

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – June 10, 2018

## [1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 8](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### **Commentary on 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 8**

(From *Homiletics*; “When God is Not Enough” – June 10, 2018)

Today's reading from 1 Samuel is part of the narrative arc stretching from chapter 8 to chapter 12 in that book, which recounts, in highly ambivalent terms, the establishment of the Israelite monarchy in the 10th century B.C. Within that narrative block, scholars have identified two literary sources, an older, pro-monarchy (or neutral) source (found in 9:1-10:16; 10:27b-11:15), and a later, anti-monarchy source (found in 8:1-22; 10:17-27a; 12:1-25). That both viewpoints have been preserved in the received text is testimony to the honesty and integrity of the redactors of the Hebrew canon.

The request of the Israelite elders for a king is preceded by an extended account of Israel's decline during the closing years of the period of the judges (roughly 1200 – 1000 B.C.). That account (Judges 19-21) includes the story of the internecine warfare that nearly obliterated the tribe of Benjamin, concluding with the grim verdict of Judges 21:25, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." That summary judgment echoes Judges 17:6 and similar statements about the lack of leadership being the result of Israel's having no king (e.g., Judges 18:1; 19:1).

The literary background to the bleak assessment in the concluding chapters of Judges was the Benjaminites war (Judges 20:1-48), which was the almost-all-Israel tribal response to the outrage committed against a Levite's concubine (Judges 19) by the men of Gibeah, a city in the tribe of Benjamin (19:16). As the narrative as we have it in the canon unfolds, the outrage of one rape is multiplied 400 times by the time the conflict grinds itself out (cf. Judges 21:12, 19-23). The narrative cumulative effect of outrage being met by counter outrage is to depict a country descending into immoral, self-destructive chaos, with no charismatic leader to bring it back from the edge of self-annihilation.

The negative assessment of the decentralized institution of judgeship will elide into an equally critical view of the decentralized priesthood in 1 Samuel 2:12-26 and 2 Samuel 8:1-3, the notices of the corrupt sons of Eli and Samuel. (In the Jewish Bible, the book of Ruth does not interrupt the summary negative judgment of judgeship and priesthood at the end of the book of Judges and the beginning of the book[s] of Samuel, as it does in the Christian Bible. In the Jewish Bible, Ruth is part of the Writings, the third division of the Jewish scriptures, and not, as in the Christian Bible, part of the historical books.) The combined negative assessments, along with the narrative of Israel's military defeat at the hands of the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:1-7:1), are used to set the literary stage for the almost inevitable emergence of kingship in Israel, a highly controversial and, in some religiously conservative circles, bitterly resented innovation.

The account of the emergence of kingship opens with the elders assembling at Ramah (identified with modern er-Ram, about 5 miles north of Jerusalem) to demand that Samuel, as the chief religious, military and political figure (cf. 1 Samuel 7:2-17), appoint a king to govern Israel (8:4-5). The elders were the leading (and usually senior) members of their families, clans, villages and tribes, and as such represented the traditional power and rights of ordinary Israelites.

The rationale the elders provide Samuel for requesting a king -- that Samuel is aged and his sons are unworthy to be his successors (8:5) -- does not logically lead to the request for a king. The solution closer to hand would have been a request (or demand) for Samuel's abdication and his replacement (and his sons' replacements) with a new judge. The request for a king is based on the elders' comparison of Israel with other nations (cf. Deuteronomy 17:14), always a perilous course of action for the chosen people.

That Samuel had appointed his sons judges (8:1) is another piece of evidence of the decline of this once-venerable institution in ancient Israel. Judges were charismatic leaders upon whom the spirit of the Lord rested in times of national crisis, providing extraordinarily gifted leadership on an ad hoc basis. The underlying theological principle remained that Yahweh was Israel's true leader, with the judges as temporary, on-the-ground viceroys. Unlike the priesthood, which was an inherited office, judgeship was never intended to be passed from father to son, as Samuel has done. Even the feared and revered Samuel does not escape the negative historical judgment of the biblical narrator.

In verses 6-9, the narrator reports the displeasure of both Samuel and the Lord with the people's request, with the deity contextualizing that request within the history of faithlessness Israel has displayed toward their covenant with God from the moment of their liberation from Egypt until "this day" (v. 8). Apostasy ("forsaking me") and idolatry ("serving other gods," both in verse 8) were perennial temptations that Israel routinely failed to resist. The Israelites' request for a king is yet another manifestation of their habitual waywardness.

The "ways of the king" (vv. 11-17) detail the oppressive nature of ancient Near Eastern monarchies: military conscription (vv. 11-12a), corvée (forced labor, vv. 12b-13, 16) and royal appropriation of property (vv. 14-15), all summarized simply as "slavery" (v. 17). In short, Samuel is warning the Israelites that by requesting a king, they will be exchanging having been Pharaoh's slaves for self-imposed slavery under their own ruler.

The list of the king's ways is less a catalog of royal vices or abuses (cf. David's notorious behavior with Bathsheba and Uriah, 2 Samuel 11) than simply a candid, albeit prejudicial, presentation of typical ancient despotism. Samuel lists what the Israelites will sacrifice to have a king with no mention of kingship's benefits (which included, among other accomplishments, the creation of a court culture that very likely produced the Yahwistic and Elohist strands of the Pentateuch, the earliest layers of the Jewish and Christian Bibles).

Despite Samuel's eloquent and elaborate warning of the dire costs of kingship, "the people" (v. 19, and no longer simply their elders) refuse to heed the prophet's counsel and insist on having Samuel anoint a king for them. Unfortunately, the lectionary passage stops short of the succinct and portentous command of the deity that will seal the fate of the Israelites for the next four centuries: "Listen to them and give them a king" (another translation of 8:22a).

The lectionary's optional conclusion (11:14-15) appears as a somewhat "happily ever after" ending on the episode in chapter 8. The verb in verse 14, "renew," indicates that kingship has been both established (9:1-10:24) and affirmed (by Saul's victory over the Ammonites, 10:27b-11:13). Saul's kingship is solidified by being ritualized at Gilgal, one of the ancient shrines that were the historic seats of power (cf. 7:15). Alas, Israel's honeymoon with her dashing new monarch will be short-lived; Saul's political decline and personal descent into madness begins one relatively short chapter later (2 Samuel 13). The Israelites, as today's reading grimly shows, had been warned.

## **Additional Resources**

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out another commentary available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?**