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Monarchy in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract: This article continues the analysis of political theory in the Hebrew Bible. The books of Samuel and Kings recount the history of the monarchy in ancient Israel. This setup allows the author to conclude his analysis of confederacy and also to examine two other forms of government: theocracy and monarchy. The author argues that confederacy is too weak to provide reliable protections to the people. He endorses the ideal of theocratic rule but views theocracy as unsuitable for practical governance. He identifies weaknesses in monarchy but endorses it as the best form of government provided that the king is constrained by appropriate checks and balances. Contrary to the view of many biblical scholars, no text from Genesis to Second Kings fundamentally disapproves of monarchy as a form of government.

* * *

This article analyzes the biblical accounts of the Israelite monarchy contained in the books Samuel and Kings. I argue that these narratives form part of an extended analysis of political ideas – a political philosophy – which rivals in sophistication, and probably predates, the theories developed by Plato and Aristotle in the Greek world.

As outlined in prior work, the Garden of Eden story serves as a prolegomenon to the Bible's political theory and also offers an impressive analysis of the question of political obligation – why people are required to obey their political rulers. The stories of

the Dark Age after the expulsion of Adam and Eve address the question of anarchy: whether it is possible for human beings to lead a good and decent life in the absence of government and law (the author's answer is no).¹ The history of the patriarchs and matriarchs from the book of Genesis address the nature, source and legitimacy of power in families. In the first fourteen chapters of the book of Exodus, the author demonstrates that political organization is the only feasible means for governing groups of substantial size; argues that nationhood is preferable to nomadism, dependency, and slavery as a form of political organization; and identifies self-governance, law, and control over territory as the essential attributes of nationhood. The Israelites achieve self-governance in the struggle with Pharaoh and the escape at the Sea of Reeds. The narrative of Mount Sinai describes the receipt of law in the form of a fundamental commitment, a rule of recognition, constitutional law, ordinary law, and administrative rules. The book of Joshua presents a theory of sovereignty: a nation's exclusive control over territory; it also presents a sophisticated account of distributive justice in the narratives of the distribution of the Promised Land at the conclusion of the war of conquest. The book of Judges evaluates the pros and cons of a confederacy of semi-sovereign tribes, constituted by legal obligations and embodied in three institutions: judges, military leaders, and a tribal assembly. Although the author portrays the leaders of the confederacy as heroes who rescue Israel from distress, his evaluation of the confederacy is negative. He argues that its institutions are not strong enough to reliably deliver the benefits of nationhood – justice, security, prosperity, domestic tranquility, and fidelity to God.

¹ I use the term “author” as a conventional way of denoting the creator of the biblical narratives without implying anything in particular about the identity of this source.

The books of Samuel and Kings tell the history of the monarchy in ancient Israel: its foundation under Samuel and Saul; the glorious days of the united monarchy under David and Solomon; the schism that separates the northern and southern kingdoms; the persistent tendency of kings to tolerate the worship of foreign gods; the fall of the northern kingdom to the Assyrians; the struggle of the southern kingdom to maintain its independence; the theological and political reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah; the fall of the southern kingdom to Babylon; and the destruction of the temple and the deportation of the country's leaders. This setup allows the author to complete the analysis of confederacy and also to consider the pros and cons of two other forms of government: theocracy and monarchy.

Confederacy Redux

The analysis of confederacy begun in the book of Judges winds up with the narratives concerning Eli, the priest of Shiloh who judges Israel at the beginning of the first book of Samuel. The author's treatment of Eli contrasts with that of other Israelite leaders.

1. We might expect that a figure as important as Eli would receive an introduction commensurate with his status. We might learn of his background—the names of his father or even his grandfather. We might learn of some exceptional quality that raises him above the crowd—valor in battle, unusual physical prowess, or charismatic gifts of personality. We might find a description of some dire situation in Israel that causes Eli to rise up as a savior of the people.

The author provides no such introduction. About Eli's parents and grandparents we learn nothing. No crisis in Israel's affairs triggers Eli's appointment as judge; the

author, in fact, seems uninterested in how Eli came to occupy the office. The reasons for the lack of deference paid to Eli become apparent as the narrative progresses.

2. The spirit of God does not enter Eli as it does in other judges. Eli displays no charismatic gifts. He receives no word, vision, or other revelation. He does not recognize genuine communication with God even when he sees it in others. He upbraids Hannah for being drunk when she is actually deep in prayer (1 Sam 1:14). Later, he twice fails to recognize that the young Samuel has experienced a vision from God, apparently attributing the boy's experience to a dream (1 Sam 3:2–7).

3. Eli is weak and ineffectual—old, fat, and nearly blind (1 Sam 2:22; 3:2; 4:15–18). He is depicted in passive postures that reinforce the impression of incapacity: sitting in a chair (1 Sam 1:9; 4:13) or lying in bed (1 Sam 3:2). He is equally passive when performing his job as priest. When Hannah prays for a child, Eli does not intercede with God on her behalf or even ask what her prayer is about. Instead, he dismisses her with the parting shot, “May the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him” (1 Sam 1:17)—ironically sealing his own fate, because the son Hannah has asked for will eventually supplant Eli's own house.

4. Eli's passivity extends to his family. He appoints his sons to work at the sanctuary and then fails to supervise or control them. They sleep with women associated with the sanctuary and misappropriate the sacrifices (1 Sam 2:12–17; 22). When Eli finally admonishes them, he fails to back his words with action. His sons simply ignore him (1 Sam 2:23–25). When he learns that God intends to take the priesthood from his family, his only response is that “he is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes” (1

Sam 3:18). Perhaps this reaction could be viewed as an admirable stoicism in the face of God's will, but one supposes that a stronger character would have urged God to relent.

