

1 SAMUEL 2 — PRIESTY PRESUMPTION EXPOSED

Things can go amuck even in the most religious circles. If the story of Eli's worthless sons is any indication, even being caretaker of the Lord's shrine is no excuse for high-handed graft.

Here's the set-up: At a time early in the history of the people of Israel, Eli was the head man at the shrine located in the town of Shiloh. His two sons, Hophni and Phineas, assisted him. His third assistant was a younger boy, Samuel, who had been adopted into the priestly household.

Apparently Eli officiated adequately. The religious rites were carried out to most folks' satisfaction. However, his lack of backbone when it came to raising his boys was something else. When they got old enough to take over the chores, everything went to pot.

Their story is told, along with the custom for feeding the priests at the shrine, in 1 Samuel 2:12-17. (In some Bibles this is 1 Kings 2:12-17.)

When people came to offer a sacrifice to the Lord, first they would grill the fatty covering of the slaughtered animal. Then the rest of the meat would be boiled in a kettle.

A servant of the priests would come with a three-pronged fork, stab around in the pot of stew, and whatever he could grab would be taken back for the priests. The worshipers who brought the sacrifice would eat the rest themselves. All in all, everyone got their share—the Lord, the priest, the people.

But the sons of Eli weren't satisfied with pot-luck. Before the worshipers could even broil the steaks, much less get the stew bubbling, the priest's servant would demand a cut of the raw meat.

Eli's sons were running a shake-down operation. If the worshipers protested, they would simply muscle in and grab the prime cuts of beef and mutton.

In the Bible this account of graft in high places is bracketed by editorial put-downs. "Eli's sons, those worthless sons, did not know the Lord," it begins. And it ends, "For the men spurned the Lord's offering."

Actually that's only part of the story. Later verses expose the sons' sexual harassment of the women who worked at the shrine. It's no wonder that no mother today calls her sons "Hophni" or "Phineas," even though many boys are still named "Samuel."

You wonder why the biblical author even bothered to relate this depressing development. Was he just trying to make Samuel look good by using Eli's family as a foil?

Did he want later rabbis and ministers to keep a tighter rein on their children? Or were his motives more profound?

The simple fact that this incident of priestly hanky-panky made it into the Bible shows something about the story's author. It shows that the author was honest enough to "tell it like it was" and let the chips fall where they may.

He knew that the most common perversion of religion is presumption. That's the attitude which takes your religious heritage for granted, which acts as though all you have to do is go through the approved rituals, and which thinks that if you can spit out the right slogans you've got it in with God.

So the biblical author put his thumb on such a supercilious attitude. It's a matter of getting your priorities in order. First comes a little respect for your offering to the Lord. Then comes your own lunch. Not the other way around.

Because if you put it the other way around, that's as bad as taking God for granted. In a word, religiosity is no excuse for presumption.

So much for the sermon. If you don't buy into the God-before-self sequence, the incident about Eli's spoiled kids can be dismissed as an irrelevant moralism.

On the other hand, you have to admire the gutsy attitude of an author who would stick this expose into the history of his people and thereby finger the one failing which threatens all religious groups. Familiarity breeds contempt. And in this case there's no excuse for the kind of religiosity which breeds presumption.