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# **THEOCRACY IN CRISIS: A Contextual Study of 1 Samuel 8:4-18 with Practical Reflection for Today**

Enock Okode

## **Introduction**

1 Samuel is a significant book in the history of Israel for it provides an elaborate account of the transition from the era of judgeship to kingship. It begins with the narrative about Eli's household and quickly moves on to Samuel, who serves as a prophet, judge and priest.<sup>1</sup> By the time we get to chapter seven, the author has already made a case that Israel is still under threat from the neighboring nations, especially the Philistines. Chapter eight begins with a note that Israel is in leadership crisis because the sons of Samuel have forsaken the righteous requirements of the law. It is against the backdrop of this crisis that the elders of Israel approach Samuel with a request to appoint a king to rule over them.

The elders' request, Samuel's reaction and the LORD's response raise several questions. Is the people's request tantamount to covenant disloyalty? Are the Israelites dissatisfied with the administration itself or with the form of administration? Why does Samuel's initial reaction indicate that he is vehemently opposed to kingship when he is presumably aware that the Torah had predicted the coming of the monarchy? Is there anything in the narrative that demonstrates that Yahweh is opposed to kingship? Or could we argue that monarchy was all along in Yahweh's decree and that this was just the right time for its realization, hence he acceded to the people's request knowing that he would later enthrone a king after his own heart?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One could make a strong case that Samuel's most significant role in the entire narrative is the inauguration of the monarchy, particularly the anointing of David.

<sup>2</sup> We might even ask whether kingship is a compromise that Samuel initiates following the people's request and God's instruction.

Does this chapter portray the king as the representative of an ill-willed people or as God's chosen one? According to the narrative, does the leadership defect lie with the people or with Yahweh and his mediators? What is the narrator's view of kingship?

Our discussion throughout this article will seek to engage these questions. The more we read 1 Samuel 8 in its context the more we realize that although kingship is not inherently evil, the motive behind the elders' request reflects a people who are not adherent to their covenant with Yahweh.<sup>3</sup> It will become clear to us that the narrator preserves tension between the people's request and Yahweh's willingness to grant it; in fact, the tension is hardly resolved at the end of chapter fourteen. As we attempt to understand the narrator's point of view and how he presents this tension, we will begin by providing a translation of our text, then move on to the literary context and the canonical usage. In the end, we will outline a few theological and practical implications of the message of the text.

### Translation

<sup>4</sup>Then<sup>4</sup> all the elders of Israel<sup>5</sup> gathered and came to Samuel at Ramah. <sup>5</sup> And they said to him, "Behold, you<sup>6</sup> have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways<sup>7</sup>; now<sup>8</sup> appoint<sup>9</sup> for us a king to judge us<sup>10</sup> like all the

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Green (*How Are the Mighty Fallen: A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel* [New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003], 179) rightly states, "The institution is not inevitably or essentially wrong, not unviable, though in practice it goes very badly" (p. 179).

<sup>4</sup> I take the w conjunction here as consequential. It may also be translated as "So" (see NET, NIV, REB).

<sup>5</sup> The LXX has "the men of Israel" rather than "all the elders of Israel."

<sup>6</sup> The MT has an independent personal pronoun, hT'a; , which appears unnecessary since the qal perfect 2msg verb (T'n>q;z" ) does not need an accompanying personal pronoun. But if this pronoun is emphatic, as it appears to be, then the sentence might read, "...you yourself have grown old...."

<sup>7</sup> The LXX has "in your way." Cf. 8:3.

<sup>8</sup> The adverb hT'[; may be used temporally ("now") or logically ("so then"). When used in the latter sense there is usually a waw prefixed to it. Since there is no waw here, the temporal rendering is more appropriate. See Bill T. Arnold & John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), 139-140.

nations." <sup>6</sup> But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And <sup>11</sup> Samuel prayed to the LORD. <sup>7</sup> And the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all they say to you, for <sup>12</sup> it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me <sup>13</sup> from being king over them. <sup>8</sup> Like all the deeds which they have done <sup>14</sup> since the day I brought them up from Egypt <sup>15</sup> even <sup>16</sup> to this day, and <sup>17</sup> they have forsaken me and served other gods, so they are doing to you also. <sup>9</sup> Now then, listen to their voice; however, <sup>18</sup> you shall solemnly warn <sup>19</sup> them, and show them the ways of the king <sup>20</sup> who will reign over them." <sup>10</sup> So Samuel spoke all the words of the LORD to the people who had asked of

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<sup>9</sup>hm'yfi- qal imperative msg, paragogic heh, ~yf. The order is directed at Samuel. Implied in this command is the conviction that Samuel has powers to grant the request of the elders.

