



Israel's First King: The Desire to be like other Nations (1 Sam 8 - 10)

Commentary: Week Six

New American Commentary¹

II. The Lord Gives Israel a King “Such as All Other Nations Have”

This second major section of 1, 2 Samuel details the outworking of one of the Torah's most important predictions, the transfer of supreme social influence in Israelite culture from judges and Levites to kings. These chapters function as a historical commentary on [Deut 16:18–17:20](#) and provide insights into both the proximate and underlying causes for Israel's immutable decision to be ruled by an earthly king. As presented in [1 Samuel 8](#), the following political, military, and spiritual factors underlay Israel's demand for a change of leadership:

1. The failure to establish a system producing an adequate number of qualified judges to lead Israel ([8:3–5](#); cf. [Deut 16:18](#)). In particular, the ability of the judgeship system to provide a system of succession failed. Four different judges were mentioned in the Bible as having sons who held positions of leadership following their fathers' deaths. In three of the cases—Gideon's, Eli's, and Samuel's—the sons were portrayed as unworthy successors. In the one instance where apparently successful succession did occur—Jair—it does not appear to have been carried on past one generation ([Judg 10:4](#)).

2. The desire of the people to have a national, rather than local or regional, government (cf. [8:4](#)). Samuel is the first judge in the Bible who was accorded truly national status—eleven times in the Hebrew Bible, Samuel is noted as leading all Israel or at least being influential throughout all Israel. Biblical narrative accounts give no suggestion that any of the judges prior to Samuel ministered to all Israel.

Samuel's influence as both prophet and judge exceeded his regional boundaries, suggesting that he was a transitional figure, preparing Israel for more formal national leadership. His leadership over extensive regions indicates that Israel was moving away from the Torah ideal of numerous simultaneous judgeships ([Deut 16:18](#)). Likely this situation came about because of a lack of qualified candidates in many localities (cf. [8:2–3](#)), reflective of the generally degraded state of Israelite society at that time. While exercising less control than a king, Samuel's career seems to have been a necessary event in preparing Israel for monarchy.

3. The perceived need for more human military leadership in armed conflicts against other nations (cf. [8:20](#)). Israel's elders considered the tribes' external military threats to be sufficiently serious to warrant a fundamental change in leadership style. It is reasonable to assume that economic considerations, especially the desire of wealthy Israelites to preserve their wealth from foreign confiscation, played a key role in the call for a strengthened military structure.

4. The desire of the people to have a form of national government that was “like the other nations” (cf. [8:5](#), [20](#)). The Torah had foreseen a day when Israel would desire a king “like the nations” ([Deut 17:14](#)) surrounding them, and in the latter part of Samuel's career that day came. The Torah implicitly suggests that this event would be an undesirable one, since Israel was to be fundamentally different from the other nations; the Lord was to be their king, with the nation set apart for service to their divine monarch.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 110-132.

5. The more fundamental reason for Israel desiring a king, however, was spiritual: the Israelites had rejected God as their king (8:7). The Bible indicates that the concept of the Lord's kingship over Israel was as old as the foundations of Israelite society, being traced to Moses (Deut 33:5) and acclaimed by non-Israelites (Num 23:21). Any attempt to have an earthly king to take the Lord's rightful place (cf. 8:20) would end catastrophically.

Remarkably enough, the Lord honored the people's request, giving them precisely what they requested—Saul, a king “such as all the other nations have” (cf. 8:5). Saul, son of Kish, was as physically impressive—even his height is reminiscent of the other nations (cf. 9:2; Num 13:28)—and spiritually blind as the pagans. Saul's unfitness to lead the Lord's people is foreshadowed already in the writer's opening narrative portrait of Israel's first king (9:3–10:16). There Saul is depicted as a bad shepherd, a metaphorical image in Semitic societies of an incompetent or ruinous leader.

This dark hint is reinforced in the writer's selection of narrative details that illustrate spiritual incompetence of almost legendary proportions. Because of his spiritual obtuseness, Saul was able to live within five miles of Samuel, the most significant spiritual figure since Moses, and yet be completely ignorant of the prophet-reformer's existence. So complete was Saul's darkness that he had to be told by his servant that a prophet could help him, and even then Saul assumed that prophets needed to be hired to perform their divine task. He displayed a fundamental ignorance of basic Torah regulations in such areas as diet and military conduct, and when he did institute Torah-based reforms, he exempted himself from them. His hypocrisy was most glaring when he attempted to justify his failure to destroy the Amalekites (15:9; cf. Exod 17:14; Num 24:20; Deut 25:19) and when he sought guidance from sources explicitly forbidden by the Torah (28:3–19; cf. Exod 22:18; Lev 19:31; 20:6; Deut 18:10–14).

Clearly deliberate parallels are established between Saul and Achish, the Philistine king of Gath, further reinforcing the notion that Saul was a king “such as all the other nations have.” Both were impressed with David and had him serve as a personal bodyguard; both believed David was a serious threat to Saul; and both misjudged David, though in opposite ways.

The biblical writer passes judgment on Saul for his failure to live up to fundamental Torah guidelines. But more importantly the writer faults Israel for desiring a king who was not “after God's own heart,” that is, wholeheartedly devoted to God.

