

Samuel, An Old Testament Character Study:
Strength and Weakness, Insight and Ambiguity

[Whether this should be dedicated to our young Br Samuel Springuel, I leave to the saintly wisdom of our eldest abba, Fr Joseph Jensen.]

The beginning is so beautiful. Samuel is a miracle baby. Hannah was infertile; her husband loved her so deeply he didn't care; but she begs for a baby and her prayers are answered. Infertility is not always overcome. Imagine Hannah's bliss. Every child deserves such welcome: to be overwhelmed with loving delight. We who experience this find later life to be blessed and easy. For that those who have not had this unmerited blessing--those who have poor parenting, as the scriptural characters of Jacob, Esau, Tamar, Ruth—to you I say that parental deprivation can be entirely compensated for. Parents who withhold approval or focus on their own narcissistic problems can be made up for by love from others (by which we usually feel divine love) and by inner work. It is more than possible; it is an opportunity; your character will be stronger, deeper than those who take our beginnings for granted.

We cannot comprehend how Hannah surrenders the miracle baby, age three, to priestly apprenticeship. She keeps the terms of her impulsive bargain. Poignantly she visits only once a year, bringing a handmade coat, the fabric drenched in tears. She models non-possessive, non-helicopter parenting. Did Khalil Gibran think of her when speaking to parents, teachers, relatives: “Your children are not your children. They are sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.... They come through you but not from you. They are with you [for a while] yet do not belong to you. You may give them love but not your thoughts. They have their own thoughts.”

Samuel finds a good surrogate grandparent in the priest Eli, the hidden hero of today's story. As biological parent and priest, Eli is a failure. His sons Hophni and Phineas are corrupt. When sacrificial animals are brought to the shrine, Eli's sons show contempt for God and the pilgrims who bring them. The slain animal are put in God's cooking pot to simmer and stew. The priests will rightfully consume their portion behind the curtain after the ritual. Eli's sons plunge their forks into the stew during the pilgrim's prayers.

Whether Eli didn't teach them right, or their badness was bred in the bone, we cannot know. It was a hard lesson in life's mystery, that children disappoint, that the righteous can suffer. Another sorrow for Eli is God's silence; a priest is an oracle but no message has come to him for a long time.

When God calls young Samuel in the night, Eli's oracle skills are very rusty. But his soul is not coarse or impervious. On the third call he understands and accepts that God is calling not him, the priest, but Samuel, the protégé. Resisting the jealous tendency of elders who cling to position and power, Eli is humble. He allows, assists, Samuel to hear the messages he no longer hears. Next morning Eli wants a report; Samuel is reluctant to tell. Eli's ministry is finished; his sons will die violently; there will be no restoration. In a miracle as great as Hannah's: Eli says, "It is God's will; it is right and good." The humble acceptance of a disappointing, even repellent, outcome is a beautiful thing. It brings us inner peace. Maybe we cannot, like Eli, achieve it overnight. We can gradually work towards it.

The story ends, "Not a word announced by Samuel fell to the ground. From Dan to Beersheba all Israel knew him as authentic prophet of the Lord." Samuel's life was filled with great accomplishments, the anointing of Saul, handsome and heroic, as first king of Israel; when Saul tragically loses divine approval, the secret anointing of David to become royal shepherd and sweet psalm singer of Israel, prototype of Christ. Samuel is the power behind the throne. He dies full of honor before David succeeds. All Israel mourns Samuel. The wording is deliberately similar that of the death of Moses.

Therefore, it comes as an unpleasant surprise that his private life is not so different from Eli, his displaced mentor. Samuel could not raise upright sons; they were as bad as Hophni and Phineas. Seduced by love of money, they took bribes and gave biased verdicts. As unfit to govern as what we have today. Because of them, the people demanded a king, improperly, for God was meant as Israel's king. This grief is known today by those with an important vocation in the world, and do their best at home, but do not succeed.

Is this failure behind the bizarre epilogue to Samuel's story, relished by Fr Philip for its paranormal qualities. Saul has lost God's approval for reasons offensive to our modern ideas of justice and mercy. Limited by conventions of the time, Samuel condemns and denies him the forgiveness he begs for, which other biblical characters with worse faults are granted. We pity Saul but Samuel does not.

Punishment is to be fulfilled after Samuel's death, in battle with David. In total alienation, Saul is terrified. In disguise he visits an occult medium. This goes against his own principles. As king he righteously outlawed such heathen practice. He wants the medium to conjure up the ghost of Samuel. "But King Saul has forbidden such practices!" The unknown

customer insists. The apparition materializes. “You are Saul,” the medium screams as if to Macbeth. She is seeing an old man in the special prophetic garment which Hannah had woven in miniature so long ago. Furious at being disturbed, the ghost foretells the death of Saul and all his sons, sure to come to pass.

There the story ends. Or does it? Could an authentic prophet’s life story really end on such a brutal note, or should we observe something more? Saul faints dead away. The Witch of Endor (for that is the medium’s title) is struck with horror. She is also compassionate. She helps Saul to rise. She begs him to eat. Desolate, He refuses. Like the angel in the wilderness to Elijah, she says, “Rise and eat or the journey will be too great for you.” In these words, food for the journey, a Catholic will recognize the eucharist. An experience which does not magically, superstitiously, change reality. Eucharist does not make delinquent children good. It does not erase our failures or give escape from consequences of bad choices. The eucharist does grant us strength for the journey towards wholeness, where we achieve humble acceptance of God’s difficult will, do the inner work by which we find peace and joy.

If the ghost of Samuel is a bitter old man, perhaps his authentic spirit is in the Witch of Endor, compassionate outsider, Good Samaritan figure. She teaches that behind the horror and misery is mercy and munificence. In fact she gives bread of life as food for the journey. We taste the munificence of the morsel and find it very sweet. In bitter times we must look for salvation and listen to messages that heal. Even in the grave we can learn what the beautiful boy Samuel learned under the guidance of his imperfect mentor Eli in the wee hours of morning.

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