

Study Notes for 1 Samuel 8:10-22

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Conforming Costs

Setting

In the opening of 1 Samuel 8, we saw the people of Israel move toward setting a king over them. Though they were to seek a king at a point in their growth (Deut 17:14-20), according to their godly judge Samuel they were acting wrongly here. God instructs Samuel that the people are acting even worse than he thought, but nevertheless he was to give them what they asked for, after giving them a solemn warning:

God sends Samuel as a witness to the people, and his testimony consists of a very grace warning.... Samuel must perform "against them" as a witness; the preposition is a signal that God and Samuel are going to put great pressure on an opponent in the political and legal struggle for the proper constitution. By having "the Manner of the King" brought in the form of a testimony, God ensures that the audience are legally bound to the new form of government - at least if they are so stupid as to not go back on their resolve after the warning; they are given a last chance to do this - and thus become fully responsible for the renewal and its consequences.¹

Literary Context and Outline: Conforming Costs (8:10-22, within 1-22)²

1 Samuel 8-12 depicts "The Transition to Monarchy," from a tribal society to a unified kingdom.

God had anticipated this growth phase and pre-advised them how to do it in Deut 17:14-20. In 1 Sam 8:1-9, Israel takes a rash and badly aimed step toward becoming a kingdom. Here in 1 Sam 8:10-22, Samuel takes the next step with them, following God's instruction: they must count the costs before rushing ahead in their own desires!

Setting	vv. 1-3
A people → Samuel: request for a king	vv. 4-5
B consultation: Samuel prays to God (report)	v. 6
B' God provides Samuel with explanation and instruction	vv. 7-9
A' Samuel → people: long speech on the king's rights and privileges	vv. 10-18
A people → Samuel: stick to their request for a king	vv. 19-20
B consultation: Samuel conveys this to God (report)	v. 21
B' God orders Samuel to obey	v. 22abc
A' Samuel → people: 1-clause "answer"	v. 22de

Study Notes: The "Justice" of the King (8:10-22)

A. Samuel Solemnly Warns of "the Rights" the King Will Claim (vv. 10-18)

8:10 The people are described as those "*asking* (participle of *sha' al*) for a king." "Ask" is a key theme of the books of Samuel. From barrenness, Hannah had asked the Lord for a

¹ J. P. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis, Vol. 1* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1993), p. 343.

² Outline from J. P. Fokkelman, 1993, p. 324.

son and “gave him to YHWH all the days of his life” (1:11), while the people “ask for a king” for their own self-esteem. Samuel = “asked from God”; Saul = “asked for” from the people. The two requests lead in two different directions, toward two different destinies. Be careful what you ask for; God just may give it to you.

8:11-18 “This is what the king who will reign over you will do (*lit*: “the king’s judgment [or custom]”: he will take your sons...” **The governing verb: “take” + “for himself”** – “The governing term of Samuel’s characterization of monarchy is the word “take” (vv. 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17). It is the business of a centralized government ‘to take,’ whether by taxation, confiscation, or the draft.”³

In the list of the king’s “judgment” (vv. 11-18), Samuel takes no chance that the people could miss the point because of details or subtlety. He starts right with each one’s most precious possessions of “sons” and “daughters,” fills in with everything else of value, and concludes with finally loss of their own identity with the concluding, emphatic: “you yourselves will become slaves.”

<i>the people’s choice: the cost</i>	
he will take:	v. 11
<i>your future:</i>	
your sons → servants for battle, food & equipment	vv. 11-12
your daughters → servants for luxury & food	v. 13
<i>your sustenance:</i>	
your best fields, vineyards & groves → his attendants	v. 14
<i>your wealth:</i>	
your top grain & vintage → his officials	v. 15
your menservants & maidservants → his own use	v. 16
your best herds & flocks → his own use	v. 16-17
<i>your identity:</i>	
you yourselves → his servants	v. 17

When the people demanded a king, what they had in mind was the impressive display of grandeur that would show that there were as important as the neighboring nations and give them a strong central authority that would be able to get rid of the corruption that was so scandalously evident in Samuel’s sons quickly and efficiently. They wanted a government that had style and clout. What they never considered was that the style and clout would be for the king’s benefit, not theirs.⁴