1. Samuel's Sons are Rejected as Judges

8:1–3 Samuel was the third Levitical judge mentioned in the Bible, Moses (Exod 18:13–26) and Eli (1 Sam 4:18) being the first two. When he grew old, Samuel obeyed the Torah (cf. Deut 16:18) by appointing judges—in this case his sons Joel and Abijah—to function as judges in Beersheba (vv. 1–2). The succession of Eli, Samuel, and his sons suggests that an attempt was being made to bring Israel back to the original Torah pattern of hierocracy, or at least rule by Levites (cf. Deut 17:8–13). Perhaps the belief was that Levites, members of the tribe divinely entrusted with the task of preserving the divine revelation and providing spiritual leadership for Israel, were uniquely qualified to provide the sort of leadership Israel truly needed.

Israel's experiment with hierocracy came to an abrupt halt, however, when Samuel's sons Joel and Abijah “turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice” (v. 3). Their actions were clearly in violation of the Torah (cf. Exod 23:8; Lev 19:15; Deut 16:19) and were certain to create conflict in society.

2. Israel's Elders Demand a King

8:4–6 An influential delegation of Israel's tribal leaders (lit., “all the elders of Israel”) came to Samuel at his home in Ramah to confront him with the failures of the existing form of government and to propose an alternative (v. [4](#)). The fact that leaders from all tribes “gathered together” suggests the existence of some sort of ruling council or political body above the tribal level.

The elders began their meeting with Samuel by delineating the facts of the present: Samuel had entered his years of physical decline, and his successors did “not walk in [his] ways” (v. [5](#)). The apparently imminent return to the dismal pattern of failed judgeships, which Israel had known for so many years, would not be tolerated by the people. An alternative pattern, one foreseen in the Torah and practiced by Israel's neighbors, was now demanded by the elders: “Appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.” In spite of its apparent attractiveness, the elders' demand contained at least one aspect that violated a fundamental tenet of the Torah. Israel was to be distinct from the nations (cf. [Lev 20:26](#); [Num 23:9](#)), and moves motivated by a desire to conform to pagan ways were bound to create problems. No doubt this request also was heavily motivated by the elders' desire to defeat oppressive enemies (cf. [12:12](#)). However, it amounted to an attempt to accomplish through a political act that which could only be achieved through ongoing spiritual responsibility (cf. [Judg 3:4](#)).

Samuel is consistently portrayed as the ideal prophet. As such, he was necessarily a supporter of the Torah. Not surprisingly, therefore, the elders' request “displeased Samuel” (v. [6](#); lit., “was evil in the eyes of Samuel”). Before formulating a response to the elders, however, the prophet wisely took the issue before the Lord in prayer.

3. The Lord Grants the Elders' Sinful Request

These verses represent one of the most significant connective links bonding the history and theology of the Torah to those of the Latter Prophets. Here the Lord establishes the thesis that Israel's history “from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day” was one continuous experience of “forsaking me and serving other gods” (v. [8](#)). Against this backdrop, Israel's demand for an earthly king is presented as merely the latest instance of their long-standing pattern of rejection.

This tragic consistency in Israel's relationship with the Lord presaged an ominous future for Israel. As envisioned by Samuel, the earthly king that Israel demanded would assume rights otherwise reserved for the Lord, Israel's divine king; he would demand a “tithe” of Israel's grain, vintage, and flocks (vv. [15](#), [17](#); cf. [Lev 27:30](#), [32](#)); he would lay claim to their land and even their own beings (vv. [11–14](#), [16](#); cf. [Lev 25:23](#)). Unlike the Lord, however, human kingship would not result in deliverance for Israel but rather oppression reminiscent of what the people had experienced under Egypt (cf. [Exod 2:23](#)), Aram Naharaim (cf. [Judg 3:9](#)), Moab (cf. [Judg 3:15](#)), and the Midianites (cf. [Judg 6:6–7](#)).

In a move that would determine the shape of Israel's history from that day forward, Israel's elders ignored Samuel's warning and restated their demand for a human king. Consistent with his pattern of fulfilling even Israel's sinful requests (cf. [Num 11:18](#), [31](#)), the Lord acceded to their will. A troubling future for Israel was thus assured.

8:7–9 The narrator was careful to note that Samuel waited for the Lord to weigh in before taking any actions on the matter. The Lord's directives to the elderly prophet were threefold: (1) heed the people's request (v. [7](#); lit., “Hear in the voice of the people”), but (2) “warn them solemnly” (v. [9](#); lit., “warning you shall warn them”), and (3) inform them of the consequences associated with their demand. These instructions are surprising in view of the underlying condition that prompted the elders' request.

Samuel was stung by the people's rejection of his efforts, but the source of their demand was not to be found in their relationship with him or his sons. Instead, it lay in their troubled relationship with God; Israel had rejected the Lord as their king (cf. [Num 14:11](#)). The people's demand for an earthly king represented the political manifestation of a spiritual problem.

[8:10–18](#) Having received the word of the Lord, the prophet carried it back “to the people who were asking for a king” (v. [10](#)). Then in the third-longest recorded speech by Samuel in the Bible (eighty-five words in the Hebrew) he provided the people with a sober description of what they could expect from a king. Dominating Samuel's characterization of Israelite kings is the portrayal of the oppressive control they would take of Israelite lives, families, and possessions. In short, kings would be “takers” who would diminish others to further their own interests (cf. [Deut 17](#)).

