

האם שמואל היה נביא או שופט?

אבנר רמז

In The Book of Kings we read:

בשמנה עשרה שנה למלך יאשיהו: נעשה הפסח הזה ליהוה-בירושלם.

“In the eighteenth year of king Josiah was this passover kept to *YHWH* in Jerusalem” (2 Ki 23:23; see also: 2 Ch 35:19).

This holyday celebration was ordered by the king:

ויצו המלך את-כל-העם לאמר, עשו פסח ליהוה אלהיכם-ככתוב על ספר הברית הזה. כי לא נעשה כפסח הזה מימי השפטים אשר שפטו את-ישראל; וכל ימי מלכי ישראל-ומלכי יהודה.

“And the king commanded all the people, saying: Keep the passover to *YHWH* your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant.

For there was not kept such a passover from the days of the judges that judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel, nor of the kings of Judah” (2 Ki 21-22).

The Chronicler refers to this event as follows:

ויעש יאשיהו בירושלם פסח ליהוה; וישחטו הפסח בארבעה עשר לחדש הראשון.

“And Josiah kept a passover to *YHWH* in Jerusalem; and they killed the passover lamb on the fourteenth day of the first month” (2 Ch 35:1).

ויעשו בני-ישראל הנמצאים את-הפסח בעת ההיא, ואת-חג המצות שבעת ימים ולא-נעשה פסח כמהו בישראל מימי שמואל הנביא; וכל-מלכי ישראל לא-עשו כפסח אשר-עשה יאשיהו והכהנים והלויים וכל-יהודה וישראל הנמצא, ויושבי ירושלם.

“And the children of Israel that were present kept the passover at that time, and the feast of unleavened bread seven days.

And there was no passover like to that kept in Israel from the days of Samuel the prophet; neither did any of the kings of Israel keep such a passover as Josiah kept, and the priests, and the Levites, and all Judah and Israel that were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (2 Ch 35:17-18).

The last biblical description of “keeping the Passover” prior to the one celebrated in the days of King Josiah, is found in the Book of Joshua (Jos 5:10-11). We may therefore have to wonder why the Chronicler “corrects” the information given in the Book of Kings about the time when this holyday celebration was discontinued. Did the Chronicler had real knowledge that the Passover was kept in the days of the Judges? And then did he know why it was discontinued in the days of Samuel? Alternatively, is it possible that the Chronicler believed that Samuel was one of the Judges, and therefore he was not really disputing the information given in the Book of Kings?

The Book of Samuel tells us that when Eli, the Priest to *YHWH* in Shiloh, died at the age of ninety-eight years: “And he had judged Israel forty years” (1 Sam 4:18).

Earlier we read about Samuel:

והנער היה משרת את-יהוה, את-פני עלי הכהן.

“**And the child did minister to YHWH before Eli the priest**” (1 Sam 2:11). However, as Samuel was an Ephraimite and not a priest, it seems more likely that he was Eli’s servant. Similarly to Moses’ servant Joshua who became the leader of the Israelites after the death of his master, it appears that after the death of Eli (and his sons) Samuel takes the role of leadership. We read: **ויאמר שמואל, קבצו את-כל-ישראל המצפתה** - “**And Samuel said: 'Gather all Israel to Mizpah**” (1 Sam 7:5), and then: **וישפט שמואל את-בני ישראל במצפה** - “**And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpah**” (1 Sam 7:6).

Chapter four of the Hebrew version of the Book of Samuel begins with a peculiar statement: **ויהי דבר-שמואל לכל-ישראל; ויצא ישראל לקראת פלשתים למלחמה** - “**And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle**” (1 Sam 4:1).

It appears that the Greek translator thought that this statement implies that it was Samuel who told the Israelites “to go out against the Philistines” a campaign that ended in a disaster and the loss of four thousands men (1 Sam 4:2). Therefore, apparently for exonerating Samuel, the words “**And the word of Samuel came to all Israel**” do not appear in the Greek translation.

We also do not hear “the words of Samuel” when the elders of Israel decided to take “**the ark of the covenant of YHWH of hosts**” from Shiloh into the next battle that ended in even a greater Israelite calamity(1 Sam 4:3-11).

However we read that later, under Samuel’s leadership:

ויכנעו הפלשתים, ולא-יספו עוד לבוא בגבול ישראל; ותהי יד-יהוה בפלשתים כל ימי שמואל.