The installation of the king seems very expensive for the average Jo(seph) in Israel, as military conscription, high taxes, real estate misappropriation, cronyism, patronage, sponsorship scandals, and slavery seem costly indeed.⁵

8:11-12 “your sons” – conscripted into military service for the king’s own pride and protection:

i. professional soldiers:

runners before the king’s chariot: How big is your entourage?:

³ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, OT Ed. Patrick D. Miller, Gen. Ed. James L. Mays (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), p. 63.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p. 56.

⁵ Keith Bonder, *1 Samuel, A Narrative Commentary*, Hebrew Bible Monographs, 19 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), p. 74

“The employment of ‘runners’ is a form of vanity particularly associated with young charioteers like Absalom... and Adonijah” (2 Sam 15:1; 1 Kgs 1:5) (Robert Gordon)... “When a man has nailed fortune to his chariot-wheels he is apt to travel about in rather a proud fashion” (Anthony Trollope).⁶

In 1 Sam 22:17 “runners” also refers to bodyguards in the king’s court. The king will turn precious sons into runners for vanity. How expensive is our “secret service?”

captains of thousands and fifties – this represents the entire range of military units from tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands.

ii. professional farmers to do his plowing and his harvesting: a merism denoting the whole of the agricultural cycle; royalty has a habit of developing expensive tastes and enormous appetites.

iii. professional artisans for the king’s war machine – note the emphasis on war:
<war> – <peace> – <war>

8:13 “your daughters” – *perfumers and cooks and bakers* – professional workers to feed the king’s sensual and bodily appetites.

8:14 “the best of your fields, vineyards and olive groves” – the king will confiscate private property and give it to his own servants. These high-ranking officials had the title ‘*ebed melek*’ (“servant of the king,” 2 Kgs 22:12; 25:8) following their name.⁷

8:15 *tithe your seeds and your vintage* – besides the normal 10% there will now be an additional agricultural tax to feed the king’s trusted officials (“officers” here is ‘*sariys*’ which often means “eunuchs”, and which may suggest that the king will have a harem as well).

8:16 “your servants and maidservants and the *best* of your cattle and your donkeys” – the people’s choice of king will take not only all that is most precious, but also the choice means of producing more.

8:17 “you yourselves will be slaves” – finally you will lose even yourselves! Monarchy, like the other nations, will eventually undo all the freedom and covenant-based living accomplished by the Exodus. The people will return to slavery, not from outside oppression, but by their own king. Nothing the people have will be free from the king’s grasp, whether it is their children, their land or their means of production. Nothing will be left in Israel that is sacred.

8:18 “you will cry out...but the Lord will not answer” – The tragic ending is even worse than the captivity in Egypt, for Israel will cry out in that day, and unlike the days of the Exodus, this time the Lord will not answer (Micah 3:4; Heb 2:11). God will not save Israel from the pre-warned consequences of their own choices. As Peterson says:

A free life of faith, lived in the vast and gracious mysteries of God, is a large, demanding life – it is far easier to live small, reduced to the visible and tangible requirements of petty gods and tyrant kings... When people transfer their expectations for righteousness and salvation from God to government, they are sure to be disappointed.⁸

⁶ Both quotes in Keith Bonder, 2008, p. 75.

⁷ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 259.

⁸ Eugene Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p. 56.

B. The People Insist upon Their Request (vv. 19-20)

- 8:19 “No!” Their response could not be more emphatic. With no thought, reflection, or prayer the people refuse the kingship of YHWH, and insist on having their own way. Such an emphatic “no” will find its climax in the gospel when Pilate asks the Jews, “Shall I crucify your king?” and the chief priests gave the blood-curling answer, “We have no king but Caesar!” (John 19:15).
- 8:20 “fight our battles” – the people reveal that their motives include fear (lacking faith in God), timidity, and eagerness to trade in responsibility and maturity for a feeling of security, even if that feeling is illusory. They want an imposing figure of a king to fight their battles: “a king who gives the appearance of security, and adds the prestige that comes through a military program”.⁹