As Samuel pointed out, the decision to have a permanent king meant much more than the addition of one person to the circle of power in Israel. It entailed the establishment of a permanent, multitiered bureaucratic institution utilizing the services of thousands of individuals. To underwrite this form of government, vast quantities of personal and family resources would have to be given over to the king.

Human resources of every description would be required for the maintenance of a monarchy. As listed by Samuel, two primary categories of governmental employees would be needed, military and administrative support personnel. Military personnel included those who would serve in the royal honor guard (v. [11](#)); those who would comprise the cavalry, a strategic military strike force (v. [11](#)); those in a professional officer corps (v. [12](#)); those involved in weapons production (v. [12](#)); and those charged with the maintenance of a strategic food supply (v. [13](#)).

Administrative support positions included those involved with the general maintenance of a high quality of life for the royal family and officials, most of whom would have been relatives of the king. From the ranks of the general population would have to come those who would serve as cooks and bakers (v. [13](#)), perfumers (v. [13](#)), and general laborers (v. [16](#)).

In addition to human resources, large quantities of material would be needed to sustain the bureaucracy. Though the king would own many fields (v. [14](#); cf. [Eccl 2:5–6](#)), the burden of providing a permanent food supply for this institution would fall on the population at large. The people would have to hand over a “tithe” of their grain, vintage, and flocks (vv. [15](#), [17](#)). In addition to food, the royal institution would need a sustained supply of beasts of burden (v. [16](#)), the engines of field labor and commerce.

Placing this heavy burden on the backs of the citizens of Israel's twelve tribes would have the practical effect of reducing them to slaves (v. [17](#)). As a result, the people would “cry out for relief from the king” (v. [18](#)) as though he were an enemy. However, the Lord would not grant them a respite at that time. Israel would one day be freed from the burden of a royal bureaucracy, but only after outside forces had reduced the royal bastions to rubble.

[8:19–22](#) In spite of the prophet's sober warning, the people “refused to listen to Samuel” and reaffirmed their demand for “a king over us” (v. [19](#)). Their previously stated sinful desire to be “like all the other nations” (see comments on [8:5](#)) was now augmented by the additional sin of desiring to remove the Lord from his position at the head of Israel's armies (cf. [Deut 1:30](#); also [Exod 14:14, 25](#); [15:3](#); [Num 10:35](#); [Deut 3:22](#); [4:20](#); [20:1–4](#)). The narrator's portrayal of Israel's rejection of Samuel's warnings is reminiscent of the Torah language depicting Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to submit to Moses; both “did not hear” (v. [19](#)) so as to heed (cf. [Exod 7:4, 13, 16, 22](#); [8:15, 19](#)[[Hb. 11, 15](#)]; [9:12](#); [11:9](#)).

In dutiful fulfillment of his mediatorial role as a prophet (cf. [Num 27:5](#)), Samuel repeated the peoples' words "before the LORD" (v. [21](#)), that is, in the worship center at Ramah (cf. [Isa 37:14](#)). The Lord agreed to their request and commanded the prophet to "give them a king" (v. [22](#)).

Their request having been granted, Samuel dismissed the "men of Israel" to their homes. Thus was set in motion the events that gave Israel a king who was far more "like all the other nations" had than anyone could have imagined.

4. The Lord Selects Saul as King Over Israel

The Lord, the God who answers prayer, responded to Israel's demands for a king by giving them Saul. The narrator's portrait of Israel's first king is artfully equivocal in these four chapters. On the one hand, Saul is described as materially well-to-do and physically impressive; he was able to inspire a following among the Israelites, skillful in battle, and gracious in victory. On the other hand, he was genealogically linked with the most depraved tribe of the period of the judges and is depicted as pastorally incompetent, spiritually ignorant and disobedient, and, at times, oddly irrational. On balance, the portrait is a troubling one and foreshadows the sad outcome that awaits the man and the nation. In keeping with the Torah prophecy (cf. [Gen 49:10](#)), the tribe of Benjamin's representative would not retain kingship for his tribe.

Structural similarities in the introduction and biographies of Saul and Samuel suggest that the writer was inviting a comparison/contrast between these two individuals. Both individuals were introduced with extensive genealogies. Both came from the same region of the country and rose from obscurity to national prominence. Both had names etymologically linked to the same verb, one meaning "requested." Both led Israel in battle against the Philistines. Both built altars to the Lord. Yet as the Saul narratives progress, the contrasts between Saul and Samuel in matters of supreme importance for the writer will far outweigh the similarities. Whereas Samuel was for the writer the embodiment of leadership in submission to the Lord, Saul was a clear example of leadership at odds with the Lord.

(1) Saul is Introduced [9:1-21](#)

[9:1-2](#) As in the case of Samuel, Saul's formal introduction is preceded by the introduction of his father. Kish, like Elkanah, was supplied with a four-generation genealogy (cf. [1:1](#)). He was "a man of standing" (v. [1](#); **Hb.** lit., "powerful man of strength/might/wealth"); the use of this phrase, in combination with the notation that the family owned slaves, donkeys, and oxen (cf. [11:5](#)), suggests that Saul came from one of the most influential families in Benjamin.