<sup>10</sup> Wnjep.v'l.- could also be translated as "to govern us."

<sup>11</sup> This conjunction should probably be taken as a result indicator, i.e., it was as a result of the elders' request that Samuel prayed to God. It might even be translated as "Therefore."

<sup>12</sup> yKi often indicates a relationship of cause and effect (showing a logical connection to what precedes and/or introduces a subordinate clause), but it may also be used as a demonstrative particle of emphasis, hence translated "indeed." Both renderings are possible here. See Bruce K. Waltke & M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 665.

<sup>13</sup> The sentence structure here is object-verb-subject, so that what we have literally is, "me they have rejected." The object has been fronted for emphasis. See 1 Sam 15:1 for a similar construction.

<sup>14</sup> The LXX adds "toward me" (RSV and NRSV follow the LXX). It is hard to know whether this addition is interpretive or a variant reading, but it makes sense because of the contrast at the end of the verse, i.e. "to you."

<sup>15</sup> Two manuscripts have "from the land of Egypt" rather than "from Egypt." There does not seem to be any significant difference in either of the renderings.

<sup>16</sup> Two manuscripts omit w perhaps because its absence does not alter the meaning or because it may seem unnecessary.

<sup>17</sup> Waw introduces an epexegetical clause that explains what is meant by "Like all the deeds they have done...." See Paul Jouon & T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Roma: E. P. I. B, 2008), 118J.

<sup>18</sup> This adverb, %a;, together with yKi construction accent Samuel's responsibility to warn the people without hesitancy. %a; Conveys a restrictive emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> dy[iT'- hiphil imperfect 2msg, dw[. The hiphil of this verb as well as the preceding verb emphasizes their declarative force.

<sup>20</sup> Waltke & O' Connor (p. 242) describe the use of the article and the common noun here as a situational, unique referent.

him a king. <sup>11</sup> And 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. <sup>12</sup> And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and of fifties,<sup>21</sup> and some to do his plowing and to reap his harvest,<sup>22</sup> and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. <sup>13</sup> And he will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakcers. <sup>14</sup> And he will take the best of your fields and your vineyards and your olive groves, and give them to his servants. <sup>15</sup> And he will take a tenth of your seed and of your vineyards and give to his officers and his servants. <sup>16</sup> And he will take your male servants and your female servants and your best young men<sup>23</sup> and your donkeys, and use<sup>24</sup> them for his work. <sup>17</sup> And he will take a tenth of your flocks; you yourselves shall be his servants. <sup>18</sup> And on 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."<sup>25</sup>

### Exegetical Outline

The passage may be outlined as follows:

Israel Asks for a King: 1 Samuel 8:4-18

- I. The elders' audience with Samuel (vv. 4-5)
- II. Samuel's audience with the LORD (vv. 6-9)

<sup>21</sup> The LXX has "hundreds" instead of "fifties;" Syriac has units of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. These readings may represent a different Hebrew text, but there is no persuasive reason why they should be preferred.

<sup>22</sup> Literally, the MT says, "to plow his plowing and to harvest his harvest."

<sup>23</sup> The LXX has "bouko, lia u`mw/n," "your herds" instead of "your young men." This LXX rendering makes better sense considering that the verse begins with "servants" and ends with "donkeys."

<sup>24</sup> Qumran manuscript has wf[w (3cpl) while the LXX has kai. avpodekatw,sei, "and will take a tenth of them." The MT reading makes better sense only if we supply the third pronominal suffix, hence "use them." The Qumran rendering might be an attempt to avoid this addition of suffix so that what we end up with is "they will do...." It is possible that Qumran is following the LXX but substitutes r for w (the LXX reading might have been influenced by rf[ in vv. 15 and 17). The Qumran rendering appears to make better sense.

