

CHAPTER V

JUDGES

For generations the children of Israel had lived in close communion. They had stood as one. Now they were separated, living among strangers in an unfamiliar land.

The rolling plain of Esdraelon, still unconquered, was hazardous for traveling Israelites. They divided the North from the South. Ravines of the hill country isolated one group from another. Small valleys were still occupied by remnants of Canaanite tribes. Many were proud worshippers of Baal. In the years ahead Israel would often wander from her chosen path.

With a will to obey their God the children of Israel set to work. They cut down the trees and established villages in the hills. They rebuilt the burned out cities and occupied them. But what did these desert wanderers know of sophisticated, two story houses and plastered floors? They had no knowledge of city planning. They had never dealt with drainage systems and the strong fortress walls of the Canaanite culture. They constructed houses hastily of the fallen stones, haphazardly placed within unsubstantial city walls. They neglected the cisterns and the sewers. They had no leaders to organize the work. But they did turn their dynamic vigor to providing food for themselves by mastering the art of farming. Always close to their hearts was the thought of Shiloh nestled among the hills north of Bethel. There the Ark of the Covenant, symbol of their Ruler and light of their existence, rested amid its colorful trappings.

And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord, that he did for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being an hundred and ten years old. And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.
(Judges 2:7,8,10)

Slowly the memories of Egypt, Sinai and Kadesh-Barnea faded. Inevitably Israel's power declined. Many were puzzled that the God of their fathers no longer smoothed their paths. Some took to experimenting with their neighbors' Baals and Asherahs. The Lord of Israel was a God of conquests. Some thought that it was logical to turn now to the gods of weather and of fertility.

The surrounding nations had feared invincible Israel under her strange, invisible God. But now they saw only a few leaderless and struggling tribes, interspersed with equally weakened Canaanites. From all directions, foreign powers pressed inward.

However, the divine spark could not die. Here and there were families who would not turn to Baal. They cherished doggedly the old teachings and the covenant of the

Promised Land. For some two hundred years, Israel's wavering history is dotted with dedicated men and women who insisted on the right to freedom of God's people. These leaders are known to us as judges. Actually they were informal local rulers or helpers. Usually they were military leaders who brought again into focus Israel's power when obedient to her God. Their wise counsel sustained and comforted their kinsmen.

One of the first such rulers was a man called Othniel. We know little about him except that he beat back an invader, apparently from Mesopotamia. For "forty years" he ruled, and kept his people faithful. After his death the old uncertainties crept back. The people turned again to Baal.

EHUD

Eglon, the king of Moab, allied himself with the Amorites and the Amalekites. They were the descendants of Esau. They were the persistent enemies of all that Israel stood for. Eglon overcame Reuben with little effort. He crossed the Jordan and established himself at the strategic oasis of Jericho. For eighteen years he forced Israel to pay heavy tribute.

As Israel's misery increased, stouthearted men turned back to the study of their forefathers' faith. When the task of delivering the yearly tribute to Eglon fell to a young Benjamite named Ehud, it found at last a courageous servant of the God of Israel.

Ehud fashioned for himself a two-edged dagger. It was short and easily hidden in the folds of his mantle. In jeopardy of his life if the weapon were discovered, he led the little band of tribute bearers into the Moabite camp. Guards were everywhere. There was no chance to use the dagger. The Israelites delivered their "gift" and plodded homeward.

Near Gilgal, rich with the memories of miracles wrought by God for those earlier faithful Israelites, Ehud stopped. He sent the other men on, but he himself resolutely turned back. Striding boldly into the enemy camp he called out, "I have a secret errand to thee, O king!" (Judges 3:19)

King Eglon silenced the outraged guards. He sent them away and granted Ehud a private interview in his own room. With his homemade dagger, Ehud stabbed the enemy of his people. He then bolted the door to delay detection and escaped unseen. He hurried up to the highland. From the hilltop he sent a mighty trumpet blast, the old summons to battle, rolling out over the land while he cried:

Follow after me: for the Lord hath delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hands. (Judges 3:28)

With the old, joyful confidence that their forefathers had known, the Israelites rushed down the river and seized the fords. The confused, leaderless army of Moab was trapped and cut to pieces.