Besides his favorable family situation, Saul himself was "an impressive young man [**Hb.** *bāḥûr wātôb*; lit., "chosen and good"] without equal among the Israelites" (v. [2](#)). The feature that most obviously set Saul apart from other Israelites was his physical appearance; he was "a head taller than any of the others." Although this characteristic would normally be considered an asset, the narrator may have included this detail as a subtle indictment of Israel's first king. Saul is the only Israelite specifically noted in the Bible as being tall; elsewhere it was only Israel's enemies whose height was noted (cf. [Num 13:33](#); [Deut 1:28](#); [2:10](#); [9:2](#); [1 Sam 17:4](#)). Israel had asked for a king "like all the other nations" ([8:20](#)), and the Lord was giving them the desires of their heart, even down to the physical details!

9:3–10 Saul’s unfitnes to serve as the shepherd of the Lord’s flock is further suggested in the unusual narrative recounted here. Semitic leaders throughout ancient times were often referred to as shepherds; the Torah’s most significant patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses—were also depicted as skillful shepherds. Yet here Saul is portrayed unflatteringly as an incompetent shepherd. So great was his ineptness that he could not even find a few large animals (v. [3](#); Hb. *hā’ātōnôt*, “she-asses”) that had wandered away from his father’s house—ones that ultimately returned home without Saul’s assistance even as he was searching for them ([9:20](#); [10:2](#))! With the aid of a slave (Hb. *‘ebed*) Saul searched exhaustively in the territory of Benjamin and southern Ephraim, including “the area of Shalisha” (= Baal Shalishah? cf. [2 Kgs 4:42](#)) and “the district of Shaalim” (v. [4](#)), probably both regions twenty miles or less from Gibeah, Saul’s hometown.

After a frustrating and fruitless three-day search, Saul and his slave entered “the district of Zuph” (v. [5](#)), the prophet Samuel’s home region located some five miles from Gibeah. There Saul recommended that the search be called off, being concerned that his “father will stop thinking about the donkeys and start worrying about us.” Saul’s servant, however, suggested an alternative plan that ultimately prevailed. Recognizing that the nearby man of God was a “highly respected” (v. [6](#); Hb. *nikbād*, lit. “honored”) individual whose prophetic word was uncannily accurate, he proposed that they seek Samuel’s help in their search.

Saul was initially unwilling to visit a prophet, however, because he lacked payment to hire his services. Saul’s objection was overcome when his slave offered to pay a quarter of a shekel of silver (approx. three grams) to the prophet “so that he will tell us what way to take.” With that issue settled, the pair set out for Ramah, “the town where the man of God was” (v. [10](#)).

At least three features are remarkable about the brief interchange between Saul and his servant in vv. [6–10](#). First is the future king’s profound ignorance of Samuel. Though Samuel lived nearby and was known to “all Israel” ([3:20](#); [4:1](#)), even Saul’s young slave (Hb. *na’ar*), he was unknown to Saul. Second is Saul’s failure to consider seeking divine help in the trials of life. It was Saul’s slave, not Saul himself, who recognized the need for spiritual help in coping with their problems. The future king’s life at this point was devoid of a spiritual sensitivity that looked to the Lord for help. Third is Saul’s assumption that spiritual favors had to be bought; though some unscrupulous prophets might have demanded this (cf. [Mic 3:11](#); [Acts 8:20](#)), no true servant of the Lord would.

Verse [9](#) is significant mainly because of the information it provides regarding the time of 1, 2 Samuel’s final composition. Clearly the overall work was written late enough in time for the common term for a man of God to have changed from “seer” (Hb. *rō’eh*) to “prophet” (Hb. *nābî*).

9:11–13 The fact that Saul and his servant “met some girls coming out to draw water” (v. [11](#)) as they approached the city suggests that they arrived in Ramah/Ramathaim in the early evening, just prior to sundown (cf. [Gen 24:11](#)). Timeless social customs in the Middle East prevented men from having much contact with women in public, but women were permitted to speak even with total strangers under the circumstances presented here (cf. also [Gen 24:13–27](#); [29:9–12](#); [John 4:7–26](#)).

Being an itinerant judge for the region (cf. [7:16–17](#)), Samuel visited his hometown only occasionally. The altar that he had previously constructed there, likely “at the high place” (Hb. *bāmā*), had apparently become a sacred site that served as a local substitute for the ruined worship center at Shiloh (cf. comments on [7:17](#)).

As a respected elderly Levite, Samuel was given special recognition at the local religious observance (cf. [Deut 14:27–29](#)), including the honor of pronouncing a blessing over the sacrifice (cf. [Deut 10:8](#); [21:5](#); [2 Chr 30:27](#)). The ritual would have been part of the evening sacrifice to be held at sundown (cf. [Deut 16:6](#)).

