

Saul's Rejection and the Obscene Underside of the Law

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Abstract

This article uses aspects of Slavoj Žižek's critique of ideology to investigate the paradox in the application of God's judgement in Saul's rejection, and Samuel and David's acceptance in the book of Samuel. Using Žižek's discussion on the obscene underside of the law, it is argued that Samuel's and David's disobedience do not lead to rejection in the same way as Saul's because Saul has transgressed the unspoken supplement to the law: by having a son, Jonathan, who is not corrupt and is suitable to succeed him; by listening to the voice of the people; and by not taking from the people. Furthermore, this paradox reveals something of the ideology of kingship in the narrative of 1 and 2 Samuel, that the "ways of the king" in 1 Samuel 8 are precisely what God demands rather than prohibits in his king.

Key words

Saul; Samuel; kingship; Book of Samuel; ideological critique; Slavoj Žižek

The rejection of Saul but not David as king over Israel is a central tension in the interpretation of 1 and 2 Samuel. When David is guilty of adultery and murder, he is forgiven for his sin and God remains committed to the promise of an eternal Davidic dynasty. By contrast, in 1 Samuel 13, Saul's dynasty is rejected and in 1 Samuel 15, Saul himself is rejected as king because of ambiguous transgressions. Following his rejection, Saul is tormented by a bad spirit from God and consistently opposed by God through the success of his rival David. In this article, I will examine the rejection of Saul and seek to untangle this central paradox in the narrative: why is Saul rejected while Samuel and David retain God's favour?

The first part of the article will identify the paradox, contrasting Saul with Samuel and David in the narrative. I will argue that a close reading of the text leads to the conclusion that Saul is rejected according to unspoken laws. The people are warned of the evils of kingship in 1 Samuel 8, and yet Saul is condemned in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 for *rejecting* rather than *conforming* to these evils. I will then detour into the thought of Slavoj Žižek and his discussion of the obscene underside of the law. Žižek offers an explanation for how spoken and unspoken laws serve a function to sustain power and so I will consider whether this critique of ideology might also explain the paradox of Saul's rejection in the book of Samuel.

Saul's obedience

In 1 Sam. 13:5-7, Saul has three thousand fighting men at Gilgal and the Philistines are mustering around him. His men become scared and hide themselves in caves or flee across the Jordan. Saul waits for Samuel an appointed seven days (v.8) and, when Samuel does not arrive, Saul makes a burnt offering to God (v.9).

According to v.10, Samuel arrives at Gilgal “as soon as Saul finished the offering.” Samuel condemns Saul and tells him his kingdom will not continue. He says in v.13, “You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which he commanded you.”

Although Samuel emphasizes that Saul has broken a commandment from God in v.13, repeating the root *ṣwh* “to command” (*lō’ šāmartā ’et mišwat yhwēh ʔlōhēkā ’āšer ṣiwwāk*), it is not clear what the broken commandment is (Gunn 1980, 34-6). One possibility is that the focus of the broken commandment is the period of time: the necessity of waiting seven days (Long 1989, 88).¹ This prior arrangement is confirmed by the narrator’s statement in v.8 that Samuel had appointed this period of time (*lammō ’ēd ’āšer šēmū ’ēl*). However, if this is the commandment, then it is Samuel who has been disobedient by being absent after seven days. Saul, according to v.8, explicitly waits seven days.

Alternatively, the command may be that Saul must wait, regardless of the time period, for Samuel to make the sacrifice.² However, the command that Samuel, not Saul, must make the sacrifice is never stated in the story. If this is the command upon which Saul’s dynasty is rejected, it is suspicious that the narrator does not confirm that the command took place. Furthermore, Gordon (1986, 133-4) points out that Saul builds an altar and makes sacrifices in 1 Sam. 14:33-5 without censure, and non-Levites and members of the royal family hold priestly roles in 2 Sam. 8:18 and 20:26, and 1 Kgs 3:3 and 8:62-3.³ It is improbable that there is a general prohibition against a non-Levite or king making a sacrifice in the book of Samuel because there are other instances where this law is broken without comment or condemnation. Therefore, although Samuel is emphatic that Saul has broken a command of God, no explicit command is given in the text, nor do Saul’s actions transgress a presupposed cultic law.