<sup>25</sup> The LXX has "in those days" and adds an explanatory clause at the end, thus, "because ye have chosen to yourselves a king."

III. Samuel's audience with the people (vv. 10-18)

**Literary Context**

The book of 1 Samuel focuses on the conditions leading to the arrival of monarchy in Israel. It also narrates the shape that the monarchy takes, with greater emphasis on the reign of David after Samuel anoints him. The first major section of 1 Samuel (1:1-4:1a) is largely devoted to the boy Samuel who is both faithful and dedicated to Yahweh. Eli who was the priest at Shiloh was in charge of the boy Samuel as he grew up. Eli failed in some of his parental responsibilities so that his sons were accused of corruption and wickedness (2:12-25). Consequently, a man of God declared to Eli that his household would be deprived of the priesthood and that Yahweh would raise up a faithful priest (2:27-36). Thus a leadership crisis has already emerged in this first section. The second section (4:1b-7:1) is centred on the Ark of the LORD. This section, which does not mention Samuel, clearly describes the nature of the religious and political crisis that emerged between Israel and the Philistines as Samuel grew up. The capture of the Ark of the LORD intensifies the need for leadership that would ensure complete deliverance from the surrounding enemies.

The next section (7:1-17), which depicts Samuel as an effective judge over Israel, resolves the tension and crisis evident in chs. 1-6. Chs. 1-6 trace the development of a covenant crisis between Israel and Yahweh. Samuel serves as a mediator between Yahweh and Israel so that at the end of ch. 7 the covenantal relations are once again back to normal. Yahweh fights for Israel so much that the towns that had been previously captured are restored to Israel (7:14). It is further noted that there was peace between Israel and the Amorites (7:14). But this peace does not last for long. The fourth section (chs. 8-15), where our narrative belongs, deals with the demand for monarchy in Israel, which leads to the anointing of Saul as the first king of Israel. However, because of his disobedience Yahweh rejects him and appoints David as a king after his own heart (16:1).

The crisis that leads to the demand for institutional change is highlighted in ch. 8 where the elders make a radical request for a king to rule over them. There seems to be a sudden change between chs. 7 and 8. In ch. 7 we witness Samuel's effective leadership as he mediates between God and Israel; he prays to God who in turn answers and delivers Israel from the Philistines (7:9). Such a display of Yahweh's might and Samuel's effective

leadership should encourage the Israelites to have more faith in theocracy. However, ch. 8 introduces an abrupt change, which may suggest that a long time elapses between the end of ch. 7 and the beginning of ch. 8. There is a problem with theocracy<sup>26</sup> and the people that Yahweh has appointed as his representatives. The narrative moves from cultic to political corruption. The leadership perverts power and perpetuates injustice. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, ch. 8 is concerned with “how to order public power and how to guard public well-being in a community where the leadership tends to pervert that power and leadership (vv. 1-3).”<sup>27</sup> The narrative is characterized by a three-fold exchange between Samuel, the elders and Yahweh. It is pivotal for it marks the transition from the era of the judges to the monarchy.

The narrator presents Samuel in such a way that he resembles Eli. Like Eli (2:22, 32; 3:1ff.; 4:15, 18) he is old; he installed his sons as judges just as Eli had his sons serving under him as priests (1:3; 2:11-13, 22-25); and both Eli’s sons and Samuel’s sons are sinning. The difference is that the latter are perverting judicial process while the former are guilty of cultic exploitation. But unlike Eli who suffers God’s wrath because of his failure to rebuke his sons, Samuel is portrayed by the narrator as one who is above reproach hence not directly held responsible for his sons’ wickedness. In both Samuel and Eli’s cases the problem apparently lies with the leaders rather than the people. Because of Samuel’s sons’ corruption, his age and a desire to have a king like the other nations,<sup>28</sup> the elders of Israel request for a king to reign over Israel (vv. 4-5). *jpv* is used in 7:15, 17; 8:2, 3, to designate judiciary functions, but the root is also associated with military leadership (8:19).