5. Eli fails to carry out the duties of a judge. There is no mention of him hearing cases. While this is also true of other judges, we normally encounter the major judges in their role as military leaders where the judicial function is not the focus of attention. At the beginning of this narrative, however, Israel is not threatened militarily. Accordingly, we might expect to hear of Eli's activities as a forensic judge, as we do in the case of Deborah, who acts as a forensic judge before the conflict with Sisera. No information of this sort is provided.

6. Eli does not carry out the role of military leader. When the Philistines field an army against Israel, it is not Eli who musters the troops (1 Sam 4:1). He does not go to the battle or even participate in strategic planning. It is the people—not Eli—who send for the ark of the covenant after the defeat in the first battle (1 Sam 4:4). Eli passively allows the precious symbol of Israel's sovereignty to be taken into danger in the company of his dodgy sons. The result is predictably disastrous: the Israelites are routed, Eli's sons are killed, and the ark is captured and borne away in triumph by the Philistines.

7. Eli is an object of derision. He dies in ignominious fashion by falling off a chair when he hears of the capture of the ark (1 Sam 4:18). The author plays Eli's death for comic effect: toppling off a chair is not exactly a dignified way to exit the stage. The author also inserts a joke. Eli shows no response when informed that his sons have been killed—but collapses and dies when told that the ark has been captured. The contrast piously emphasizes the importance of the ark but also mocks Eli's children by suggesting that their own father cares little for their welfare.

* * *

The near-simultaneous deaths of Eli and his sons mark the end of the confederacy as a form of government in Israel. Eli's chair is a symbol of authority: kings rule from thrones, which are nothing other than fancy chairs. When Eli falls off his chair, the message is that he has lost both the power and the right to govern. The cause of this default is also provided: the capture of the ark. Because Eli was not able to prevent the loss of Israel's national symbol, he forfeits his authority. The deaths of his sons indicate that the default extends beyond Eli to all who might take power through him. And the fact that two equally objectionable sons are involved indicates that the entire line is corrupted.

This story concludes the analysis of confederacy as a form of government. Previous threats to Israel's security had resulted in periods of hardship and oppression but had always been resolved short of disaster. The weaknesses of the confederacy were chronic but not catastrophic. This time, the unthinkable happens: the judge does not save the nation; the Israelites are humiliated; and the ark is taken into captivity.

From the standpoint of political theory, the author claims that this sort of decline is inevitable under the confederate form of government. Eventually a confederacy's weak structure of mutual obligation and support will break down in the face of internal or external pressures. A time will come when a charismatic leader does not arise to rescue the people from distress. The author therefore concludes that confederacy is not viable as a form of national government over the long term.

Theocracy

In addition to concluding the discussion of confederacy, the opening chapters of the first book of Samuel explore the issue of *theocracy*: government by God administered through his human representatives. Eli is a transitional figure between the two forms of government since he combines the offices of judge and priest. In this sense Eli's career could be seen as a form of theocratic government. But Eli is not a true theocratic ruler. Although he occupies the offices of priest, judge, and military ruler, he performs all of them poorly. Nor does he combine the roles into a unified whole. He does not bring the powers of his priesthood to bear when serving as Israel's military leader, nor does he bring the powers of the judge, either military or forensic, to the pursuit of his religious duties. Accordingly, Eli cannot be considered as a genuine theocratic ruler.

After Eli's death there follows a twenty-year interregnum symbolizing a break between forms of government.² Samuel, who is introduced with great fanfare at the beginning of the story of Eli, disappears from the scene. When he does arise again, he is a new kind of leader, one whose approach differs from that of Eli and, indeed, all previous Israelite leaders:

(a) Although the author refers to Samuel as judging Israel, his leadership contrasts with that of judges of the confederacy in important respects. Other judges arise in the face of military need and are inspired by a wish to rescue their people rather than by religious fervor. Samuel, in contrast, has been devoted to the priesthood from early childhood and is inspired by nothing other than religious fervor.

² The spark of Israel's sovereignty is maintained in the ark, which escapes from Philistine captivity and finds shelter in Kiriath Jearim (1 Sam 7:1).

(b) Unlike Eli, Samuel is the recipient of genuine revelation. He speaks with God frequently and regularly consults him on matters of public importance.

(c) Samuel's call to leadership is different from that of other judges. In his case the people do not cry out to God to rescue them from worldly oppression. Rather, they experience a spiritual revival: they "turned back to the Lord" (1 Sam 7:2). Samuel acts only after receiving assurances that they are indeed returning to God with all their hearts (1 Sam 7:3).

(d) The purpose of gathering the people is different in Samuel's case. Instead of mustering the troops, Samuel convenes the popular assembly—the body that comes together to deal with fundamental issues concerning the identity of the nation (1 Sam 7:5). When the people gather in Mizpah, they do not arm themselves for battle. Instead they participate in a ritual of confession and appoint Samuel as their leader (1 Sam 7:6).

(e) Samuel's defense of the people, moreover, is religious rather than military in nature. He does not defeat the Philistines through valor in battle but rather by devoting a burnt offering to the Lord (1 Sam 7:9–10).

* * *

These details suggest that the assembly at Mizpah is a constitutional convention that alters Israel's political structure. Executive power in Israel had previously been exercised by forensic judges with limited powers and by military leaders who relied on voluntary participation and whose terms of office were defined by the nature and duration of the threat. Now, Israel is to be ruled by *God himself*, acting through a consecrated priest with whom God is in regular communication. The political system established by the assembly is a "kingship of God" (see 1 Sam 8:7)—a theocracy.

