

1 Samuel 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 17 July 2020

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[0 : 00] 1 Samuel chapter 8 When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah.

They were judges in Beersheba. Yet his sons did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice. Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, Behold, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways.

Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed to the Lord.

And the Lord said to Samuel, Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you.

Now then, obey their voice, only you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them. So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him.

[1 : 10] He said, These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you. He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots, and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war, and the equipment of his chariots.

He will take your daughters to be perfumers, and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards, and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain, and of your vineyards, and give it to his officers and to his servants.

He will take your male servants and your female servants, and the best of your young men, and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves. But the Lord will not answer you in that day. But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel, and they said, No, but there shall be 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.

And when Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, Obey their voice, and make them a king. Samuel then said to the men of Israel, Go every man to his city.

[2 : 35] When reading scripture, we often want things to be simple. We want to know who are the good guys, who are the bad guys, what are sinful actions, what are righteous actions, what is driven by unbelief, and what is driven by faith.

But scripture is a very great deal richer and more complex than this, and 1 Samuel chapter 8 is a very good example. Many people reading scripture are expecting texts that straightforwardly take sides.

Abraham is a good guy. Esau is a bad guy. David is a good guy. Saul is a bad guy. And coming to 1 Samuel chapter 8, the burning question in many people's minds is, was the monarchy a misguided course of action for Israel?

Was getting a king a good thing or a bad thing? However, the book of Samuel has a far more subtle and multifaceted portrayal of the monarchy. Its concern is not to present it simplistically as a good or a bad thing, but to portray the actual reality of monarchy in all of its complexity and ambiguity.

A common feature of many contemporary readings of scripture is the assumption, often derived from philosophers like Michel Foucault, that claims to truth are typically veiled claims to power.

[3 : 47] Narrative is propaganda. It's designed to rationalise regimes or parties, and to counteract the propaganda of texts. Many will try to deconstruct them, observing details within texts themselves that subvert, betray, unsettle, or otherwise push against the message that is supposedly essential to them.

Such reading strategies are very popular among feminist theologians, for instance, who will often try to re-read biblical narratives from the perspectives of their female characters, against what they regard to be the male-centred character of the text.

However, one of the great problems with such reading strategies is that the scriptures can make such readings a bit too easy. It's almost as though the scripture intended for such complicating voices to be present within it all along, and trying to force them into the text is like trying to kick down an open door.

A character like Hagar, for example, is not silenced in service of a pro-Abraham narrative, but plays an integral speaking and acting part in the entire story, a part that resonates throughout the entirety of the book of Genesis, long after Hagar herself has left the surface of its pages.

In their recent book, *The Beginning of Politics, Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel*, Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes remark upon the problems with reading scriptural texts like the book of Samuel as partisan narratives, observing that those advancing such positions can end up attributing different parts of the book to different authors.

[5 : 16] It is assumed that there must be some pro-monarchical sources, and then some anti-monarchical sources. The idea that there might be a single author having both of these different voices together is hard for people to fathom.

Indeed, the power of a book like Samuel is that it vastly exceeds propaganda. It does not paint a flattering portrait of any of its characters, and endorses no particular side.

They write, What makes Samuel not only a literary masterpiece, but also a profound work of political thought, is the way in which the beautifully crafted narratives cut to the core of human politics, bringing into relief deep structural themes that transcend the particular events and fates of the book's main protagonists, and that remain resonant wherever and whenever political power is at stake.

This dimension of the author's achievement is what makes Samuel such a penetrating and endlessly fertile exploration of political life. Rather than writing a piece of political propaganda then, the author of Samuel wrote a book that sheds light upon the character and the challenges of political power more generally.

The vision of kingship in the book of Samuel stands out from that of surrounding societies in the ancient Near East. Halbert Allen Holmes write again, Though there was certainly a spectrum of monarchic ideologies in the ancient Near East, kingship was not generally perceived as a historical institution that was consciously chosen at a certain critical point in time out of the imperatives of communal life and in full recognition of the onerous burdens of taxation and conscription that would inevitably be imposed by a human sovereign as the price of organising collective defence.