So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of the Israelites.
And the land had rest fourscore years (Judges 13:30)

DEBORAH

And the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, when Ehud was dead. And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin King of Canaan that reigned in Hazor;...And the children of Israel cried unto the Lord: for he had nine hundred chariots of iron;...(Judges 4:1-3)

Israel's chroniclers always attributed her misfortunes to the will of God. What other power was there to afflict the chosen people? Servitude as the consequence of disobedience runs like a refrain through the book of Judges.

Hazor, north of Lake Chinnereth, had been reduced to ashes in the days of Joshua. Through the years Canaan had returned. The cruelty of Jabin's rule was felt far to the south:

the highways were unoccupied, and the travelers walked through byways. The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I, Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel. (Judges 5:6,7)

Deborah was a prophetess. She gave her wise counsel from the sacred precincts of Bethel, near Rachel's tomb. Sensing that her kinsmen were ready to return to the laws of Moses, she called upon Barak. He was a leader of the northern tribe of Naphtali. He gathered an army on the high, rounded hill called Mount Tabor. At Barak's insistence, she agreed to go with him, but she warned him that the Lord would give the victory through a woman.

Barak called for volunteers. They flocked to him eagerly, rich and poor, farmers, princes and governors, even "they that handled the pen of the writer." They were undaunted by the odds against them.

But not all the inhabitants were on the side of Israel. Heber, the Kenite, dwelling in the northern hills, treacherously disclosed the rebellion to Jabin. He dispatched his trusted captain Sisera and nine hundred chariots into the plain of Esdraelon.

And Deborah said unto Barak, Up; for this is the day in which the Lord hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the Lord gone out before thee? (Judges 4:14)

Ten thousand zealous warriors raced down the steep slopes of Mount Tabor against the crowded chariots. Torrential rains fell and the enemy abandoned their unwieldy vehicles. They fled and were slain or carried away by the swollen river Kishon.

Praise ye the Lord for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves. (Judges 5:2)

So sang Deborah in her triumphant war song, parts of which form the oldest, grandest folk epic in Hebrew literature.

However, Sisera, Jabin's captain, escaped on foot into the hills. He came, exhausted, to the tent of Heber the traitor, fully expecting safety. Deborah's son continues

Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent. He asked water, and she gave him milk; she brought forth butter in a lordly dish. She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workmen's hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera,... (Judges 5:4-26)

The poet turns to the plight of the enemy:

The mother of Sisera looked out at the window, and cried through the lattice, Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the wheel of his chariots? Her wise ladies answered her, yea, she returned answer to herself, Have they not sped? have they not divided the prey; to every man a damsel or two; to Sisera a prey of divers colors, a prey of divers colors of needlework, of divers colors of needlework on both sides, meet for the necks of them that take the spoil? (Judges 5:28-30)

Only in this paean of praise for victory over Hazor do we learn that the exquisite needlework of the Israelites was a much coveted luxury even among their enemies!

Hazor's strength was broken by the loss of Sisera and his chariots. Israel had free use of the commercial highway through the valley of Esdraelon. The walled city of Bethshan, at the Eastern mouth of the plain, remained unconquered. Nevertheless the land had rest for forty years.

GIDEON

And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord: and the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years.
(Judges 6:1)

The Midianites were fierce desert nomads. They had learned the use of camels. They no longer traveled predictably from waterhole to waterhole with their donkey caravans, as in previous centuries. Mounted on their tall, terrifying beasts, they appeared suddenly. They plunged through the farms and vineyards, penetrating westward nearly to the sea. Numerous as grasshoppers, they brought their cattle and their tents. They would plunder at harvest time, leaving poverty and starvation in their wake. This time the torch of leadership fell to Gideon of the tribe of Manasseh.

Gideon was cautiously threshing a little wheat by the stone winepress, hoping to hide it from the invaders. As he worked he pondered. Why had this misfortune befallen Israel? Where were the miracles the elders spoke of? Then he remembered the warning words of one of the prophets:

Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I am the Lord your God; fear not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but ye have not obeyed my voice. (Judges 6:8, 10)

Did not Gideon's own father support the village altar to Baal, and the poles that symbolized Asherah, goddess of fertility? In that moment of realization, an angel of God appeared to Gideon.

