

Who was Eli in the Bible?

Eli in the Bible was a Jewish priest living in the days of the judges and serving God at the tabernacle in Shiloh, a city near the hill country of Ephraim (1 Samuel 1:1, 3). Eli is best remembered for his blessing on Samuel's mother and for his part in Samuel's first prophecy.

Eli had two wicked sons named Hophni and Phineas; they also served in the tabernacle but did not know the Lord (1 Samuel 2:12). They violated the Law by keeping and eating meat from the sacrifices that was not allocated to them. They also had sex with the women who served at the doorway to the tent of meeting (1 Samuel 2:22). The bad behavior of Eli's sons was apparently widely known (1 Samuel 2:24), and the report came back to Eli. When he found out about these things, he rebuked his sons but failed to make them stop, allowing them to continue to profane the tabernacle (1 Samuel 2:25).

Apparently, there was some lack of zeal on Eli's part; some part of Eli's heart was with his sons and not with the Lord. We know this because God sent a prophet to Eli to deliver a dire message concerning Eli's household: "I will cut short your strength and the strength of your priestly house, so that no one in it will reach old age. . . . What happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you—they will both die on the same day" (1 Samuel 2:31, 34). This was a terrible curse, because the Levites depended on the priesthood for their living (1 Samuel 2:36). Eli's family line would be supplanted by another, more faithful priest: "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always" (1 Samuel 2:35).

The priest God raised up was a boy named Samuel, who was dedicated to the tabernacle by his mother, Hannah, a formerly barren woman who had prayed for a child. Hannah spoke her prayer in Eli's presence, and he had blessed her: "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him" (1 Samuel 1:17). God answered Hannah's prayer, and she had a son. After Samuel was weaned, she gave him to the Lord's service (1 Samuel 1:24-28).

The young Samuel lived in the tabernacle, under the tutelage and care of Eli. Each year, Hannah brought Samuel a robe for him to wear in the house of the Lord (1 Samuel 2:19). Eli again blessed Hannah and her husband, asking God to give Hannah children to replace the one she had dedicated to the Lord (1 Samuel 2:20). Hannah eventually gave birth to three more sons and two daughters (verse 21).

Later, when Samuel was a little older and Eli's eyes were so weak that he could barely see, the Lord Himself spoke to Samuel. In the middle of the night, the Lord "came and stood" in Samuel's room (1 Samuel 3:10) and told the young boy to deliver to Eli the message that it was almost time for the prophesied judgment to fall upon his family (verses 11-14). Eli humbly accepted God's decree, and Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the Lord in Shiloh (1 Samuel 3:19-21).

A short time after that, the Philistines came against Israel to attack them. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas, went to battle, and they brought with them the Ark of the Covenant thinking it would guarantee protection against their enemies. However, God was not with them, and Eli's two sons were killed, along with about 30,000 foot soldiers of Israel. In addition, the Ark was captured by the Philistines. When Eli heard the bad news, he fell off of his seat, and his neck was broken "for he was old and heavy" (1 Samuel 4:3,

10, 17-18). Meanwhile, Eli's pregnant daughter-in-law, Phinehas's wife, went into labor; she died during delivery, but not before she named her son "Ichabod, saying, 'The Glory has departed from Israel'" (verse 21). Thus, Eli's grandson, born on a day of death and defeat, was given a name meaning "No Glory." Eli had been a priest in Israel and a judge for forty years.