[6 : 58] Elsewhere, for the most part, monarchy was understood as part of the permanent furniture of the cosmos itself. In the canonised scribal accounts of the ancient Near Eastern kings and their deeds, the deification of kingship and general veneration of political authority meant that an unblinking look into the moral trespasses, ambiguous virtues, and personal shortcomings of monarchs and empires was exceedingly rare.

Scripture represents an exception to this because of its unique account of kingship, an account founded upon the conviction that the Lord himself was the one true king.

Gideon had rejected the kingship in Judges chapter 8 verses 22 to 23. Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.

Gideon said to them, I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you. The Lord will rule over you. Halbertal and Holmes observed that the conditions for true political thought emerged when a third alternative to the positions of The king is a god and God is the king emerged.

Namely, the king is not a god. Chapter 8 of 1 Samuel begins with the problem. Samuel is old and his sons aren't walking in his ways. The sinfulness of Samuel's sons might recall the sinfulness of Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli.

[8 : 21] The leadership of this Moses-like prophet, Samuel, might have seemed to be a good alternative to the judgeship of the high priest Eli, but it doesn't seem to be working. His sons aren't following in his ways.

They're situated in the extreme south of the country in Beersheba. Perhaps, as Peter Lightheart suggests, Samuel has purposefully put them there to limit their influence. There is a continuing threat of the military power of the Philistines, and the people are deeply concerned.

They want a leader to unite the nation against their enemies, to lead them out into battle. They also have had enough of the episodic character of the delivering judges. They want continuity in their rule.

Samuel's mode of rule was that of the prophet, who interceded for the people and more directly represented the kingship of the Lord over them as his people. However, his sons don't seem to be doing this.

They were directly flouting the prohibitions of the law in places such as Deuteronomy chapter 16, verses 18 to 19. In this situation, the Lord's kingship seems distant and often absent.

[9 : 44] A king like the other nations, by contrast, would feel very close. It would make Israel much more like the other peoples that surrounded them. Samuel takes this situation very personally, to the point that the Lord has to correct him.

They hadn't rejected Samuel so much as they had rejected the Lord himself. Kingship was already anticipated in Genesis, Deuteronomy, and also in Judges, which talked about the situation prior to the arrival of the king and many of the problems with that situation.

Genesis chapter 35, verses 10 to 12 speak of the expectation of a king arising from Jacob. And God said to him, Your name is Jacob. No longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.

So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.

The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you. There's another expectation of kingship in Genesis chapter 49, verse 10, in the blessing upon Judah.

[10 : 52] The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Deuteronomy chapter 17, verses 14 to 20, is the fullest declaration of the laws and instructions concerning the king.

When you come to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and then say, I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me. You may indeed set a king over you, whom the Lord your God will choose.

One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. Only he must not acquire many horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, You shall never return that way again.

And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold. And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests, and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by keeping all the words of this law, and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children in Israel.

While Genesis presents the arrival of kings as a blessing, Deuteronomy presents the monarchy in more ambiguous terms than the other offices of leadership. The monarchy comes in response to a request of the people of dubious merit, rather than being directly established by God's own positive intent.

[12 : 38] It surrounds the monarchy with restrictions to ensure that the monarchy does not exalt itself inappropriately. The king was also instructed to write out a book of the law. He would rule under God and under his law, as God's vice-guerrant, rather than as a divine figure himself.

He was expected to be obedient, humble, and a brother of his people. There would be a way to have a king that wouldn't entail a rejection of the kingship of the Lord. Having a king didn't seem to be wrong per se.

However, the way that the people asked for a king was driven by a desire to be like the surrounding nations, from which they were currently set apart by the kingship of the Lord. Rather than appealing for a king under the Lord, they seemed to want a human king instead of divine kingship, and such a request is idolatrous by nature.

