Monarchy and the Bible

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Kings dominate the story of the Bible, but the scriptural narrative expresses ambivalence towards monarchy. Some years after the people of Israel are rescued from slavery in Egypt and brought to the land God promised them, they begin to desire a king to rule over them. In one sense, the unfolding narrative suggests this desire is a good idea: kings are anointed by prophets, they unite the people, they build the temple in Jerusalem, and they win victories and defend—often against improbable odds—the tiny nations of Judah and Israel in battle. Nonetheless, Israel's experience of monarchy begins with the prophet Samuel warning the people against having a king, and indeed the subsequent history of faithless and idolatrous kings more than backs up that dire admonition. Yet the recognition of Christ as king, in the fullest sense of the word, could only be born of a real encounter with earthly kingship. It is from within this tension between real and ideal kingship that a model of recognition for Christ as king is laid down, making monarchy an institution that cannot be so easily dismissed. Thus, while the Bible underscores the need for a king in Israel, the failures of monarchy ultimately point forward to the advent of a true and everlasting king.

Most of the Old Testament writings describe Israel's experience under the reign of the monarchy, a period that lasts from 1000 BC and ends with the sack of Jerusalem and the beginning of the Babylonian exile in 587 BC. This four hundred-year period is the focus of the "history books"—in particular, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles—and most of the prophetic writings. Even the earlier biblical accounts, all the way back to Genesis and the stories of the patriarchs, were received, written down, and recast during and after the time of monarchy. Consequently, key themes from the time of the kings—the importance of Judah among all the children of Jacob, an early focus on Jerusalem, the centralisation of worship in the temple, even the moral failings of kings like David—shape the way the earlier stories of the Torah are told.

A famous example of such a "retrojection" of monarchic themes into the Torah is the story of King Jeroboam. We read in the first book of Kings that, having established the separate kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam intends to set up rival places of sacrifice to the temple in Jerusalem. To this end, he has two golden calves fashioned for shrines or little temples he sets up in Bethel and Dan. He then tells the people, "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28). This incident perfectly echoes the episode in Exodus 32, when Aaron pronounces these same words at the foot of Mount Sinai. This may simply be a repeating figure, a story told in the same way to underscore the seriousness of such idolatry and rebellion. Or perhaps, as many scholars surmise today, the

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Bible is almost entirely a product of the monarchical period and its aftermath, and many of the ancient stories are in fact a backwards telling of the failures of their contemporary kings. Even the garden of Eden, the story of Adam, may be read as the story of King David: the man who is given everything he needs, including a covenant with God, but desires the one thing he cannot have.

A Retrospective of Wretched Kings

It is during and after the Babylonian captivity that the people of Israel search for a theological meaning behind their monarchs' failures and the ensuing consequences for them as God's people. The books of the Bible are written, redacted, and assembled in exile, and so it is from within this experience of being deprived of kingship that the covenant people reflect on whether it was ever a good idea to have a king.

Significantly, what we Christians call the historical books—everything from Joshua through Judges, Samuel, and Kings—rabbinic Jewish tradition has always called the "earlier prophets," distinguishing them from the "latter prophets," which are the prophetic books that we share. This nomenclature helps us understand the way these books were first written and interpreted. They do not merely tell the history of the period; they are prophecies speaking the truth of God amidst history. From the vantage point of exile, the Judahites realised that, having lost land, temple, and king, what they still had was God. This new insight informs a theologically consistent telling of the story of the kings through the accounts of these "earlier prophets" or so-called historical books. They reflect an idea already suggested in Deuteronomy, a book focusing on God's covenant with Israel and the hope and possibility that a real person within history would be faithful to that covenant, someone who turns neither to the left nor to the right (Deut. 17:20) but follows rather in the path of God's righteousness. Such a person would indeed be a good king.

Judged against that standard, how do the anointed kings of Israel fare? Saul, the first to be anointed, never really rises above the level of tribal chieftain, and his descent into madness is a sobering foreshadowing of the monarchs to come. God then makes a covenant with the first true king, David, and promises him: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16). Yet David himself turns left into adultery and right into murder, the fruits of which lead to Solomon's own downward spiral, resulting in a divided kingdom.

