

1 Samuel 2:12-36

The Curse on the Two Sons of Eli

1 Samuel 2:12 - "Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the LORD."

The meaning of "*Belial*" is obscure. The rabbis - by changing one vocalization - explain "sons of Belial" to mean "sons who have broken the yoke of heaven from off their necks."

Other interpretations say it means "worthlessness" or "not prospering."

- **2 Samuel 22:5** - "When the waves of death compassed me, the floods of ungodly men (*b^olîya'al*) made me afraid" (Also repeated in **Psalm 18:4**)

- **Psalm 41:8** - "An evil (*b^olîya'al*) disease, say they, cleaveth fast unto him: and now that he lieth he shall rise up no more."

i.e. a disease or plague of "not rising up" - or a "mortal disease."

There is makes more sense as a synonym for death or *sheol*, the grave. Even more so, it refers to the Abyss - "the place from which one comes not up."

Thus the sons of Belial would be those who displayed "abysmal" wickedness. A similar term in Aramaic refers to "a deep pit, or hell."

Idolators are called sons of Belial:

- **Deuteronomy 13:13** - "Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known"

The Dead Sea Scrolls depict Belial as the Angel of Darkness, the King of Evil and Prince of Darkness, leader of the sons of darkness. It was Belial they say who inspired the Egyptian sorcerers, Jochaneh and his brother, to oppose Moses and Aaron.

The 2nd-Century Book of Jubilees refer to all uncircumcised Gentiles as "sons of Belial."

The first-century Ascension of Isaiah calls Belial "the angel of lawlessness, who is the ruler of this world"

Paul uses it as a reference to Satan:

- **2 Corinthians 6:15** - "And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?"

The Crimes of Eli's Sons

1 Samuel 2:13-16 - "And the priests' custom with the people was, that, when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant came, while the flesh was in seething, with a fleshhook of three teeth in his hand; And he struck it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fleshhook brought up the priest took for himself. So they did in Shiloh unto all the Israelites that came thither. Also before they burnt the fat, the priest's servant came, and said to the man that sacrificed, Give flesh to roast for the priest; for he will not have sodden flesh of thee, but raw. And if any man said unto him, Let them not fail to burn the fat presently, and then take as much as thy soul desireth; then he would answer him, Nay; but thou shalt give it me now: and if not, I will take it by force."

The evil activities of the sons of the High Priest Eli display a pattern repeated throughout history not only by unscrupulous religious leaders, but in the manipulation of any leaders who have no fear of God. They misuse their authority, succumbing to greed and lust, taking advantage of the vulnerable instead of acting as a covering and sanctuary for them. They were and are full of corruption and bribery, injustice and false piety.

Their father Eli was also culpable by not providing any oversight or accountability.

1 Samuel 2:17 - "Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD: for men abhorred the offering of the LORD."

Besides these crimes, the actions of the sons of Eli were turning people against "the offering of the Lord." Specifically, the Peace Offering, which was supposed to be shared not only with the priest, but by the offerer and his family and friends. The corrupt priests even demanded the portion that was supposed to be offered to God. The sacrificial system had one reason for being - to point to the Messiah and his ultimate sacrifice, the offering of His life at the cross. They were desecrating it, and like the Pharisees, taking away the "key of knowledge" from the people:

- **Luke 11:52** - "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered."

The reason the cross and the Gospel - "offering of God" - is abhorrent to many people today is usually because the ministers somehow rob the people of the sustenance meant for them. If the focus is on the minister, he is first robbing God of His portion of glory. If the people leave the house of God with contempt and dissatisfaction, it is usually because the sacrifice of the cross has been kept from them - the knowledge that we all died on the cross with Christ and we pick up our cross daily, our sins are forgiven and our life is not our own, is the great comfort of faith.

This prepares the way for actual fund-raising scams, fraud and thievery of followers or of a congregation.

This is an evil not restricted to televangelists or megachurch pastors, but is a warning even to the shepherd in a small country flock who keeps the spotlight on himself, on "prosperity" and success rather than sacrifice, on "feel good" preaching rather than a

call to pour our life out for others.