In light of the absence of an explicit transgression, several interpreters have proposed that Saul is condemned on account of his attitude towards God. Hertzberg (1964, 128) argues that Saul has a stubbornness, a “hidden non-co-operation” which makes him unsuitable for kingship; and Arnold (2003, 201) suggests that “Saul’s guilt derives from his determination to usurp power rightly belonging only to Yahweh and his servant Samuel” when he fails to wait for Samuel to consecrate battle. Another suggestion made by scholars is that Saul is ultimately rejected because his interior commitment to God is fundamentally different from David’s devotion. For example, Chapman (2017, especially 127) argues that Saul has false piety whereas David has true worship of the heart (see also Moberly 1998).

However, a close reading of Saul’s response to Samuel in 1 Sam. 13:10-12 highlights that Saul expressly seeks God’s help, rather than usurps his power, and the response displays no indications that Saul’s piety towards God is not genuine.

¹ Samuel commands Saul to wait seven days in Gilgal in 1 Sam. 10:8, after Samuel has anointed Saul. However, in the chronology of the narrative, too many intervening events take place before 1 Sam. 13 for this to be the command referred to by Samuel in 1 Sam. 13:13.

² See Brueggemann (1990, 99-100), who argues that Saul has usurped Samuel’s role as priest. However, he also points out that the command is not specific; Saul has acted in innocence and the commandment that he has really broken is “thou shalt not violate Samuel’s authority.”

³ Cf. Tsumura (2007, 347) argues that David and Solomon would have had priests to do the sacrifices, even though they are not mentioned in the text. However, Chapman (2016, 126-7) argues that the monarchy is an inherently religious office, and that king and priest overlap.

In v.10, Saul's compliance to the prophet Samuel is indicated by his greeting to Samuel when he arrives, "and Saul went out to meet him to bless him" (*wayyēšē' šā'ûl liqrā'tô lēbārākô*). Rather than attempting to replace the role of God or his prophet, he sets out to meet the prophet and welcome him. In v.11, it is apparent that Saul interprets the command that he is accused of breaking as waiting seven days. He points out that he waited the seven days but Samuel did not come ("but you did not come in the days appointed"—*wě'attā lō' bā'tā lēmô'ēd hayyāmīm*), the emphatic use of the second person pronoun emphasising that Samuel did not keep his word. In Saul's eyes, he has not appropriated Samuel's role, but rather Samuel has neglected it.

Furthermore, Saul's response in v.12 reveals that his piety is not false and that his sacrifice is not merely a formality before going into the battle, but rather a sacrifice to entreat the Lord ("I have not yet entreated the Lord"—*ûpēnē yhw h lō' ḥillîti*). In other contexts, the verb "to entreat" (lit. to be sick—*ḥlh*) is used when the intercessor humbles himself or reasons with God to reverse a situation,⁴ implying Saul knew God's help was necessary to reverse the desperate situation where the people are slipping away from him. Saul also says, according to v.12, that "he forced himself" (*wā'et'appaq*). The root 'pq shows that Saul restrained or took control of himself, rather than losing control from fear. As Polzin (1989, 129) points out, Saul has courage in the face of Philistine attack, despite Samuel's absence, surely a positive reaction in contrast to the people who are afraid and trembling. In summary, there is no evidence that Saul has broken an explicit command in 1 Samuel 13, or that his worship of God is false. Saul has either broken an unspoken law, or an unspoken interpretation of the command to wait seven days for Samuel.