“**So the Philistines were subdued, and they came no more within the border of Israel; and the hand of YHWH was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel**” (1 Sam 7:13).

Probably, as a result of this victory we now read: **וישפט שמואל את-ישראל כל ימי חייו** - “**And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life**” (1 Sam 7:15; see also: 1 Sam 7:16, 17).

It is rather remarkable that we are told that Samuel “**went from year to year in circuit to Beth-el, and Gilgal, and Mizpah**” or went to his home in “**Ramah**” (1 Sam 7:16-17), but does not visit again Shiloh. Furthermore, we do not hear that he makes any effort to return the “Ark of YHWH” from Kiriath-jearim to the shrine of God in Shiloh.

Although we hear Samuel repeatedly telling the people:

אך יראו את-יהוה, ועבדתם אתו באמת-בכל-לבבכם - “**Only fear YHWH, and serve Him in truth with all your heart**” (1 Sam 12:24), he never refers to:

שלוש פעמים בשנה-יראה כל-זכורך אל-פני האדון יהוה - “**Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord YHWH**” (Ex 23:17; see also: Ex 34:23; Deu 16:16).

We may conclude, that while Samuel was considered **איש האלהים** - “**the man of God**” (1 Sam 9:6, 10), he was not interested in restoring the status of the religious center in Shiloh that could have challenged his authority as a judge (or a leader) of the Israelites.

However, while Samuel apparently evaded Shiloh, we hear that in this religious center:

ואחיה בן-אחטוב אחי איכבוד בן-פינחס בן-עלי כהן יהוה בשלום-נשא אפוד
“and Ahijah, the son of Ahitub, Ichabod's brother, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eli, the priest of *YHWH* in Shiloh, wearing an ephod” (1 Sam 14:3).

We also read: **ויהי כאשר זקן שמואל; וישם את-בניו שפטים לישראל** - “And it came to pass, when Samuel was old, that he made his sons judges over Israel” (1 Sam 8:1).

Yet it appears that Samuel’s efforts of establishing his own dynastic rule met with a popular resistance:

ויתקבצו כל זקני ישראל; ויבאו אל-שמואל הרמתה. ויאמרו אליו, הנה אתה זקנת ובניך לא הלכו בדרכיך; עתה שימה-לנו מלך לשפטנו-ככל-הגוים.

וירע הדבר בעיני שמואל כאשר אמרו, תנה-לנו מלך לשפטנו;
“Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel to Ramah. And they said to him: Behold, you are old, and your sons walk not in your ways; now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.

But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said: Give us a king to judge us” (1 Sam 8:4-6).

והיינו גם-אנחנו ככל-הגוים; ושפטנו מלכנו ויצא לפנינו ונלחם את-מלחמתנו.
“That we also may be like all the nations; And that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battle” (1 Sam 8:20).



Saul tears Samuel's robe. Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. 1851-1860.

We read about Soul:

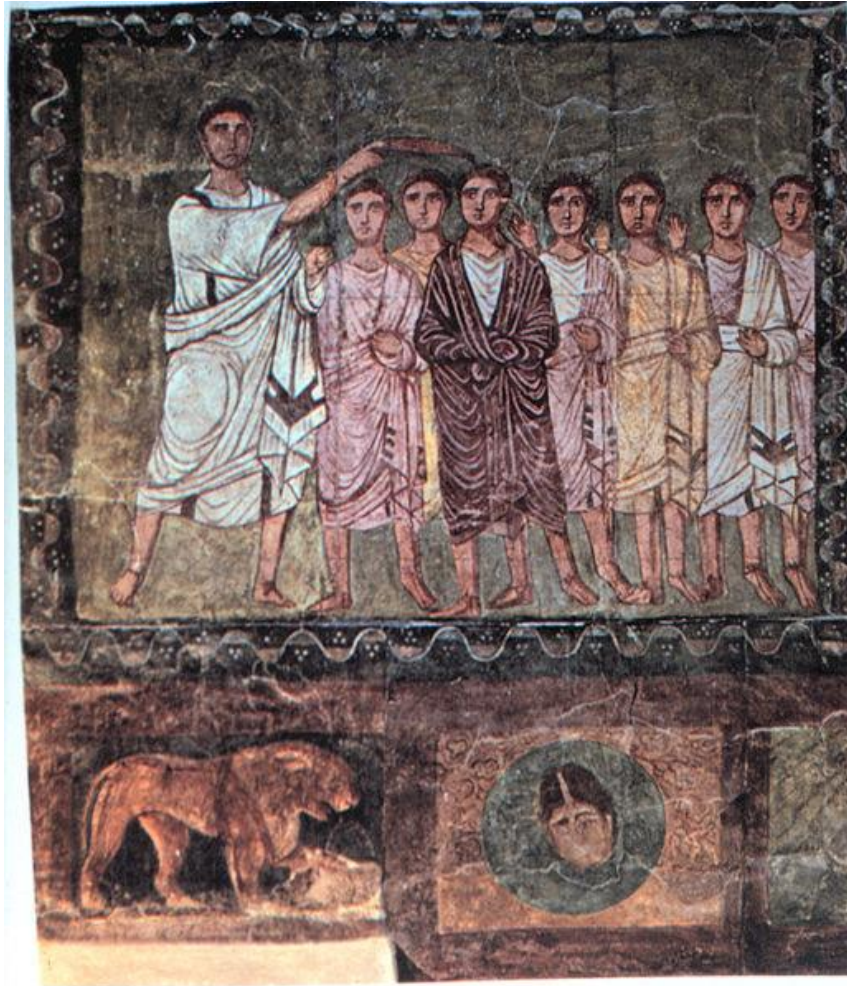
בחור וטוב, ואין איש מבני ישראל טוב ממנו; משכמו ומעלה גבה מכל-העם.

“Young and goodly, and there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he: from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people” (1 Sam 9:1).

Yet we may wonder whether these qualifications made Soul the best Israelite candidate for the kingship. We are not told that Soul was wiser, or more courageous, or a better organizer, or more virtuous than any other Israelite. There is not even a claim here that he had any experience as a local leader. It therefore appears that at best, Samuel chose Soul as the King of the Israelites without much thought. Otherwise we have to assume that the sour Samuel chose Soul because he knew that he was doomed to fail, and that it would reprove the Israelites who requested a king. In fact Samuel’s first instruction to Soul to join **“a band of prophets”** (1 Sam 10:2-6), could hardly be described as intended to coach him for leadership. It seems that it was more likely to disgrace Soul as the people would say:

ויאמר העם איש אל-רעהו, מה-זה היה לבן-קיש-הגם שאול בנביאים - **“then the people said one to another: What is this that is come to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?”** (1 Sam 10:11).

The fact that **“Ahijah, the son of Ahitub, Ichabod's brother, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eli, the priest of YHWH in Shiloh”** was one of King Soul’s men (1 Sam 14:3, 18) apparently did not bode well with Samuel, and he now anoints David (1 Sam 16:13) who will challenge the reign of King Soul and will later annihilate all his offspring.



Samuel anoints David. Fresco in the synagogue at Dura-Europos. 244 AD.

When Samuel was “old and gray-headed” (1 Sam 12:2) he delivered an historical account to Israelites. Among the items that he listed we find:

וישכחו את-יהוה אלהיהם; וימכרו אתם ביד סיסרא שר-צבא חצור וביד-פלשתים, וביד מלך מואב, וילחמו בם.
 ויזעקו אל-יהוה, ויאמר (ויאמרו) חטאנו, כי עזבנו את-יהוה, ונעבד את-הבעלים ואת-העשתרות; ועתה הצילנו מיד איבינו--ונעבדך.
 וישלח יהוה את-ירבעל ואת-בדן, ואת-יפתח ואת-שמואל; ויצל אתכם מיד איביכם מסביב, ותשבו בטח.

“But they forgot *YHWH* their God, and He gave them over into the hand of Sisera, captain of the host of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab, and they fought against them.

And they cried to *YHWH*, and said: We have sinned, because we have forsaken *YHWH*, and have served the Baalim and the Ashtaroth; but now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, and we will serve You.

And *YHWH* sent Jerubbaal, and Bedan, and Jephthah, and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and you dwelt in safety” (1 Sam 12:9-11).

Although, Samuel knowledge of the historical period described in the Book of Judges is wanting, the comparison that he makes between himself and Jerubbaal and Jephthah indicates that he indeed saw himself as one of the judges.