

As the Israelites struggled to establish themselves and their faith in the midst of the Promised Land, it was difficult for them to keep a clear distinction between developing Yahwistic monotheism and the polytheism of the Canaanites' Ba'alism. The Hebrews' assertion that there was only one true God meant that Yahweh was a mobile God. Yahweh could come and get the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, travel with them through the wilderness and guide them into a new land. Ba'al worship was based on belief in a localized deity -- a god tied to one place, whose jurisdiction was limited by specific boundaries. Shrines and altars marked the especially sacred, but circumscribed, dwelling places of these local gods.

The appeal of identifying certain locations as favorite dwellings of gods seduced the Israelites into erecting regional houses for Yahweh as well. The permanent temple at Shiloh, where Eli and his sons served as priests, was one such place. In these early days of the Israelite faith, Shiloh was thought of as God's dwelling place, where a light always burned to symbolize that God was "home," and where an oracle could always be obtained by priestly rites and rituals. At Shiloh, the Israelites believed they had God's presence as a captive audience. The pitfalls of this belief became obvious when shrines in Jerusalem, Bethel, Dan, Samaria, Ophrah and Mizpah began popping up -- each claiming Yahweh's special presence.

Even if Yahweh were willing to put up with such sneaking Ba'alism, God was not about to stand for the kind of priestly shenanigans that are described in 2:12-17. Eli's sons abused and belittled the priestly office, the people who were making sacrifices, and, most of all, the honor of God. Eli's sons had nothing but open contempt for God and ultimate concern for themselves.

Not only are the priests corrupt and greedy, but the whole identity of Shiloh as a dwelling place of God is now suspect because "the word of the LORD was rare in those days; and there was no frequent vision" (3:1, RSV).

Samuel's vision of God, in good Israelite tradition, begins with a word. Nearly all the OT prophets speak in this form of mixed metaphor, identifying a divine vision with the spoken divine word. Samuel's eyes are opened only to the extent that his ears are open. Samuel runs back and forth between his bed and Eli's, trying to obediently answer what he believes to be his master's call.

After the third call, Eli acts as mentor for Samuel one last time by instructing him to go lie down and wait to hear the voice again. This time, Eli counsels, do not jump up and run around, but remain still and answer, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" (v. 9). Eli reveals that to be God's prophet first and foremost demands a listening ear.