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DID SAMUEL SIN?

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One of the many ways in which the Bible distinguishes itself from other ancient literature as being a direct revelation from God is in the biographical accounts of many of the great Old Testament saints. Time and time again the sins of the most godly men are exposed and denounced. Such a frank admission of personal sin and error is probably without parallel in ancient literature.

If this great objectivity in the Biblical accounts is an indication of revelation, then we, as interpreters, must ever be on guard that we suppress our natural tendencies to elevate a hero and be frank to admit sin and error where it indeed exists.

Samuel the prophet played no small role in the history of Israel living as he did at a time of transition from a theocracy to a monarchy. His virtues were many and yet his life was not without sin. He turned the hearts of many to the Lord and yet his own sons walked amiss, took bribes, and perverted the ways of the Lord. Doubtless Samuel's life was blemished with sin in many areas as is the life of every saint of God. It is to one of these questionable incidents that this paper is directed. Our quest will be to attempt to show that Samuel was in error when he turned to worship with Saul after Saul had committed his great sin in refusing to slay utterly the Amalekites at the command of the Lord.

Our considerations will be directed primarily to I Samuel 15:26 and 31 with their context. "And Samuel said to Saul, 'I will not return with you. . . ' . . . So Samuel turned back after Saul; and Saul worshipped the Lord."

THE SETTING

It is hard to imagine a setting with more profound and serious overtones than that of I Samuel 15. The occasion is familiar. Saul had disobeyed the command of the Lord in refusing to slay utterly the Amal-
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ekites. This sin seemed to be the culmination of a life of disobedience which brought upon him the condemnation of the Lord. Verses 25 and 28 embody the pronouncement of judgment. ". . . Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king. . . . The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you."

Within such a context of Divine judgment we do well to note carefully the words and actions of all concerned--in this case, Saul and Samuel.

The seriousness of the situation is further delineated by Samuel's words in 15:16, "Then Samuel said to Saul, 'Stop! I will tell you what the Lord said to me this night'. . . ." Although we are not able to say of a certainty all that the Lord told Samuel, we can be assured that all of the words uttered throughout the scene bear tremendous implications. We believe that Samuel's change of mind with regard to his willingness to worship with Saul exhibited a spiritual weakness and resulted in a serious judgment.

COMMON INTERPRETATIONS

When the standard works on the Old Testament are consulted, it is found that there is a general agreement among Biblical scholars that Samuel's capitulation to Saul's pleadings are in order and easily explained. Condemnation of the prophet is difficult to come by.

Our contention is not that these standard explanations are not without value. We do, however, feel that they fall short of explaining the motives and outcome of certain aspects of Samuel's encounter with Saul.

We are going to take the liberty to express some of these views at this point and then present some observations and conclusions of our own.

F. B. Meyer:

Finally, Samuel stayed with him that the elders might not become disaffected and that the people generally might have no idea of the deposition of the king, lest the kingdom itself might totter to its fall before his successor was prepared to take his place. He stayed therefore.¹

S. Ridout:

Saul begs that Samuel will return with him, still to honor the Lord in sacrifice; but the prophet cannot compromise. The declaration of judgment had been final, and could

not be retracted. Saul was a rejected man, and there must be no uncertainty to this. Therefore the prophet, whatever his personal feelings may be, turns away from the suppliant king. . . . Again Saul pleads. . . . Saul consents to this, as God had His own ways of working out His purposes. It was not necessary that Saul should be outwardly deposed at once. His own conduct will manifest his unfitness for his position, and therefore, it could be no compromise for Samuel to return thus and worship with the king."²

Keil and Delitzsch:

The sub presupposes that Samuel was about to go away after executing his commission. . . . After this declaration as to the irrevocable character of the determination of God to reject Saul, Samuel yielded to the renewed entreaty of Saul, that he would honour him by his presence before the elders and the people, and remain whilst Saul worshipped. . . also to carry out the ban upon Agag, whom Saul had spared. . . .³