The ensuing history catalogues a succession of disastrous kings, each outdoing the other in idolatry and faithlessness. Among the notable exceptions is Hezekiah, who, at least under the prophet Isaiah's influence, was able to restore some stability and faithfulness to the kingdom. The king most in keeping with this Deuteronomic model of covenant faithfulness is Josiah. He is anointed king at age eight but his life and reign are sadly short, for even he is not immune to imprudent choices. Yet he does bring an unprecedented commitment to covenant faithfulness, restoring obedience to the law. This is exemplified in the re-establishment of a national celebration of the feast of Passover for the first time since the days of Samuel four centuries before. Nevertheless, Josiah's reign is merely a brief reprieve. Twenty years later, the Babylonians led by Nebuchadnezzar come knocking down the door—and

the temple—and carry the people into exile, bringing the kingdom to a dramatic end.

Biblical Assessment of Monarchy

It is from the perspective of exile, setting down this wretched history of lost kings, that the Judahites who compile and redact the Biblical texts question the purpose and weigh the benefits and costs of monarchy. Should they have had a king in the first place? The exiles remember how the prophet Samuel, foretelling the disasters to follow, warned against monarchy in no uncertain terms. The people had come to him and demanded a king "like all the other nations" (1 Sam. 8:20). In reply, the prophet pointed out that having a king would mean the loss of crops, women, and more. Kings, he reminded them, always consume. Kings take, and they rarely give. But no, the people insisted, it was their desire to be like all the other nations. And, of course, from the Deuteronomistic perspective, forged in the crucible of exile, Israel *had* become like all the other nations; that was precisely the plot of the unfolding story. Being like all the other nations, the Israelites had thrown in their lot in with other powers, forming alliances with them, taking wives from them, and adopting their idols. The worship of the one true God was lost. Not only were high places and other places of worship set up against the temple in Jerusalem, but the temple itself was corrupted by idolatry and prostitution. Having a king "like all the other nations" proved inevitably to involve compromise.

Yet God had finally condescended and allowed Israel a king. Moreover, Samuel did personally anoint both Saul and David, instituting the very monarchy he had warned against. This prophetic action of anointing a king—proclaiming a *messiah* (literally, an anointed one)—contains within it the hope for an ideal and God-ordained exemplar of kingship. In Deuteronomy, a theological reflection

Samuel anoints David king of Israel. Tempera on plaster, synagogue, Dura-Europos, 3rd century.

on monarchy can be seen in Moses's farewell discourse, in which the Babylonian exiles remember this hope for a true king: the liberated Israelites may indeed have a king when they come to the new land, but he must be of their own nation, not a foreigner, and "he must not acquire many horses for himself or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You must never return that way again'" (Deut. 17:15–16). In other words, a true Israelite king must not be like the kings of all the surrounding nations who build palaces, acquire horses, and make alliances with foreign powers like Egypt to amass and preserve their wealth. "He must not acquire many wives for himself or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself" (17). This description of a king who seeks the vast wealth and many wives of the rulers of the nations evokes David's son, Solomon, as well as the ambition of most of those who follow and aspire to his example.

Deuteronomy further describes the ideal king: "When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests" (18). The only king who ever does this is Josiah, during whose reign a scroll of the law is discovered—likely an early version of Deuteronomy itself—prompting Josiah to declare a fast and a period of repentance, returning the nation to this law. He strives to embody what Deuteronomy says: "It shall remain with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes" (19). The true king keeps the covenant and observes the Torah, rejoicing in the law, not "exalting himself above other members of the community" (20). Here is a very different kind of kingship, foreshadowing the gospels and Jesus who says, "You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42–45) The Deuteronomic king shares this gospel vision of the anointed king as the servant of all.

The ideal king does not turn "aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel" (20). Josiah apart, whose reign is ever so brief and ends just before the curtain descends on monarchy in Judah, this verse describes precisely no one in all the history of the kings. There are sporadic hints of this true kingship, but the story of the kings—and the retrospective account of the patriarchs and judges before the kings, viewed through the lens of failed monarchy—is told through the Scriptures as a constant falling away.

The Rescuing and Healing Purpose of Kings

For Christians, the entire experience of Israel points directly to Jesus as the anointed one in whom the ideal vision of the king and the everlasting Davidic covenant are fulfilled. Christ represents all that is good about kings but was never fully lived out. We must nevertheless be careful not to conclude that the kings over God's covenant people had no real purpose or were not God-ordained. From

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the earliest centuries of Christianity, there has been a tendency to read the Old Testament as a mere foreshadowing of all that was to be fulfilled in Jesus. In this perspective, land, king, temple, sacrifice, and so forth only become "real" in the life of Christ. Early writers such as Justin Martyr speak (as in his *Dialogue with Trypho*) as though the Israelites had misinterpreted the covenant from the beginning, by following a fleshly view of its provisions rather than grasping their true spiritual meaning. According to these authors, the building of a temple and the practices of animal blood sacrifice and circumcision were never meant to be taken literally, but only as symbols of spiritual realities (sacrifices of praise, circumcision of the heart, and so forth). Such a view approaches that of the early heretic Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament outright when he could not reconcile the God of Israel with the God revealed in the messiah Jesus.

