

THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

"Eli: Judge and Priest"

Introduction

1. During the dark days of the "judges" God raised up His judges to lead the people of Israel. There were eight major judges: Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Eli and Samuel. Six minor judges were also prominent: Shamfar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.

2. Two of the major judges are not mentioned in the book which focuses on the ministries of the judges. They are Eli and Samuel. The information concerning them is found in 1 Samuel, a book related to the beginning of the monarchy. Both Eli and Samuel are connected to the preparation for this form of government.

3. Eli was a man prepared of God for his ministry and cast into the lot which he had with a divine intent. Items of note relating to him include these:

1. HIS TIME

It is quite clear that the battle of Aphek (1 Sam. 4:1-11) was about 1075 B.C. The battle of Mizpeh (1 Sam. 7:7-14) was about 1055 B.C. Eli died the same year as the Aphek battle (1 Sam. 4:18). Since he was 98 years old at the time, he was born about 1173 B.C. This would have been shortly after the midpoint of the period of rest following Deborah and Barak's victory over the Canaanites. Further, since Eli judged Israel for 40 years (1 Sam. 4:18), Eli must have begun his work at 58 years of age, about 1115 B.C. This was three years after the death of Abimelech, the renegade king from Shechem. It is not known at what point during this 40 year period that Hophni and Phinehas began to take priestly leadership from their father. We do know that they died at the Aphek, too (1 Sam. 4:11), but by that time they had been entrenched in the service of the tabernacle (1 Sam. 2:12-17). It is altogether possible they had started prior to Jephthah and continued during the time of the Ammonite oppression which Jephthah was used of God to stop. It must be remembered then that Eli was contemporaneous with the judgeships of Tola and Jair, with the time of the great Ammonite oppression, and for three years with the judgeship of Jephthah. He would have known of Jephthah's great victory over the Ammonites prior to the disaster of Aphek.

2. HIS MINISTRY

a. As judge 1. Sam. 4:18.

This lasted 40 years. His work did not involve war; it was peacetime activity. Apparently the rampant sin in Israel called for the Eli type of men for judges (Judges 2: 16-19).

b. As priest 1 Sam. 1:9.

As a priest, he was a descendent of Ithamar, the fourth son of Aaron (1 Sam. 14:3; 22:20; 1 Kings 2:27; 1 Chron. 24:3, 6). The two eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, had been slain by the Lord (Lev. 10:1, 2). Eleazar, the third son of Aaron, had provided priests for some time. Eli was the first, apparently, from Ithamar. In this office, Eli performed such duties as a high priest would: leading in the ceremonies, giving instructions to priests, using the Urim and the Thummim (Ex. 28).

NOTE: Three items stand out in the person of Eli: 1) He was a man of compassion. This is noted in his treatment of Hannah (1 Sam. 1). Later on he assumed a major role in taking Samuel from Hannah to rear him. At his age, this was no easy task! 2) He was a man of submission. To accept a child to rear is fantastic. He did it for Samuel. Later he was rebuked for his family problems by a man of God (1 Sam. 2:27-36) and also by Samuel himself (1 Sam. 3:17, 18). In both instances, Eli was very submissive and responsive. Indeed, so much so that he actually said that the Lord could do what seemed good in His sight (1 Sam. 3:18). 3) He was a man of conviction. This was demonstrated by his concern for the ark (1 Sam. 4:13) and also that he actually died when it was captured (1 Sam. 4:17, 18).

3. HIS FAILURE 1 Sam. 2:29; 3:13.

Eli suffered terrible defeat in the lives of his sons. Both Hophni and Phinehas were sinful in two areas: a. Perversion of the sacrifices to God (1 Sam. 2:13-17). This was particularly involving the peace offering (Lev. 7:30-34). The Israelites were made to abhor the offerings unto God (1 Sam. 2:17). b. Desecration of moral standards (1 Sam. 2: 22). The women involved had committed themselves to God's service like Jephthah's daughter. Apparently Eli remonstrated with his sons (1 Sam. 2:23, 24), but not sufficiently (1 Sam. 3:13).

Conclusion Eli stands out as a judge-priest in Israel's history. His life makes a resounding witness: Serve the Lord with the right attitude, but don't let work outstrip one's responsibility to his home. Remember Eli!