And the Lord looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee? (Judges 6:14)

Gideon accepted the challenge. Under cover of darkness he took the first step. With trusted servants and his father's bullock, he pulled down Baal's altar. Then quickly he built a new one. Using Asherah's poles for firewood he offered the bullock as a great, blazing sacrifice to the God of Israel. The scandalized villagers stormed to Joash, demanding Gideon's death. But his son's firmness had awakened the old man. He asked them, "Will ye plead for Baal? If he be a god, let him plead for himself!"

Gideon sent out the commanding trumpet call to battle. The leader-hungry people came thronging in such hordes that his confidence wavered again before the magnitude of his responsibility. Mindful of the Lord's ascendancy over even the laws of nature, he prayed for reassurance:

If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said, Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said. And it was so: for he rose up early on the morrow, and thrust the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water. (Judges 6:36-38)

But was this not a frequent phenomenon? Careful that he be not self-deceived, he prayed again:

..let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. And God did so that night: for it was dry upon the fleeces only, and there was dew on all the ground. (Judges 6:39,40)

Convinced at last, Gideon shouldered his task. Eager volunteers were too numerous. The hand of the Lord would not be apparent in a victory by so great a multitude. The Lord advised Gideon to send home all those who were afraid. Thousands turned homeward. Still there were too many. Gideon led his men to a brook and watched as the hot, thirsty volunteers dropped to their knees to suck in the cooling water. Only a few scooped up the water in cupped hands, remaining vigilant even as they drank. By these few alert men, only three hundred out of thousands, Israel's God would vanquish her oppressors.

Gideon divided the men into three companies and armed them strangely. In their right hand he put a trumpet. In their left hand a clay pitcher with a lamp inside. Their swords were at their sides. After nightfall, they crept silently into the forest above the sleeping Midianite camp and waited. Gideon gave a sudden signal. The men sounded their strident trumpets, broke the pitchers with great clatter, waved the lighted lamps and shouted, "The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon!" (Judges 7:20)

The terrified Midianites stumbled over one another in the darkness, lashing out at each other with their swords. A few fled, only to be pursued and slain by the jubilant Israelites.. The rout was complete. Once more Israel was free.

Nevertheless, the mood of total reliance on their God had not returned to the people. Gideon, not the invisible God, seemed to them the central figure in the victory. They begged him to be their king. Perhaps a touch of envy of the power and pomp and the colorful ceremonies of the Canaanite city-kings was insidiously gaining a foothold in Israel. Gideon's reply was stoutly loyal to his God:

I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you. (Judges 8:23)

The country was quiet for forty years, while Gideon lived. After his death the longing for royalty broke out again. One of his sons, Abimelech, born of a Shechemite concubine, aspired to kingship but failed miserably. His brief reign began with murder and ended in civil war, with a layer of ashes in Shechem that remained for three thousand years.

JEPHTHAH

The hammer of oppression next fell to the east of Jordan. The tribe of Ammon had become too numerous for their home along the borders of the desert. They erupted westward into the grassy plateau, the grazing and grain bearing land of Gilead, where Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had lived since the days of Moses.

In their extremity the elders of Gilead turned for help to Jephthah. He was a kinsman whom they despised but who had proven to be an exceedingly able warrior. Jephthah accepted the commission on condition that, were he successful, he would be

chief in Gilead. At Mizpah, the high place whose sanctity would bind him to his promise, he took his oath of service. In religious exaltation, at the head of a mighty army, he marched against the Ammonites.

What did this outcast, son of a pagan harlot, truly know of Israel's God? He had been denied the warm family life which instilled in Israel's children the loved old patriarchal narratives. How could he have learned of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac and the divine assurance that human sacrifice was not God's will? In deep sincerity, Jephthah vowed a typical Canaanite vow:

If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands,
Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth out of the doors of my
house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon,
shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.
(Judges 11:30, 3)

The campaign was highly successful. The Ammonites fled in disorder before Israel. Jephthah returned in triumph. As he approached his home, who should dance out to meet him but his beloved only daughter! Brokenhearted, Jephthah fulfilled the vow. The tragedy shook Israel into an awareness of the hideousness of pagan rituals. For generations, the young girls of Gilead went into the hills for four days each year to mourn for Jephthah's daughter.