9:14–18 Having walked up the hill from the well, Saul and his servant entered the city gate just as Samuel was “on his way up to the high place.” A providential encounter ensued between these three men. To delineate this point, the narrator notes that on the previous day the Lord “had revealed to Samuel” (v. [15](#); lit., “uncovered Samuel’s ear”) that he would send him “a man from the land of Benjamin” (v. [16](#)). Deeper than any mortal motives driving the encounter were the currents of divine will: the Lord was fulfilling his promise to give Israel their new leader (Hb. *nāgîd*), who would deliver (Hb. *hōšîa*) Israel from “the hand of the Philistines.”

God’s words to Samuel regarding Saul in v. [17](#) are filled with irony: the Hebrew verb *šr*, translated here as “govern,” can equally well mean “restrain/hold back/hinder” or even “imprison.” The core meaning is “to restrain/constrict.” In the majority of its forty-six occurrences in the Hebrew text the word possesses a negative connotation, suggesting imprisonment ([2 Kgs 17:4](#); [Jer 33:1](#)), sterility ([Gen 20:18](#)), silencing ([Job 4:2](#)), or holding back ([2 Kgs 4:24](#)). In fact, [9:17](#) is the only location in Scripture where the word can be taken to mean “rule.” By employing the verb here, the writer was suggesting that the Lord had determined to use Saul’s career as a means of punishing the nation. Saul would literally fulfill the various meanings of this verb. Even as he governed Israel, his policies and behavior would hinder the welfare of the nation and act as a sort of barrier separating Israel from God’s best for them.

Particularly striking in the instructions to Samuel in vv. [16–17](#) is the Lord’s fourfold repetition of the phrase “my people.” Though he had placed Saul in a position of authority over Israel, the Lord was in no way relinquishing his own claim to the nation: Israel would remain the Lord’s own treasured possession (cf. [Exod 19:5](#); [Deut 7:6](#); [14:2](#); [26:18](#)). At his finest Saul would be a mere caretaker of God’s flock (cf. [1 Pet 5:2](#)).

One function of the Saul narratives is to depict the spiritual unfitness of the man who would serve as Israel’s first king. In so doing the writer demonstrates that Saul is spiritually, as in other ways, “a king such as all the other nations have.” Emblematic of Saul’s spiritual blindness is his initial encounter with Samuel. Though Samuel was the most famous and honored spiritual leader in Israel since the time of Moses, when Saul looked at him he saw only a stranger. The contrast between Saul and Samuel is striking: Samuel, the man of spiritual insight (the “seer”), knew all about an obscure young man even before he met up with him; Saul, the paragon of spiritual blindness, knew nothing of the most famous man in Israel even after he encountered him. The narrative motif of Saul’s incapacity to see the true nature of people would later be expressed in the context of his relationships with Jonathan, David, and Ahimelech. He would misjudge Jonathan to be an unworthy son and traitor; David, a treacherous revolutionary; and Ahimelech, a co-conspirator against the throne. All of these misreadings of others resulted in tragedy, both for Saul and others.

9:19–20 Samuel’s response to Saul’s inquiry provides the young man with far more than he requested. Instead of being given directions to the seer’s house, Saul was given the seer himself. In addition, he received a prestigious invitation to a sacrificial meal, free information regarding the lost donkeys (cf. vv. [7–8](#)), and the intimation of a fabulous destiny. Instead of learning about his father’s donkeys, he would learn about himself. The prophet’s words contained a subtle condemnatory note, but they were on the whole extremely positive. At the same time, they were perplexing to Saul.

9:21 Saul’s response ignores his original motive for seeking out the prophet and suggests that his initial concerns had been replaced by a larger issue: why did Israel want him, a Benjamite, to be king? Benjamin was a notorious tribe that had been nearly eliminated through fratricidal wars in the not-too-distant past (cf. [Judg 20:35, 48](#)). Furthermore, Saul’s clan (Matri, cf. [10:21](#)) was by his own admission “the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin.” This latter statement may merely reflect customary deference (cf. [24:14](#); [2 Sam 9:8](#)), or it may be true in ways other than numeric or material. Saul apparently had numerous living relatives ([10:14, 21](#)), and his father, Kish, was well-to-do, possessing land ([11:5](#)), servants ([9:3](#)), oxen ([11:7](#)), and donkeys ([9:3](#)).

Perhaps in the presence of Samuel the seer, Saul was reckoning spiritually: his clan was the least spiritual clan of the most sin-stained tribe. Reinforcing this possibility was the fact that Saul came from Gibeah, a Benjamite town whose citizens (Saul's forebears?) had committed one of the most heinous crimes in Israelite history (cf. [Judg 19:22–26](#)). D. F. Payne surmises that humanly speaking someone from Benjamin would have been a good choice. Its location between Ephraim and Judah would help “reduce rivalries” and “unify Israel in the struggle against the Philistines.” Saul, therefore, could have been “the ideal king for Israel, and at this point in time there was nothing to stop him achieving true greatness.” It was not to be, but the fault was in himself.

(2) Saul is Honored [9:22–25](#)

[9:22–23](#) Samuel is not recorded as responding to Saul's questions. Instead, Samuel assumed the role of gracious host to the travelers and set about tending to their needs. As host to the strangers in the city, Samuel was responsible for providing them with food (cf. [Gen 19:2–3](#)). Thus Samuel brought Saul to the worship center and, as a proper Middle Eastern host, gave him a seat of honor (v. [22](#)). The exact nature of the sacrificial event attended by Samuel and his guests is unknown. The text suggests that the thirty or so men who attended were there by invitation; perhaps it was a new moon sacrifice limited to members of Samuel's clan (cf. [20:18](#), [28–29](#)). The site of the banquet was a rectangular room (Hb. *liškā*) that opened into a courtyard, apparently part of a sanctuary associated with the high place in Ramah.