In the second story of Saul's rejection, in 1 Samuel 15, the law that is broken is ostensibly that Saul does not fully carry out the *herem*—the complete destruction—of Agag and the Amalekites. In the order of presentation of events in 1 Samuel 15, Saul initially appears guilty. The command is given explicitly in the text in v.3: "Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them [*wēlō' taḥmōl 'ālāyw*], but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." Then, contravening this command in v. 9, "Saul and the people spared [had pity/compassion—*ḥml*] on Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed." The repetition of *ḥml* ("to spare") demonstrates that Saul has disobeyed God's command.

However, in v.15 this interpretation is overturned. The animals were spared, according to Saul's explanation, only so that later they would *not* be spared, but would be sacrificed at Gilgal.⁵ The root *ḥml* is used again, but now put into a new context in v.15: "The people spared [*ḥml*] them ... in order to sacrifice [*lēma'an zēbōḥ*]." Saul's (and the people's) actions were not a transgression to the command:

⁴ E.g. In Exodus 32:11, Moses intercedes with God after the Israelites make a golden calf; in 1 Kgs 13:6, a man of God entreats God on behalf of Jeroboam to restore his withered hand; in 2 Kgs 13:4, Jehoahaz entreats God to relent his anger and Aram's oppression of Israel.

⁵ Hertzberg (1964, 127) and Tsumura (2007, 398) suggest sacrifice and the ban are different things. Again, this is an issue of how an ambiguous command is interpreted, and Saul and the people evidently do not understand that there is any difference (see Gunn 1980, 49).

they spared the best in order to sacrifice them to the Lord. The initial command did not say *where* the animals and people should be killed and so Saul was obedient to the letter of the law. Saul's claim that they intended to sacrifice the best of the animals is further vindicated by the location of the dialogue in Gilgal, the sanctuary of God, and therefore a place where it is expected a sacrifice would be made (Bodner 2009, 156). Another indication that Saul intends to destroy everything as commanded is given at the beginning of the story in v.6 where Saul tells the Kenites that they should withdraw from the Amalekites because otherwise they will be destroyed with them. In v.32, it is implied that Agag thought he was going to die, even after being taken to Gilgal, because he is relieved that the threat of death is now gone when he is face to face with Samuel.⁶ These details point to Saul's intention to carry out the sacrifices. Once again, Saul has not violated an explicit command and Saul himself believes that he has been obedient.

Saul is not represented as entirely blameless in these episodes. In the intervening chapter, 1 Samuel 14, Saul makes a foolish vow which he must either break or kill his own son Jonathan. There are also several elements in 1 Samuel 15 where Saul is arguably not portrayed sympathetically. In vv.15, 21 and 30, he describes God to Samuel as "your God," suggesting a distance has opened up between Saul and God. If this is the case, it is a development from Saul's relationship with God in 1 Samuel 13, where he entreats God directly. Saul blames the people for the supposed "transgression" in v.21: according to v.9, he and the people spare Agag and the best of the animals but, in v.21, he says that the people have taken the animals (Firth 2009, 175). However, he takes responsibility for sparing Agag in v.20 and so it is possible that v.9 has co-ordinating nouns: Saul spares Agag, while the people spare the animals for sacrifice (Gunn 1980, 51-2). In this case, his actions can even be interpreted as generous, because he gives the people animals to sacrifice at Gilgal.

Regardless of these details, there remains no explicit command that Saul has broken. According to 1 Samuel 13, he waits the appointed time for Samuel to arrive to make a sacrifice; and according to 1 Samuel 15, he destroys and plans to destroy the Amalekites completely. In the construction of the narrative, there is no incontrovertible evidence from the narrator that disproves Saul's claims that he has been obedient. It is only on "Yahweh's terms," (Gunn 1980, 124) according to God's unspoken interpretation of ambiguous commands, that he has been disobedient.

Other interpreters who reach the conclusion that Saul has not disobeyed any explicit commands suggest that this reading points to God's arbitrariness (Polzin 1989, 147) or hostility (Gunn 1980, see especially 131; cf. Exum 1992, especially 41) towards Saul. It has also been proposed that Saul's trajectory is shaped by Samuel's hostility towards him (Jobling 1998, 79-88; Middleton 2013), although 1 Sam. 15:10-11 makes clear that God sends Samuel to reject Saul. At the very least, God is complicit with Samuel in Saul's hostility.