The victory was not a total blessing for Israel. Bitter envy struck between the tribes. Honor and rich booty had come to Gilead's warriors. The jealous men of Ephraim swarmed across the Jordan valley. They vowed vengeance for not having been invited to join in the route of Ammon. Jephthah's trained army surrounded and slaughtered them. Those who tried to flee back to Ephraim were intercepted at the fords. Each man was asked,

...Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say
now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to
pronounce it right.
(Judges 12:5,6)

Thousands of Ephraimites were thus unmasked and slain at the fords. The Hebrew word Shibboleth lives on in language as a test of identity.

Jephthah judged Israel for six years. At his death he was honored with burial in one of the cities of Gilead.

SAMSON

Confusion and intertribal turbulence increased after Jephthah's time. Strong leaders appeared briefly but they were not noted for spiritual strength or for military prowess. Their fame seems to have rested on pomp and wealth like the envied Canaanite aristocrats.

Then came Samson the Danite. Perhaps he finds a place among the judges rather by courtesy of folklore than for spiritual insight. Greatness came to him only at the moment of his death. Nevertheless, he stands in the Bible as an example of tremendous potential ability defeated by self-indulgence.

The sophisticated Philistines were sea people. They were from the Aegeans. They had gained a foothold along the Mediterranean shore about the time the children of Israel arrived in Canaan. Now they were steadily pressing inland along the valleys and up into the hill country occupied by the tribes of Dan and Judah, reducing them to servitude. To Samson's kinsmen his pranks against their overlords brought both awe and merriment to brighten their evening gatherings. They loved him for it. Poets and singers carried the tales of his exploits throughout the beleaguered land.

Samson's deeply devout mother, in gratitude for her pregnancy had placed her unborn son under the vow of the Nazarites. This meant that he would be separate from his fellows, "holy unto the Lord," all his life. Hair was universally considered to be a fit offering to God as outcome of human life. Uncut hair was the Nazarite symbol of special devotion. No razor would ever be used on Samson's head.

As he grew to manhood, "the Lord blessed him," and he rejoiced in prodigious strength, dexterity and fearlessness. However, unlike Deborah and Gideon, he never heard a divine call to responsibility. Indifferent to tribal loyalty, he chose for his wife a Philistine woman. His outraged parents berated him:

Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me: for she pleaseth me well. (Judges 14:3)

So they journeyed down from the hills to the Philistine town of Timnath. The marriage contract was arranged with the girl's father. As was customary, there followed a week of feasting and dancing. There was singing and telling of stories and riddles, with high stakes for the losers of the latter. Samson's witty riddles would easily have won, but his bride drew from him their answers and betrayed him to her brothers.

Furious, Samson paid his debts and went home, deserting his disloyal bride. Her father promptly gave the insulted girl to another man. Samson retaliated by catching jackals, fastening torches to their tails and loosing them among the Philistines' ripened grain. For their part in the disaster, the Philistines slew the girl and her father. So

Samson's private war escalated until, finally, he withdrew to the wild rocks above the Salt Sea (the Dead Sea.) Here he was in Judah's land. For fear of the Philistines the men of Judah dared not shelter him.

Unwilling to use his strength against the children of Israel, Samson permitted them to bind him and deliver him to the Philistines.

...and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands. (Judges 16:14;

Armed only with the jawbone of an ass, he killed "thousands" of his enemies and went his way.

Then the Philistines sought his life in earnest. Nevertheless, Samson daringly persisted in seeking diversion in their cities. One night he found himself surrounded within the city after the gates were closed. He lifted the gates on his powerful shoulders and carried them away!

Continuing to move among his enemies, taunting them, he finally fell in love with a Philistine woman. This girl, whose name was Delilah, gladly accepted the offer of money from her kinsmen for discovering the source of his great power. It was clear to them that his phenomenal strength was the result of some magic. With the right spell it could be overcome.

Day after day Delilah stormed and wept, insisting that Samson reveal his secret. Day after day he teased her with a fanciful tale and escaped easily from his would-be captors. However, the inevitable moment came when Delilah's approval seemed more important to him than anything else in the world. He tried to explain to this pagan gold digger the sense of exultant strength which allegiance to the Nazarite vow had given him. Triumphant, Delilah called her accomplices, who shaved his head as he slept.

