

Kingship

The Chronicles The History The Prophets

The phenomenon of kingship is known to us from our own European history. Because of the massive influence of the Bible in that history, the study of Biblical texts will doubtless be influenced, sometimes distorted, by anachronistic trends from later periods. When we call someone like Saul a king, the word means something very different from its use about Solomon, two generations later. We must be all the more careful not to confuse Ahab with Henry VIII or Hezekiah with Charles I (and no-one at all with Elizabeth II).

It will be worth reiterating the thoughts assembled by J L Mackenzie in his Dictionary article on **King**: that to the secular historians' twofold interest in the Kings - War and Law - must be added a third category which, in most circumstances of the ancient Near East, takes priority over both: the *cultic* rôle of the King, which places him at the head of the people over and against God or the gods. Kingship is a divine power conferred on a man. From the exercise of this power, celebrated in liturgy, flow the twin powers which govern the life of the nation, viz. war - the subduing of external enmity - and law - the restraining of destructive internal forces.

There is a brief section of the Abraham tradition (Gen 14) which represents the patriarch as a King, engaged in war and in liturgy (the Melchizedek passage). Abraham is the oldest historical figure presented in Biblical tradition. The fact that the military expedition represented here culminates in an encounter between the patriarch and the priest of Salem (=Jerusalem) implies at least a heavy editing hand. But if we recall that Egypt was an independent monarchic state from 2800 BC, nine hundred years before the alleged birth of Abraham, and that the first fully recognised king of Israel is anointed about 1020 BC, it is clear that the meaning of monarchy must be sought on a wider front than the merely Hebrew. In Egypt the Pharaoh was divine, ruling from a cultic space rather than a mere court. He was himself an object of worship. The liturgy of Egypt was based like everything else on the Nile, whose regular inundations restored the fertility of the land each year. The great river was also the major means of communication, providing the king and his enormous bureaucracy with ready access to the whole kingdom: such a co-ordinated grip on the land was essential if the system of irrigation and agriculture was to be maintained.

To the North of the Promised Land the Mesopotamian kingdoms did not divinise their kings. But they still derived kingly power from the favour of the gods, and modelled the rôle of the kings on their understanding of the divine rule of the universe. The king represented the gods to the people of these city-states. Typically, therefore, he was not only a political or military leader, but the head of the cult. Having said that, Mesopotamian city-states were far more unstable than Egypt ever was. The stately rhythm of the Nile was absent from their disparate and ragbag history, and the institutions they formed reflected this transience and multiplicity. The kings habitually governed with the help of a council of ministers, and assemblies of the people were occasionally integral to the system, though even these could not be called stable democratic structures. Amid the instability of an uncircumscribed territory in a shifting continental history, the king was seen as a saviour against the forces of chaos, appearing in the annual new-year festival as a sustainer of life, and as the embodiment of the state. His victory in war and his delivery of the laws fulfil his rôle as saviour of the people, vindicator of rights, defender of the weak.

No-one really knows how the title of King was first accorded to the God of Israel. Scholars have disputed its origins on the grounds that it must have developed after the institution of the earthly kings in Jerusalem, perhaps even in opposition to the earthly monarchy. The title of “King of Israel” would express the authority of God over his people, or the place of pagan kings in Gentile nations, which was reserved for Yahweh alone in kingless Israel. The title “Ruler over the Gentiles” might express a longed-for *human* dominion of Israel over other nations, of the kind David and Solomon are sometimes described as enjoying, or the far purer notion of the theological right of Yahweh to be worshipped by all other gods and men. Yahweh’s cosmic kingship, as Creator and Ruler of All That Is, develops separately from these politically-involved titles. Some think that the Mesopotamian designation of the gods as kings might have passed into Israel’s thought, in that the royal title accorded to their gods by the pagans could hardly be withheld by Jews from Yahweh. Some have pointed out that the Ark of the Covenant was from the beginning conceived of as a throne upon which Yahweh might be seated within the Tent of Meeting, and argue that the “royal” title carries the sense of *True King*, and derives ultimately from Yahweh’s effortless defeat of Pharaoh in a straight fight: the royal title of God would thus flow from the Exodus.