The Lord tells Samuel to obey the people's voice. The Lord will accommodate the people's desire for a king, ordering it under his kingship, while warning them of what they let themselves in for when they idolatrously pursue a human king, rather than divine kingship.

Oppression may not be a necessary consequence of choosing a king, but it will be the natural tendency, given the earlier positive statements in Genesis about the future monarchy, the more guarded teaching of Deuteronomy, the sinful character of the people's request in this chapter, the negative portrayals of a situation without a king in the book of Judges, and the very mixed portrayals of both Saul and David, both positive and negative, in the narrative of 1st and 2nd Samuel that follows, something of the ambivalence of the monarchy, and of human political power more generally, can be clearly seen.

[14 : 16] Samuel, instructed to do so by the Lord, warns the people of the character of the king that they have chosen. The people want a king to be their head and to fight their battles. They want a ruler to serve them.

However, Samuel makes clear that the type of ruler that they want would make them his servants and conscript them to fight his battles. The repeated pronoun his in Samuel's speech tells the story.

The king will need to gather manpower and resources to fight battles and to defend the people. Yet this extractive power will come to be used to serve his own glory. And as he pursues his own glory, the people will be progressively enslaved to their king and to those in his regime.

The people want this powerful political system, without considering the way that they will become prisoners of that very system. Their idolatrous rejection of the Lord for this system strips the people of their capacity to subject their king to any higher principle.

The king will start to act in a way that sets himself up as a new capricious deity over them. He will take the best of their men and animals rather than the Lord. He will demand a tithe.

[15 : 23] Such a king would become a god before the Lord. The king that they choose for themselves will end up acting like a new oppressor. We see a good example of this in the story of Solomon, who ends up breaking each of the three prohibitions of Deuteronomy and takes on the character of a new pharaoh, placing heavy burdens on his people's backs, building a great war machine, and extracting incredible wealth and labour from the population.

The Lord had formerly given them over to the hands of their surrounding enemies, and now he will hand them over to the ruler that they had chosen for themselves. The people refuse to listen to Samuel and insist upon having a king.

They make their intent clear again. They want to be like all the nations. They've been set apart from the nations, but now they want to become like them. In their response to Samuel, they shift the pronouns in a noteworthy way, that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles.

They're rejecting Samuel's warning about what will actually happen. They do not believe him. Holmes and Halbertal sum up the situation as follows. At the heart of politics lies an existential urge for physical security, and the people proved willing and even eager to relinquish whatever unsupervised freedom and entitlements they enjoyed in the state of divine anarchy, and to surrender to a political sovereign who will freely tax and conscript them, so long as he can also safeguard them from their pitiless enemies.

Sovereignty does not emerge in the Samuel narrative, out of a Hobbesian state of nature therefore. It does not arise out of an imaginary war of all against all, but rather out of a historical state, realistically described as a weak confederation of frequently feuding tribes where political and military power was fragmented, intermittent and dispersed.

[17 : 10] Although sharing a common religious bond, the various Israelite tribes had been unable to achieve unity and stability. They clashed repeatedly among themselves, and were increasingly vulnerable to attacks from outside forces.

The constituent building blocks of a proposed united kingdom therefore, were not atomistic individuals, but extended families or tribes. In describing what is lost as well as what is gained in unifying the Israelite tribes under a single dynastic monarch, the book of Samuel provides us with our earliest account of the arduous, contested and historically contingent emergence of this worldly sovereignty.

The centralisation of political military authority is admittedly accompanied by priestly anointment and bestowed by the grace of God. But as will become evident as the narrative unfolds, sovereign authority is actually consolidated much less sacramentally through a hard-fought struggle, by tactically ingenious applications of force and fraud deployed to overcome considerable human resistance.

A question to consider. In what ways can this passage inform our own understanding of the promise and danger of human government?