The author's assessment of theocracy is subtle and complex. On the one hand, he views the kingship of God as an ideal system. It could hardly be otherwise, since God is divine. Moreover, theocracy under Samuel seems to have performed reasonably well. Israel displays loyalty to God during this period. The people put away offending images and rituals. Samuel also achieves a modicum of national security. The Philistines withdraw from captured towns; the Amorites also do not threaten Israel (1 Sam 7:13–14). In some ways it is a halcyon period.

On the other hand, several elements indicate that the author does not view theocracy as a viable system of government over the long run:

(a) Although Samuel ousts the Philistines from Israelite territory, they do not disappear. When Saul comes on the scene, God tells Samuel that the new king will “deliver [Israel] from the hand of the Philistines” (1 Sam 9:16)—a remark that would not be needed if Samuel had eliminated the risk from that quarter. It turns out, in fact, that a Philistine garrison is occupying Gibeah in Benjamin at the time of Saul's anointment (1 Sam 10:5). Samuel's military accomplishments are less impressive than at first appears.

(b) Samuel also does not establish a viable governance apparatus for Israel. His only administrative appointments are to commission his sons as judges—and they turn out to be disasters (1 Sam 8:1–3). He does nothing to create institutions capable of governing a substantial nation. Even after Samuel has led Israel for a long time, he makes a living providing oracles for pocket change (1 Sam 9:8–13).

(c) In spite of the decision at Mizpah, Samuel never really consolidates national leadership. The author codes this fact in the detail of the ark's location. The ark returns to Israelite territory during Samuel's administration, but it does not go back to its previous

home in Shiloh or anywhere else under Samuel's control. It winds up at Kiriath-Jearim in a shrine administered by someone else. Full consolidation of national power occurs only when the ark returns to Jerusalem during the reign of David (2 Sam 6).

(d) While Samuel's integrity is unimpeachable, the same cannot be said for those around him. His sons pervert the administration of justice and Samuel does nothing to control them. Nor is it clear that others less objectionable would be available if Samuel's sons were removed from office.

(e) Even if a theocratic leader is not corrupt, moreover, his rule will not be effective if he lacks a reliable connection with God. The author makes it clear that few are as divinely favored as Samuel: "in those days messages from the Lord were very rare, and visions were quite uncommon" (1 Sam 3:1). Lacking genuine revelation, Samuel's successors are likely to resort to divination or pretense. The problem of false revelation is acute in this context.

(f) If the author believed that theocracy was an excellent idea for practical governance, he would have provided a narrative in which Israel prospered and flourished under this system for a substantial period of time. But theocratic rule in Israel is very brief, amounting to only part of Samuel's lifespan. Even then, it comes to be rejected by nearly everyone. The people convene another assembly and demand a king (1 Sam 8:4–5). Even after Samuel warns them about all the hardships kings will impose, they remain adamant (1 Sam 8:19–20). If theocratic rule were exceptionally desirable, one would suppose that the people would not take the extraordinary step of seeking to escape into a new form of government.

(g) God is not a strong supporter of theocratic rule either. He does not institute this form of government and never indicates that it is the only appropriate system for Israel. He tells Samuel to accede to the people's demand for a king, even though he knows that Samuel detests the idea (1 Sam 8:7–9). God would not do this if he were fundamentally committed to theocracy as a form of government for Israel (more on this below).

* * *

Given these narrative elements, we can understand the author's assessment of theocracy as follows. In a perfect world, theocracy would be the best form of government. The kingship of God is, after all, the form of government in the utopia of the garden of Eden. But an ideal world does not exist in ordinary experience. In the real world, theocratic government is subject to serious shortcomings. Its institutions do not deliver the benefits of government over the long term. It is subject to abuse because theocratic leadership is intrinsically autocratic. The person chosen as the theocratic ruler may not receive genuine revelations from God and may not rule according to God's wishes. And theocratic rule performs badly as a guarantor of national security. Overall it is not optimal as a model for governing a substantial nation.

The author codes this adverse judgment in the fate of Samuel's sons. Like Eli, Samuel has two bad sons who corrupt their offices (1 Sam 8:1–3). By providing bad sons for Samuel, the author establishes that theocratic rule is at an end: one bad son could be an accident, but two show that the entire line is defective. Unlike the sons of Eli, Samuel's sons are not killed. The author has too much respect for Samuel for that. But their role in Israel's government ends just as effectively. In his farewell address, Samuel

says, “And now *you have a king as your leader*; and I am old and grey, *and behold, my sons are with you*” (1 Sam 12:2). This mention of Samuel’s sons is more than a touching sign of parental devotion; it establishes that Samuel’s line—and theocracy as a form of government—has come to an end. Samuel’s sons are no longer leaders in Israel; they are simply members of the public who, like everyone else, are subject to the authority of the king.

Yet the author’s conclusion that theocracy is not feasible in the real world does not obviate the importance of the idea. Theocratic rule remains an inspirational benchmark against which other forms of government can be assessed. And although theocracy disappears from Israel during the time of the kings, the power of religious authorities does not. The fact that Samuel once ruled Israel gives religious officials and prophets of later times a claim to power that is both independent of and more fundamental than that of the king—an authority that is used rarely, and that may in practice be more theoretical than real, but that nevertheless remains an element of constitutional organization through the entire history of ancient Israel.