Then she called out, as she had done so many times before, "The Philistines are upon thee, Samson!" Samson sprang up prepared to fight his way out as always. On the floor lay his carefully tended hair, the emblem of his very life. For a crucial instant he stood, stunned and horrified of the curse and the black disgrace of his broken vow. He found no strength for self-protection. In that moment his enemies overcame him. They put out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. There they set him to grinding corn in the prison house.

It was weeks later that the Philistines lightheartedly gathered for a great festival in honor of their god who had delivered Samson into their hands. In chains, blind, unkempt, Samson was brought out to stand before the gloating crowd. No one noticed that his hair had grown back. He could claim again to be a Nazarite, and he had also learned to pray.

He placed his hands on two supporting pillars of the great house, beneath the heavily crowded balcony.

And Samson called unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life. (Judges 16:28,30)

The catastrophe to the Philistines did nothing to quell their relentless inroads upon the children of Israel. In desperation, a portion of the tribe of Dan searched northward for easier living. In an isolated valley at the headwaters of the Jordan they found a prosperous, peaceful city which they sacked and renamed Dan. Henceforth the boundaries of Israel's land would be described as stretching "from Dan to Beersheba."

SAMUEL

Approximately two hundred years passed since the dedicated, tightly disciplined children of Israel swept into the Promised Land under Joshua's command. Separated from each other by enemies and rugged terrain they entered into trade with the inhabitants of the land. No doubt they had fought shoulder to shoulder and had common enemies. Some had intermarried with them and all had become familiar with the fear of Baal, and with trust in the goddesses of fertility.

Yet, beneath the laxities of everyday living, the Israelite's sense of divine destiny had not faded. Enshrined in the temple at Shiloh, the ark was still their guiding and uplifting light. Once a year they journeyed from their homes to this religious center. There were feasts, processions and singing as the children of Israel met and gave thanks to the God of their fathers. Under the priests' guidance they lived again the awesome tribulations of their forefathers in the wilderness. They solemnly reaffirmed the covenant between Israel and her God.

These were priests, usually of the tribe of Levi, who were keepers of the ark at Shiloh. They had their own fields to till, besides their other tasks. But in the crowning hours of the evening, they often gathered for discussions. They asked questionings and made speculations on subjects dear to the heart of the Israelites. Would it not be they, and their successors, who carried on the ancient myths that Abraham had known?

Over the centuries the rambling, magic and blood-oriented accounts of creation and of the great, worldwide flood were gradually taking shape, focusing on the one true God. With this focus they became sharp tools for the better understanding and teaching of morality and spiritual values, which was lacking in their neighbors' religions.

Imagine an evening scene in an Israelite village. Boys and young men lounge quietly at the outer fringe of the men's circle. The cool breeze brings a sound of trumpets and shouting from a Canaanite village in the valley. What young boy would not be tempted to investigate that other, festive way of life?

Yet the lewdness of the pagan rituals was completely incompatible with Israel's higher views. Within the circle of men, an elder, or perhaps an itinerant singer, might raise his voice against the distant trumpets in the saga of the patriarch Noah's days. He might have told of how Shem, Noah's firstborn, became the ancestor of Israel. Then tell of how Ham, his brother, the father of Canaan and how Ham's unclean thinking was even then evident to Noah.

And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. (Genesis 9:25, 26)

What proud young Israelite, thus reminded of his superiority, would stoop to curiosity concerning a base servant of a servant?

Although this spiritual teaching had been carried throughout the Promised Land there was no "open vision." It was long since an Israelite had spoken with God as with a friend, or really listened, through the dullness and confusion, for the divine voice. So when Eli the priest, sitting in the temple at Shiloh, noticed an Ephraimite woman weeping uncontrollably, mouthing words which she didn't utter, he berated her for drunkenness. With an Israelite's fundamental rebellion against injustice, the woman, whose name was Hannah, refuted the accusation. She was childless, therefore an object of shame and uselessness. She had "poured out her soul before the Lord." Eli answered her contritely, "Go in peace, and the Lord of Israel grant thee thy petition." (I Samuel 1:17)

In due time Hannah bore a son and named him Samuel (heard of God), and a new chapter in the history of Israel began. The towering figure of Samuel was to be the last of the judges, the first of a new order of prophets and a maker of kings.