[9:24–25](#) Since the Lord had told Samuel that he was sending him a guest (v. [16](#)), the faithful prophet had duly prepared for the visitor's arrival, even setting aside the choicest portion of the sacrificial animal, “the leg with what was on it” (v. [24](#)), for Saul's enjoyment.

Following the meal a nocturnal conversation ensued between Saul and the prophet on the roof of Samuel's residence. The roof, always flat in ancient Israel, functioned in warm, dry weather as useful living space (cf. [Deut 22:8](#)). Following the conversation Samuel once again acted as the thoughtful host, permitting Saul to sleep in this preferred location, where breezes would have made the night more pleasant.

(3) Saul is Privately Anointed [9:26–10:8](#)

[9:26–27](#) Rising about daybreak, Samuel summoned Saul from the roof back into the interior of the house so that final preparations could be made for the journey back home. As a proper host, Samuel then accompanied both Saul and the servant to the edge of the city (cf. [Gen 18:16](#)); but in a break with customary practice, Samuel asked Saul to stay behind while sending his servant on ahead. The reason Samuel gave was provocative: “so that I may give you a message from God” (v. [27](#)), a message that was to take the dual forms of a symbolic gesture as well as a spoken word.

[10:1–8](#) In his longest recorded speech to an individual (147 words in Hb.), Samuel accomplished three things: he (1) revealed that Saul was God's choice to be Israel's first king, (2) laid out for Saul a series of confirmatory signs, and then (3) intimated to Saul the proper relationship that was to exist between king and prophet in Israel.

Samuel's “message from God” first took the form of anointing, an action heretofore reserved for sacred objects (cf. [Lev 8:10–11](#), [30](#); [Num 7:1](#)) and Aaronic priests ([Lev 8:30](#)). The act of pouring a flask of specially prepared olive oil on Saul's head apparently symbolized the staking of a divine claim on him,

as well as the outpouring of the Lord’s enabling Spirit into the newly designated king’s life. Payne notes: “In Egyptian culture it was the custom to anoint vassal kings, i.e., minor kings who owed allegiance to the great king of Egypt; in this light we may see the king of Israel not as a king in his own right but as the vassal of Yahweh, who is envisaged as the true king of Israel.” Though Samuel anointed Saul, it was in fact the Lord who was responsible for designating Saul as the leader “over his inheritance” (v. [1](#)). The Lord termed him “leader” (Hb. *nāgîd*) and not “king” here, though the term evidently implied kingship (cf. [1 Sam 12:13](#)) and should not be taken here as a status inferior to that of king. Payne suggests it may mean “king-designate” or “king-to-be.” Samuel’s kissing of Saul was an expression of respect for and acceptance of the Lord’s anointed (cf. [Gen 29:13](#); [33:4](#); [45:15](#); [Exod 4:27](#); [18:7](#)).

Samuel’s artful casting of the affirmation “The LORD anointed you leader over his inheritance” (v. [1](#)) in the form of a question probably resonated with Saul’s own uncertainties. To dispel doubts concerning the Lord’s claim on the young man’s life, Samuel provided Saul with an unprecedented series of validating signs that would be accomplished almost immediately—even before Saul could return to his own home. This early confirmation would in theory help Saul accept his new status immediately and thus prepare him to accept his role as Israel’s king when it was publicly bestowed on him.

The confirmatory signs would take the form of encounters with three successively larger and religiously more significant groups of men. Having left the one man Samuel, Saul would encounter two men with connections to his family; next, he would meet three pilgrims on their way to Bethel, a worship center in Ephraim; finally, on the outskirts of Gibeah-of-God he would come upon a band of prophets. While in the presence of this third group Saul would have a climactic fourth encounter, this time with the Lord’s Spirit. Saul’s encounters with the three groups of men parallel his encounters with Samuel at Ramah. The following chart clarifies the semantic parallels between Saul’s meetings with Samuel and the others.

Saul informed of donkeys’ return (9:20)	Saul informed of donkeys’ return (10:2, 9)
Saul receives the food of sacrifices (9:24)	Saul receives the food of sacrifices (10:4, 9)
Saul receives the holy anointing in the presence of a prophet (10:1)	Saul receives the Spirit of the Lord in the presence of prophets (10:6, 10)

This replay of events in Saul’s life would underline the significance of his encounter with Samuel and at the same time confirm the veracity of the divine word spoken through the prophet.

Saul’s first confirmatory sign would authenticate Samuel’s word concerning the issue that had motivated Saul to seek the prophet in the first place; two men near Rachel’s tomb would inform him of the return of the donkeys and the mounting anxiety for Saul’s safety back in his father’s household. The second sign would confirm the authenticity and legitimacy of Samuel’s act of anointing Saul: three men on their way to a Yahwistic worship center in Bethel (cf. [Judg 20:18, 26](#); [21:2](#)) would present Saul with food designated for use by one who was anointed. Though “the two loaves of bread” (v. [4](#)) were originally intended by the pilgrims as a gift for an anointed Aaronic priest, Saul’s acceptance of the food would require him to accept the legitimacy of his own anointing. The third encounter would confirm Samuel’s assertion that the Lord had also anointed Saul (v. [1](#)). In the presence of a group of prophets, “the Spirit of the LORD will come upon you in power and you will prophesy with them” (v. [6](#)).