Monarchy

In response to the corruption displayed by Samuel’s sons, the elders take the extraordinary step of convening an assembly without the leader’s participation (1 Sam 8:4). The agenda is to deal with the problem of who will take over after Samuel’s death. But that topic evidently sparks a discussion that ranges beyond unworthy heirs. Like the American constitutional convention of 1787, the assembly starts off with a limited agenda but winds up proposing a dramatic change. In the case of the Bible, the proposal

is to appoint a king. Samuel resists the idea, but when the people prove adamant, he selects Saul as the future king and confers government powers on the new leader.³

The narrative of the creation of kingship in ancient Israel provides a setup for the author to examine monarchy as a form of government.⁴ In typically systematic fashion, he considers the following questions: (a) the need for monarchy; (b) the problems associated with monarchy; and (c) the means available to achieve the benefits of monarchy while minimizing the problems so identified.

Need

The author sets forth the general case for monarchy in the reasons the elders give in support of their request for a king. They phrase the matter as follows: “Behold, you [Samuel] are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Sam 8:5). Later, after Samuel warns the people of the ways of kings, they repeat the request in slightly different form: “We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam 8:19–20).

This petition is not addressed to any specifically Israelite conception of kingship. The elders do not have any definite idea of kingship in mind at this juncture. They ask for a king such as “all the other nations” have, leaving it up to Samuel to determine what particular form kingship will take. The setup thus allows the author to explore the advantages of kingship *in general*.

³ The author codes this in the detail of Samuel kissing Saul after anointing him as Israel’s future ruler (1 Sam 10:1). Under Israelite customary law, it appears that a kiss undertaken with the appropriate formality can transfer intangible rights. See Miller, “Contracts of Genesis,” 15–45, here 28. Samuel’s kiss is significant because it conveys Samuel’s authority not only to Saul but to monarchic government in general.

⁴ For discussion of the concept of kingship in Deut, see Bernard M. Levinson, “The Reconceptualization of Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History’s Transformation of Torah,” *VT* 51 (2001): 511–34.

The elders identify the following reasons why they desire a king:

(a) First, they do not want to be ruled by Samuel's sons. The puzzle here is why they consider monarchy to be a solution to the problem of succession, given that kings are just as likely as theocratic leaders to have unworthy heirs. The implication seems to be that the monarchy is preferable because kings are subject to checks and balances in a way that theocratic rulers are not. Kings tend to operate within legal, political, and bureaucratic structures that limit their range of action; theocratic rulers, in contrast, may face no such checks. As compared with theocratic leaders, the limitations on the powers of kings mitigate (although they do not eliminate) the risk that a successor will prove to be unworthy.

(b) The elders ask for a king to "govern us." Although the terminology is similar to that used to describe the activities of Samuel and the judges of the confederacy, the elders clearly have something different in mind here. They are asking for affirmative, proactive regulation in contrast to the passive, reactive form of government that Israel has received to date. The king they demand is going to be a much stronger executive. This king, as the elders imagine him, will "go out before" the people. He will take wars away from their cities or homes. He will "fight our battles"—relieve the people of the burden of answering calls to arms. The reference here is to the role of the king as commander-in-chief of a professional army.

(c) The people want a king "like all the nations." The comment is sometimes criticized from a theological perspective as indicating that the people suffer from a craven wish to conform to the ways of other nations and an insufficient appreciation of Israel's unique nature. Yet the wish to be like other nations is a perfectly respectable rationale for

wanting a king. Other nations have kings; Israel is an outlier. A purist might argue that Israel should remain in its special status, but a realist could respond that if the other nations had kings, there must be something desirable about that form of government. Further, if kingship is associated with superior military performance, then as other nations move to monarchic government it becomes ever more necessary for Israel to do likewise. By appointing a king, moreover, Israel would be able to participate in the community of nations and achieve the benefits of diplomatic treaties and trade relationships that are possible under monarchic government. Even if the only reason to seek a king is a matter of pride—of wanting to be like all the other nations—this is not an illegitimate reason. Pride enhances a nation’s morale and increases its stature with other nations.

The Trouble with Kings

Having presented the general case for monarchy, the author considers objections to that form of government. Two objections are most pertinent:

(a) In a variant on Acton’s adage that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” the author observes that kings tend to abuse their powers. The fullest expression of this concern is found in Samuel’s warning about the ways of kings:

This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. (1 Sam 8:11–17)

Kings, in other words, will take cherished things away from citizens and use them for their own advantage.

(b) A second problem with kings is that they relentlessly hold on to power. Unlike the judges under the confederacy, kings do not need the continuing support of the people in order to rule. They enjoy powers of taxation and a professional military. Even if the people tire of a king's rule, they cannot easily replace him by another, nor can they abandon the monarchy as an institution if they find its demands to be too onerous. The move to kingship is permanent. Samuel notes this problem explicitly: "When [the king imposes excessive burdens on you], you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day" (1 Sam 8:18).

Limitations

Having identified both virtues and risks of monarchy, the author seeks to identify mechanisms of government that will preserve the benefits of kingship while mitigating its defects. This is the perennial problem of authority. Because people are not perfect, a strong government is needed to control them and to protect them from enemies. But because governments are not perfect either, there must be some means to limit government itself, lest the cure become worse than the disease.⁵ The modern solution is the system of checks and balances, by which power is set in opposition to power so that no single individual or office can assume dictatorial control. The biblical author does not present a concept of checks and balances in this sense, but he does offer approaches to

⁵ As Madison summarized the issue in *The Federalist No. 51*: "if men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

the problem of unlimited executive power that foreshadow in some respects the solutions adopted in constitutions of modern times.⁶

1. One means for checking tendencies for abuse is to impose norms that apply to the kings of ancient Israel:

(a) The author specifies qualities of character or conduct deemed desirable (or undesirable) in kings. In the book of Exodus, as we have seen, he explores the qualities of leadership in the context of the selection of Moses. Here he returns to the topic of leadership in the setting of the monarchy. He focuses on the kingships of Saul, David, and Solomon, since these figures represent either the beginning of monarchy as an institution in Israel or else the beginning of the Davidic dynasty. By defining good and bad features of monarchs, the author specifies a normative definition of a good king and also offers a model to which leaders in Israel can refer in order to learn how to govern well.