However, as we will now examine, God's hostility towards Saul is not entirely arbitrary. In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Yoma* 22b, the rabbis suggest that Saul is rejected not only without transgression, but because of his excessive

⁶ Contrary to Chapman (2017, 140 n.5).

righteousness.⁷ A reading that Saul is too righteous, at least in comparison to Samuel and David, is also supported by close analysis of the text. Rather than arbitrarily rejecting Saul, God is presented as consistent throughout Samuel with respect to his stated commands and warning about exploitation: he rejects Saul who is obedient; and favours or has mercy on Samuel and David who are disobedient.

Saul's excessive righteousness in contrast with Samuel and David

In 1 Samuel 8, the elders of Israel ask Samuel to anoint them a king. Samuel resists and, at God's command, delivers a lengthy speech on the "ways of the king" (*mišpaṭ hammelek*) in 1 Sam. 8:11-20. However, in the ensuing narratives of the book of Samuel, each of the concerns that 1 Samuel 8 raises about the evils of kingship are applied to Samuel rather than Saul. Furthermore, Samuel's failings will be echoed in the story of David.

First, 1 Sam. 8:1-3 highlights the problem with leaders' sons as the prelude to Israel's request for a king: "When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel ... Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice." Samuel's sons are corrupt and this makes Samuel an unsuitable leader in the eyes of the elders. There is unmistakable irony: Israel rejects Samuel and his sons, and yet they want to replace Samuel with a system of kingship that guarantees a leader will be succeeded by one of his sons. Nevertheless, this background information about Samuel's sons endorses the Israelite elders' claim for anointing a new leader and highlights the problem of corrupt sons.

The problem of corrupt sons also features in the story of Eli in 1 Samuel 1-4 and the story of David in 2 Samuel. 2 Samuel 13-18 is dominated by the drama of David's problems with sons: in 2 Samuel 13, Amnon rapes his sister Tamar, and Tamar's brother Absalom murders Amnon; then Absalom tries to seize the throne from David in 2 Samuel 14-18. The effects from the rebellion of David's sons are not confined to David's own household because Absalom's coup leads to civil war within Israel. All Israel suffers because of David's sons.

Saul is the one leader in the book of Samuel who does not have a problem with corrupt sons. The story in 1 Samuel 13 is prefaced with the account of Saul's son Jonathan, successful in battle against the Philistines and loyal to Israel in 13:2-3. Again in 1 Samuel 14, Jonathan excels as a hero in battle against the Philistines. Saul's dynasty promises to bring success for Israel and the ongoing stability required in a good leader. Saul's loyal and successful son Jonathan is a corrective to the problem of Samuel's corrupt sons, a major concern of 1 Samuel 8 (Handy 1993).

Secondly, in 1 Samuel 8, God commands Samuel to "listen to the voice of the people" (*šēma' bēqōl hā'am*), repeated in vv.7, 9, and 22. At the close of the chapter, Samuel still does not answer their request for a king and sends each to his own house. God does not censure Samuel for refusing to listen to them, but only

⁷ "Rab Judah said in the name of Samuel: Why did the kingdom of Saul not endure? Because no reproach rested on him, for R. Johanan had said in the name of R. Simeon b. Jehozadak: One should not appoint any one administrator of a community, unless he carries a basket of reptiles on his back, so that if he became arrogant, one could tell him: Turn around! Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: Why was Saul punished? Because he forewent the honor due to himself" Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Yoma* 22b, translation from Epstein (1948).

keeps repeating his command in response to Samuel's defiance. Correspondingly, it is never reported in the book of Samuel that David listens to the voice of the people, even though he is always popular with them.