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<sup>26</sup> Theocracy is basically a form of government that recognizes Yahweh alone as the supreme leader of Israel. Even when Yahweh is represented by a human ruler, theocracy still holds that Yahweh is still the King and that the human ruler only serves as a vassal.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 61.

<sup>28</sup> Kingship was not a new concept to Israel. They were familiar with the kings of city-states in Canaan, like Adoni-bezek of Jerusalem (Judg 1:5). Gen 36:31-9 lists kings of Edom ‘before there were kings in Israel.’ See Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary: The First Book of Samuel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), 72.

According to ch. 7 Samuel serves as the judge who mediates Yahweh's covenant with Israel as well as renews and maintains that relationship. Understanding the role of the judge helps the reader to grasp the magnitude of the people's request. The people see intrinsic weaknesses and dangers of theocracy; they do not want to go through the sufferings that characterize chs. 1-7. Their request amounts to "a formal petition, calling for an end to the theocratic system with its fallible mediators and its holy God."<sup>29</sup> With their desire to be like the other nations, especially in relying on a militaristic leader, the elders of Israel come perilously close to rejecting Israel's call to holiness, which Leviticus repeatedly asserts will derive, in part, from Israel's refusal to be like other nations (Lev 18:1-5).

Their request displeased Samuel (v. 6): laeWmv. ynEy[eB. rb'D"h; [r:YEW; , literally, "But the thing was evil in Samuel's eyes." This is a mild rendering; Samuel thought it was a terrible idea, an affront to God's revealed ways among them (2 Sam 11:25, 27). As D. J. McCarthy puts it, the request for a king is evil "because it is a rejection of the divinely ordained institution of the judgeship represented by Samuel."<sup>30</sup> Samuel might have considered kingship as a "substitute for the judgeship with its special theological significance and the demand for oneself what Yahweh gives."<sup>31</sup> As the mediator, Samuel takes the people's request to Yahweh in prayer.

The LORD gives a threefold answer. First, they have rejected Yahweh as their king; second, this rejection is a continuation of their disobedience and unfaithfulness which began in the days of the wilderness; and third, Yahweh tells Samuel to grant their request but also to warn them of the consequences of their choice (vv. 6-9). Yahweh's first response is meant to correct Samuel's perception of the people's demand; he should not take it primarily as a personal affront, for it is a rejection of Yahweh rather than Samuel. However, by implication, a rejection of Yahweh is also a rejection of Yahweh's representative. That is why at the end of v. 8, Yahweh states that the Israelites are rejecting Samuel. Israel's rejection of Yahweh is not occurring for the first or last time; it is an endemic problem that began in the

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<sup>29</sup> Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1-12* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1985), 255.

<sup>30</sup> Dennis J. McCarthy, "The Inauguration of Monarchy in Israel" in *Interpretation* 27 (1973), 403.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

wilderness and will still persist. Israel's sin is both covenantal and religious as the parallels in Deut 29:25ff. indicate. Yahweh emphatically commands Samuel to listen, [m;v., to the people. The fact that this qal imperative verb occurs at the beginning and end of Yahweh's response shows that Yahweh is determined to grant the request. Whether this concession is permissive, a compromise, or a resignation is not clear. Could it be that Yahweh grants their desire so that they may experience the negative consequences of their request? As we shall see later, Yahweh's response reveals the genuineness of his interaction with humanity as well as the fact that he is still sovereign even with the demand for the monarchy.

But Samuel is also instructed to ~h,B' dy[iT' d[eh'-yKi, "solemnly warn them" of the consequences of their request. The verb dw[ may be translated as "to bear witness" or "to testify." It occurs in Gen 43:3 where Judah tells his father how he had been warned not to return to Egypt without his brother. In Exod 19:21, the LORD tells Moses to warn the people of the peril of forcing themselves to see Yahweh.<sup>32</sup> In our passage it is preceded by hiphil infinitive absolute which serves to emphasize the significance and seriousness of Samuel's responsibility. The construction is a formal legal language which implies that in the future the Israelites will have no grounds to claim that they were unaware of the burdensome consequences that come with the monarchy.<sup>33</sup>