J. P. Lange:

Samuel's turning away from Saul was a vigorous confirmation of his rejection, and a sign that he would henceforth have no association with him. . . . He then acceded to Saul's request, not, of course, to yield to his selfish opposition to God's honour, but to preserve unimpaired in the eyes of the people the position of Saul's kingdom...⁴

T. Scott:

. . . Samuel however, perhaps by divine directive, changed his mind and delayed his departure; that he might not occasion any disturbance among the people, and that he might execute the justice of God upon Agag.⁵

Gray and Adams:

. . . "not return," public disapproval of Saul's act must be shown. . . . And to this request Samuel accedes."⁶

M. Pool:

. . . "I will not return with thee": this was no lie, though

he afterwards returned, because he spoke what he meant; his words and intentions agreed together, though afterwards he saw reason to change his intentions: . . . Samuel turned again first, that people might not upon pretence of this sentence of rejection immediately withdraw all respect and obedience to their sovereign; . . . secondly, that he might rectify Saul's error, and execute God's judgment upon Agag.⁷

Seventh-Day Adventist:

There were perhaps two reasons why Samuel changed his mind: (1) He wanted to do everything possible to win Saul as an individual. (2) His known disapproval of Saul might lead some of the discontented spirits in Israel to use this as an excuse to revolt.⁸

The foregoing lengthy list of comments has been given to show that without apparent exception, Biblical commentators explain or excuse Samuel's change of mind in a few common ways. He did it either to win Saul, to prevent the people from forsaking Saul, or to slay Agag. Only one commentator was found who thought that Samuel might have received a Divine directive to change his mind.

In several cases, comments are made suggesting that Samuel's initial refusal was made in order to give a public disapproval of Saul's sin. If such is true, then it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to justify his later change of mind at the insistence of Saul. Nor does it seem proper to excuse Samuel's capitulation to Saul's demands by saying that he did not actually worship with him. Verse 26 makes it clear that Samuel would not even return with Saul whether to worship or not. There seems to be no justification whatever in attributing to Samuel's words the idea of returning to worship. He would return for no reason whatever.

The only explanation of Saul's actions which seems in any way plausible is the argument that Saul was expressing his own intention initially but was actually carrying out a Divine directive when he returned with Saul. Again, this explanation seems difficult to substantiate from the text. How do we know that one as opposed to the other or either of Samuel's actions were Divinely directed? To hold that the latter action only was Divinely directed is an argument from silence. The thrust seems to be that since Samuel returned, this fact presupposes a word from the Lord. This to me seems to put one on the dangerous ground of placing the integrity of the man above the integrity of the plain statement of Scripture.

My conclusion thus far is that there is no satisfactory explanation for Samuel's capitulation to Saul's strong requests. The arguments used do not in any way clear the problem. They use the logic that the end justifies the means, e. g. : Samuel yields to Saul (against his better judgment) in order to retain the favour of the people. The principle of separation in worship is sacrificed to the pressure of public opinion. The argument concerning the slaying of Agag holds no greater weight. The slaying of Agag did not necessitate Saul's presence with Samuel in public worship. To argue thus seems futile at best.

The conclusion that Samuel's yielding to Saul's request constituted a sin, can be well argued from the statements of verses 25 and 28 alone. Our surprise is that no commentary consulted even suggested that Samuel might have been in error at this point. There seems to be a genuine reluctance to lower him from his priestly pedestal. But Samuel's own contradictory words do not exhaust the arguments in favour of the view being presented. There are, we believe, at least two other arguments from circumstantial evidence which we believe support this view. To these arguments we now direct our attention.

FURTHER EVIDENCE

The first argument given concerns Samuel's refusal to separate himself from a flagrant sinner in the act of worship. To our knowledge, all commentators agree that Saul's words in verse 30: "I have sinned. . ." do not, at this point at least, indicate true repentance. The Pulpit Commentary concludes: "We have here no real confession of guilt."⁹ Ellicott, quoting St. Gregory, states: "If Saul had been really penitent, he would pray to have been humble rather than to be honoured."¹⁰ Kirkpatrick in the Cambridge Commentary deals a death blow to any argument that Saul may have been sincere. He states that "John 5:44 and 14:43 point to the radical defect in Saul's character."¹¹ It will be well to quote these verses here. John 5:44, "How can you believe who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" John 12:43, "For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." Although these quotes are from the New Testament, they simple echo the thrust of Samuel's eloquent words to Saul on this very occasion, "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice." Saul's insincerity was therefore shown by his words and he was thus excluded as a candidate for public worship with a man of God.