In addition to the three prophecies, Samuel also gave Saul his first lesson about the relationship that was to exist between Israel's king and Yahweh's prophet. Under the Lord's inspiration, Samuel and the later prophets had the right to prescribe royal behavior (cf. [1 Kgs 20:13, 22](#)). Furthermore, the plans of Saul (and all Israelite kings who would come after him) were to be subordinate to the prophetic word: "You must wait ... until I come to you and tell you what you are to do" (v. [8](#)). In Israel's monarchy royal authority was derived and secondary; the king was always to be under the Lord's authority. Since the Lord's true prophets were conduits through which the divine word came to kings, these prophets were in a functionally superior position to royalty. Royal power would have divinely set limits, and the Lord's prophets would define those limits. Samuel's words to Saul were thus the opening volley in an enduring struggle between human political will and divinely inspired religious conscience.

(4) Saul is Overpowered by God's Spirit [10:9–13](#)

[10:9–10](#) As Saul turned to leave, "God changed [lit., "overturned"] Saul's heart" (v. [9](#)).

The writer assumes the occurrence of the first two predicted events and depicts only the climactic final one. When Saul passed through "Gibeah of God" (NKJV, "the hill of God,"; **NRSV**, "Gibeath-elohim"), an otherwise unknown site in Benjamite territory "where there is a Philistine outpost" (v. [5](#)), Saul and his servant encountered an itinerant group of prophets playing musical instruments and prophesying. God's Spirit overpowered the formerly spiritually undistinguished Saul, so that he spontaneously "joined in their prophesying" (v. [10](#)).

[10:11–13](#) Saul's uncharacteristic behavior shocked "those who had formerly known him," and they reacted in disbelief: "What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" (v. [11](#)). It also gave rise to ridicule, expressed in a cryptic response to the previous rhetorical questions: "And who is their father?" (v. [12](#)).

In these latter words an unnamed resident of Gibeah seems to have made a cynical wordplay on the meaning of the Hebrew word "father," a term used to indicate both genetic relationship—parenthood (v. [11](#))—and social relationship—authority over a group of prophets (cf. [2 Kgs 2:12; 6:21; 13:14](#)). Though the meaning of the response is contested, it seems intended to degrade Saul and the prophetic movement in general by raising derisive questions about the circumstances of Saul's birth. The logic underlying the saying probably was as follows: To be a prophet, one might be expected to have a father who is a prophet (cf. [Amos 7:14](#)). Yet Kish is not a prophet. Thus either Saul and, by extension, his prophetic brotherhood are not really prophets ("Is Saul among the prophets?") or Saul is only apparently the son of Kish but was actually conceived in an adulterous relationship between his mother and the head of the prophetic band.

Saul's experience at Gibeah parallels an important pneumatic event recorded in the Torah (cf. [Num 11:16–18, 25](#)). In both cases individuals not previously associated with the prophetic movement had the Spirit come upon them in the presence of recognized prophets, and in both cases the nonprophets temporarily manifested the gift of prophecy. The repetition of this sequence of events here and elsewhere in 1 Samuel (cf. [19:18–24](#)) suggests that the Lord's prophets were dynamic conduits through which the divine Spirit might overflow into the lives of others around them with powerful, if temporary, effects. After his unique experience at Gibeah, "Saul stopped prophesying" (cf. [Num 11:25](#)) and continued on his way "to the high place" (v. [13](#)). Perhaps he went there to offer up the bread presented to him earlier (cf. v. [3](#)).

(5) Saul Conceals His Anointing and Empowerment [10:14-16](#)

[10:14-16](#) Returning to his hometown, Saul was approached by his uncle, probably Ner (cf. [14:50](#)), who “asked him and his servant, ‘Where have you been?’ ” (v. [14](#)). Saul indicated that they had been in various places in the region but had ultimately gone to Ramah to visit Samuel. Mention of the prophet’s name sparked further inquiry from Saul’s uncle: “Tell me what Samuel said to you” (v. [15](#)). Saul’s response was honest, though deceptively incomplete: the prophet had informed them that the donkeys had been found. What Saul did not say was more significant than what he said: “he did not tell his uncle what Samuel had said about the kingship” (v. [16](#)). Thus at this time none of Saul’s servants or family members were aware of Saul’s divine selection; it remained a secret shared only by Saul and Samuel. David’s kingship likewise would have a two-stage beginning. Both were selected as kings by the Lord, yet the kingship of both was hidden from their family members for a period of time.