The following features set Saul apart from others at the time of his selection as king. Being unusually tall, Saul has the robustness to defend against aggression and enjoys line-of-sight advantages in the sense that people look up to him (1 Sam 9:2).⁷ Saul is also loyal (9:5), modest (9:21), favored by God (9:17), a man of the people (11:5), and charismatic (11:6–8). At the beginning of his kingship, he is forgiving and slow to anger

⁶ For exploration of the concept of separation of powers in biblical thinking, see Levinson, “The First Constitution,” 1853–88; Levinson, “Deuteronomy’s Conception of Law”; David C. Flatto, “The King and I: The Separation of Powers in Early Hebraic Political Theory,” *YJLH* 20 (2008): 61–110.

⁷ Even today, we recognize height as a desirable attribute signaling unusual gifts (as when we say that someone is “head and shoulders” above his competitors). This is not merely a matter of perception: unusual height is empirically correlated with leadership and success. For example, the United States has not elected a president of below-average height since 1896. See, e.g., Timothy A. Judge and Daniel M. Cable, “The Effect of Physical Height on Workplace Success and Income: Preliminary Test of a Theoretical Model,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 89 (2004): 428–41 (reporting meta-analysis of prior studies showing strong correlation between height and measures of leadership and workplace success).

(10:27; 11:13), is inspired by a wish to protect his fellow Israelites (11:6), and is a capable military leader (11:11).

As for David, the author supplies a list of attributes roughly overlapping those attributed to Saul but also displaying significant differences. In contrast with Saul's height and physical prowess, David is a small person, at least as a young man. David is also physically attractive—"glowing with health [with] a fine appearance and handsome features" (1 Sam 16:12). The author, however, rejects appearance or size as criteria for kingship. As God tells Samuel in reference to one of David's brothers, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). In addition to matters of appearances, which the author excludes as irrelevant to the selection of a king, David displays some more substantive differences with Saul. In contrast with Saul's somewhat plodding personality, David is clever, wily, and resourceful in all of his enterprises.

When we come to Solomon, the leading attribute is his wisdom (1 Kgs 3:7-9; 4:29-30, 34; 5:12; 10:24; 11:41)—an asset that would be particularly valuable to a king serving as a successor in a dynastic succession rather than as the founder of a kingship.⁸ Solomon's wisdom includes not only knowledge of the world but also understanding of people and their motivations—traits shown to good advantage in his famous judgment in the dispute between two putative mothers (1 Kgs 3:25).

These kings are not perfect, and their flaws also model behaviors that leaders in Israel should seek to avoid. Saul, for all his virtues, fails to carry out the commands of

⁸ See generally Kim Ian Parker, "Solomon as Philosopher King? The Nexus of Law and Wisdom in 1 Kings 1-11," *JSOT* 53 (1992): 75-91.

God and in later life becomes paranoid and isolated. David displays an objectionable selfishness and lack of concern for the rights of his subjects when he misappropriates Bathsheba and arranges for the death of her husband. Solomon displays extravagance in his management of public affairs and fails to insist on religious purity. The narratives suggest that future leaders of Israel should seek to avoid each of these failures.

(b) Another non-legal check on executive power concerns the transformation of the person that accompanies elevation to office. In the book of Exodus, the author presents these ideas in the narrative of the selection of Moses for leadership over Israel. He returns to the issue in the narratives about Saul and David, examining them in the particular context of monarchy.

Samuel tells Saul that he will meet a procession of prophets in Gibeah and that he will be “changed into a different person” (1 Sam 10:6). After Saul joins the prophets, God “change[s] Saul’s heart” (1 Sam 10:9). These texts refer to the transformation of identity that occurs when a leader becomes personally identified with the role in which he is placed and therefore tends to act in ways consistent with that role even if he is not forced to do so by external constraints.⁹

The author also tells us, however, that the transformation is not necessarily permanent: when David receives the spirit of God after his anointment, the spirit departs from Saul (1 Sam 16:14). Saul then behaves in ways that are unworthy of a king, displaying inconsistency, rage, and paranoia in his relationship with David. David’s behavior, in contrast, becomes kingly even though he has not yet ascended to the throne.

⁹ See Miller, “The Legal Function of Ritual,” 1181–233.

2. In addition to these non-legal factors, kings of Israel are checked by legal constraints:

(a) Kings must act in ways that are pleasing to God. This requirement is set forth in 1 Sam 12, where Samuel warns that the change in government from theocracy to monarchy has not released the people or their king from the obligation of fidelity to God: “If you fear the Lord and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you *and the king who reigns over you* follow the Lord your God—good! But if you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your ancestors” (1 Sam 12:14–15).

The requirement that kings act in ways that are pleasing to God operates as a check against oppression. The author offers two examples. The first is David’s scandalous behavior toward Uriah the Hittite in the matter of Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:27). The prophet Nathan rebukes David for the misconduct, manipulating the king into passing judgment on himself (2 Sam 12:1–25). The narrative suggests that at least some of the problems David encounters later in his monarchy stem from this egregious abuse of power. The second example is from the northern kingdom. Ahab arranges for the death of Naboth on charges of treason in order to take possession of a vineyard that Naboth has refused to sell.¹⁰ The action also displeases God, who sends the prophet Elijah to pronounce judgment against Ahab and his wife (1 Kgs 21:17–19). The stories of Uriah and Naboth illustrate the principle that religious authorities (priests or prophets) have the right and responsibility to police against abuses of royal authority.