The origins of *human* kingship in Israel are described in 1 Sam 1 - 12, but the historical value of the traditions expressed there is not absolutely assured, since the book forms part of the Deuteronomistic History which is far from neutral about the Monarchy. The theory of the historian in the books of Kings is that the Monarchy failed because it neglected fidelity to the cult. The northern kings were condemned out of hand because they rebelled against the Temple and rebuilt the high places of the Confederacy. Of southern kings only the religious reformers, Hezekiah and Josiah, are unreservedly approved; all the rest are condemned for their neglect of religion and of the cult. The fact that Jerusalem had to be financed and defended like every other human city always led the kings into human politics, which dirtied their hands religiously, always threatening the theocratic ideals of the Bible.

This brings the history books into close contact with the prophets, whose constant accusation is that the People of God must consistently opt for the theocratic path, in contrast to the nations about them, which follow the way of the world. For three years Isaiah walked naked through the streets of Jerusalem, as a prophetic deed, in order to symbolise what he thought of as a shamelessly political and earthly perspective in an attempted alliance with Egypt. Israel should have trusted in God’s promise of protection. When the Northern Kingdom fell in 721, the Deuteronomistic history had no theological difficulty about this promised protection. God did not fall with his fallen people, as did the gods of the nations. Their fall was his withdrawal of help for a faithless people, and their disaster was the success of his judgment.

When we attempt to rediscover the truth about the origin of Monarchy, we meet two almost contradictory traditions.

- One, probably the elder, is positive towards the institution of kingship, and positive towards Saul as first king. It is sometimes designated “the Saul source”. The historical setting is the onset of the Iron Age. Philistia has the (closely-guarded) secret of smelting iron, in contrast to the other nations’ copper. Hebrew farmers are depicted as taking their tools and weapons into Philistine territory to have them upgraded and sharpened. Philistia dominates the other small nations much as a nuclear power today dominates one conventionally armed: thus the story of Goliath. It is under the obvious threat of superior fire-power that the Israelites decide that they need to enter a new programme of military organisation. One trigger is the attempt of the people of Jabesh-Gilead to engineer a defensive alliance with the Ammonites (1 Sam 11:1-11). The latter’s reply is that they will grant an alliance when every Israelite’s right eye has been gouged out. At this Saul sees red, is seized on by the spirit of God, and raises the country to war, which he wins. This charismatic response sets Saul into a prophetic relationship which recalls the same quality in the later Judges, and especially Samuel, who combined the wisdom of a Judge with the insight of a seer.

Samuel's anointing of and fair promises to Saul thus come very naturally, and cement the arrival of Monarchy with a very traditional approval.

- The anti-monarchic voice can also be found in the same first chapters of 1 Sam, in a cluster of traditions which are often referred to as "the Samuel source". This is usually assumed to be a far later verdict on the institution of Monarchy, fed from the experience of such figures as Solomon, who taxed the people unprecedentedly, and who truly was bred to the purple: and his successor Rehoboam, who was effectively responsible for dividing the people and the Holy Land into Judah and Samaria. This schism is recognised by the historian as disastrous, and as the beginning of the end of the Monarchy as a redeemable institution.

Our own meditation on Israel's experience of the Monarchy must take something from both of these currents, present as they both are within the Word of God. When we find ourselves reading the liturgical texts for royal occasions, notably the royal Psalms, we must be open to the notion of a faithful kingship, given to the shepherding of the people in the spirit of David. This represents a long and complex development in the people's history, and a considerable investment of faith and hope on their part. Some of the most famous lines of the Psalter and of the books of Wisdom flow from this source. In being ready to find the King just and effective, they were being faithful to the covenant, and open to the work of God. When we read the stories of royal crime, or listen to the horrified oracles of Ezekiel on the Shepherds of Israel, we must be ready to sustain judgment, and acknowledge the hardship of uniting holiness with worldly authority. When it comes to reading the story of the obliteration of the royal line at the exile, we shall be forced to acknowledge that the understanding enshrined in the oracle of Nathan (2 Sam 7) has foundered, and to remind ourselves that the multitudinous perceptions of human history do not respond with perfect accuracy to the unchanging truth of God.