When the child Samuel was weaned, Hannah brought him, with an offering of a three-year-old bullock, a skin of good wine and about thirty-five liters of fine flour, to Eli in Shiloh, saying, For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him: Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth, he shall be lent to the Lord(I Samuel 1:27,28)

After the sacrifice, Hannah and her husband returned home, leaving Samuel with Eli. Each year thereafter, she brought a little robe for her growing son. The tent in which the wandering children of Israel sheltered the ark had been replaced at Shiloh by a simple stone temple. There Samuel served Eli, and performed such tasks as he was able. One night, as he laid on his pallet near the ark of the Lord, the Lord called him:

And he ran unto Eli and said, Here am I; for thou calledst me. And he said, I called not; lie down again. And the Lord called yet again, Samuel. And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And he answered, I called not, my son, lie down again. (I Samuel 3:4-6)

A third time this happened, and the old priest realized that a new era had dawned. It was the voice of the Lord that had been heard by the devoted lad. Eli said unto Samuel,

Go, lie down: and it shall be, if he call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth. (I Samuel 3:9)

Samuel obeyed, and when the call came again, he accepted the challenge, and was entrusted with a troubling message. As he opened the temple doors to the morning sun, he blurted out to Eli the painful insight the vision had brought: Because Eli had failed to discipline his two profligate sons, priests who were defiling the temple, a scourge of misfortune was to be laid on his family forever. Eli answered sadly, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good."

All Israel heard of Samuel, as he grew older, and rejoiced greatly that the Lord had appeared again in Shiloh.

Though there seemed to be new hope, the Philistines still pushed relentlessly eastward into the Promised Land. At the vital springs of Aphek, farmer-warriors of Israel attempted to resist and were cruelly defeated. If only their God were on the field! The elders quickly sent messengers to Shiloh, and Eli reluctantly permitted the ark to be carried into battle. However, his own greedy and immoral sons were sent, as its guardians and the pious gesture failed. Israel was routed, Eli's sons were slain, and the sacred ark of the Covenant fell into the jubilant hands of Ore pagan people. The terrible news brought death to Eli; the town of Shiloh was sacked and burned, and the other priests scattered. The beacon of Shiloh was extinguished, and Israel no longer had a rallying point. Hope was focused on Samuel.

A KING FOR ISRAEL

Samuel set for himself a yearly circuit among the central towns to judge, advise and teach. However the people's dream of a king in Israel grew ever stronger. "The Lord is your king!" Samuel thundered. In vain he reminded them of the Lord's help heretofore. In vain he pointed out the inevitable results of kingship: the loss of individual freedom, taxes, enforced labor.

Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles. (I Samuel 8:19,20)

Samuel prayed for wisdom and was convinced that, under the circumstances, a king was the only solution.

Samuel's home was in Ramah, among the hills of Ephraim. It happened that a certain young man named Saul came into the vicinity in search of his father's stray donkeys. At the insistence of his servant he went into the city to ask Samuel the "seer" for counsel in locating the animals.

And when Samuel saw Saul, the Lord said unto him, Behold the man whom I spake to the of! This same shall reign over my people
(I Samuel 9:1)

Samuel invited Saul to partake of the sacrificial feast. He showered him with honors that left him bewildered. Then in a moment when they were alone Samuel anointed Saul's head with holy oil and revealed to him the will of the Lord. Saul returned home with a deep sense of reverence and dedication. To his family he seemed a changed man. Curious they plied him with questions. But Saul kept his secret.

Samuel summoned the elders of Israel to the fortified watchtower at Mizpeh near Ramah and addressed them solemnly:

...ye have this day rejected your God, who himself saved you out of all your adversities and your tribulations; and ye have said unto him, Nay, but set a king over us. Now therefore present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes, and by your thousands.
(I Samuel 10:19)

True to their democratic way of life, even in choosing a king, they cast lots, seeking the guidance of their God. As Samuel had predicted Saul was chosen. But as the lots were cast Saul lost his confidence and he hid among the baggage. When they found him and brought him out he stood head and shoulder taller than his kinsmen. Israel was delighted.

Then Samuel told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the Lord. And Samuel sent all the people away, every man to his house. (I Samuel 10:25)

The twelve tribes of Israel were now the kingdom of Israel, perhaps the first kingdom to have a written charter.