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Eli: The Man For Whom It Was Too Late

John Goldingay takes us to the heart of the story of Eli and his family, from 1 Samuel. The story is one of missed opportunities and failures, and Goldingay faces these unflinchingly. Yet from the heady mix of divine action and human frailty, profound and searching insights emerge.

Too late for Eli

There was a Canadian management guru called Lawrence Peter who formulated the 'Peter Principle': everyone gets promoted to beyond their level of competence. It is related somehow (perhaps inversely) to Catch 22. You are good at something, so you get promoted; you are good at it again, so you get promoted again; and so on until you are no good at it, and then it is too late, for you and for everyone else.

It was too late for Eli, and for everyone else, in 1 Samuel 1-4. Admittedly, traditional societies like ancient Israel side-step the problem of the Peter Principle, along with the obverse virtues of the meritocracy, by not having a meritocracy. You become a priest or a king because your father was one, not by doing well as a Levite or winning an election. So no-one expects you to be competent.

Poor Eli was not. He failed to keep order in church. He failed to recognize a pastoral problem when it presented itself to him. He failed to stop talking patriarchally even when it had been made pretty clear that Yahweh was doing something somewhat special with Hannah (2:20-21: Eli prays for Elkanah's sake, but Yahweh takes note of Hannah). He failed to get his sons (who also became priests just because their father was one) to exercise their ministry on any other basis than a concern to look after themselves – indeed, he was implicated in the results, perhaps because the whole priestly family ate from the same table (2:29). He failed to get them to sort out their relationships (2:22-25). But these sons have taken over as priests and Eli is perhaps a kind of 'priest emeritus', like the old minister who has retired locally and helps out at Christmas and Easter.

So we first meet him at the Israelite equivalent of one of these festive occasions, probably the feast in the autumn when Israel gathered before Yahweh. They celebrated harvest, and the old year's ending and the new year's beginning, and also the liberating of their ancestors from Egypt centuries before, which made it possible for them to be a free people here in the land of milk and honey. Eli sitting

at the door of the cathedral, in charge of making sure than no-one comes in who should not do so – for instance, because they have been celebrating the harvest a little too enthusiastically (1 Samuel 1:9, 13-14).

At least the contrast with Hophni and Phinehas makes clear that before God and the people, Eli's heart and spirit were in the right place. At least he wanted the house of God to be a place of prayer and not a den of thieves. At least he was sometimes able to get his pastoral act right at the second time of asking, as he did with Hannah when he learned to recognize the difference between being overwhelmed by Spirit and by spirit. (Of course often we get no second chance with people.) At least he could recognize the voice of Yahweh at the third time of asking. (I do not know how often God knocks three times: 3:1-9.) As far as we know there was no-one more insightful in the community, except Hannah herself, but she belonged to the wrong sex; women had to settle for being prophets, the role which did not and could not pass from parent to offspring. But Eli had never been up to the job of leadership.

It was now too late in another sense. Eli is ninety-eight years old. We are beyond the time in the OT when ages seem wildly out of proportion, so perhaps he really had had ninety-eight candles on his cake and wished there was a king so that he could send him a greetings telegram in two years' time; but even if we assume he was literally more like eighty-eight or seventy-eight, he is an old man. I once knew a minister who exercised an effective ministry within a big ministerial team, and as a result was appointed the senior pastor in another big team. It did not work. It was a classic example of the Peter Principle in operation. It was not exactly a disaster; the team worked round him and things got done. But they knew that he was not up to the job, that he was out of his depth, not waving but drowning, and I suspect he knew. One Wednesday he dropped dead. It was the only way he knew to get out of the situation.

Eli has not managed to do that. Life will not go away. He cannot do much more than sit about. Indeed, in the story he moves between sitting and lying down (1:9; 3:2; 4:13). He is never the subject of verbs such as 'walk' or 'stand': it is those wretched sons who have to do the active things. He is sitting on 'his seat'; you know how you will see an old man sitting on 'his seat' watching life go by. Eli cannot even watch life go by. He listens to life go by; his sight has deteriorated and then gone (3:2; 4:15).

Too late for Eli's sons

And it is too late. It is too late to do anything about his sons. Eli had no doubt tried to bring up Hophni and Phinehas to honour Yahweh as he did, to serve Yahweh as he did, to live honourably before Yahweh as he did. Perhaps they could only see the feebleness of it all: the feebleness of their father, the feebleness of Israel under pressure from the Philistines, the feebleness of Yahweh who seemed unable to do anything about it. In any case, Eli had failed. Perhaps they were just overwhelmed by the temptations of ministry.

