

1 SAMUEL 8

8:1–3

Throughout the books of Samuel and Kings, children who don't keep the Lord's commandments and covenant are described as not walking in the way of their father. One of the conditions of the Lord's covenant with His people included the commandment that children should honor their mother and their father. In ancient times, honoring parents meant keeping the Lord's commandments, which also demonstrated devotion to God.

Samuel had appointed his sons as judges, but they were so unrighteous that the people rejected them.

8:4–7

One of the key questions driving the scriptural narratives in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon is, Who is the king? In the Book of Mormon, the Lord offered a powerful answer through Jacob: "I, the Lord, the king of heaven, will be their king, and I will be a light unto them forever, that hear my words" (2 Nephi 10:13). How people in scripture accept or reject that answer says much about their spiritual state and experiences in life. We see this happening with the ancient Israelites as they transitioned from having God-appointed redeemers/judges to clamoring to have a human king in place of God being their ultimate king. The people asked for a king to be "like all the nations." Instead of relying on the Lord, the people rejected Him and demanded to have a king just like the rest of the small kingdoms surrounding them. Samuel was unhappy with the people's request. He knew that they had rejected God, and he also may have felt personally betrayed by the people with whom he had worked all his life.

The ancient Near East at the time had no major empires but instead had a variety of larger and smaller kingdoms. Each was ruled by a king who had control over a surrounding territory. Occasionally, when one king or another conquered a larger area by force, the people would fall under the rule of the conquering king. In later Israelite history, for example, the king of Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel (in 722 BC), and even later, the king of Babylon conquered the Assyrians and also the Southern Kingdom of Judah (in 587 BC). The peoples in these conquered territories were then ruled by the conquering king.

8:9–12

The Lord told Samuel to warn His people what it would mean to reject Him and to have a human king. In his warning to the people, Samuel listed the evil that a king could bring. The young men of the kingdom would be forced to fight the king’s battles. Those that had to “run before the chariots” would be the ground troops, those most likely to be on the front lines of battle. The king, not the people, would decide who were soldiers, who were farmers, and who were artisans. In a very real sense, the king would have power over all the personal decisions individuals could make. The people would give up their freedom, letting someone else—not God—take absolute control over their lives. Compare Samuel’s reasoning with the ancient Israelites about the problem of kingship with the second King Mosiah’s reasoning with the Nephites about the problem of kingship in Mosiah 29.

8:13

Under a human king, the young women would be forced to work in trades that the king selected for them—all to serve the king and provide him with perfume, cooks, and bakers.¹ Notice that the people would be pressed into serving the human king instead of the divine king.

8:14–17

Besides the king forcing people to serve him in war, growing food, and making supplies, he would also collect taxes. The words “and ye shall be his servants” (verse 17) was a warning as well as a condemnation that the people had rejected the Lord and would end up serving a human king instead of the divine King.

¹ The word translated as “confectionaries” only appears once in the entire Hebrew Bible. The word *raq-qa-khot* is related to words that translate to “perfume.”

8:18

The final words of warning show that since the people refused to listen to the Lord, He would in turn not listen to them in their time of need. Notice how this is fulfilled in the Book of Mormon when the people under the wicked King Noah rejected and killed the prophet Abinadi (Mosiah 17). Later when they were enslaved by the Lamanites, God was slow to hear their cries (Mosiah 21:15). He did eventually liberate them and lead them to salvation (Mosiah 22), just as He had done in the Exodus for their Israelite ancestors who were in bondage to the Egyptians.

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