

THE PRIESTHOOD OF SAMUEL¹

A Very Short Study of 1Sam 3:1-15

Ferry Hartono*

Abstract:

Posisi Samuel dalam 1-2Sam sangat besar. Dialah kingmaker yang dipilih oleh Allah. Dengan diurapinya Saul dan Daud sebagai raja, Israel memasuki suatu periode baru yang penting. Samuel lebih dikenal sebagai nabi, meskipun panggilannya yang terjadi di bawah bimbingan Imam Eli di Rumah Tuhan sangat pantas ‘dicurigai’ menempatkan posisi Samuel sebagai imam juga. Artikel singkat ini bertujuan untuk mencari bukti-bukti intrabiblis dari 1Sam 3,1-15 akan martabat dan status imamat Samuel. Ini tidak mudah pertama-tama karena mengingat institusi imamat pada masa Samuel belum terdefinisikan secara penuh. Belum lagi ditambah dengan latar belakang Samuel yang bukan berasal dari Suku Lewi. Untuk membedah masalah-masalah ini saya akan menggunakan kritik teks sederhana dan pendekatan sinkronistik.

Keywords:

Priesthood, Samuel, Synchronistic, Textual Criticism

In his commentary Anthony F. Campbell stated that the prime role of Samuel in 1-2 Sam was to anoint David as Israel's future king.² Later, he alleged that even though there were chapters narrating the roles of Samuel in the inauguration of the monarchy in Israel and the events of Saul, the

***Ferry Hartono** adalah dosen Kitab Suci di STIKAS Santo Yohanes Salib dan alumnus dari Universitas Pontifikal Urbaniana, Roma, Italia.

¹ This research is mainly based on the method developed by Giovanni DEIANA, *Introduzione alla Sacra Scrittura alla luce della ‘Dei Verbum’*, Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2009.

² A. F. CAMPBELL, *1 Samuel. The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, vol. 7, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids (MI) 2003, 2.

most important of all was his consent of the kingship of David. Campbell assumption is because the figure of David in these books stood up much higher than that of Saul; his descendants ruled Judah successively; his name showed up in most parts of the books. More than that, he was held up as the role model of faithful king transcending even his own storyline.

David is a very important character in the Bible, especially in 1-2 Sam. I couldn't agree more. But, eventually, we cannot sort out the unique importance and theological interpretations of the other major characters in 1-2 Sam regardless how many times they were mentioned. It seems that Campbell treats David in these books in a similar comparison with Jesus in the gospels. In the gospels the main character is Jesus. It is even plausible to say that the other characters are there to strengthen the figure of Jesus and to prepare the climax of the story: His passion, death and resurrection. But, even in His case we cannot just render insignificant the other characters and their unique roles for today's interpretation. Now, to say that the main importance of Samuel in the 1-2 Sam was to anoint David is equivalent as saying that John the Baptist was there to prepare the way for Jesus. For the latter case, I don't have any doubt. But, in the former, it would somehow be a bit inept.

There was more a character in Samuel than a mere "way opener" for David. Theologically speaking, he was even more important than David. He was a prophet and, as we will ponder later, a priest. God spoke personally to Samuel, something that He did only to Samuel's giant predecessors: Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua and Gideon. The kingship of David came through him. Furthermore, we should put in mind that the anointing of a king for Israel was never a direct will of the Lord. The Israelites asked for it (1Sam 8, 4-6). In prior to that, the prophets and the judges were the only authorities the Israelites had. I don't have the space to further the discussion, but the point is the story of Samuel should be analyzed first in its own narrative context. The purpose of this paper is to show Samuel in his own significant role: as a priest of the Lord, although somehow, the use and meaning of the terms "prophet" and "priest" in Samuel will be unavoidably intertwined. In this work I would like to focus and limit my study in the calling of Samuel in 1Sam 3, 1-15 as the foundation of his priesthood.