There were two classic ministerial temptations they had fallen for. Instead of their ministry being one exercised for God and for their people, it was exercised

for themselves (2:12-17). Their calling was to help people reach out to God; they were turning that into a means of doing well for themselves. They were feeding off the people rather than feeding them, taking for themselves gifts which were designed to be expressions of commitment to God. In addition, they were involved in sexual relationships with fellow-ministers; and you cannot keep that kind of thing secret for ever (2:22-24). When priests accidently went wrong in their ministry, there were ways of find cleansing and restoring the situation. If they deliberately walked in wrong ways but came to their senses and turned back to Yahweh and also made appropriate offerings, they could find cleansing and restoration. But no amount of sacrifice and offering can cover up a continuing life of the kind that they were living (3:14).

Eli had come to know and he had confronted them about it, but it was too late. They had been blaspheming God, and he had not restrained them (3:13). What was he supposed to have done? If he is an old man, presumably they are men in the prime of life themselves. Presumably whatever should have been done, should have been done years before.

I know the minister of a successful church who had three sons, all of whom grew to be committed Christians. I know the minister of another successful church who had two sons, both of whom turned their backs on their father's faith. The two men were rather similar; to be honest, if I had been the son of either, I can imagine myself rebelling by rejecting my father's faith so as to find space for myself. What decides whether one succeeds, the other fails? What did Eli do wrong?

To judge from hints in the story about Eli's own personality and faith, he would have wanted to bring up his sons in the right ways. But he had failed to restrain them from the wrong ways. It is odd that a man who could be straight with a woman whom he thought to be 'a worthless woman' (1:16) failed to be straight with his own sons. Or perhaps it is not. I know yet another pastor who has two sons, not yet grown up, who speaks from a woman's perspective. Like God in Hosea 11, she knows she could never reject her sons, never throw them out, never disown them. They will always be her sons, no matter what they should do. Perhaps Eli felt that attachment to his sons, but was thus unable to be straight with them.

And now it is too late for Eli, and even more too late for Hophni and Phinehas. They have joined in an ill-fated, ill-considered venture with the 'ark' of Yahweh. The ark which resided in the cathedral was a chest in which Israel was required to keep the stones on which were inscribed the Ten Words proclaiming Yahweh's basic requirements of Israel: that they should worship no other gods, make no idols, and so on. We do not know how much of all this applied precisely at this moment at a place such as Shiloh, but Shiloh is apparently Israel's central place of worship at the time, so the general idea will be the same. The chest sat in the most holy part of the cathedral, the place where Yahweh promised to be present to meet with Israel. Above it towered two carved figures, celestial beings with wings, the cherubim, and above them Yahweh promised to sit enthroned in the presence of the people. This chest thus stood for the mutual relationship between Yahweh and Israel, for the presence of Yahweh and the commitment of Israel.

Shiloh sits on the mountain ridge which runs down through Israel between the coastal plain and the Jordan valley. In an ongoing struggle for control of the region, the Philistines have defeated Israel in battle, down at the point where hills become plain and Israelite territory becomes Philistine territory. Ironically, the place was called 'Eben-ha'ezer, 'The stone of help', but it has become the place of defeat. To put it theologically, 'Yahweh has put Israel to rout before the Philistines' (4:3).

Why had this happened? The leaders wisely ask this question, but they ask it only rhetorically. Without waiting for an answer, they urge that the covenant chest be brought from Shiloh. That might be a splendid move. It might imply that Samuel came, too. In the old days, Moses would meet with Yahweh in the moveable shrine where they kept the covenant chest, and Yahweh would speak with him there. There Yahweh would tell Moses what Israel was to do, when they were to be on the move and where. Fetching the ark, the elders might have asked Samuel what he thought about why Israel had been defeated; after all, we have just been told that his word was coming to all Israel.

But after that statement, Samuel disappears from this story for some while, apparently in an act of collusion between a people who do not listen and a God who does not speak. For when they jump from asking their question to urging that the covenant chest be brought from Shiloh, it is not so that they can seek an answer. They believe that the presence of the chest will mean the presence of Yahweh in person, come among them to rescue Israel from the power of its enemies. There is a nice reversal of a pattern which had obtained in Israel's earlier story. There, Yahweh was the kind of God who was present and active out in the world, but also secondarily could be met in church. That has now been turned round to the pattern we are familiar with in the church, and the question is whether you can get Yahweh back out of church into the world. So that was how Hophni and Phinehas came to be at 'Eben-ha 'ezer, as priests caring for the covenant chest.

Too late for theology

The story is told with a marvellous interweaving of psychological, religious, and theological perspectives. Let us take the last first. In a sense I lie. There are no overt theological judgments at all in the story in 1 Samuel 4 – no comments at all on what God was actually thinking and doing. This is a marked contrast with the chapters on either side. There is nothing with which atheists would have to disagree – indeed they would find the psychological and religious perspectives entirely plausible; just the kind of perspectives they would bring to other chapters to replace the overt theological judgment that God did or said this or that.

