

**Idolatry in 1 Samuel 8:4-22:
Appointing Kings and Building Nations**

Randall J. Greene

HB-511: Hebrew Bible I

July 21, 2017

⁴ Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵ and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” ⁶ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the Lord, ⁷ and the Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to 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. ⁸ Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹ Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

¹⁰ So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ 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; ¹² and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵ He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶ He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ 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.”

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰ so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” ²¹ When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. ²² The Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them.” Samuel then said to the people of Israel, “Each of you return home.” (NRSV)

Israel’s heritage is the story of a small, nomadic community becoming a flourishing, wealthy kingdom of influence, but their road to power was paved with trouble. Tradition maintains that their nation was established by God, but the climactic moment in their movement from a group of tribal communities to a defined state was marred by an idolatrous relationship with violence, money, and social influence.

The story of Israel’s governmental transition is told in 1 Sam 8:4-22. The elders of the tribes approached Samuel, the man serving as God’s representative to the people, and asked that he appoint them a king. They appear to have had a variety of underlying motivations, as documented by the text itself in addition to modern extra-biblical scholarship and research.

Despite the misgivings of both God and Samuel concerning the leadership potential of a human king, God chose to grant their request.

The question of the nature of the relationship between God and national governance is a relevant one today. With the rise of the Religious Right in the past few decades and a recent resurgence in Christian governmental politics, we carry a renewed interest in the ways God works in, through, and outside of national hierarchical structures. By considering the social and political perspectives of the people, Samuel, and God in this text, we can learn valuable lessons about the character of God and, more importantly, about our own nature. This analysis requires the assumption that there is a basic level of historicity underlying the text, though such an assumption must be tempered by the awareness of recent archaeological and sociological research that informs the historical perspective of the text itself.

What Is This Text?

Authorship and Date of Writing

In the oldest Hebrew manuscripts, the books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel were one book. During the translation of the original book into Greek, the text was probably divided into two parts,¹ possibly to accommodate the length of common scrolls at that time. Most modern scholars consider 1 and 2 Samuel to be a part of the deuteronomistic history of the Hebrew Bible, packaged as a cohesive unit with the books of Joshua, Judges, and Kings.

Although tradition holds that Samuel wrote the books bearing his name, modern scholars agree that one or more editors of some kind were involved in the authorship of the entirety of the

¹ John J. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: Second Edition*, 2 edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014): 139.

deuteronomistic history at a much later date than the events the history describes. The books of Samuel contain frequent references to social norms “in those days” (see 1 Sam 3:1; 5:5; 6:18; and many more), indicating that the author was writing at a time when most readers would not recall such cultural distinctives. Some scholars have analyzed different strands of vocabulary and thematic details woven into the books of Samuel, suggesting that the deuteronomistic editor may have combined a variety of source documents into a single narrative, but there is no mention in the text itself of such original sources, so those proposed documents are only speculative.

Theories about the date of the text’s authorship are likewise inconclusive. Most scholars believe it was written around the time of the Babylonian exile (586 BCE) to provide a divine reason for the fall of Israel to Babylon’s military, although some hold to a pre-exilic authorship as a testament to the kingship of Josiah, and others argue that it was still being edited and revised after the exile had ended.²

Themes

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel tell of Israel’s political transition from a sociological status as a tribal group to that of a centralized nation with a monarchical ruler. Though the topic suggests that the text is historical, it should not be read as a modern, journalistic accounting of dates, times, and persons - the text itself does not encourage such a reading, because it disagrees with itself on a number of details. Instead, the text should be understood as a complex narrative describing the theological reflections of Israel upon their past; rooted in history, the books of

² McKenzie, Steven L. “1 Samuel.” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, and Carol Newsom, 4th ed. edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 399-400.

Samuel tell a story that was intended to guide the readers into a particular understanding of God's involvement in their heritage and, therefore, in their future.

At the heart of this narrative is a singular character: David. Although David does not enter the story until halfway through 1 Samuel, the opening chapters of the book continually point the reader forward to the reign of King David. Samuel and Saul, the primary characters in those chapters, set the stage for David's entrance to the story. The deuteronomistic editors do not entirely glorify David, though. Rather than portraying him as a one-dimensional quasi-deity, as neighboring cultures often did with their kings, 1 Samuel develops a sophisticated picture that balances his divine appointment with his human failings. In fact, all of the primary characters in the book have multi-dimensional personas with often mixed motivations, authentic human reactions, and both positive and negative results. As we will see, this complexity is not restricted to the character development in the book - it pervades the political activity taking place, as well.

Israel at the Time of this Narrative

The books of Samuel are a transitional piece between the stories of the judges and the kings. The ancient Hebrew heritage tells of their people being delivered from Egypt and wandering in the wilderness for forty years, then of conquering the cities of the Canaanites and dividing the land into tribal Israelite territories. Although archaeologists generally dismiss the historicity of the Israelite conquest of their Promised Land, they do conclude that the area at the time of the judges was indeed grouped into loose, tribal associations.³ The book of Judges tells the story of the interaction between those tribes and the Canaanites living amongst them, as well

³ Israel Finkelstein, "The Emergence of the Monarchy in Israel the Environmental and Socio-Economic Aspects," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 14, no. 44 (1989): 43-74, doi:10.1177/030908928901404403.

as the relationship between the Hebrew people and God at this time. Whenever the Hebrew people strayed from their covenant with God, a judge rose as a heroic character to call Israel to repentance and deliver them from their oppressors.

The biblical text makes it clear that the tribes were, at this time, independent groups bound together by their religious heritage - their primary unifying characteristic was the fact that they were governed by an ancient covenant with God. This covenant was not rigorously held, though, as evidenced by the continual need for judges to intervene. Judges concludes with a solemn declaration, foreshadowing the transition to come in the book of Samuel: “In those days, there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judg 21:25 NRSV). The biblical text, sociological analysis, and archaeological data come together to identify three key motivations for Israel’s impending desire for a king: a need for an army, a need for social boundaries due to increasing population density in Israel and the surrounding region, and a need for trade regulation due to economic prosperity.⁴

First Samuel, beginning immediately where Judges ended, introduces the group of people that would become the nemesis of Israel. The Philistines were not natives of the region - they were seafarers that settled along the Mediterranean coast and, aided by their superior military and the apparent wealth of their homeland, sought to establish a colony in the land occupied by the Hebrews.⁵ This conflict escalated into a sustained war with the tribes of Israel. In 1 Samuel 7, Samuel rallied the tribes together and, with the help of God (as the author deliberately mentions), repelled the invading force. The defeat was swift and seemed to be decisive, at least for the time,

⁴ Israel Finkelstein, “The Emergence of the Monarchy in Israel the Environmental and Socio-Economic Aspects,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 14, no. 44 (1989): 43–74, doi:10.1177/030908928901404403.

⁵ Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.* (Society of Biblical Lit, 2012): 14-16.

but the Israelite leaders grew increasingly concerned about the decentralized military authority of the tribes, questioning the reliability of tribal forces to unite in opposition to the ongoing Philistine threat.

In addition to the opposition of external armies, the Israelite tribes were growing in population. As they grew and began inhabiting new territories, they experienced increased interaction between the people of various tribes and with external, non-Hebrew cultures (this very interaction, and the inter-marrying of Hebrews with people from other societies, was the cause of many of the problems detailed in the book of Judges). This cross-cultural interaction stimulated a paradoxical desire for a distinctive social identity that mirrored the identities being forged by surrounding societies. In essence, they wanted to leave behind their tribal organizational system because they saw it as an ineffectual, outdated model that could be replaced by a new cohesive group identity as a kingdom.

The growth in population was accompanied by an economic boom, which raised a number of related concerns. The distribution of goods and services between the tribes needed to be regulated, trade with other states needed to be monitored, and the protection of personal wealth became a priority within the developing upper class of Hebrew social orders.⁶

The New Interpreter's Bible summarizes the confluence of changes occurring in Israelite society: "A military crisis, like the Philistine threat, may have provided the opportunity for transition to kingship, but vested economic and political power interests stood to gain more than simply relief from Philistine pressure."⁷ In the midst of socio-political turmoil, the leaders of the

⁶ Michael Attwell, Isy Morgenstern, and Maya Rothschild, *The Bible Unearthed* (History Channel, n.d.), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5RfSepEcZ8&t=254s>.

⁷ Bruce C. Birch et al., *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume II: Numbers - Samuel* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 1998): 1023.

tribes became increasingly dissatisfied with their decentralized governance. Samuel had served well as a prophet, priest, and judge, but he was getting old. The tribal leadership could not identify a person to take his place, and they were uneasy at the prospect of an undefined and insecure future. They wanted a more sophisticated system.

The Request for a King

At the opening of segment, in v. 4, “all the elders of Israel” approached Samuel in his home town. These elders were the social leaders of each of the tribes; though not necessarily old in age, they were considered elders based on their social status and their perceived role as wise, guiding members of the tribe. This body of elders was described several times in the Pentateuch as being participants in the passing on and legislation of the Law (for example, see Num 11:16) and, in later passages of the deuteronomic history, would be involved in David’s anointment as the king of Israel and in the dedication of Solomon’s temple.⁸ They were likely wealthy, both in terms of their economic status and the size of their familial households, and carried significant social and legal authority over the people.

They set up their argument in v. 5 by pointing out Samuel’s increasing age and lack of adequate successor. The text does not indicate exactly how old Samuel is, although it does suggest that a number of years have passed since his triumph over the Philistine army. Samuel’s sons had previously been described as being corrupt leaders unfit to inherit Samuel’s position as their religious and military leader. The elders anticipated a gap in visible leadership and wanted a

⁸ A. Graeme Auld, *I and II Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), ProQuest Ebook Central.

sense of political stability, yet they did not request that Samuel appoint a better judge to succeed him. Instead, in their desire for a complete institutional shift, they requested a king.

This request was not made lightly and they knew it would not be simple to implement a comprehensive system of kingship. Such a transformation would shake the foundations of their collective identity, so they came together and approached Samuel as a unified group. Although the text does not indicate whether they represented the interests of the greater Israelite community or their own interests as an upper class, the text does present the voices of the elders as a single unit without a hint of divergent opinion. They were not asking for Samuel to simply change an official title from “judge” to “king” but to initiate the institution of a comprehensive governmental system. Such a system was a dramatic break from their reliance on the covenantal leadership of God mediated through the prophetic roles of judges, which had been their cultural distinctive since their exodus from Egypt. It presented a shift not only in organizational structures, but in the relative prioritization of socio-political constructs (such as class, status, and security) and faithfulness to God. Though they likely believed they could pursue both ideals at the same time, no longer would fidelity to God be their driving sociological impulse; instead, they would seek their own sense of national and personal security.

The Response of Samuel

Samuel recognized the gravity of this shift and resisted, praying to God for guidance. In vv. 7-9, God responded, saying, “Listen to the voice of the people,” and affirmed that the elders were not rejecting Samuel’s leadership, but were forsaking the reign of God over their cultural identity. This was not the first time Israel had abandoned their covenant with God; since leaving

Egypt, they had engaged in continual cycles of disobedience, judgment, and repentance. God drew a parallel between the demand for a king and the idolatry practiced by Israel throughout its history. Nonetheless, God told Samuel a second time to listen to the voice of the people, asking him to warn them of the dangers of monarchy yet, in the end, to submit to their will.

The cost of a kingship was not a foreign concept to the elders. Many of the surrounding nations had thrived under monarchs, including Egypt while the Hebrews had been enslaved there, but Samuel laid bare the burdens of such a governmental system upon the people. Their children would be conscripted into the army, forced to participate in state labor, and consigned into royal servanthood. The government would demand taxes take their freedoms until they were effectually slaves of the state. The specific examples cited by Samuel were conspicuously fulfilled in the reign of Solomon (see 1 Kgs 10-11), so many scholars believe they were placed deliberately into the text by the author (writing well after the time of Solomon) as a connection to Solomon's legacy, but the examples would have been common enough even in Samuel's day that it could have been recorded in an earlier source document as a general observation about the needs of a kingdom.

Samuel's argument concluded with a dramatic flourish in v. 18, stating that "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." The depiction of Israel as "crying out" is frequently used throughout the deuteronomistic history to describe the people's response to oppression or tragedy, so its use here fits within the overall theme of the greater text; this sentence is distinct, though, because it delivers an ultimatum, indicating that God will not answer them when they cry out. The implication is that, because Israel chose its own way instead of God's, God would allow them to

suffer the consequences of their decision. This seems to either be extemporaneous speaking on the part of Samuel or an insertion by the deuteronomistic author as a divine justification for the Babylonian exile. Such a promise of abandonment was not given in the recorded conversation between God and the prophet, so if the depiction was Samuel's rhetoric, one must wonder if he was trying to harness the motivating power of fear to scare Israel into submission to God. Regardless of the source of that promise, Samuel was clear throughout his speech that he and God were opposed the decision to appoint a king, and he echoed the idea that, at its heart, such a move was a rejection of God.

The Decision is Made

The elders did not relent and, in their forceful counter-argument, revealed the primary motivations behind their request. They specified three priorities in v. 20 that mirror the three motivations mentioned previously: that they “may be like the other nations” (reflecting population growth and the desire for a social identity), “that our king may govern us” (instituting legislative power for trade and economic security) and, finally, that the king might “go out before us and fight our battles” (establishing a military for protection against invading forces). It is notable that the author records the elders as looking for a king who would fight *our* battles rather than fight the battles of God. Throughout the deuteronomic history, military victory is seen as being given by God, so the word “our” indicates a subtle yet significant shift in perspective regarding the purpose of war, foreshadowing the aggressive militaristic ambitions of Saul and subsequent rulers.

Having heard the clear voice of the elders, Samuel returned to God and relayed their decision. God then told Samuel a third time to listen to their voice, commanding the prophet to “set a king over them.” Though God and Samuel both wished the people had chosen differently, God conceded. Samuel did not immediately tell the elders that he would select a man to rule over them. Instead, he told them to return home. The text does not indicate precisely why Samuel delayed here. Many scholars believe this is simply an editorial transition between the request of the people and the identification of Saul as the king-elect; others have suggested that Samuel remained reluctant to recognize the change in national identity; and others have speculated that he was taking time to prepare the people for this dramatic institutional shift. Whatever the case, Samuel resigned himself to pass on his mantle of Israelite leadership to a new paradigm of God-ordained monarchy.

Reflection

The story of Israel’s demand for a king illustrates the nature of the relationship between God and human societies, and that relationship is not a simple one. A quick reading of this text would indicate that God is opposed to the idea of human governance, and there does seem to be some truth to that assertion. Indeed, God resists the appointment of a king for the chosen people of Israel, but this cannot be taken as a universal condemnation of human governmental authority. The text as a whole establishes the monarchy as double-edged sword: it sets the stage for the glorious reign of David, yet it also serves as a defining moment in Israel’s abandonment of God. The establishment of a monarchy is not portrayed as being wrong simply because *all* monarchy *must be* wrong, but because in that moment the people snubbed their covenant relationship with

God. The author does not portray God as angry or retributive in this text, but as solemn and sad. God mourns, not because of the evolution of Israel's institutional structure, but because of its idolatry of war, money, and power. The appointment of a king is only a symptom of the disease that had been devouring them for generations.

As I initially approached this text, I sought a better understanding of the perspective of God regarding governmental systems; as I studied the text, though, I found myself examining more closely the nature of humanity and our obsession with security. This segment does include a theology of God, communicating God's allowance for human will and God's grace in response to rebellion, but it delivers a far stronger picture of our own corporate tendency to seek other gods, driven by a selfish desire to control and preserve our future.

In this narrative, the yearning of Israel for a national identity usurped their heart to be led by God, and that is a tension still felt today, particularly by Americans. As we seek to honor the legacy we have been given - the privilege of living in a nation of freedom and democracy - we are often pulled away from the worship of our Creator. When we pursue a trustworthy system of defense, we dispel the need to trust in God for our protection and we establish a basis upon which we can justify violent atrocities as ordained by God. This is not to express that measures of self-defense are necessarily idolatrous, but to say that we must remain cognizant of our inclination to rely upon our own power rather than the strength of God for deliverance. Just as the elders of Israel anticipated a gap in leadership and sought to fill it with humanly sustainable systems, so do we abandon the perceived insecurity of faithfulness to our covenant with God and seek to fill it with an assurance of perpetuating our own ideals. We must recognize, though it goes against our nature, that the power of God is greater than all the power of the world.

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