS (4/8/9)

He called Israel to repentance regarding idolatry, delivered them from Philistine oppression, and administered justice at Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpeh, and Ramah. Eventually the Philistines began to threaten Israel again, and Samuel's sons lost the Israelites' confidence. Israel's elders expressed their demand for a king and placed Samuel in the unique position of being the last judge and the first king-maker (1 Sam. 8:3,5,19-22).<sup>2</sup>

Israel's transition from a tribal confederacy to a monarchy is an interesting study. The interdependent nature of the tribal relationships changed upon Israel's conquest and settlement in Canaan. As each tribe

settled in its allotted territory, the unity that had characterized Israel's experience came to an end. The commentary provided in Judges 21:25 (NIV) is revealing: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit." The Israelites failed to break the cycle of apostasy, judgment, repentance, and restoration typical of their existence after settling in Canaan. The Israelites did not respond favorably, in the long term, to the judges' attempts to provide continuity and motivation to maintain faithfulness to the Lord. The leadership at the tribal level



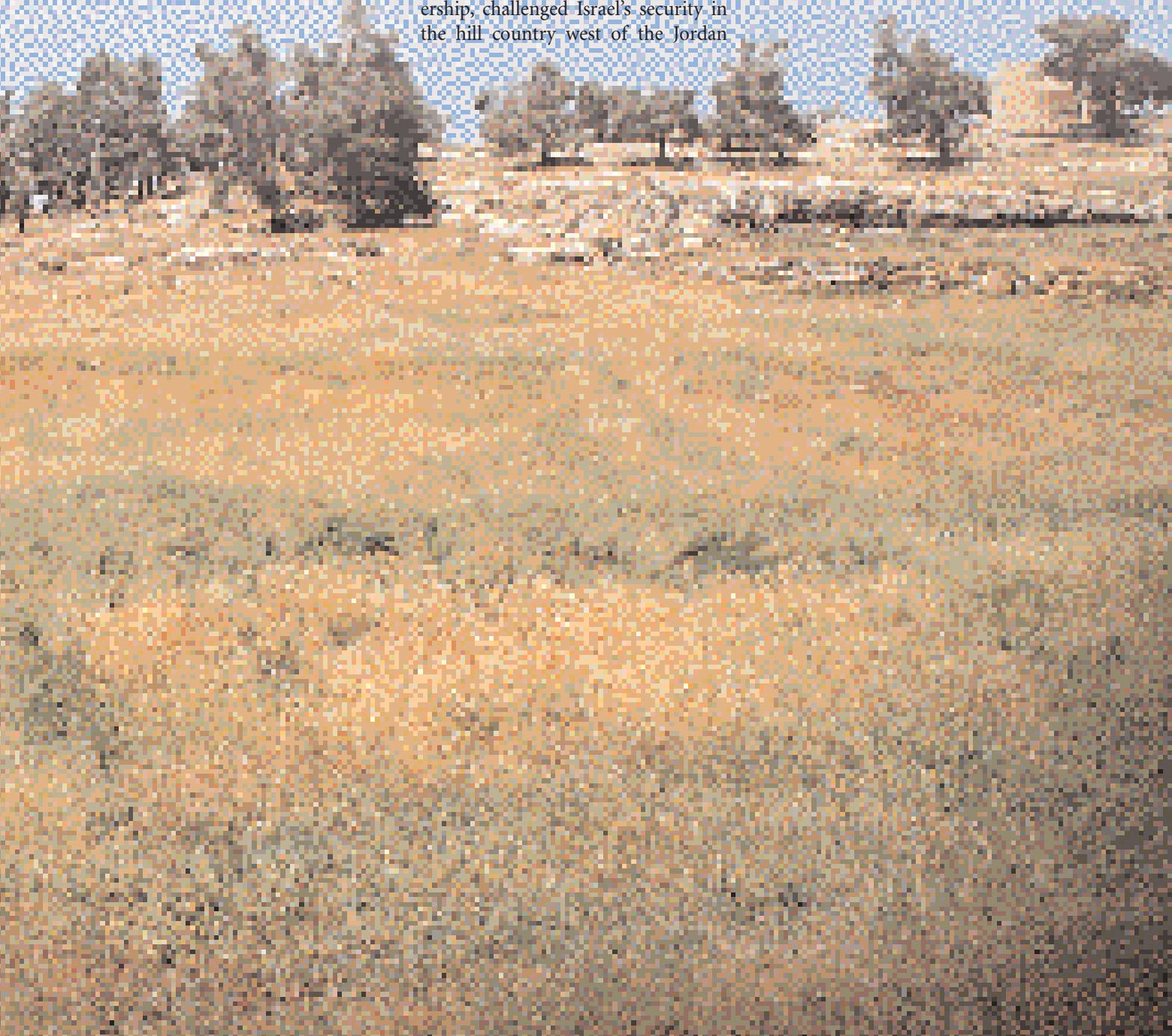
decided that their circumstances required a king.<sup>3</sup> First Samuel 8 is the beginning of the account of the monarchy's establishment. The subsequent chapters provide details of the efforts to fulfill the Israelites' desire for a king.