Perhaps we may infer that for Eli and Hophni and Phinehas and this whole Israelite generation, it is too late for theological judgments. God has nothing else to say. Events will be allowed to speak. The epicentre of theological judgments has moved on. 'The word of Yahweh was rare in those days; visions were not widespread' (3:1). We have noted that Eli needed two or three chances to hear Yahweh's word when it did come. When Yahweh sent a strange messenger to warn Eli of the terrible calamity that was coming on his line, we are told of no response at all (2:27-36). There was one exception to that rule. Through Samuel Yahweh then

gave one last final revelation to Eli, and he heard it first time (3.18). Yahweh has begun appearing to Samuel at Shiloh and begun speaking to him there: so chapter 3 closes. Yahweh has nothing else to say to or through Eli, and certainly not to or through Hophni and Phinehas.

So there is no theology in 1 Samuel 4. As we have seen, there is religion, accounts of how Israelite and Philistine faith worked, and there is irony about it. Israelite faith is really no better than Philistine faith, arguably worse. When the covenant chest arrives at the Israelite army headquarters and the Philistines hear the enthusiastic Israelite reaction, they recognize that something supernatural is happening. Indeed, the story says, with more irony, like Rahab in Jericho they know about Yahweh and about what Yahweh did in defeating Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and they recognize that no-one can rescue them from such power. They just have to try to rescue themselves. They believe in Yahweh's power, yet they do not. The same is true of the Israelites. That enthusiasm about the covenant chest's arrival suggests faith in Yahweh; but what kind of faith in Yahweh thinks that the arrival of a religious symbol makes the difference between Yahweh's presence in power and Yahweh's absence?

And that runs into psychological perspectives. In its absence of theological judgments this is a marvellously modern chapter – or rather a frighteningly modern one. Neither Israelites nor Philistines really believe in Yahweh; or rather, both combine recognition of Yahweh with the assumption that everything depends on them (and not in the sense that we do need to hold those two assumptions together). In their heads they acknowledge the power of God, yet when the dirt hits the road they know they are on their own. But religion may help you to feel better; it may be psychologically good for you.

So the arrival of the covenant chest does wonders for Israelite morale. They will fight more bravely. And that (a broad-minded theologian might say) is how God works. The trouble is that the arrival of the covenant chest does even more for Philistine morale; or rather, fright is even better for them psychologically. Galvanized by fear, they fight even better. And that (a broad-minded theologian might say) is also how God works. Because this story-teller who makes no mention of God certainly believes that God is involved. But unaffected by explicit theology or true religion, psychology wins the day and Israel experiences a terrible defeat.

Meanwhile Eli sits in his seat by the road in Shiloh, near the cathedral with its empty holy place and the town emptied of its able-bodied men. There will have been no way of knowing when a battle would take place. Unable to peer with those sightless eyes, he no doubt strains an ear for a male voice, one which does not belong to the young, the old, or the infirm, or for the voice of women-catching sight of men coming home. And Eli 'watches' too, insofar as he can. His heart trembles for the covenant chest (4:13). So is there faith and unfaith in Eli too, a belief in Yahweh yet an uncertainty regarding whether Yahweh can look after this symbol? Or has Eli indeed listened well at last to Yahweh's message, and does he know in his heart what must be the result of this ill-fated expedition? Is this an understated theological judgment on the Israelites and their religious and theological and psychological confusion?

Too late for the splendour

It is thirty miles from Aphek back to Shiloh, all of it a climb from the coastal plain north of Tel Aviv to the mountain ridge north of Jerusalem. A messenger runs the whole way on the very day of the battle. His clothes are torn and he has dirt rubbed onto his head. This is not the disarray of battle itself but the mark of grief. That in itself no doubt tells the waiting women the kind of news he brings. But they have to wait till his actual arrival to hear precisely what has happened. Eli hears the commotion in the city square. 'What is going on, what has happened, won't someone tell me something?' The messenger hauls himself to his feet again knowing that it is he who must tell the helpless old man. 'Israel has fled before the Philistines. There has been a great slaughter among the troops. Your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead. God's chest has been captured.'

When someone relays bad news, they order it so as to break it as gently as possible. They work gradually towards the inevitable moment when the most terrible thing has to be said. For messenger and hearer there has to be time. Both know that something terrible is to be said, but there has to be time to prepare. 'There's been a car crash. Your father was injured. I'm afraid your mother – there was nothing they could do. She died in the ambulance.' The messenger knows and we know that for Eli slaughter is worse than defeat, and that the death of his own sons is worse than the loss of other Israelites. But it is the symbol of Yahweh's presence that Eli has been trembling for and it is its capture that is the most terrible announcement. And when Eli hears the news he most fears, he collapses. His aged, stiff, heavy body falls to the ground with all its weight. He will not even sit again, only lie in the tomb, perhaps next to his sons, if it were possible to recover their bodies.