(6) Saul is Publicly Installed as King [10:17-27](#)

[10:17-19](#) In response to the peoples’ desire to have Samuel “set a king over us” (v. [19](#)), the prophet summoned the people to Mizpah (v. [17](#)), one of Samuel’s four centers of judicial activity. Ironically, the site chosen for the installation of Saul the Benjamite as king was also the site where Israel had previously covenanted to exterminate the tribe of Benjamin (cf. [Judg 20:1-11](#)). Ultimately this act would also mean the death of Benjamites, in this case the most honored of Benjamin’s remaining tribesmen (cf. [31:2](#)). Samuel knew it was God’s will to select Saul as king, but he also understood that the day’s events were motivated by Israel’s rejection of God as king.

At the public convocation in Mizpah, Samuel acted not as judge but as prophet. His first act in the assembly was not to proclaim Israel’s new leader but to reveal the Lord’s prophetic judgments. In classic prophetic fashion Samuel began with an indication of his oracle’s true origin: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says” (v. [17](#)). What followed were words of severe condemnation.

The oracle opened with a litany of the Lord’s key saving acts on Israel’s behalf, as described in the Torah. The choice of words in v. [18](#) creates subtle yet deliberate links to the Sinai covenant itself (cp. [Exod 20:2](#)) and suggests that the root of Israel’s present problems was violation of the first commandment given at Sinai (v. [19a](#)). This failure to keep the most basic requirement of Israel’s covenant with King Yahweh could only result in devastating judgment, especially since the alternative to divine leadership was to have a human “king over us.”

[10:20-21a](#) The process utilized here to identify the king was meant to emphasize that Israel’s next leader was selected by divine prerogative, not human manipulation. As presented here, however, it serves a second function: it reinforces the notion that Saul’s selection was a divine judgment against Israel. The only other occasion in which an individual was selected using a method like that described in vv. [20-21](#) was when Achan was identified following a previous disastrous act of rebellion against the Lord (cf. [Josh 7:16-18](#)).

[10:21b-24](#) Curiously, when Saul son of Kish was chosen, “he was not to be found” (v. [21](#)). Human efforts failed to locate Saul, and it was only after inquiring of the Lord that they learned that he had “hidden himself among the baggage” (v. [22](#)), probably a location at the perimeter of the camp.

Saul's actions, however odd, were consistent with the portrayal of Saul to this point; previously the king-designate had shut out both his servant (9:27) and his uncle (10:16) from any knowledge of his destiny. Saul's vacancy at his own coronation suitably foreshadows a reign that would vacate responsibilities associated with the exercise of godly rule and perhaps suggests the lack of wisdom of those who preferred such a king to Yahweh. At the same time, divine assistance in the search for Saul reinforced the conclusion that Saul was indeed the Lord's answer to Israel's demand for a king "like the other nations."

The narrator's choice of details in describing the people's first view of their new king is thematically significant: "as he stood among them he was a head taller than any of the others" (v. 23). Elsewhere in Scripture only noncovenant peoples are noted as being tall. Through the narrator's selection of this feature as the only attribute used to describe Saul, he successfully linked Saul with those who represent a threat to the safety and integrity of the Lord's covenantal people. A further wedge is driven between Saul and the rest of Israel in Samuel's words: "there is no one like him among all the people" (v. 24). All this being true, Saul still was "the man the LORD has chosen," and the people responded with enthusiastic shouts of "Long live the king!" (lit., "May the king live").

10:25–27 In what has been judged to be one of the turning points of Israelite history, the faithful judge Samuel declared to the people "the [divine] judgment of the kingship" (v. 25; *mišpaṭ hammēlukâ*, NIV, "regulations of the kingship") (cp. *mišpaṭ hammelek* in 8:9, 11). In keeping with the stipulations set forth in the Torah, Samuel the Levite made available to the new king "a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites" (Deut 17:18). The exact content of this document is unknown; it may have been a copy of at least a section of the Mosaic legal materials or perhaps an expansion of the materials in Deuteronomy. Like other sacred documents, it was "deposited ... before the LORD." That Samuel's document was the first one explicitly deposited before the Lord since the time of Joshua serves as a silent indictment of the entire period of the Judges. At the same time it elevates Samuel to the highest category of prestige and honor in orthodox Israelite religious history.

At the conclusion of the day's events Samuel, as God's spokesman, was still in charge, dismissing the people, including Saul, who returned to Gibeah (v. 26). Since no capital city had yet been established for an Israelite monarch, Saul's hometown became the de facto first capital of Israel. The beginnings of a standing military force—a necessary component for effective national leadership—are seen as Saul was "accompanied by valiant men [Hb. *hahayil*, "the strength"] whose hearts God had touched." God's action in these men's lives demonstrates that the Lord was supplying his anointed with the vital resources needed to fulfill his responsibilities.

Saul was not without his detractors, however, as "some troublemakers" (lit., "sons of Belial," translated "wicked men" in Deut 13:14 (Eng., 13); Judg 19:22; 20:13; 1 Sam 2:12; 25:17; 30:22; and "scoundrels" in 1 Kgs 21:10, 13; 2 Chr 13:7) "ridiculed him and brought him no gifts" (v. 27). In spite of compelling evidences that the Lord had indeed chosen Saul as Israel's king, these individuals rejected the outcome of the events and withheld all support from their new ruler, including tokens of goodwill customarily presented to newly installed authorities. Admirably, Saul's first act as an oriental monarch was one of grace; he "kept silent" in response to the critics' effrontery instead of ordering their deaths (cf. Prov 16:14).