

1 Samuel 8:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots.

Analysis

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The military hierarchy described here ("sarei alaphim" and "sarei chamishim"—captains over thousands and fifties) mirrors Moses' organization in Exodus 18:21, but now serves royal rather than covenantal purposes. More striking is the agricultural conscription: sons will "ear" (Hebrew "charash," to plow) the king's ground. Under the theocracy, each family worked their own ancestral inheritance; under monarchy, they become tenant farmers on royal estates. The harvest labor ("qatsar") that should benefit their own households will enrich the crown. Additionally, they will manufacture weapons ("keli milchamah") and chariot equipment. This comprehensive conscription transforms free Israelites into a labor force serving state interests. The passage anticipates Solomon's forced labor policies that eventually split the kingdom (1 Kings 12:4). Human government, though necessary in a fallen world, invariably tends toward self-aggrandizement at citizens' expense.

Historical Context

The military decimal system (thousands, hundreds, fifties, tens) was common throughout the ancient Near East. Archaeological evidence of royal estates with centralized storage facilities confirms the economic practices Samuel describes. Conscript labor (corvee) was standard in Egypt and Mesopotamian kingdoms.

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does this warning about centralized power inform Christian thinking about government and institutional authority?
2. What safeguards exist in your own life against allowing any human authority to take God's rightful place?

Interlinear Text

וְלֹאשׁ וָם	לֹא	וְשָׂרֵי	אֲלֹפִים	וְשָׂרֵי	חֲמִשָּׁים
And he will appoint		and captains	over thousands	and captains	over fifties
H7760	H0	H8269	H505	H8269	H2572
וְלָחֶם שׁ	חֲרִישׁוֹ	וְלִקְצֹר	קִצִּירוֹ	וְלַעֲשׂוֹת	
and will set them to ear	his ground	and to reap	his harvest	and to make	
H2790	H2758	H7114	H7105	H6213	
וְכָלֵי	מִלְחָמָה	וְכָלֵי	רֶכֶבּוֹ:		
and instruments	of war	and instruments	of his chariots		
H3627	H4421	H3627	H7393		