There is a footnote to Eli's story. One of the women who was anxiously awaiting news of their husbands and fathers and sons and lovers was one of Eli's daughters-in-law. She was nine months pregnant. Suddenly in moments the chest is captured, her father-in-law is dead, and her husband is dead. The news throws her into labour, but the labour overwhelms her. In a pre-modern society, of course, giving birth is always a dangerous business, for mother and baby. Sometimes the baby would die, sometimes both mother and baby. This mother gives her life for her baby. As she ails in the very process of giving birth, the women who are with her acting as midwives tell her that it is a boy.

The only response they received was a name, 'I-kabod'. The kabod of God is God's majestic splendour, the splendour visible at moments such as Yahweh's deliverance of the people from the Egyptians and Yahweh's coming to dwell in the tent-shrine. A battle with the Philistines, the covenant chest, the father-in law who was a priest, the husband who was a priest: they all spoke of that majestic splendour, in theory. They were all associated with the glory of God. But the splendour had gone. Actually it had gone long ago, and perhaps Phinehas's wife knew that. Presumably the stories about her husband and the women ministers in the cathedral also reached her. What did giving birth to Phinehas's baby mean in that context? It is too late for her, too. The splendour went long ago.

So with a dying breath whose wish cannot be gainsaid she names her son 'Splendour-is-gone'. It is because of God's chest, and because of her father-in-law, and because of her husband. It is not specifically because they have died; they saw the splendour off while they lived, Phinehas with his fine food and his love-affair, his father with his failure to confront. Their death was only the verification of this. But she too grieved especially because of God's chest (4:21-22). The departure of the sign of God's presence is the most terrifying sign of the departure of splendour. It is too late.

As father-in-law and daughter-in-law had waited and watched and listened and wondered and trembled, was there anything to take the edge off their fear? Was there anything to take the edge off the fact of having been the man who was just not big enough for his job, whether it was the job of being priest or the job of being parent? Was there anything to take the edge off the fact of having been the woman who married the wrong man and had the wrong baby, so that in different senses she lost herself to both of them?

In recent years in Western society we have begun to try to face the fact of death, not least of our own death as it approaches, and to seek to die a good death. Someone who discovers that they have a terminal illness may have particular opportunity to prepare for death. Someone who faces martyrdom or execution may have that opportunity. They say that your life passes before you when you die. I am sure that these two people's lives passed before them as they sat waiting and watching and listening and wondering and trembling. You have the opportunity to make sense of your life, to ask what it has been about, to own it, to stop pretending about what you will do one day.

When we took up the offer of seven free videos for joining a video club, my wife and I knew that *Dead Man Walking* was one we would want. It is the story of a man on death row and the woman who tries to get him pardoned. She fails, and at the end of the film two things happen before the actual execution. One is that he owns that he did commit the murder after all. The other is that he finds God's forgiveness. In some sense neither could have happened without the other, not merely (for instance) because God would have withheld forgiveness unless the man had confessed what he had done, but because the same kind of opening up of oneself to oneself (as well as to other people) is required for confession to another person as is required for seeking forgiveness from God. The person we thought was innocent becomes a murderer, but also becomes a man.

Eli's equivalent moment is the one when he acknowledges to Samuel, the young man he might have resented because he has taken Eli's place in Yahweh's affections, 'It is Yahweh; he must do what seems good to him.' It was the second time that he had been forewarned of the calamity that hung over his family, first by an anonymous religious person who appears out of the blue, but now by this young man who might have seemed the faithful son he had never had. His words of response could be words of resignation (in a sense they are), but in the context of his pressing Samuel to tell him what Yahweh has said, they are more likely words in which he prepares to die a good death. Perhaps, like the narrator of the story, he knew that his failure to discipline his sons successfully involved Yahweh as much

as him (2:25); the two of them have to share responsibility, and arguably Yahweh's proactive responsibility is the greater.

When his daughter-in-law declares 'Splendour has gone', there is even more ambiguity, or even less reason to find hope in the words. Perhaps she had lost all hope. But at least she has her mind focused on the aspect of these terrible events which is most significant. That, she knew, was not the death of her father-in-law or the death of her husband (or even the orphaning of her son before he was born) but the departing of the splendour. And we know that this will not be the end of the story. So did Eli, and so I imagine did she, though we are given no hint that she could think about it at this moment of overwhelming by the threefold terror.

But we, and Eli, and (I imagine) she know about that other woman giving birth, whose rejoicing provided a framework for hearing her story and Eli's (see 2:1-10). You cannot manipulate God into acting, and God may settle for apparent defeat in order to make the point, but that does not alter the fact that 'there is no Rock like our God'. Yahweh kills, but Yahweh also brings to life. Yahweh will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed. It is too late for father-in-law and daughter-in-law, but they form part of a bigger story for which it is not too late.

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