Textual Issues

The first three passages of Samuel are not as simple as they might appear. Even until today there are major debates among the scholars in the

field of textual criticism. H.P. Scanlin in his comparative studies of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the OT testified that the complexity of the textual traditions of the books of Samuel has presented one of the major challenges in the study of OT textual criticism.³ For the whole book of Samuel the scholars are yet to decide which form is better, Masoretic Text (TM) or the Old Greek version (LXX). To decide about it is unavoidable since there are some passages which are very different between TM and LXX. With the discoveries of Qumran, one of the most important sources of Samuel we have now is 4QSam^a (4Q51).⁴ James H. Charlesworth shows us that the scribe of TM was obviously had made some errors.⁵ On the other side, having more similarities to 4QSam^a, the longer text of LXX is often shown more conceivable. As eager as I am to further the discussion on Charlesworth's discoveries, I must restrain myself. Charlesworth's studies are valid examples to show the importance of the texts of LXX and Qumran in today textual criticism of 1-2Sam.

It would not be exaggerated to say that the texts of LXX and Qumran are necessary to have a more complete view of the book of Samuel. Unfortunately, this fact doesn't make the study of 1Sam 3, 1-15 an easier task. Since the beginning, as viewed by Robert P. Gordon, there are severe discussions whether we can approach these texts intellectually.⁶ Some skeptics do not see any historiographical worth of the early Samuel narratives in general. The others, on a contrary, can easily comprehend the possibility that the vivid characters presented in these passages such as Samuel and Eli really did exist. I myself agree with Gordon completely that since the Old Testament historical books are theologically motivated, we don't really need to busy ourselves to prove the historicity of the events.⁷

V. 1: LXX adds “*tou iēre,wj*” after the name Eli, which doesn't occur in TM and 4QSam^a. “*#r'p*” is translated in “*diaste,llousa*” in LXX, while its original meaning is nearer to “burst out” or “manifest strongly” rather than “widespread”.

V. 3: LXX^B (*Codex Vaticanus*) omits “*kuri,ou*” after the “*tw naw*”. 4QSam^a indicates the same thing and it even goes all the way to skip over

³ H.P. SCANLIN, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Modern Translations of the Old Testament*, Tyndale Publishers, Wheaton (IL) 1993.

⁴ For the respected text of 1Sam 3:1-3 of 4QSam^a, see Eugene ULRICH (ed.), *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls, Transcription and Textual Variants*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 2010, 263.

⁵ The most notable one is in 1Sam 11:1. James H. CHARLESWORTH, *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Baylor University Press, Waco (TX) 2006, 14, 167.

⁶ Robert P. GORDON, *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Versions*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Hants 2006, 61-64.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 58

“~yhi(l{a|Aria~v~rv,a”, “where the ark of God (was)”. Meanwhile, TM and LXX^L (Lucian manuscript of the Septuagint) have a longer phrase. I tend to follow the suggestion of P.K. McCarter that here 4QSam^a makes a simpler yet stronger sense: “Samuel was lying down in the temple.”⁸ It is interesting that in the Qumran’s Samuel Apocryphon (4Q160) we find a different case. The text says “”, “Samuel was lying down before Eli”, in the same room, not separately.

V. 4 and also v. 6: There is a repetition of the name Samuel in LXX in vocative case, which is not occurring in TM. The name Samuel in Vulgata also has an accusative meaning as in TM.

V. 6: TM and Vulgata write “and Samuel got up” which is omitted completely in LXX.

V. 9: Instead of the name “IaWnv”, we have “te,knon” in LXX.

V. 10: In this forth calling, TM testifies that the Lord calls the name of Samuel twice, while LXX simply prefers the pronoun “auvto.n”. But what makes this verse a problematic one is that the author gives us a different respond of Samuel from that Eli had suggested. The respond of Samuel lacks the word “hWthy”. Instead of responding “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening,” Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” TM, LXX, Targum Jonathan and Vulgata, all affirm the same respond.

V. 13: LXX puts the genitives of “avdiki,aij”, which are “ui`w/n auvtou”: “of his sons”. An error on TM version for the word “~h,l”. Most probably it was the name of the Lord as indicated by LXX’s “qeo.n”.

V. 15: LXX has a longer version. It adds “kai w;rqriseu to prwi” which makes a more plausible phrase: “Samuel lay there until morning *and rose up in the morning*; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD.” It is most possibly that TM’s copier has made a *parablepsis homoioteleuton*⁹ error because of the word “rq^{bit}” that might had occurred twice.¹⁰

⁸ P. K. MCCARTER, Jr., *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, Yale University Press, London 2008, 95.