By contrast, the circumstances surrounding the rejection of Saul and his dynasty in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 relate specifically to Saul responding to the concerns or voice of the people (Sellars 2011). In 1 Sam. 13:11, Saul claims he has made the sacrifice because he saw the people frightened and slipping away. In the intervening chapter in 1 Sam. 14:45, Saul also listens to the people when they ransom Jonathan. According to 1 Sam. 15:24, Saul explains that he disobeyed God because he feared the people and "listened to their voice" (*wā'ešma' bēqôlîm*), echoing the language in God's repeated command to Samuel in 1 Samuel 8 (*šēma' bēqôl hā'ām*). Samuel is explicitly commanded to listen but not censured for refusing or delaying his obedience; Saul is rejected for listening and responding.

Thirdly, the "ways of the king" in 1 Sam. 8:11-18 are given as a warning of the evils of kings but the description is more readily applied to Samuel and David than Saul. The verb "to take" (*lqh*) is repeated four times in 1 Sam 8:11, 13, 14, and 16 to describe the king taking the people to be his servants and their wealth as taxes. According to 1 Sam. 11:7, Saul "takes" oxen (*wayyiqah šemed bāqār*) only from his own field. By contrast, according to 1 Sam 8:3, Samuel's sons "take" bribes (*wayyiqēhū šōhad*).⁸

The verb "to take" again becomes important in the story of David and Bathsheba, the incident in Samuel that most closely resembles the "ways of the king" described in 1 Sam. 8:11-20. In this story, the exploitation of the people outlined in 1 Sam. 8:11-20 is magnified. David summons Bathsheba, one of the people's daughters, not to be a perfumer, cook, or baker (cf. 1 Sam. 8:13), but to commit adultery with her. Her husband Uriah is not only a loyal soldier in David's army, besieging Rabbah on behalf of David (2 Sam. 12:1; cf. 1 Sam. 8:11-12) but is murdered by David. In 2 Sam. 11:4, the language used is that David "took" (*wayyiqqāhehā*) Bathsheba, and the verb is repeated in Nathan's parable in 2 Sam. 12:4, to describe the rich man "taking" the ewe from the poor man: "he was loathed to take from his own flock or herd [*wayyahmōl lāqahat miššō'nô ûmibbēqārô*] ... but he took the lamb of the poor man [*wayyiqqah 'et kibsat hā'îš hārā's*]." Whereas David's kingship could be characterised as exploiting his people and taking a wife who is not his own, Saul's could not. 1 Sam. 8:11-18 pointedly does not resemble Saul's reign.

Not only is Saul innocent of exploiting the people, Saul is condemned in 1 Samuel 15 for having "compassion/sparing." In 15:9, the root "to spare" (*hml*) refers to Agag, but, as becomes apparent in v. 15, the sparing is for the people so that they can make sacrifices to God. Saul's reluctance to grasp power is also suggested in 1 Sam. 15:17, when Samuel delivers his indictment, beginning with the words, "although you are small in your own eyes." Saul previously spares his detractors in 1 Sam. 11:13. Thus the paradox deepens: the "ways of the king" suggest the king will exploit the people but instead Saul listens to them and has mercy on them.

⁸ Cf. in 1 Sam. 12:3, Samuel repeats the verb "to take" four times when asking Israel if he has taken anything. They reply in v. 4 that no, he has not taken anything from them, although Samuel's insistent repetition suggests that the charge has been made and needs to be actively denied.

In summary, God's rejection of Saul is not arbitrary, but consistent with his acceptance of Samuel and David, over and against his stipulations in the introduction to kingship in 1 Samuel 8. Saul is condemned for being disobedient and yet he does not disobey any explicit commands; he has a son who is suitable to succeed him; and rather than conforming to the exploitative ways of the kingship, he listens to the voice of the people and has mercy. By contrast, Samuel and David both disobey or delay explicit commands or presupposed law; they have corrupt sons who are unsuitable for leadership and exploit Israel; and David himself also exploits Israel, taking one of their married daughters. This pattern may simply be a continuation of God's "dark side," as Gunn (1980, 131) describes God's hostility towards Saul. However, I propose that this paradox can be explored further, and a hypothesis developed for "why" God (and Samuel) are portrayed as hostile in response to Saul's excessive righteousness. By reading these stories alongside Slavoj Žižek's critique of ideology, many of the paradoxical elements of the text can be accounted for.

