

1 Samuel 3:1-21

The Call of Samuel

According to Josephus, Samuel had just completed his twelfth year when the word of the Lord came to him. In later times this age was a critical point in the life of a Jewish boy. He then became 'a son of the Law,' and was regarded as personally responsible for obedience to it. It was at the age of twelve that "the child Jesus" first went up to Jerusalem along with his parents (**Luke 2:42**).

1 Samuel 3:1 - "And the child Samuel ministered unto the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision."

"precious" = *yāqār* - valued as precious because it is rare

vision = *ḥāzôn* - spiritual vision, dream, revelation, or oracle

hazon refers to sights that are revealed to the spiritual eye of a seer when in a state of ecstasy; while another word, *mar'â*, is a vision seen by the natural eye.

The Jewish translation has "Now the word of the Lord was withheld in those days; vision had not broken through."

There was no publicly acknowledged prophet, whose 'word came to all Israel.' The only prophets mentioned in the time of the judges were Deborah (**Judges 4:4**) and an unnamed prophet in Judges 6:8. There had been a "famine" of hearing the word of the Lord (**Amos 8:11**)

There may possibly be some reference to the absence of an appearance of Divine glory which was connected with the Urim and Thummim, which were worn by the high priest.

In Psalm 74, Asaph laments such a time after the destruction of Jerusalem:

- **Psalm 74:9** - "There are no signs for us to see. There is no longer any prophet. And none of us knows how long this will last."

God had promised to raise up prophets in Israel (**Deuteronomy 18:15**; cf. **Numbers 23:23**) but unbelief and disobedience would restrain those promises.

1 Samuel 3:2 - "And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see; And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep;"

"Ere the lamp of God went out" - The Talmud notes that no righteous man departs this life before another equally righteous is born, and cites **Ecclesiastes 1:5**, "The sun rises and the sun goes down." Before the sun of Moses set, the sun of Joshua arose. The

sun of Eli had not set before that of Samuel rose (Tract Kiddushin, fol. 72) The Lampstand in the Holy Place was the only light in the Tabernacle, and was kept burning until it was extinguished just before dawn (**Exodus 27:21 Leviticus 24:3 2 Chronicles 13:11**).

The picture is that Eli and Samuel slept just outside the Tabernacle's curtained walls of the Holy Place, under the overhanging coverings that extended out and down. (Eli's sons probably had their own families and dwellings of their own adjacent to the courtyard). In the Temple this would become the Court of Priests.

Saying that "Eli's eyes were dim" just after saying "there was no open vision" is probably a comment on Eli's spiritual vision as well - he was not aware of his sons' corruption.

It's also a beautiful picture of Samuel's innocent faith.

- **Psalm 91:1** - "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

The scene of Samuel sleeping and at rest under the edges of the Tabernacle is a type of God throwing his *kanaph* or the corner or hem of his garment, over Samuel, as Boaz did for Ruth and as God does for his Bride.

- **Psalm 91:4** - He shall cover (*sakkach* - the root of *sukkah*, to cover, to weave together) thee with his feathers, and under his wings (*kanaph* - wing, skirt, corner of garment) shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

- **Revelation 7:15** - "Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell (*skēnoō*) among them."

"dwell among them" = "will spread his tabernacle over them"

1 Samuel 3:4 - "That the LORD called Samuel: and he answered, Here am I."

Rashi explains that the voice "emanated from the... Holy of Holies. Specifically from the mercy seat on the Ark. This is what is inferred by the Scriptural verse (Job 37:5): The Lord thunders wondrously with His voice." The voice jumped over Eli to Samuel (Tractate Tamid).

Samuel answers with "Here am I." Spiritually, he puts himself completely at the service of his master, jumps up and is in the process of responding, probably running to Eli. This should always be the believer's response to God's call.

- **Isaiah 6:8** - "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me."

1 Samuel 3:7 - "Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, neither was the word of the

LORD yet revealed unto him."

Rashi - "had not yet known the Lord": (Heb. *'terem*') i.e., he had not yet recognized the nature of the prophetic voice.

"neither was the word of the LORD yet revealed unto him." - Targum: "no word of prophecy of the Lord was yet revealed unto him."

1 Samuel 3:10 - "And the LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy servant heareth."

"the Lord came and stood" - Rabbi Kimchi thinks the expression denotes some glorious appearance of God to him, because it is the same which is used in **Numbers 22:22-31**, "the angel of the LORD took his stand" to oppose Balaam's journey. And so the Targum has, "The Lord was revealed, and stood and called."

The Lord appeared to Israel sometimes as the Angel of the Lord. To see God face to face would result in death. Jesus in his incarnation is the only form presented to us in which we can take in His glory and His presence.

Like Jacob wrestling with the Angel of the Lord, and this same Angel appearing to Joshua and to Gideon, He likewise appears to Samuel, the first prophet. This appearance of God is described in **verse 15** with the word *mar'â* - something seen when wide awake - and not *hazon*, a vision of ecstasy or a dream.

By calling Samuel by name, the Lord placed him among the ranks of Abraham, Jacob and Moses, whom God had also called by name.

The Curse Against Eli's House

1 Samuel 3:11-12 - "And the LORD said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end."

tinge = *t'zillenah* - like cymbals, to resound

Like when a violent clap of thunder strikes the ears so strongly that the sound tingles and remains afterward, Israel will be amazed and stunned.

God began with the death of Hophni and Phinehas, and went on in the slaughter of Abimelech, and the eighty five priests at Nob, in the times of Saul, and finished in the thrusting out of Abiathar from the priesthood, in the times of Solomon, whereby that family was brought to disgrace and poverty.

Not only that, but as the psalm says...

- **Psalm 78:60-61** - "He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent He had pitched among men. He delivered His strength (the Ark) into captivity, and His splendor to the hand of the adversary."

And then Eli himself died:

- **1 Samuel 4:17** - "As soon as the ark of God was mentioned, Eli fell backward from his chair by the city gate, and being old and heavy, he broke his neck and died."

1 Samuel 3:13 - "For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not."

The Septuagint has "because his sons spoke ill of God (or cursed Him). Alternately, it can be translated that they cursed themselves by their actions.

"he restrained them not" - "darken" - Eli didn't even knit his brow in a countenance of displeasure (or cause them to knit their brows in response to his chastisement or shaming).

In the wilderness, the Levites had been commended for ignoring familial ties when revenging the incident of the golden calf (**Exodus 32:27**). Eli had been doing the opposite.

Eli did not use his authority or oversight to require accountability, either as a father, a High Priest or a judge of Israel. His respect of persons and avoidance of confrontation brought the downfall of his house.

1 Samuel 3:14 - "And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever."

This is a horrible fate. By dismissing as irrelevant the sacrificial system that points to the Messiah, causing Israel to despise the offerings, and instead using it for their own greed, it is impossible for the sons of Eli to obtain forgiveness through His sacrifice. As in **Hebrews 6:4-6**, "they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh." If you don't believe in the need for the mercy seat, you can never get there. Like seed falling on rocky ground, only briars come up, which are then rejected (**Hebrews 6:8**).

- **Matthew 12:31** - "Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven."

To blaspheme or curse the Holy Spirit is to reject His work of producing faith to believe in the Son and His sacrifice. Without faith, there is no path to repentance and forgiveness.

This is probably the original picture that inspired the maxim "Judgment must begin at

the house of God."

- **1 Peter 4:17** - "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?"

Also, judgment begins with those serving in His sanctuary and spreads out from there:

- **Ezekiel 9:6** - "Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary...."

The word for "mark" is literally the *tau*, the final letter of the Hebrew alphabet shaped like a cross. It means "It is finished!"

- **John 19:30** - "When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost."

We need to constantly be aware and make sure we have the mark of the cross "on our foreheads," i.e. filtering our thoughts and plans and will through that prism of death to self. We are finished.

Eli's Response

1 Samuel 3:18 - "And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, It is the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good."

The Jewish translation has "Let Him do what is good in his eyes." This is another reference to the time of the judges, when "every man did what was good in his own eyes." Now that time was at an end.

Samuel told him "every whit." He left off nothing from what God spoke to him, as a good prophet should do. We also need to speak every part of the Good News, not only that Jesus has come in the flesh to establish His kingdom, and by His death on the cross He provides forgiveness of sin, but also that the human race died with Him (Romans 6) and that those who reject Him are rejecting eternal life.

Eli is remarkably calm as he submits to God's word to him, which is effectively a curse. Hopefully, this was a sign of his humility and not of dementia. (Aaron had the same response when hearing of the death of his two sons).

1 Samuel 3:19-21 - "And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the LORD. And the LORD appeared again in Shiloh: for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD."

The Targum replaces "the Lord" with "the Word of the Lord," meaning the Logos as

interpreted by Philo and others. John directly associated this idea with Jesus the Messiah.

"The LORD revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh" - or "because of Samuel" according to an alternate reading. God had wanted to immediately abandon Shiloh because of Eli's sons, but because God had revealed himself to Samuel there, he continued to abide in the Tabernacle in Shiloh. (Kli Yakar)

“The Lord ...let none of his words fall to the ground”

"None of his words fell to the ground" - Not only did his prophecies come true, but even his natural speech was so ordered that there was no idle word or extraneous phrase wasted, according to the rabbis. But this was God's doing, not Samuel's.

Mainly because God Himself is faithful - None of *His* words fall to the ground, or are spoken in vain.

- **Isaiah 55:10-11** - "For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."

- **Numbers 23:19** - "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"

- **Psalms 119:89-90** - "Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Your faithfulness endures to all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast."

- **Isaiah 40:8** - "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever."

And in the New Testament, the Word became flesh in Jesus:

- **Matthew 24:35** - "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

Although prophets and prophecy are among the gifts and callings given to the New Testament church, it refers more to a forth-telling of the truth of the gospel than a foretelling of events. Jesus is the culmination of what all prophecy was pointing to.

And the living Word within us is a more important and powerful witness than even hearing the direct voice of God speaking from heaven at the Transfiguration:

- **1 Peter 1:17-21** - "For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts."

Moses had predicted that God would raise up a prophet like himself:

- **Deuteronomy 18:15** - "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear."

Jesus was that prophet. Now, when we prophecy by the Holy Spirit, we speak only of the Son:

- **Hebrews 1:1-2** - "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds."

Samuel's ministry will be mainly to be a vehicle through which God will test Israel and Saul in their faithfulness, to exhort and deliver God's message of judgment as here with the sons of Eli, or of blessing, as when he anoints Saul and then David as king.

Bottom Line: None of God's promises will fail or "fall to the ground."