¹⁰ See Nahum Sarna, “Naboth’s Vineyard Revisited (1 Kings 21)” in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg* (ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey Tigay, eds.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 119–26.

(b) In addition to acting in ways that are pleasing to God, kings must obey the law applicable to the people generally.¹¹ They must fairly and rigorously enforce the rules for their subjects (Deut 17:19) and also must obey the general law themselves (Deut 17:20).

(c) Kings must abide by rules that pertain to them in particular. They must obey the constitution that Samuel writes down and entrusts to the religious authorities (1 Sam 10:25). They must also comply with specific prohibitions (apparently developed in response to Solomon's excesses): they may not acquire too many horses, take too many wives, or accumulate too much wealth (Deut 17:16–17).

(d) The command that the king must follow the law is buttressed by a requirement that every new king must “write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law” (Deut 17:18).¹² The recopying serves a practical purpose: scrolls needed to be renewed every generation or so in order to correct for the depredations of time and the gnawing of rodents. But the rule on recopying also carries important symbolism. Associating the recopying ceremony with a king's coronation enhances the prestige of the law and publicizes its contents. Requiring that the king do the copying commits him to the legitimacy of the law (in practice, the copying would be done by scribes, but no matter: the act is still one performed under royal authority). The symbolism of the king as scrivener also implies that he should be familiar with the law—a requirement that is reinforced by the rule that the king must “read [the law] all the days of his life” (Deut 17:19).

¹¹ See Levinson, “The First Constitution,” 1853–88 (arguing that Deut establishes a utopian legal system including a requirement that all citizens, including the monarch, obey the rule of law); Levinson, “Deuteronomy's Conception of Law,” 77–79 (describing how, as a result of legislation in Deut, “monarchy becomes regulated by and answerable to the law”).

¹² See the interesting discussion in Berman, *Created Equal*, 62–63.

These rules would not mean much if the king had the discretion to change the law. The author deals with this problem in the book of Exodus, which recognizes as valid only the laws given by God to Moses during the wilderness wanderings. The book of Deuteronomy reiterates this principle with specific reference to kings. The authoritative copy of the law is maintained by the religious authorities who, we surmise, are more reliable custodians than kings who might be tempted to alter the text out of motives of political expediency (see Deut 17:18). When the king recopies the law, he must work off of the official text and do so under the watchful eyes of the priests.

3. Kings are subject to constitutional rules regarding selection:

(a) Once a dynastic line is founded, the next king is selected from the king's sons.

This limitation on succession enhances stability because it denies the kingship to candidates who are not heirs of the king's body and thus limits the potential for destructive power struggles. The dynastic requirement also facilitates the training of the next king, since the princes, being close to the kingship, can be educated for high office from an early age. The requirement, however, has certain disadvantages: it limits the choice of the next king and thus excludes worthy candidates, and it is also overly restrictive when the king has no male heirs (multiple wives mitigated that problem, however).

(b) Among the king's sons, the assumption is that the eldest will succeed to the throne. Yet the author has already established that the rule of primogeniture is not ironclad. Younger sons can and do become kings. A soft rule of primogeniture makes sense because a fixed preference for the eldest son could result in incompetent leaders, whereas no preference at all could lead to destabilizing conflicts. The soft rule on

primogeniture implies that the king has authority to designate one of his sons as heir-apparent, even if that son is not the firstborn. The advantage of this procedure is that it cuts off the potential for conflict over succession.

The author illustrates this proposition in the story of Adonijah. When David is well on in years, Adonijah proclaims himself the heir apparent and gathers support from the people (1 Kgs 1:5–6). Nathan and Bathsheba respond by persuading David to appoint Solomon instead (1 Kgs 1:35). The message is both that the king has the power to designate his successor and also that kings are well advised to do so early enough to head off struggles over succession. David waited too long, with near-disastrous results; future kings should select their successor earlier in order to ensure an orderly transfer of power upon their deaths.

(c) The selection of a new king is also subject to approval by the religious authorities. This limitation on royal power is found in Deut 17:15: “be sure to appoint over you the king *the Lord your God chooses*.” This basic authority is implemented by the ritual of anointment, established in 1 Sam 10:1, where Samuel anoints Saul, Israel’s first king, by pouring oil on his head. While in later times the ritual of anointment is *pro forma* and sometimes may not even have been performed, the symbolism is still important: it asserts that the monarch’s appointment depends on the approval of God, acting through his official representatives on earth.

(d) The king’s tenure in office is theoretically contingent on the approval of the religious authorities throughout his reign, not just at the beginning.¹³ After Saul is

¹³ The author addresses the topic in preliminary fashion in Num. During Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness the people run out of water and begin to murmur against Moses. God tells Moses to generate water by speaking to a rock (Num 20:6–8). Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses strikes it with his staff

elevated to the kingship, he performs an unauthorized sacrifice and is rebuked by Samuel, who announces that “your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the Lord’s command” (1 Sam 13:14). Later, Saul compounds the offense by sparing the king of the Amalekites in violation of Samuel’s command that all of them be destroyed (1 Sam 15:1–9). Samuel responds by declaring that God has rejected Saul as king of Israel (1 Sam 15:23–28) and secretly anointing David in Saul’s place (1 Sam 16:13).