Samuel as a Contrast

1 Samuel 2:18-21 - "But Samuel ministered before the LORD, being a child, girded with a linen ephod. Moreover his mother made him a little coat, and brought it to him from year to year, when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. And Eli blessed Elkanah and his wife, and said, The LORD give thee seed of this woman for the loan which is lent to the LORD. And they went unto their own home. And the LORD visited Hannah, so that she conceived, and bare three sons and two daughters. And the child Samuel grew before the LORD."

Samuel "ministered before the LORD," but the sons of Eli were serving only themselves.

"a little coat" = *m^eil* - the same word that is used for the high priest's robe, **Exodus 28:4**

The Talmudists (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma, fol. 25. 1.) observe that a priest might wear a garment, and minister in it, if his mother made it; and they give instances of priests, Ishmael and Eleazar, for whom their mothers made garments.

"she conceived and bare three sons and two daughters" - whereby the prophecy of Hannah was fulfilled (**1 Samuel 2:5** - "the barren hath born seven.")

Eli Rebukes His Sons Too Late

1 Samuel 2:22 - "Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation."

This new charge may have prompted Eli - now 90 years old - to confront his sons. But the rebuke was mild compared to their sins. Eli did not respond to whistleblowers and complaints until it became a general outcry from the people.

One line of interpretation says that Eli's body quivered uncontrollably and he was therefore unable to engage in service in the Tabernacle. Thus he did not see his sons' evil activities. (Radak in Chullin 24b)

The Talmud says that the town of Shiloh was ultimately destroyed because of immorality (Yoma 9a).

Who were these women assembled at the door of the Tabernacle?

The Targum says they were devout women who came there in large numbers (the word used has the signification of armies) to fast and pray, and bring sacrifices to be offered. (See **Exodus 38:8**, and Anna the prophetess, **Luke 2:37**)

Other Jewish commentators see them as new mothers, who came with their offerings

for purification, attended with many other women, their relations, friends, and neighbors, and which especially, when several met together on such an occasion, made a crowd at the door of the Tabernacle.

The evil activities of Eli's sons are common to religious predators throughout history, who capitalize on women's piety and respect for their office and authority to induce their victims into sex and then threaten them into silence.

"for it is no good report that I hear" - That's the weakest way Eli could have stated it.

"ye make the LORD'S people to transgress" - well, yes. But he should have first rebuked his sons for their *own* transgressions.

"if a man sin against the LORD, who shall intreat for him?" - Eli is saying that even he as high priest would not be able to intercede for them.

Only repentance can avail. No other than Jesus as High Priest can intercede.

- **1 John 2:1-2** - "...And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And he is the propitiation (mercy seat) for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

But by dismissing the importance of the sacrificial service in the Tabernacle, Eli's sons put themselves beyond a way to get to repentance. They didn't believe in the mercy seat, and so couldn't return there.

"Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the LORD would slay them." - Like Pharaoh, God hardened their hearts to resist further (**Romans 9**). This is a scary statement concerning God's sovereignty, and like Pharaoh, they became a symbol and a cautionary tale of the effects of resisting God.

One rabbi saw in the actions of Eli's sons the similar self will and pride of Nadab and Abihu, also the sons of a high priest - Aaron - who offered strange fire (**Leviticus 10**).

1 Samuel 2:26 - "And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favor both with the LORD, and also with men."

Like Jesus: - **Luke 2:52** - "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man"

Because of the evil example of Eli's sons, the righteous life of Samuel was given even more distinction and was admired by the people.

Message from the 'Man of God'

1 Samuel 2:27 - "And there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him, Thus saith

the LORD, Did I plainly appear unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh's house?"

Who this man was is not said, nor can it be known with certainty; many conjectures are made. The more ancient Jews say (Seder Olam Rabba, c. 20. p. 53.) he was Elkanah, the father of Samuel; and so Jarchi; and Elkanah is said in the Targum on 1 Samuel 1:1 to be one of the disciples of the prophets, and was reckoned by them among the two hundred prophets that prophesied in Israel (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah, fol. 14. 1.). Other's think he was Samuel himself, who through modesty conceals his name. And some are of the opinion that what follows is recorded in this chapter by way of anticipation, and properly belongs to the message sent from the Lord by Samuel to Eli, in the following chapter.

The prophet reminds Eli of the honored place of the Tribe of Levi and of Aaron his forefather, and how a generous portion of the sacrifices were allotted to them by God.

1 Samuel 2:29 - "Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honorest thy sons above me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people?"