The scene then switches from Yahweh and Samuel to Samuel and the people (vv. 11-18). In what is commonly viewed as the most anti-monarchical polemic in the OT, Samuel articulates what life under kingship entails. The phrase %l,M,h; jP;v.mi, "the ways of the king" is significant. jP;v.mi normally means "justice," but it can also mean "way," "custom," or "manner."<sup>34</sup> There is probably wordplay here. The elders ask for a king to judge them (v. 5) and Samuel responds with a polemic on what justice of the king they could expect (v. 11).<sup>35</sup> jP;v.mi recurs throughout this chapter and constitutes its basic theme. The root occurs eight times (vv. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9,

<sup>32</sup> See Jer 11:7 where the same verb is used with reference to how the LORD continually warned Israel yet the people failed to obey him. Cf. 1 Ki 2:42, etc.

<sup>33</sup> See P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *The Anchor Bible: 1 Samuel* (London: Doubleday, 1980), 157.

<sup>34</sup> See G. Liedke, "jpv" in *TLOT* Vol. 3 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 1392-1399.

<sup>35</sup> Tony W. Cartledge, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2001), 114.

11, 20). The expression may connote the conduct of the king<sup>36</sup> or the constitutional rights of the king.<sup>37</sup> Its meaning should probably be distinguished from “the rationale for kingship” in 1 Sam 10:25, which is apparently a reference to the theological basis for kingship in deuteronomistic circles (Deut 17:14-17). In this passage it most likely refers to how the king would operate as he leads the people, i.e. the way he will exercise his authority as a judge.<sup>38</sup>

The key word summarizing the way the king will reign is *xq;l'*, “to take.”<sup>39</sup> It occurs six times in this narrative (11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17), and in every occurrence its object(s) is (are) fronted for emphasis. Kings are depicted as takers both militarily and economically. Two other key verbs that are repeated in Samuel’s address are *~yf*, “to appoint” (vv. 11, 12) and *!tn*, “to give” (vv. 14, 15). What the king will take, appoint and give in order to accomplish his interest ranges from family and land to the people’s wealth. He will demand that the Israelite men join military service; their daughters will serve in his palace; he will confiscate their property, and ultimately they will become slaves (v. 17). As the Israelites bear the consequences of their choice, they will cry out but the LORD will not answer them (v. 18). The language used here is characteristic of the period of judges when the people repeatedly face oppression and cry out to Yahweh who in turn delivers them. However, when they will cry out to Yahweh because of the oppression stemming from the reign of their own kings, their cry will fall on deaf ears. Yahweh will not deliver them from the misery and suffering which they have inflicted on themselves. This is in contrast with 7:9 where Samuel cries out to Yahweh on behalf of the Israelites, and Yahweh answers and delivers Israel from the Philistines. The

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<sup>36</sup> Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 73.

<sup>37</sup> Ralph W. Klein, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Samuel*, vol. 10 (Waco, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1983), 76. It is important to note that in this episode, it is less likely that the word means the rights of the king, i.e., the limits to be set to the powers of the king to put a check to the danger of lawlessness. The word most likely denotes the conduct of the king towards Israel. See Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *1 & 11 Samuel*, 73.

<sup>38</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., 157.

<sup>39</sup> Two other key verbs that are repeated in Samuel’s address are *~yf*, “to appoint” (vv. 11, 12) and *!tn*, “to give” (vv. 14, 15). For further discussion on *xq;l'* see H. Ladbergen Seebass, “*xq;l'*” in *TDOT* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 16-21.

thrust of Samuel's warning is that the kind of a king that the people want will create a bureaucracy that will spiritually devastate Israel.

### **Canonical Context**

When we come to the canonical context we find many preceding scriptures that suggest that kingship is not a concept that begins in 1 Samuel; rather, there is evidence that it had been part of Yahweh's plan from the inception of Israel as a nation. In Gen 17:6 (as well as 17:16 and 35:11), Yahweh promises Abraham that he would bless his seed and that "kings will come from you." Although Exod 19:6 does not explicitly talk about kingship, its traces are evident especially when the verse notes that Israel shall be to God a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps the most significant scripture that addresses kingship in the Pentateuch is Deut 17:14-20. This text envisions a monarchic Israel and warns the people against choosing as a king a foreigner who would inevitably lead them astray. Yahweh is providing controls for the future desires of the Israelites. It is evident from this passage that Yahweh "revealed his eternal plan of using kingship as the vehicle of central importance in messianic prophecy and fulfillment."<sup>41</sup> We clearly see here that Yahweh was not anti-monarchy in Israel; in fact, it was his prerogative to choose a king for Israel. What Yahweh objected was the kind of kingship that the Israelites demanded, namely, a king like the nations around them. In Samuel the Israelites fail to bring their request to God and to cry out to him as envisioned in Deut 17:14-20; they have made up their mind on the kind of king they want without letting Yahweh choose one for them.<sup>42</sup>

In Judg 8:22-23 we find the first recorded attempt by Israel to have a king rule over her. Following Gideon's victory over the Midianites, the men of Israel offer to him the hereditary leadership, but he declines to be king and says that "Yahweh will reign over you." Although Gideon rejects this offer, the demand for kingship seems to have persisted as Abimelech's narrative in Judges 9 reveals. Abimelech usurped leadership by killing his

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<sup>40</sup> See Num 24:17-19 which prophesies about a ruler who proceed from Jacob and destroy the enemies of Israel (cf. Gen 49:10). In Rev 1:6 we read that Christ "has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (NIV).

<sup>41</sup> Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 116.

<sup>42</sup> According to Deut 17 Yahweh appoints the king, and the king is accountable to him.

seventy brothers, a tragedy that elicits Jotham's parabolic rebuke. Jotham's fable (Judg 9:7-15; 1 Ki 12) ridicules the idea of the kingship and the types of men who become kings. The fable posits that kingship cannot do anything beneficial for the people. The people's desire to seek protection from the enemy is viewed as a mere myth. George F. Moore observes, "Those who made the thorn king over them put themselves in this dilemma: if they were true to him, they enjoyed his protection, which was a mockery; if they were false to him, he would be their ruin."<sup>43</sup> However, the difference between this episode and I Samuel is that while Abimelech was not divinely appointed, the elders approach Yahweh's representative to appoint a king so that kingship is something granted by Yahweh.

As we have already noted, the problem with Israel's demand for a king like the other nations is that it is a rejection of Yahweh and their unique status; their motive is toxic and detrimental. According to Israel's covenant with Yahweh they were to be a unique people different from the nations (Exod 19:4-6; 33:16; Lev 20:26; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18ff.; 32:8ff. 1 Sam 12:22; cf. Jer 2:11). But Israel now wants to be like the other nations, thus forsaking their unique status in light of their covenant with Yahweh. The divine election distinguished and elevated Israel above all the nations of the earth (Deut 4:6-8). They were to live according to the Torah and rely on the promises of the LORD (Exod 19:4-6; Deut 7:7-11). Therefore, their request is an abandonment of "that self-understanding, that vocation which prized a peculiar form of social organization."<sup>44</sup> In a sense the people have rejected both the covenant and theocracy.

Theocracy is generally agreed to have begun early in Israel's religious constitution. Ps 29:10 states that Yahweh is eternally enthroned as king among the gods. Ps 24:1-10 notes that Yahweh is king of all the earth. The sanctuary itself was established to, among other things, witness to Yahweh's kingship.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, it is apparent that despite Yahweh's kingship the social and political circumstance at the time of Samuel ineluctably heightened the need for the monarchy. Israel was facing both social and political instability due to the threat from the Philistines and the Ammonites, and the perversion of justice by the sons of Eli and Samuel. It is also evident

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<sup>43</sup> George F. Moore, *The International Critical Commentary on Judges* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 249.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 62.

<sup>45</sup> See Num 23:21; Mal 1:14; cf. 1 Sam 12:12.

that justice was generally at low ebb (cf. Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). A king was needed not only to govern the people but also to fight the surrounding enemies and secure Israel's borders. Yet this amounted to a rejection of Yahweh.

The feeling that this was a rejection of Yahweh was widespread in the prophetic tradition as confirmed by Hosea and Ezekiel. According to Hosea, Yahweh gave Israel a king in his anger (Hos 13:11). Ezekiel sees what followed after inheriting the land as blasphemy and treachery against God (Ezek 20:27ff.). The prophet maintains that Yahweh will never again yield to the demand, "Let us be like the nations" (Ezek 20:32); rather, Yahweh himself will be king over Israel (v. 33). Elsewhere, the prophet indicts the kings of Israel for exploiting the people for the benefit of only the rulers (Ezek 34:1-10).<sup>46</sup> But it is also important to note that we also see in 1 Samuel Yahweh's sentiments that favor a monarchy that will operate under theocracy (8:9, 22; 9:15-16). Samuel himself later adopts a favorable attitude towards the monarchy (ch. 12; cf. 9:15-16). The Israelites themselves are eventually won over to Yahweh's version of the monarchy following Samuel's address (10:17-27) as well as a manifestation of the spirit's power in Saul, and Yahweh's direct demonstration of power (12:16-19).<sup>47</sup> The anointing of David as a king after Yahweh's heart may also add weight to the argument that the institution of monarchy was never inherently evil.<sup>48</sup> We do not see any explicit or implicit sentiment in Scripture that Israel was never to have a human king over them. What we see are warnings against forsaking the covenant as they seek to follow the wicked ways of the neighboring nations. The prophets who come after Samuel add their voices to such warnings as they condemn injustice and urge faithfulness to the covenant.

### **Theological and Practical Reflection**

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<sup>46</sup> Solomon is known to have used Israelites as chariot commanders and as (commanders of) his horsemen (1 Ki 9:22). He allegedly had 40, 000 stalls of horses for his chariots, and 12, 000 horsemen (1 Ki 4:26; cf. Deut 17:16). Also see 2 Sam 11:2-5 about David's seizure of Bathsheba, and 1 Kings 21 about Ahab's grabbing of Naboth's vineyard.

<sup>47</sup> Lylér Eslinger, "View Points and Point of View in 1 Sam 8-12" in *JSOT* 26 (1983), 66-7.

<sup>48</sup> Other key texts that support the view that kingship is of Yahweh are Ps 72 and 1 Chr 29:1ff.

Apart from the literary context and canonical usage we also need to address how this passage is significant both theologically and practically. On the one hand, this passage underlines humanity's continuous rebellion against God, while on the other hand, it is a demonstration that Yahweh, rather than ruling over his people with an iron fist, 'honors' human choice even as he exercises his sovereignty. Yahweh views Israel's demand for a king as a rejection of his kingship and as a trend that has persisted since the days of Exodus. Beneath this rebellion is humanity's inclination to become more than it ought to be. The Israelites are not content with the tribal leadership that Yahweh has put in place for them thus far. Like Adam and Eve in the creation account, the Israelites desire more than what the Covenant stipulates; they want to become like the nations. They are convinced that a monarchy similar to what their neighboring nations have will ensure more security and prosperity, and that it will bring more glory. In reality it will make them weaker and reduce them to a state of servitude. That is what happens when humanity opposes the plan of God that he has clearly revealed. There is no true freedom apart from abiding in the purpose of God; the more humanity moves away from the ways of God the greater the bondage it inflicts upon itself.

Related to the preceding discussion is the call to be different, set apart for Yahweh. Such was the thrust of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel. The Israelites were expected to abide by the Torah so that the nations would realize that Yahweh their God is holy. They were to resist any influence from the nations that could lead them away from the decrees of Yahweh. Although institutional change is not intrinsically evil, we have already observed that Israel succumbed to the tragic influence of the nations. This is an incredible illustration that faith and culture cannot be divorced. The Israelites lived among people with different religious, social and political practices.<sup>49</sup> There is no doubt that they were subject to the nations' cultural influences. By giving in to such influence, they violated the covenant. The challenge that Israel faced is not different from what the church is facing: the call to remain holy in this world of darkness demands unwavering faithfulness to the biblical teaching. There is an ever intensifying attraction and appeal to Christianity to conform to the standards of the world. Complacency that characterizes many churches today inhibits