⁹ *Parablepsis homoioteleuton*: an error that occurs when the eyes of the scribe, seeing the same word or phrase repeated in a text, jump over the first to the second and by that miss the whole words in between. Cf. P. Stephen PISANO, *Introduzione alla critica testuale dell'Antico e del Nuovo Testamento*, quinta edizione riveduta, Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Rome 2008, 36.

¹⁰ R. W. KLEIN, *I Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 10, Word, Inc., Waco (TX) 2002, 30.

Interpretation and Discussion

The first chapters in the 1 Sam tells us the birth narrative of Samuel and his calling to become a priest and prophet for Israel. It was a typical birth narrative. Despite some uncanny similarities between it and the birth narrative of Samson (and later that of John the Baptist), the particularity of Samuel appears immediately in chapter three, the story of his calling. In general, this story is clearly and beautifully told. The author seems to spend a lot of efforts to bring forth the qualities of Samuel. The story was preceded by Samuel's miraculous birth (1Sam 1, 1-20), of him being offered to serve the Lord (1Sam 1, 21-28), his mother's song of joy (1Sam 2, 1-10), the denunciation of Eli and his house (1Sam 2, 11-26) and, as the last piece, the prophecy of a person who will become the new priest, instead of the children of Eli (1Sam 2, 27-36). We shall discuss later who this "new priest" might be.

In verse 1 we find the phrase "הַדְבָרִים־יְהוָה", "word of the LORD". In the Old Testament this phrase almost always refers to prophecy come from God, to or through his prophets. In a similar context we have the word "אִזָּח", "vision" a word related closely to prophets. With those words the author put the foundation of his story of the calling of Samuel, anticipating the role of a prophet in Samuel, which was rare in his time. As the story developed, the author made the role of Samuel as a prophet unquestionable in 1Sam 3, 20: "And recognized by all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba that Samuel was an affirmed prophet of the LORD." He and his sons were also shown as judges of Israel (1Sam 7, 15; 8, 1). Scholars such as Campbell, Klein, and Tsumura argued that Samuel was never a priest.¹¹ He was a prophet and a judge.¹² They based their argumentation on the fact that Samuel was never mentioned as a priest. Furthermore, his background as an Ephraimite made him not a Levi (cf. 1Sam 1, 1; Josh 18, 7). Therefore, he could not be a priest. On a contrary, Ehud Ben Zvi after studying the literati of Yehud believes that while it is true that 'prophet' and 'priest' are two distinguished posts in ancient Israel, somehow in Samuel we can appropriately find both a prophet and a priest.¹³

¹¹ CAMPBELL, *op.cit.*, 54; KLEIN, *op.cit.*, 27; D. TSUMURA, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids (MI) 2007, 170.

¹² For a more detailed study of Samuel as judge please refer to André WÉNIN, *Samuel, juez y profeta, lectura narrativa*, Editorial Verbo Divino, Estella 1996.

¹³ Ehud BEN ZVI, *Observations on Prophetic Characters, Prophetic Texts, Priests of Old, Persian Period Priests and Literati* in Lester L. GRABBE & Alice Ogden BELLIS (eds.), *The Priests in the Prophets, The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets*, T&T Clark International, London 2004, 28.

As sound as their arguments of those who reject the priesthood of Samuel, I myself believe that Samuel was a priest. First, I would put my attention on the word “r[ׁ]” (3, 1), which means an unmarried boy with a robust potential to be trained. TM showed that Samuel was training under Eli. Here it is still unclear what he was trained for. But, LXX adds the genitive “tou i're,wj” after Eli, perhaps to stress out the priesthood nature of the training. Second, again in the same verse, it is also interesting to analyze the *piel* participle “tr^{עֲוֹמ}”. In biblical Hebrew, the participle functions as a verb, noun or adjective and as a *piel*, it should have an intensive meaning.¹⁴ New American Bible translated the participle into noun “minister” while the other English version Bibles such as New Revised Standard and New Jerusalem Bible translated it into verb “was ministering” and “was serving”. New King James, New International and some others translated it into a simple verb “ministered”. Even the LXX’s choice of word “leitourgw/n” can be rightly translated into verb or noun. In either case, the exact word was used three times to explain the identity of Samuel (1Sam 2, 11.18; 3, 1), each time intensifying that he is a servant with the Lord as his master.