- **Deuteronomy 1:17** - ""Ye shall not respect persons in judgment..." God's word takes precedence over even our feelings for family.

Jesus:

- **Matthew 12:48-50** - "Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother."

"kick" - a metaphor taken from cattle well fed and fat, which kick and spurn with their feet at even the owners and feeders of them.

Paul, who as Saul was persecuting the church, received a similar rebuke:

- **Acts 9:5-6** - "it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks"

The Targum is, "why do ye use force with the holy offerings?" or use force to obtain them.

Eli apparently was benefitting from his sons' actions, making himself "fat" by sharing in what was for the times a luxurious lifestyle. His judgment was muddled by this "respect of persons."

- **Deuteronomy 16:19** - "...thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous."

And he really was fat:

- **1 Samuel 4:18** - Eli "...being old and heavy."

1 Samuel 2:30 - "Wherefore the LORD 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 honor me I will honor, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed."

This is really the basis for God's word to Abraham :

- **Genesis 12:3** - "And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."

Fulfilled in the death of Eli's sons - killed in battle with the Philistines (**1 Samuel 4:11**) in one day - and the banishment of Abiathar:

- **1 Kings 2:27** - "So Solomon banished Abiathar from the priesthood of the LORD and thus fulfilled the word that the LORD had spoken at Shiloh against the house of Eli."

The tradition is that Tabernacle courtyard itself cried out, "Remove the sons of Eli, who contaminated the Temple of the Lord." (Pesachim 57a)

1 Samuel 2:33 - "And the man of thine, whom I shall not cut off from mine altar, shall be to consume thine eyes, and to grieve thine heart: and all the increase of thine house shall die in the flower of their age."

The Talmud has a story (Babylonian Talmud, Roshhashanah, fol. 18. 1. & Yebamot, fol. 105. 1.), that there was a family in Jerusalem, the men of which died at eighteen years of age. They came and informed Yochanan ben Zaccai of it; he said to them, "perhaps ye are of the family of Eli," quoting 1 Samuel 2:33. He advised them to learn Torah, and they ceased to die young.

In the city of Mamlah, the whole population had black hair, because no one lived long enough for their hair to turn white. When Rabbi Meir visited, he told the inhabitants they were no doubt descendants of Eli, and advised them to devote themselves to charitable deeds, quoting Proverbs 16:31 - "The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness."

Although the curse on Eli's descendants seems clear, the rabbis said it applies only to those descendants who failed to repent and mend their ways. An individual cannot be punished for the sins of his forebears:

- **Deuteronomy 24:16** - "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin."

- **Ezekiel 18:20-21** - "The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked

shall be upon him. But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die."

1 Samuel 2:35 - "And I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind: and I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever."

"do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind" - The Kli Yaker (a 17th century commentary) adds that this phrase alludes to a person who ponders the service of the Lord until he grows sensitive enough to do God's will without needing to be commanded.

Zadok and His Sons

This "faithful priest" probably doesn't refer to Samuel. Samuel's "house" - his own sons Joel and Abijah - also turned out to be corrupt, like Eli's sons:

- **1 Samuel 8:3** - "And his sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment."

But it's rather the faithful priest Zadok, whose name means "righteous" and who was put into the office of the high priest by Solomon when he came to the throne, in the place of Abiathar, of the line of Eli, and who was the first to officiate in the new Temple and fulfills this prophecy.

Later prophecy says Zadok's descendants will also serve in the Temple to come, described in Ezekiel's vision:

- **Ezekiel 44:15** - "But the priests the Levites, the sons of Zadok, that kept the charge of my sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from me, they shall come near to me to minister unto me, and they shall stand before me to offer unto me the fat and the blood, saith the Lord GOD"

In that sense the sons of Zadok are the antitype of the sons of Eli, and are a model for Christian believers, who are a royal priesthood:

- **1 Peter 2:9** - "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Bottom Line:

This is a lot of scripture space devoted to condemning the abuses by ministers of God. It's a universal problem, and we see it in headlines every week. It's important that we take this to heart as a warning, and recognize the tremendous privilege and responsibility we've been given as a "royal priesthood" in Christ.

The alternative to the generational curse on Eli's sons who didn't fear God is given in Mary's Magnificat, echoing Hannah:

- **Luke 1:49-50** - "For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation."