

# The Call of Samuel

## Background

Desert days were over. Israel had moved into the Promised Land. The Ark of the Covenant, which had moved with the people, now had a permanent home at Shiloh. Its initial home, the Tent of Meeting, had now become housed in what would become the beginnings of the tradition of the Ark placed in a Temple dwelling. God became grounded in the desert. No longer remote on a mountain top. At Shiloh, the Holy One became localized in one place. Its presence made that building holy. Sacred space had traveled from the top of a mountain, where Moses talked with God, to a particular spot — but a spot moving as the people moved. Shiloh brought worship to another stage. The God of Israel not only touched the ground but now touched it in one particular place. This particular house therefore became a Temple because of who now resided within it.

The call of Samuel occurs in the Temple at Shiloh (1 Samuel 3, 1-18). Reverenced as a Temple should be, Shiloh still stands for a time of corruption. Moral darkness had overtaken this holy place. Eli and his sons were the priests attending the Temple at the time. Eli, a good man, was weak when it came to confronting his sons on their practices. They seemed to care more for themselves than for Temple service. It was a bad time. The atmosphere became more apparent with the arrival of the boy Samuel. During his time of growing up, his goodness stood in sharp contrast to Eli's sons. His righteousness threw a glaring light upon the workings of their corruption. Samuel's mother had dedicated him to Temple service because she originally had been called barren. He was her miracle baby. She had vowed if she could have a son, she would dedicate him to the Temple. It was in this badly-served Temple that he first heard God calling to him.

The call of the boy Samuel can easily hide the dark backdrop behind an innocent child hearing the voice of God. Behind his mystical experience lay hidden a dramatic change in the traditional lines of the priesthood. Eli traced his priesthood to Moses. He came from a family of priests who saw themselves chosen for this task. Samuel's arrival on the scene began a momentum that would sweep the Moses priesthood from office and will replace it with one rooted in the figure of Moses' brother Aaron. Corruption brought to an end one tradition and drew into prominence another. It would be Samuel who would anoint David king. David would negotiate to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. Solomon, David's son, would build a new Temple in that city and would confirm the followers of Aaron as its official priests.

The corruption at Shiloh was made supremely evident by the loss of the Ark. A war had broken out between Israel and the Philistines. It went badly for the Chosen People. As a means of turning the tide, the army requested the Ark be brought into camp to encourage morale. Not only did Israel lose the battle, they also lost the Ark. It was

captured and taken by the Philistines. The holy place at Shiloh would now stand empty. News arrived at the Temple of the loss of the Ark and of the death of Eli's two sons who had accompanied the Ark. The shock was more than Eli could handle. Losing his sons was tragic but also losing the Ark for which he was responsible was overwhelming. He himself suffered death shortly after. No Ark, no priests, only Samuel remained. He stood called to fill the sudden emptiness with his personality and leadership. Losing the Temple Liturgy with the Ark of the Covenant at its center must have been an experience of the absence of God. The prophetic word would now move more to the center and become more prominent during this in-between time, between Temples, between Shiloh and Jerusalem.

The loss of the Temple would mark a watershed in recording Israel's history. Events eventually became identified by when they occurred: during the first or second Jerusalem Temple. Shiloh comprised the first loss of the Ark. It had traveled with the people through the wandering years, the desert existence. The Ark was lost at Shiloh but the Temple remained, empty but still there. The Temple of Solomon arose in Jerusalem in 957. It was completely destroyed in 586 BC by the Babylonians who not only destroyed the Temple but sent all those living in Jerusalem into exile. The second Temple dates from 516 BC to 70 AD. In the year 70, the Romans finally crushed a Jewish revolt. Unlike Shiloh, there was no empty Temple left. There was no Temple at all. It too was destroyed and Jews were again sent into exile.

The destruction date of the second Temple carries Christian significance. Biblical scholars think the Gospel of St. Mark was written around the year 70. The other three Gospels clearly come after the Temple destruction. The Gospel references to the Temple will come from memory. From what it once was. That date also divides the Gospels from the letters of St. Paul. Paul wrote before the Temple destruction and exile. Biblical research has wondered how much this historical event influenced the writing of the New Testament. Shiloh carries significance because it represents the first time the Ark was lost in war. It also describes what led to the tragic event and what impact it had on what followed. It was also a foreshadowing of two Temple tragedies yet to occur.

Times of exile created another spirituality. Lacking a Temple and its Liturgical sacrifices brought attention more toward the Word of God. Temple Liturgy was no longer a part of Israel's life. After the year 70, Synagogues achieved new importance. They existed previously in countryside. We know Jesus attended the Synagogue at Nazareth. We know of pilgrimages to the Temple, at least once a year as expected. St. Luke's Gospel writes of Jesus becoming lost on one of those pilgrimages. And being found in the Temple. Which he called his Father's house. Testimony to the part played in people's lives by the Temple may be seen in the custom of prayer. For Jews living apart from Jerusalem praying privately, it was encouraged they face Jerusalem during those moments.

The call of Samuel plays an important part in these reflections. It brings together a number of themes relative to the call to holiness and ministry. Samuel grew up training

to be a priest but called as well to be a prophet. This double role situates well the ministries of Lector and Eucharistic Minister. Both serve within the Temple of the New Testament. One attends to the Word of God and the other to the altar of sacrifice and the sharing of the Divine Presence. The Samuel story also orients us to where we need to go: to the Levites who serve the Temple and assist the priests who serve there. Here we may find an Old Testament model for service rendered by those assist the priest according to the New Testament. It may also raise awareness of the role of the priesthood of the laity, positioned so by their baptism. Since Vatican II, the role of prophet and priest have been made more evident by their participation in Liturgical celebrations. By service given to the Word and to the altar. And so, the need to become more familiar with the Levites and their activities in the Temple. But first, we must become more familiar with the Temple. It began in the desert and reached its climax in Jerusalem. Those years saw the building of a liturgical tradition followed by both priest and levite. But first, to delve a bit more deeply into the notion of being called.

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