Saul's misdirected enthusiasm also shows in his actions toward Samuel. Verse 27 tells us, "As Samuel turned to go away, Saul laid hold upon the skirt of his robe, and it tore." Now this act on the part of Saul was contrary to Scripture which plainly teaches that the garment of the

priest must not be torn. Exodus 28:32, "It shall have in it an opening for the head, with a woven binding around the opening, like the opening in a garment, that it may not be torn" (underlining mine). The Scriptural teaching that the priest's garment must not be torn was carried out with regard to our Lord as prophesied in Psalm 22:18, "They divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots." The fulfillment of this prophecy is recorded in John 19:24, "So they said one to another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.' This was to fulfill the scripture" (underlining mine). Now this remarkable fulfillment of Scripture seems to bear significant implications. The tearing of a priest's garment was a serious matter. Samuel knew that it was and knew also that Saul had committed, in his desperate actions, this sin. The violence of Saul is well attested to in the remarks given by the Pulpit Commentary. "Now the me^cilo was not a loosely flowing garment, but fitted rather closely to the body, and, therefore, the tearing of it implies a considerable amount of violence on Saul's part."¹² Kirkpatrick differs in his description when he describes the skirt of his mantle as "some kind of lappet or flap hanging down behind, which could be easily torn off."¹³ Despite the uncertainty of the garment's structure, there can be no doubt about the action. Saul tore it.

In view of Saul's violent actions it would then seem entirely inappropriate for Samuel to worship with Saul at this time.

Samuel's error may be further hinted at in verse 35. "And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. . ." I Samuel 19:24 does not contradict this statement. "All intercourse with Saul on Samuel's side ceased from now on, since God had rejected him, and Samuel could have met him only as a messenger and prophet of God."¹⁴ Normally, the fact that Saul and Samuel had no more encounters (except that of I Samuel 19:24) is considered a judgment upon Saul. The account, however, seems to put Samuel under considerable judgment also. It was Samuel who grieved the loss of their friendship. And later on in I Samuel 28:15, 19, 20 we are told that Saul was permitted to disquiet Samuel. Although this is known to be a problem verse, there is a suspicion that the disquieting of Samuel on the part of Saul may have been a permissive act by God upon Samuel because he did not himself voluntarily separate from Saul. The fact that Samuel saw Saul no more illustrates a further Biblical teaching set forth by Paul in I Corinthians 5. Because Samuel did not separate himself and mourn for Saul willingly, he was forced into it circumstantially by God. Paul taught the Corinthians that they should mourn for those who sin (I Cor. 5:2) and should "drive out the wicked person from among you" (I Cor. 5:13). Despite his refusal to do such, the Biblical concept of separation was accomplished in the life of Samuel.

CONCLUSION

The defense of our thesis is now complete. Let us summarize in conclusion.

Samuel seems to have been in error when he yielded to Saul's request to return and worship. Our substantiation is threefold. First, Samuel's words are contradictory. He was right either the first or the second time, but not both. Biblical principles of separation indicate that he was correct in his initial statement and in error in his ultimate action. Second, Saul's violent action in tearing Samuel's garment disqualified him as a person with whom to worship (perhaps Samuel himself was temporarily disqualified, too, because of his torn garment) and Samuel's public recognition with him was an error. Third, the ultimate results of the incident indicate that Samuel's unwillingness to separate from Saul was brought about despite his actions.

DOCUMENTATION

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12. Spence, op. cit., p. 267.
13. Kirkpatrick, op. cit., p. 146.
14. Lange, op. cit., p. 211.