Slavoj Žižek and the obscene underside of the law

According to Žižek, the obscene underside of the law is the unspoken supplement to the law that accompanies a public prohibition or disavowal. An example of this given by Žižek in *Trouble in Paradise* is of paedophilia in the Catholic Church (2015, 71-8). There is a public disavowal of paedophilia in the Catholic Church, and child sex abuse is officially a sin. However, the obscene supplement to this law, the unspoken law amongst many Catholic clergy, is that they should not bring disrepute on the clergy. This underside to the law relativizes the prohibition against child sex abuse, or as Žižek argues, even permits it. Whereas paedophile priests may be moved from parish to parish, clergy who are whistle blowers may be marginalised, losing their influence and even position. Breaking the unspoken law is punished harshly, whereas breaking the public prohibition is barely censured.

Disobedience to the unspoken law is punished harshly because, as Žižek argues, the obscene underside upholds the whole system. The most dangerous subversion of the system is to take the public prohibition too seriously and so threaten its underside. As an example, Žižek relates a practical joke played by a student newspaper during so-called free elections in Yugoslavia (2008, lxii-lxiii). The communist party regularly received around 90 percent of the vote in their elections. Everybody knew that the elections were not free and the Party knew that everybody knew. Instead of making the obvious claim that the elections were not democratic, the student newspaper decided to take the elections seriously, publishing a headline to the effect that "although the final results are not yet known, it seems that the communist party might be headed for another electoral win." The newspapers were confiscated and the editorial committee immediately sacked. The most dangerous threat to the system was to take the public disavowal of corruption too seriously.

Žižek also argues that public disavowal is what allows a prohibition to be broken. In *Living in the End Times* (2011, 20), he uses the example of torture. A law might say that torture is in principle permissible, but so many sub-regulations and conditions are inserted that it can be ensured that this possibility is never realized. Torture is permissible in principle but not practice. Conversely, if torture is *prohibited* in principle, but there are enough qualifications that the prohibition can be

overridden in extreme circumstances, torture can be carried out whenever wanted. As Žižek says, “the principled ‘no’ is exceptionally allowed to realize itself” (2011, 20).

In *Trouble in Paradise*, Žižek describes public prohibition in terms of the superego, and using this framework, he argues that a public prohibition is not only allowed to be broken, it is *expected* to be broken. One example he uses is from Monty Python’s film, *The Meaning of Life* (1983):

The pupils are waiting for the teacher to arrive; they are bored, sitting at their benches, yawning and staring into the air. When the boy standing close to the door shouts “The teacher is coming!”, the pupils explode into the wild activity of shouting, throwing papers around, shaking their tables and so on—all the stuff pupils are supposed to do when the teacher is absent, so that, when the teacher enters, he can be annoyed and shout at them: “Stop this circus! Quiet!” What this scene makes clear is that the “transgressive” commotion that annoys the teacher is in fact directed at him—it is not spontaneous amusement, but something performed for the teacher. (2015, 72)

The superego makes a prohibition—do not be rowdy for the teacher—which is in fact an injunction to perform and enjoy this same behaviour.

In summary, Žižek gives an account of how corruption or other permissiveness can function within a group’s ideology and power structure. Public disavowal is not intended to be heeded but functions because of its obscene underside, the unspoken laws against challenging the ideology. Power is sustained by the widespread acceptance of the paradox between public disavowal and injunction for transgression.

Saul and the obscene underside of the law

The breadth of Žižek’s examples suggests that his critique of ideology may also be effective for reading an ancient text such as Samuel, and for an ancient Israelite ideology of kingship conveyed in the portrayal of Saul’s rejection and David’s acceptance.⁹ I will now apply the critique to Saul’s rejection and test whether such a reading resonates with the evidence of the text.