Opposing any kind of Marcionism, other fathers like Augustine rightly insist that there can be no true fulfilment of Old Testament images in Jesus unless the types were real and concrete to begin with. For Augustine, the story of Israel, its covenant with God, and the Torah were all continuous from Moses to Jesus. Those who praised the Old Testament covenant and Torah but condemned the Jews for their fleshly misunderstanding or misapplication of it were fundamentally mistaken. God's commands about circumcision, blood sacrifices, and keeping the Sabbath were neither unclear nor cryptic mysteries, but clear directives to follow as Israel had done. "The Jews were right to practise these things," Augustine wrote (*Against Faustus* 12:9). For him, the two covenants, old and new, are in harmony and represent a single divine initiative.

Land, king, and temple were all stripped from Israel because of Israel's unfaithfulness and failure to live up to the covenant. All these things are fulfilled in Jesus, the true messiah or anointed king, but they had to have been real to begin with. So there had to have been *real* kings in Israel, not merely the idea of kingship in a purely symbolic way. The Bible expresses this by telling us all these stories about actual kings, despite all their moral failures, and always holding out the possibility and promise of a faithful king. It is worth noting that, according to Augustine, even after the fulfilment of Old Testament types in Jesus there remains an ongoing function for those images in pointing to him as messiah. Augustine accounts for the mystery of the survival of Judaism and Torah observance in these terms: the scattered Jewish communities were like "librarians" (*scriniaria*) embodying and manifesting by faithful practice the ancient Scriptures and thus unconsciously bearing witness to their fulfilment in Jesus (*Against Faustus* 12:23). In an analogous way, we could see the continuing role of earthly kings, if not the Israelite monarchy, as a sign pointing to the true kingship of God in his messiah.

This need for real kingship is underscored by an oft-repeated phrase in the book of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel and the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6, 21:25). The king of Israel is not only real, but *necessary*. Indeed, one of the implied aspects of kingship is that there is an enemy that needs to be confronted and defeated. The purpose of having a king is to bring order, healing, and peace—aspects of God's own rule

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that are constantly under threat in the world.

The difficulty presented in Judges for the ancient Israelites (as well the modern reader) is that the land promised to Israel is not unoccupied. The Israelites hesitate to go in. They lose heart and wind up taking forty years in the wilderness to make a two-week trip. Nevertheless, God does call them to go into occupied land, to cleanse it, and to bring order and peace. Canaanite worship was not merely idolatrous; it incorporated horrific elements such as child sacrifice, an evil that had to be opposed and defeated. The subsequent stories of conquest are exaggeratedly violent, in keeping with ancient Near Eastern literary tradition. Yet there is a point to be made about cleansing, and about anointed leadership that moves in and brings healing and peace to the land and its people. Ultimately, the failure of Israel's leaders is not their unwillingness to confront these evils, but their perennial propensity to re-descend into them.

The Need for a True King

In the process of drawing together their stories and reflecting on their ancestral traditions, and in particular the central history of the kings of Israel, a key realisation emerges: a king was needed not so much to rescue people from external political foes, but to rescue people *from themselves*. This is the most profound insight for the people of God in their time of exile. Stripped of their land, temple, and king, the exiles knew God was still with them in the fiery furnace. Trampled and cast into the flames by an earthly tyrant, another figure was with them—Emmanuel, "God with us." They came to understand that the real problem human beings face is within every human heart, and not simply in those Canaanites or Assyrians or Babylonians who drew them time and again into corrupting alliances or damaging warfare. And thus Israel's messianic hope, its desire for a true king, comes to rest in a more holistic vision of what healing and peace are all about. It is kingship not as political power nor military might, and certainly not, as Deuteronomy makes clear, as the acquisition of horses, foreign wives, or silver and gold. True kingship is rather about healing human beings and communities from within, so that they are no longer doing "what is right in their own eyes." That is what it means to have a king in Israel. It would have been unimaginable for followers of Jesus to receive him as messiah, as the long-awaited king, without what Israel learned in the crucible of exile, reflecting backwards on their experience of monarchy. ❃

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