The request for a king came in response to two crises. The first crisis was political in nature. Samuel entrusted some judicial responsibilities to his sons, Joel and Abijah, in

Beersheba on Canaan's southern border. Joel and Abijah lacked Samuel's integrity, evidenced by the accusation of greed and bribery. Their actions perverted justice, undermined the public trust, and provided Israel's elders the opportunity to challenge the political system administered by the judges. The second crisis related to the perceived military threat of Israel's neighboring states. The Philistines, though subdued under Samuel's leadership, challenged Israel's security in the hill country west of the Jordan

River. The Ammonites expressed hostility east of the Jordan. The tribal leadership thought the circumstances warranted a strong military leader. Either of these crises alone may have caused a different reaction in Israel. Their convergence set the stage for a new development in Israel's history.

Samuel's attitude toward the request for a king was negative. He demonstrated wisdom and maturity by seeking God's will in the matter



before responding to the elders. The Lord interpreted the request for a king as an outright rejection of divine leadership and equated the action with idolatry (1 Sam. 8:8). Samuel received God's permission to grant the elders' desire with a solemn warning regarding how the king's reign would impact their lives.

Samuel relayed the Lord's decision to the people in the strongest terms. The king the people desired would exercise arbitrary and absolute power by conscripting forced labor, seizing personal property, and levying taxes (vv. 10-18). The description of the dangers represented by a king should have caused the elders to reconsider their demand. Instead, they reiterated their desire.<sup>4</sup> To the elders' credit, they recognized the necessity of the Lord's involvement in the selection of a king and followed Samuel's instruction to return to their homes.

The amount of time required for the conversations between Samuel and the elders is not specified. The events recorded in

1 Samuel 8  
c o u l d

have occurred in a single day. The transition from a tribal confederacy to a monarchy in theory occurred in the course of a judgment handed down from the Lord through Samuel to the Israelites. As a practical matter, the transition to the monarchy took place through a series of events over an undetermined time period.

The selection and establishment of Israel's first king is recorded in 1 Samuel 9—11. The Lord instructed Samuel to anoint Saul from the tribe of Benjamin as Israel's leader. In a private ceremony, Samuel carried out the Lord's command and informed Saul about three signs he would experience as affirmations of God's presence. Saul's presentation to the Israelites occurred at Mizpeh, where Samuel revealed the Lord's choice of Saul to be Israel's king. The Israelites acclaimed Saul as their king and returned to their homes to await the opportunity for Saul to exercise his leadership abilities. Saul won the Israelites' popular support by defeating the Ammonites' attempt to enslave the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead. Following the victory, Samuel ordered the people to return to Gilgal to reaffirm Saul's kingship.

Saul's success as Israel's first king was short lived. His inability to carry out the Lord's instructions, given by Samuel, resulted in the Lord's rejection of Saul as king. Samuel informed Saul of God's decision to give the kingdom to "a man after his own heart" (13:14; 15:26). The Lord sent Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint

**Left:** Relief from the Ankara Museum in Turkey of a Hittite king before a god. Saul may have gotten the idea of offering sacrifices to God because his pagan counterparts offered sacrifices to their gods.

COREL PHOTO

David son of Jesse as king (16:13). Under David's leadership, the Israelites completed the transition from a tribal confederacy to a monarchy.

Israel experienced political and social influences from surrounding countries. The immorality of Eli's sons regarding the women who served at the entrance of the tent of meeting may reflect Canaanite religious influence in Israel (2:22). Canaanite shrines included prostitution as a part of idol worship. The Canaanites worshiped fertility gods and goddesses, believing participation in sexual activity in the idol's honor would guarantee agricultural productivity.<sup>5</sup> After Eli's death, Samuel told the Israelites to put away their foreign gods and serve the Lord only (7:3).

The desire to be like other nations was one of the motives behind the Israelites' request for a king (8:5). The values of centralized authority, efficient administration, unity in purpose, and continuity of leadership appealed to the Israelites. Israel's tribal leaders preferred a new political structure instead of the tribal system's perceived weaknesses.

The Book of Samuel is an invaluable resource for understanding Israel's history. The book's writer recorded Israel's transformation from a loosely connected band of tribes to a ranking world power. The lessons taught and illustrated in the book regarding the importance of faithfulness and the consequences of disobedience are timeless.

<sup>1</sup>H. I. Hester, *The Heart of Hebrew History* (Liberty, Missouri: The Quality Press, 1962), 166.

<sup>2</sup>See Chris Church, "Samuel" in *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1227.

<sup>3</sup>David F. Payne, *The Daily Study Bible: Old Testament, I and II Samuel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 40.

<sup>4</sup>C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, 1 and 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975 reprint ed.), 85.

<sup>5</sup>Payne, 18.

James Newell is pastor of First Baptist Church, Gadsden, Alabama.