While it is true that the word “trv” in OT can have a meaning “servant” in general (cf. Josh 1, 1; 1 Kg 1, 15; 5, 15), in context of religious service in the temple, which was very true in Samuel’s case, this word is most often and closely related to the liturgical acts of the priests.¹⁵ In fact, specifically the priest is the one who is appointed to serve the Lord, “hw^{הַכֹּהֵן}-ta^{תַּעֲבֹד}” (Deu 17, 12). The same verb “trv” but in infinitive *piel* is used here. The last citation from Deuteronomy distinctly shows why the title should be given to the priest. But, the ones which convinced me were 1 Ch 16, 4 and Is 61, 6; the same participle *piel* was used to indicate the role of the priests. In fact, other than the texts concerning Samuel, in the OT this particular title “servant of the LORD” using the verb “trv” is always dedicated to the priests.¹⁶ The LXX has done a great job translating it to “leitourgw/n”, from “leitourge,w”, “to perform religious duties”, from which derived also the word “leitourgi,a”, “liturgy”.

¹⁴ Cf. P. JO ON & T. MURAOKA, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Roma 140.

¹⁵ There are numerous examples of it in the OT, such as Ex 30, 20; 39, 26; Deut 10, 8; Num 4, 9.12.14; etc.

¹⁶ According to *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT) “trv” occurs ninety-six times, always in the Piel. Phoenician uses the verb with the same meaning. “trv” is distinguished from the more common “db[ׁ]”. “trv” is generally a higher category of service, while “db[ׁ]” is often used of menial employment.

Based on the fact that Samuel was training under the priest Eli and his title as the servant of the Lord we can assume that he was a priest, and at the same time, enrolled as a prophet and a judge. What makes him all of these was the choice of the Lord. From this perspective we can read the prophecy in 1Sam 2, 35 in a much simpler way. In this passage the author just wanted to show us that the new priest was indeed Samuel. Campbell thought that since Samuel could not be a priest, this passage could not be speaking of him. As the consequences, he thought of Zadok and his descendants, priests of the house of David, which from where would come the Consecrated One in the future.¹⁷ But, it just might be Samuel who it was talking about. In fact, David was anointed by Samuel. He also acted as a mediator between God and the Israelites and sacrificed a lamb as a burnt offering (1Sam 7, 7-9). Even though Zevit displayed by presenting examples Elijah on Mount Carmel that sacrifice in OT did not only performed by a priest, he also gave us enough evidence that one didn't have to be a Levi to be ordained as a priest.¹⁸ In case of another Ephraimite, Micha (Jdg 17, 1-13), we find out that although a Levite descendant is favorable as a priest, he first had installed his own son as a priest (v. 5). In 2 Sam 8, 16-18 the sons of David are among the list of his official priests.

Back to our text, the author in a subtle manner put in contrast Eli and Samuel. In v. 3 Samuel was said to be sleeping in the temple. If we refer to 4Q160, normally a trainee should stay close to his mentor. Samuel should be sleeping near Eli, but the author carefully and intentionally switched the place. This place, which seems quite unusual, might have a symbolical meaning in it. Samuel slept near the Ark in the presence of the Lord, while Eli did not. Samuel was closer to the Lord than anybody else, especially in this case, the priest Eli himself.

God called Samuel four times. In the first three times, Samuel thought that it was Eli who had been calling him. While it was acceptable that Samuel in his training could not recognize the voice of God, Eli should have recognized it. Yet it took three times for him to at last comprehend the situation. It was not because in that time the visions were rare, but because his eyesight had grown dim (v. 2), not only physically but also spiritually. It was also a sign of the downfall of his house. Later, when he could not see any more in 1Sam 4, 15, the priestly status of his house would be completely destroyed. Then Samuel would be completely assigned as the new priest, a true servant of the Lord. Signs of the downfall of the house of

¹⁷ CAMPBELL, *op.cit.*, 55.

¹⁸ Zevit, "The Prophet versus Priest Antagonism Hypothesis", in GRABBE & BELLIS, *op.cit.*, 201-202.

Eli were affirmed in the message of the Lord through Samuel in verses 11-14.

