



Samuel's Preparation – Part 2 (1 Sam 3) *Commentary: Week Three*

New American Commentary¹

3. The Lord Makes Samuel Israel's Prophet

This section depicts Samuel's transformation from *na'ar* ("boy," [3:1](#)) to *nābî'* ("prophet," [3:20](#)), from being a juvenile ignorant of the Lord to one who functioned as the Lord's impeccable and revered spokesman. With this event the child Samuel, the first named male prophet since Moses, begins his career as a prophet who will be like Moses (cf. [Deut 18:15–19](#)). In it all the Lord once again demonstrated his propensity for confounding human systems, bypassing the exalted in favor of the humble.

(1) The Lord Reveals to Samuel His Judgment Against the House of Eli [3:1–18](#)

Samuel's first act as prophet was perhaps his most difficult; though only a child, he had to announce the Lord's fatal judgment against Israel's most powerful family. Samuel's message came on the heels of the unnamed prophet's condemnation of the house of Eli and confirmed the certainty and severity of the Lord's judgment (cf. [Gen 41:32](#)).

[3:1–3](#) Samuel, as a youthful Levite, was providing service to the Lord under Eli's tutelage. In the days of Eli, prophetic revelations in the form of visions and divine words had been "rare" (v. [1](#); lit., "precious"), a circumstance that can be linked to divine displeasure (cf. [14:37](#); [28:6](#)) and helps explain why society was so degenerate at that time (cf. [Prov 29:18](#); [Amos 8:11](#)).

Background details provided here are laden with symbolism relevant to the events that follow; Eli's eyes—and by extension his spiritual insight—were "so weak that he could barely see" (v. [2](#)). The mention of "the lamp of God" (v. [3](#)) still burning in the midst of Shiloh's darkness provided not only a temporal setting—the predawn hours (cf. [Exod 27:21](#))—but also a symbol of Samuel's presence in that spiritually benighted worship center. Samuel lying down in the Lord's temple, "where the ark of God was," positions the youth not only spatially but also spiritually; he was of all Israelites closest to the Lord's throne (cf. [4:4](#); [Num 7:89](#)).

[3:4–14](#) While Samuel was fulfilling the Torah obligations to tend the lamp of God (cf. [Lev 24:3](#); [Num 18:23](#)), the Lord called the youth and delivered a message of judgment to him. In a form paralleling Abraham, Jacob, and Moses' obedient responses to divine calls ([Gen 22:1, 11; 31:11; Exod 3:4](#)), Samuel responded, "Here I am" (v. [4](#)). Because he did not initially know the Lord, however, Samuel at first went to Eli for further instructions (vv. [5–6, 8](#)).

Eli twice turned Samuel away (vv. [5–6](#)), perhaps because Eli essentially was blind to the possibility of the Lord's revealing himself in a personal manner. Eventually, however, the elderly priest came to understand that the Lord was calling the youth and advised him to respond submissively.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 83-88.

On the climactic fourth approach to Samuel, the Lord called the boy's name twice and also "stood." The repetition of the personal name is reminiscent of the divine call to Abraham at Mount Moriah ([Gen 22:1, 11](#)) and the one to Moses at the burning bush ([Exod 3:4](#)). The similarity suggests that this moment was as important in Samuel's life and for all Israel as the parallel moments were in the lives of the earlier heroes of the faith. Samuel obediently identified himself as the Lord's "servant" (v. [10](#); cf. [1:11](#)) and urged the Lord to speak.

The Lord's terrifying revelation was in fact a confirmatory repetition of the judgment against the house of Eli given by the unnamed prophet ([2:30–36](#)). Though prophetic messages could be conditional—warnings of possible consequences resulting from continued disobedience (e.g., [Jonah 3:4](#))—in the case of the words spoken against the house of Eli they were certain. Every promised outcome—"from beginning to end" (v. [12](#))—would become reality. And Eli, as the family patriarch, would bear the brunt of the blame because "he knew about" (v. [13](#)) his sons' "contemptible" sins but "failed to restrain them" (cf. [Deut 21:18–21](#)). Eli's conscious failure to enforce divine law in his own family amounted to a high-handed (i.e., deliberate) sin; as such it could "never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering" (v. [14](#); cf. [Num 15:30–31](#)). Furthermore, the magnitude and form of God's judgment would be so shocking that it would cause "the ears of everyone who hears it to tingle"—that is, to give rise to great fear and dismay (cf. [2 Kgs 21:12](#); [Jer 19:3](#)).

[3:15–18](#) With the coming of morning, Samuel "opened the doors of the house of the LORD." The description of a dawn marked by the prophet's reopening the way into the Lord's presence is an obvious double entendre: on the one hand, Samuel was merely performing his daily duty as a temple servant; on the other hand, he was ushering in a new era of spiritual consciousness in Israel.

But Samuel did not enter into his role as the Lord's spokesman without hesitation: "He was afraid to tell Eli the vision" (v. [15](#)). Eli's fatherly reassurances and stern admonition provided the encouragement the lad needed to perform his duty. Eli's threat in v. [17](#) is reminiscent of the Lord's words to Ezekiel: "When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die, and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways ... , that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood'" (cf. [Ezek 3:17–21](#)).

The interaction between Eli and Samuel in vv. [17–18](#) conveys an idealized model of prophetic activity in society: the addressee encourages the prophet to speak the full revelation, the prophet does so, and the addressee accepts it willingly. In these verses both the seriousness of the prophetic responsibility and a model of its proper discharge are presented. Samuel's alert, expectant reception of the divine message (v. [10b](#)) and his full disclosure of the Lord's revelation (vv. [17–18a](#)) in spite of personal misgivings (v. [15](#)) are the proper responses of a prophet to a revelatory divine visitation.

(2) The Lord Makes Samuel a Prophet to All Israel [3:19–4:1a](#)

[3:19–4:1a](#) “The LORD was with Samuel” (v. [19](#)). The drumbeat of the writer is that the Lord was at work in Samuel’s life—from the moment of his conception ([1:19–20](#)), through his early development ([2:21, 26](#)), into his entrance into the prophetic ministry ([3:4, 6, 8, 10](#)), and now in the maturation of that ministry. The Lord did not let Samuel’s prophetic pronouncements “fall to the ground”; the young man’s words, like those of any authentic prophet, were authoritative and trustworthy because they were the Lord’s words. Samuel’s success was in fact the Lord’s success.

Most Israelite leaders during the period of the Judges exercised authority in only small areas of the country, but not Samuel. Though his role as a judge was almost certainly limited to the central region of Israel, his prophetic ministry was not so restricted. Because of his service at Israel’s central sanctuary during the earlier years of his ministry, pilgrims visiting Shiloh spread his reputation as a prophet throughout “all Israel from Dan to Beersheba” (v. [20](#)). Like Moses the prophet before him (cf. [Num 12:7](#)), Samuel was “attested” (Hb. *ne’ēmān*, “established,” “confirmed,” “faithful”); his words had passed the Torah’s test for authenticity (cf. [Deut 18:22](#)). For the first time since Moses, Israel had a national prophet.

“The LORD continued to appear [lit., “was seen”] at Shiloh” (v. [21](#)). These appearances took the form of prophetic words given through Samuel rather than through any physical manifestation.