C. Samuel Reports the Response to God (vv. 21-22)

- 8:21 lit: “when Samuel heard all the speech of the people, then he spoke them into the ears of YHWH.” Both sadly and a bit comically, Samuel seems in shock. Speaking “into the ear” is usually used of major news, either unexpected or crucial (e.g., Gen 20:8, 44:18); as if Samuel thinks that God will be surprised at the news, or – maybe as a wild hope – that God somehow has a new explanation. God has already told Samuel what to do (8:7); but Samuel tries again. Can he have a lack of full faith – or is he just in bewilderment?
- 8:22 The second cycle of people’s request / Samuel’s report / God’s instruction / Samuel’s announcement is much shorter than the first. God patiently repeats what Samuel did not want to hear: “Listen to them and give them a king.”

But Samuel’s response is less than direct: “Everyone go back to his town.” Is he stalling for time, or waiting for God’s timing in identifying the people’s king? Among the views:

Though God has just instructed Samuel to comply with the people’s demand for a monarchy, Samuel’s immediate response instead is to send them back to their homes. His acquiescence remains grudging: he appears to be buying time, perhaps with the claim that he needs to find a suitable candidate.¹⁰

The plot of the unit I Sam 8 does not attain completion by any manner or means, and ascends to a higher plan: an entire Act is needed for the realization of the far-reaching initiative of the people as actantial subject. And its curious final word renders doubtful anew whether Samuel is going to take up the position of a helper or an opponent.¹¹

Questions

1. What are you asking for? (8:10) How could the people of Israel evaluate their desire and request for a king, to better align them with God’s will for them and with their own long-term benefit? How do you evaluate your petitions to God? Are requests for our own benefit always a good course, since after all we are the people of God and indwelt by the Holy Spirit?

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, OT Ed. Patrick D. Miller, Gen. Ed. James L. Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 65.

¹⁰ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), p. 45.

¹¹ Fokkelman 1993, p. 355.

2. A leader's responsibility: As leader of Israel (despite their stated preference for pomp-and-circumstance king), God insists on giving the people a full and detailed explanation of the dangers and difficulties they are heading for (8:10-18), even though He knows in advance that they will reject the advice (8:7-9). What does this tell us about our responsibilities as parents? in business or professions? as friends? as national citizens? as fellow church members? In what ways are our responsibilities based on commitments of covenant and care, or on what we expect as results?
3. God's diligent care: Though God reluctantly and with great pathos gave the people what they wanted, he was not giving up on them. How might it be serving the best long-term purposes of the people for God to let them get their own way, even though that was sure to lead to great difficulties? Many of us, imagining ourselves in God's position, might choose instead to insist that the people accept a "wise" choice. Would that be likely to turn out better for the people in the end?
4. The destined king: In the gospels (see *Mark*), the first secret of the kingdom is that Jesus is indeed the promised king, Messiah. It shouldn't surprise us that Jesus preferred the title "Son of Man" to Messiah, since the latter was so misunderstood. Once the disciples come to realize that Jesus is the Messiah (*Mark 8*), the rest of the gospel is devoted to Jesus redefining what Messiah means. In Samuel's time, in what ways were the people's idea of a king different from the ideal Messiah-king? Do we today still have some of the same self-defeating, "captivating" purposes for a leader that the people of Israel had in demanding of Samuel a king "like all the nations"?
5. A "king like all the nations" in the Church? If Jesus is the model of servant/king, it is our absolute responsibility not to supplant his Lordship in the church with hierarchal leadership. Ray Stedman once said, "If the Protestant Reformation ousted the Pope's authority in the worldwide church, today we have placed a pope in every church." He was speaking of the control many "senior pastors" exert in the governing of their flocks. Jesus insisted, "It shall not be so among you!" (*Mark 10:42-45*) Have you seen churches go the way of a "king like all the nations"? How can that tendency be undone? If we the Church were following model of Christ's kingdom closely, would we see significant differences from today's situation of major divisions (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) and denominations? Would many church organization structures look different?

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