The narrative of 1 Samuel 8 provides public disavowal of exploitative kingship. The narrator critiques Samuel’s corrupt sons by presenting their corruption as the impetus for the elders’ request for a king. The narrator confirms in 8:3 that Samuel’s sons have “perverted justice” (*wayyattū mišpāṭ*), and the Hebrew root for “justice” (*špṭ*) becomes a keyword throughout 1 Sam. 8, including when the elders ask for a king “to judge us” (*lēšāpṭēnū*) in 1 Sam. 8:6. That the leader should not ignore the people is conveyed by God’s repeated commands to Samuel, “listen to the voice of the people”. The “ways of the king” in 1 Sam. 8:11-18 are framed negatively by the narrator: these evils are described as a “warning”, and in 1 Sam. 8:18, God says these ways will cause the people to “cry out because of your king.”

⁹ On the question of how historical events, institutions, and ideology might relate to the literary portrayal of kingship in Samuel, see Gilmour (2011). In this article, the ideology is read as upheld by the characters of God and Samuel within the world of the story. However, these characters probably reflect the interests of a pro-Davidic group involved in the composition of Samuel (see Dietrich 2007).

Furthermore, in 1 Sam 10:25, Samuel writes the “ways of the king” (*mišpaṭ hammelek*) in a book and places it before the Lord. The word “ways/custom” (*mišpaṭ*) also means “justice” and so the “justice of the king” is endorsed publicly, in contrast to the “justice” that the sons of Samuel have perverted (1 Sam. 8:3). Finally, in Deut. 17:14-20, we find explicit prohibitions against exploitation by a king, a passage with close connections to the ways of the king in 1 Sam. 8:11-18: the king must not acquire possessions and must be obedient to the law. The overwhelming implication of 1 Samuel 8 is that a leader should not exploit the people: he should not have corrupt sons, he should not ignore the voice of the people; and he should not take from the people. These are equivalent to the “public prohibitions” discussed by Žižek.

However, just as school children are expected to misbehave for their teacher, so the king is expected to exploit his people: this is the obscene underside to the law. On the surface, 1 Sam. 8:11-18 is a warning to Israel of the evils of kingship, but in practice, these evils are the unspoken commands for the king. Although Saul is obedient to God’s explicit commands to wait seven days in 1 Samuel 13 and to destroy the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, he disobeys the unspoken law to exploit the people. He listens to the people, his son Jonathan is a hero, and he does not take the best of the animals from the people, allowing them to sacrifice at Gilgal.

In this way, Saul takes the public disavowal in 1 Samuel 8 “too seriously.” Like the student newspaper in Yugoslavia in Žižek’s example, Saul threatens the ideology of kingship, upheld by its unspoken underside that the king should be exploitative. Saul does not openly challenge corruption, but he interprets the commands to him in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 in light of the public disavowals in 1 Samuel 8, not according to the unspoken law that the king should exploit the people. The Party in Yugoslavia responded harshly, confiscating newspapers and sacking an editorial committee where no law would seem to have been broken; so too God rejects Saul as king despite not having broken any explicit commands.

A number of details in the text are illuminated by this reading, suggesting it is a valid critique of the stories. Primarily, the critique explains the insistence by Samuel that Saul has broken God’s commands, despite these commands never being stated in the text. Moreover, it offers an account for why Saul is eventually willing to admit his guilt in 1 Sam. 15:24, despite the ambiguity of the commands: “Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.’” It is significant Saul admits that he has “obeyed their voice” in his confession. Saul kept the letter of the law in the stated command to destroy the Amalekites; but by listening to the people and bringing Agag and the best of the animals to Gilgal, he has broken the unspoken commands in his interpretation of these instructions.

Another feature in the text which corresponds to this analysis of the ideology of kingship is that in 1 Samuel 8, God has already granted Israel a king (vv.7-9) when he tells Samuel to warn them of the “ways of the king” (v.9). The warning is evidently not given to persuade the elders of Israel to change their minds. Rather it is akin to Žižek’s claim that the prohibition is necessary to make the action permissible. As in Žižek’s example of torture, Samuel gives this public “warning” so that exploitation becomes permissible in its public disavowal.