There is a difference between the response which Eli suggested in v. 9 and Samuel's actual reply in v. 10. Campbell suggests that the lack of the word "LORD" is only "part of good Israelite storytelling".¹⁹ But, the best explanation might have come from Omanson & Ellington: it is only natural for Samuel as a priest-apprentice and at his young age to evade pronouncing the divine name.²⁰ In either case, this wouldn't matter because Samuel acknowledged his servant status, which we had known beforehand tied to the Lord.

After hearing the message of the Lord, Samuel continued sleeping. Then the first thing he did after rose up was to open the doors of the house of the Lord. After studying the text would be difficult for me to say that it was unintentional for the author to say it. Again, it might be a sign of given that this act of Samuel was never mentioned before. It was the part of his new priestly task. There are plenty evidences in the OT stating the task of opening doors to the temple was exclusively assigned to the priests, for examples: 2Ch 34, 9; 2Kg 12, 9; 35, 4; and Jer 35, 4.

Conclusions and Further Readings

1. Samuel was a priest. He was not only entitled a priest, but he did fulfill the function and role of the priest. After the destruction of the house of Eli, Samuel acted as the rightful successor of the office. The training was over, and he became a priest, the new priest.
2. The destruction of the house of Eli, proclaimed beforehand by the Lord, was made inevitable by the author of 1Sam. The status of priesthood is something granted by the Lord himself. Unfortunately, it can also be taken away.
3. In the person of Samuel, we find a priest, a judge, and a prophet. One can argue that the priesthood of Samuel is personal. Indeed, we will not find the rule or constitution for the priesthood in the time of Samuel. We will not find an institutionalized priesthood in his time. But, we cannot deny after reading the text that a priest dear to the Lord is one who listen and proclaim the word to the people and open the doors to

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ R. L. OMANSON & J. ELLINGTON, *A Handbook on the First Book of Samuel*, UBS Handbook Series, United Bible Societies, New York (NY) 2001, 95.

the Lord's house. Each priest should also have his own prophetic dimension.

4. Finally, I honestly admit that there are still many themes unexplored and then problems yet to be resolved. Personally, I would like to suggest the work of Lester L. Grabbe & Alice Ogden Bellis, *The Priests in the Prophets*, for further and advance reading on the dispute between the office of prophets and that of priests.²¹ The text of Qumran becomes more and more appreciated by the scholars, also in the study of the texts of Samuel. For this I would like to suggest the principal work of Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert*²² and, of course, the essays of Robert P. Gordon in *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Versions*.²³

²¹ GRABBE & BELLIS (eds.), *op.cit.*

²² Emanuel TOV, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 2004.

²³ GORDON, *op.cit.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CAMPBELL, A. F. *1 Samuel. The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*, vol. 7, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, (MI) 2003.
- CHARLESWORTH, James H. (ed.), *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Baylor University Press, Waco (TX) 2006.
- DEIANA, Giovanni, *Introduzione alla Sacra Scrittura alla luce della 'Dei Verbum'*, Urbaniana Univ. Press, Roma 2009.
- GORDON, Robert P., *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Versions*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Hants 2006.
- GRABBE, Lester L. – BELLIS, Alice Ogden (eds). *The Priests in the Prophets, The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets*, T&T Clark International, London 2004.
- HARRIS, R. Laird et alli (eds.). *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Moody Press, Chicago (IL) 1980.
- JO ON, P. – MURAOKA, T. *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Roma 2006.
- KLEIN, R. W. *1 Samuel. Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 10, Word, Incorporated, Waco (TX) 2002.
- MCCARTER, P. K., Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, Yale University Press, London 2008.
- OMANSON, R. L. – ELLINGTON, J. *A Handbook on the First Book of Samuel*, UBS handbook series, United Bible Societies, New York (NY) 2001.
- PISANO, P. Stephen, *Introduzione alla critica testuale dell'Antico e del Nuovo Testamento*, quinta edizione riveduta, Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Roma 2008
- SCANLIN, H. P. *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Modern Translations of the Old Testament*, Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton (IL) 1993.
- TOV, Emanuel, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 2004.
- ULRICH, Eugene (ed.). *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls, Transcription and Textual Variants*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 2010.