(e) The misconduct that costs Saul the kingship seems minor or even justifiable. Saul does perform an unauthorized sacrifice, true, but only after Samuel has not shown up for seven days; Saul’s troops are deserting, and he concludes that he needs to perform a sacrifice in order to bolster morale. This hardly seems like an offense that warrants loss of the throne. As for the battle with the Amalekites, Saul’s sparing the life of the king was probably justifiable as a strategic measure. Again, Saul’s behavior seems benign. Yet this offense too is deemed serious enough to cost Saul his kingdom. These narratives code the grounds for removal from office: *any behavior by the king, however reasonable, is a basis for removal if it contravenes a clear and express command of God.*

(Num 20:9–11). God becomes angry that Moses has not strictly followed his instructions and announces that as punishment Moses and Aaron will not be allowed to enter the promised land (Num 20:12). This narrative seems problematic in that the offense hardly seems severe enough to warrant severe punishment, especially one directed against a leader who in all respects has been an exemplary exponent of God’s wishes. Moses uses the rod only for the good of the people and to carry out the general objective that God has specified. Why is God so harsh in response? The answer is that the author wishes to establish the principle that the actions of the political leader are subject to the overriding commands of God. When God has given a clear command, the political leader must follow those instructions to the letter, even with respect to issues of implementation. By placing the offense in the person of Moses and making the command so seemingly unimportant, the author establishes the principle at its point of maximum effect: if even Moses can be severely punished for minor disobedience to God’s command, any lesser leader who follows after him can expect the same or worse.

This rule might seem to create instability by vesting too much power in the religious authorities. However, no king in the line of David is actually removed from office on this ground. It is evident that while the theoretical grounds for removal are not demanding, the practice is otherwise. The story of Saul and David itself suggests that removal is not a particularly potent political tool. Although Samuel tells Saul that the kingdom has been taken away, he does nothing about it other than secretly anoint David. Saul continues as king as before. Meanwhile, the author takes pains to establish the legitimacy of David as successor to the throne on other grounds: his marriage to Saul's daughter, his friendship with Saul's son, his acts of mercy toward Saul, his professions of loyalty to the king, his kinglike behavior, and his ostentatious display of grief at the king's death. All these legitimating actions would not be needed if David's claim to the throne could be established by the mere fact that Samuel has withdrawn God's approval.¹⁴

The author's account thus appears to serve the following purposes. First, it establishes that the king has an absolute duty to obey the command of God and stipulates

¹⁴ In evaluating the extent of the removal power, we must consider the meaning of God's promise, through the prophet Nathan, to establish the house of David "forever" (2 Sam 7:16). Taken literally, this covenant would seem to obviate the removal power, since if a king in the Davidic line is removed from office, the house of David will not endure forever. Moreover, God explains that in establishing the Davidic line, "my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you" (2 Sam 7:15). The implication is that while Saul was removed from office for violating God's command, no king of the Davidic line will be removed in this way. Yet the author cannot mean this literally. If a king of the Davidic line rejected God and turned to the worship of foreign gods, it is inconceivable that God would keep the promise to continue the Davidic line forever. God makes a similar promise to keep the house of Eli as the priests of Shiloh "forever" (1 Sam 2:30), but he abrogates that promise when Eli's sons fail to live up to God's standards (1 Sam 2:30-33). David does not understand God's promise to his line as unconditional: when he repeats it to Solomon, it is explicitly conditioned on continuing fidelity to God (1 Kgs 2:4). God's renewal of the promise to Solomon contains the same condition: "if you walk before me faithfully in integrity of heart and uprightness, as David your father did, and do all I command and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.' But if you or your descendants turn away from me and do not observe the commands and decrees I have given you and go off to serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them" (1 Kgs 9:4-7).

that the punishment for breach of that duty is removal from office—not only removal of the king himself but also the forfeiture of his dynastic line. While this principle appears to give the religious authorities a great deal of power, in practice the power of removal is more theoretical than real. God’s representative has the putative power to remove the king from office, but the power is one that would be exercised only in extraordinary circumstances. However, even the theoretical presence of this power is not unimportant as a check against severe abuse of office. And if a king ever attempted to do something far outside the bounds of permissible conduct, such as set up another deity as Israel’s god, the religious authorities might attempt to draw on this power. The removal authority thus represents a weak but still valuable check on abuses of authority by kings.

4. In addition to these legal and extralegal checks on royal authority, the power of the kings of Israel is subject to check in the form of illegal action: the people may revolt against a king who pushes them too hard, even if the king is acting within the scope of his authority. This scenario is illustrated in the first book of Kings. Solomon’s heir Rehoboam goes to Shechem to be crowned king of the northern tribes (1 Kgs 12:1). The assembly demands that Rehoboam lighten the burdens that his father had imposed on them (1 Kgs 12:4). Rehoboam rebuffs the demand and threatens to impose even harsher obligations. The northern tribes respond by rejecting Rehoboam as their king—resulting in a split between the northern and southern kingdoms that is never healed (1 Kgs 12:19).

The author here implies that Rehoboam was within his rights to refuse the people’s demand. Their subsequent secession from the united monarchy was illegal in his view. But the author also suggests that Rehoboam was foolish to have rejected the demand, especially in such an undiplomatic way, since the consequence was to lose the

greater part of his kingdom. This narrative codes the idea that the powers of a king are checked by the risk that the people will reject his rule if he makes unreasonable demands.

Evaluation

The author compares the Israelite monarchy with other forms of national government from the perspectives of both theory and experience.

1. He suggests that monarchy can do a good job at protecting national security since the king is the commander-in-chief of a professional army. Confederacy does a poor job along this dimension because the lack of a strong executive makes Israel chronically subject to being invaded or oppressed by foreign powers. Theocracy is also a weak protector of national security; its inadequacy in this regard is one of the reasons that the elders call on Samuel to supply a king to rule over them. Military rule, on the other hand, is a good provider of national security; under Joshua's rule Israel is a fearsome fighting force.