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<sup>49</sup> John Mauchline, ed., *New Century Bible: 1 and 2 Samuel* (Greenwood, S. C.: The Attic Press, 1971), 89.

inward devotion as it seeks to be politically correct and as it succumbs to the “make-me-happy” ideology. Israel’s rebellion against theocracy is not worse than Christianity when it has been dethroned by “Christianism.” The church needs to unreservedly submit to the biblical authority and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that the world may see the light of Christ. Part of this also entails embracing our identity which is articulated in 1 Pet 2:9, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

This narrative not only admonishes faithfulness to Yahweh even as it highlights humanity’s inclination to rebel against the divine authority, but it also demonstrates that Yahweh will always exercise his sovereignty even as he grants human choice. When Samuel presents the people’s request to Yahweh, instead of acting manipulatively, Yahweh accedes to their demand. This episode, however troubling it may be, reveals that God enters a genuine relationship with human beings, whereby there is no passivity or subjugation of human freedom. The fact that God grants the elders’ request does not mean that he is ambivalent and uninterested in mankind; rather, he shows interest in, watches closely over, and gets involved with humanity. Of course being omniscient he knew that Israel would demand a king to rule over them.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, he had previously revealed that Israel would one day be ruled by a king. Yet the Israelites are human beings whose response to God’s covenant is vital. In the words of R. W. L. Moberly, “How people respond to God *matters* to God, and *affects* how God responds to the people.”<sup>51</sup> This does not imply that God is ignorant of the future, but it is the genuine way of showing the value of human freedom and encouraging growth in grace. It is not the same thing as Bernhard Anderson’s comment that “God’s actions are sometimes experimental.”<sup>52</sup> An omniscient God does not need to experiment with mankind in order to know the outcome of their exercise of freedom. Since human beings are not mere robots in their interaction with God, and since God does not undermine human freedom, it was only appropriate for God to grant the people’s request while at the same time warn them of the consequences.

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<sup>50</sup> That is why he provided the controls that we see in Deut 17:14-20.

<sup>51</sup> R. W. L. Moberly, “God Is Not Human That He Should Repent” in *God in the Fray* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 115.

<sup>52</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson, “When God Repents” in *BR* 12:3 (1996), 44.

But we also learn from this narrative that God is sovereign. God interacts with humanity according to the constancy of his nature, life and purposes. Israel's demand for a king cannot frustrate Yahweh's sovereign plan in any way. As he had previously promised, kings will come from Israel (cf. Gen 17:16); Israel shall be to God a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:6), and a ruler will proceed from Jacob and destroy the enemies of Israel (Num 27:17-19; cf. Gen 49:10). Ultimately, this narrative is part of God's broader plan to fulfill his promise to Israel and accomplish his purposes. That is why after the rejection of Saul, God chooses David, a man after his own heart, and from whose lineage came Christ the king of the Jews (Mt 27:11, 29, 37, 42) and the Gentiles (Acts 17:7).<sup>53</sup> Thus in his sovereignty God guided the history of Israel, leading to the inauguration of his kingdom with the coming of Christ, about whom Scripture testifies, "Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom" (Ps 45:6; cf. Heb 1:8).

### **Conclusion**

In summary, throughout this article we have sought to demonstrate that kingship was actually part of Yahweh's plan for Israel. According to Deut 17, it was the LORD's prerogative to choose a king for Israel. When the elders approached Samuel to appoint a king for them Yahweh was displeased because they did not follow the Torah. Moreover, the people's motive was purely militaristic and pragmatic. They wanted a king to lead them in battles. They also wanted to be like the other nations. They were dissatisfied with theocracy as well as the failed institution of judgeship. Thus throughout the narrative, the reader has to reckon with the fact that the elders' request amounts to disobedience to Yahweh, yet such disobedience does not demonize kingship. In the end Yahweh's sovereignty is affirmed as he leads Israel towards his desired end. He later chooses David, a king after his own heart, from whose lineage came the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

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<sup>53</sup> See Mt 5:35; 21:5; 25:34, 40; Eph 5:5; Rev 15:3.

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