



Samuel's story

Written by Silvia Purdie

Tena koutou
Ramah te kainga, Ephraim te iwi
Ko Elkanah toku papa, ko Hannah toku whaea
Ko Samuel ahau

Greetings. I am from the town of Ramah, of the tribe of Ephraim. Elkanah is my father, Hannah is my mother. My name is Samuel. This is my story.

I was always a gift from God, named for God. Throughout my strange childhood, each year, once a year, my family would come up to offer sacrifice to God and feast. And each year my mother would tell me again the story of my birth and my naming, justifying to herself as well as me why she must again leave me. And each year after they left I would wrap my new robe around me and smell my home in its fabric and it hurt to be left. Each year she would come with a new baby in her arms, and each year Eli would bless her for another, until I had 3 brothers and 2 sisters and when they came to Shiloh they would look at me intently and they would bring me little things from their home.

I was the gift from God and the gift to God, so I lived in Shiloh, with Eli. Eli was my other-father, or perhaps other-grandfather, and I loved him. I did not love his sons, who worked the altar like a street stall, taking women, taking the best of each family's offerings until they got fat on the fat. On a good day they ignored me. On a bad day they teased me or abused me. I got good at being where they were not. They were appointed to the Ark of the Covenant, and they used the power it gave them but were always nervous of it.

For me the Ark became my safe place. Its room was my room. I was never afraid of it, although everyone else was. My mat lay by the wall, and I would lie there watching the lamp until it flickered and fluttered, and there I slept in the dark. By day I learned about God. By night I slept in God's house. But I had not yet met God. I had not yet heard the Word.

That changed that one night, when three times I heard him. The voice was calling me, calling my name, "Samuel, Samuel", urgent, wake-up, get-up! Three times I went running

to Eli, three times he said it was not him who had called me. The third time he clicked; God was speaking – to me, in a way that God had never spoken to Eli. Looking back I realise how hard that was for him. I knew at the time how hard it was for him to accept, but he taught me what faith looks like – Yes Lord, he replied. That’s all. Even though the worst was coming. Even though he knew he would lose everything.

After that my teaching began for real. Day after day he taught me story after story, genealogies repeated over and over until I could recite them exactly word for word. His eyesight was failing so he told the stories and I wrote them down. Stories of Moses, Joseph, Abraham, Hagar, Sarah, Eve. Ancient poems and prayers, laws and more laws, handed down, *tuku iho, tuku iho*. Until my arms ached from writing and my brain spun with names and battles and rules. But after that night when the Lord himself spoke my name ... I just found it easy to remember everything, as though I already knew it, as though it was already inside of me. And when someone came up to me and asked me a question, the answer seemed obvious to me and I found joy in sharing what I knew about God. So people started coming to Shiloh just to talk to me.

For I had met God. I suppose I must say more about that night, when the Lord himself was standing there, in the room that I shared with the Ark of the Covenant and I heard him say my name and speak of the fate of Eli and his sons. The Word was terrifying but I was not afraid. I stood there and God stood there, in the dark; I could see nothing but only hear the Word that spoke without sound. I honestly was not afraid. After a while I lay down again on my mat. I was afraid to tell Eli, but of the Lord God I was not afraid. That night opened in me a way of hearing. I have never felt truly alone ever since. Oh, I’ve been upset, afraid, disappointed, angry, even violent. But I could hear the voice of God ringing through my bones and I have spoken it aloud, whether it was a welcome Word or not.

We only had a few more years, Eli and I, before the terrible battle when his sons were killed and the Ark of the Covenant was captured, when Eli collapsed and died. My life in Shiloh was over (*after 1 Samuel 4 there is no mention of Samuel for 20 years*). I went home - wouldn’t you? I walked home to Ramah. I moved in with my family. I married and had two sons. I grew old and my sons let me down, let everyone down. I guess I became just like Eli, unable to be the father that God needed me to be.

Instead I was father to a whole nation. Everyone came to me with their problems and I listened for them, I sacrificed for them, I prayed for them, I blessed them and warned them. I found them a King, and then another King. And they let me down too. Do I sound bitter? I don’t want to sound bitter. I’m happy to go down in history as a talent scout. But please, remember that I met the Lord and heard the Word and called my people to live for the living God. Through it all I stood in my mother’s prayer. With her I rejoice in the Lord and only in the Lord.

No reira, huri mai, huri mai, return to the Lord all the earth,
for he is your salvation.
Korokia ki te Atua! Amine.