This analysis explains the contrast between Samuel and Saul. Samuel is portrayed negatively in these chapters in many respects, as was demonstrated earlier. He has corrupt sons; he is commanded repeatedly by God to listen to the voice of the people in 1 Samuel 8; and he does not arrive at the appointed time in 1 Samuel 13. Nevertheless, throughout these stories, Samuel retains his influence in Israel and is not censured by God at any point. He violates God's public commands, but acts according to the obscene underside of the law. Furthermore, God is complicit in Samuel's cruelty towards the people. Earlier in 1 Sam 12:17, Samuel calls for a sign from God, thunder and rain, to come down upon the people's harvest. God duly responds with thunder and rain, destroying the harvest and potentially creating a famine.

Similarly, this ideology of kingship offers a plausible interpretation for why Saul is rejected but David retains an ongoing dynasty. David sins by breaking the explicit laws: do not murder and do not commit adultery. Although these transgressions displease God (2 Sam. 11:27), they do not violate the ideology of kingship that a king exploit his people, but rather uphold it. As highlighted above, David's sin consists of "taking" from his people by taking Bathsheba. In 2 Samuel 12, in Nathan's condemnation of David, the root "to spare" (*hml*) is significantly used twice: first in the parable to say the rich man spared an animal from his own livestock (*wayyahmōl lāqahat miššō' nō ūmibbēqārō*) but not from the poor man (v.4); and secondly in v.6, in David's judgment that the rich man should repay fourfold because he showed no pity (*wē'al 'āšer lō'hāmāl*). Saul's act undermined the ideology of kingship by sparing Agag and the livestock for the people to sacrifice. David's sin upholds the ideology that the king should exploit the people and this is highlighted when he is identified with the rich man in the parable who does not spare the poor man or the poor man's animal.

Finally, a wider look at kingship in the books of Samuel and Kings can be adduced for this reading of the ideology of kingship in the rejection of Saul. Absalom sits at the city gate offering justice for the people and he points out the neglect of King David in 2 Sam. 15:2-6. However, Absalom's claim for kingship is also rejected by God when he acts against Absalom in 2 Sam. 17:14 to frustrate his coup. With the exception of Ahab in 1 Kgs 21:20, kings in the book of Kings are not evaluated as doing "evil in the eyes of the Lord" because they exploit the people. For example, although Solomon accumulates great wealth and institutes forced labour (1 Kgs 5:13-14), he is condemned in 1 Kgs 11:1-13 for marrying foreign wives and worshipping other gods. His son Rehoboam, who continues his policy of forced labour, never receives an explicitly negative evaluation from the narrator of Kings.¹⁰ Furthermore, the sons of the most highly praised kings, David, Hezekiah and Josiah, are all evaluated as doing evil in the eyes of the Lord: Solomon (1 Kgs 11:6); Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:2); and Jehoahaz (2 Kgs 23:32). Thus, the ideology that a good king has corrupt sons continues throughout these traditions.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Slavoj Žižek's critique of ideology offers an explanation for God's hostility towards Saul, and for why Saul is rejected as king of Israel for his supposed

¹⁰ Cf. in the LXX, 1 Kgs 14:22 reads as an explicit condemnation of Rehoboam, "Rehoboam did evil in the sight of the Lord" in place of MT, "Judah did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord."

disobedience to unspoken laws. In contrast, Samuel and David break only the public prohibitions and so are not rejected *despite* their disobedience. By taking the warning against the evils of kingship “too seriously,” Saul undermines the whole system. Ironically, it is only when Saul is rejected, when he is tortured by God’s evil spirit (1 Sam. 16:14-23) and consumed with jealousy for his rival David (1 Samuel 18-31), that he is transformed into the ideal king, exploiting the people in his pursuit of David.

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