Israel's later history supports the author's generally positive assessment of monarchy as a guarantor of security. The united monarchy expands to control a mini-empire. Even after the division of the land into two countries, the southern kingdom survives for more than four hundred years—sometimes as an independent country, sometimes as a vassal to a foreign power, but nevertheless preserving a degree of autonomy in the face of manifold dangers. It is true, of course, that Judah finally loses its independence to Babylon in 587 B.C.E. But it nevertheless has a very good run—one far longer than could reasonably be expected for a country of its size and location. The history more than fulfills Moses' promise that the future king and his descendants "will reign a long time" (Deut 17:20).

2. The author suggests that monarchic rule is superior to the alternatives as a provider of prosperity. The Israelites under Joshua engage in no productive activities; they sustain themselves with the spoils of battle. The confederacy is also inadequate as a provider of prosperity; it is regularly harassed by foreign powers that interfere with trade and damage the nation's infrastructure. Theocracy, too, provides inadequate protections for prosperity by failing to control the menace of foreign aggression; it also fails to develop durable administrative institutions. The Israelite monarchy, with its settled institutions and promise of security, offers a much better chance at amassing wealth.

Israel's later history bears out these inferences. Under David and Solomon the nation expands, secures its borders, and enters into trade relations with lands near and far. The result is spectacular. Solomon builds a beautiful temple and a magnificent palace (1 Kgs 5–7). His commercial relations extend to distant lands (1 Kgs 10:13–22), and his wealth becomes famous throughout the world (1 Kgs 10:23–25). While Solomon's reign may have represented an apogee of worldly success, the monarchic system appears overall to have provided more-than-adequate prosperity to the citizens of the land.

3. As for the goal of ensuring domestic tranquility, we saw that the confederacy performs poorly. The civil war against Benjamin, the battle between Gilead and Ephraim, and the constant carping and jealousies among the tribes illustrate that an alliance of sub-national groups with a weak central authority is subject to a chronic danger of internal disruption. Theocratic rule does better on this score; the tribes appear generally able to cooperate under Samuel's leadership. But another theocratic ruler less capable than Samuel could well experience difficulties. Military rule performs well with respect to ensuring domestic tranquility: as we have seen, the Israelites under Joshua act as a

cohesive group and never fall into conflict. As for monarchy, a king with strong executive powers ought to be able to prevent domestic conflict; but competition among princes can lead to violence, as can oppressive measures by kings that spark popular resistance.

Later history attests to significant breaches of domestic tranquility—the conflict between Absalom and Amnon (2 Sam 13), the revolts of Absalom and Sheba (2 Sam 15–18; 20:1–22), the secession of the northern kingdom under Jeroboam (1 Kgs 11:26–42; 12:1–24), and subsequent conflicts between the northern and southern kingdoms. Yet the worst of these conflicts occur around the time of the creation of the monarchy. After the partition of Israel and Judah, conditions in the southern kingdom revert to a calm that is only rarely broken during the centuries that follow. In the northern kingdom, however, domestic tranquility is fleeting, as coups and other forms of violence mark much of its history. Overall, the author’s judgment is that kingship in its best form—Judah under the Davidic dynasty—delivers a reasonable amount of domestic tranquility.

4. Israel’s monarchy earns mixed reviews on the dimension of promoting fidelity to God. It does better than the confederacy, under which the people turn to the worship of other gods at a moment’s notice. It performs worse than military rule along this dimension, at least if the ruler is himself loyal to the deity, as was the case with Joshua: because the military ruler has a high degree of control over the people, he can monitor their activities and require them to manifest appropriate reverence. Monarchy also performs worse than theocratic rule when it comes to promoting fidelity to God: this is why Samuel worries that kings will allow the people to fall into sinful practices. However, because kings enjoy substantial executive power, they have the ability, if they

choose to exercise it, to promote the worship of God among the people and to suppress pagan practices.

The later history of Israel bears out this mixed assessment. In the northern kingdom, which the author criticizes for rejecting the Davidic line of kings, the tendency is to tolerate or promote pagan practices. In the south, the kings of the Davidic line maintain greater fidelity to God overall. It is true that some southern kings fall into sinful practices; but others remain faithful, and some—Hezekiah and Josiah—even reform the religious system. Thus, while the Israelite monarchy is not a reliable guarantor of religious fidelity, at its best it performs well along this dimension.

5. The author evinces a subtle and nuanced attitude regarding the potential of the monarchy for abuse of power. We saw that the tribal confederacy did not create a serious danger of abuse because of the weak nature of the executive authority. Theocracy poses greater dangers in this regard because the power of the ruler is autocratic: Samuel did not abuse his office, but his sons took bribes. Military rule poses an even greater risk of abuse because the military ruler is essentially a dictator; although Joshua, being an ideal leader, does not abuse his powers, others in his position would not be so scrupulous. The potential for abuse under monarchy depends on the type of monarchy involved. Samuel's warning to the people about the dangers of monarchy is nothing other than a prediction that kings, if given unfettered executive authority, will proceed to abuse it. But this is not Israel's monarchy. As we have seen, while the Israelite constitution gives substantial powers to the king, those powers are also limited by legal and extralegal constraints. Overall, Israel's monarchy—especially the monarchy in the southern kingdom—displays a reasonable record for avoiding abuse.

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The author's judgment of monarchy is therefore balanced but favorable overall. Although like all human institutions the monarchy is subject to flaws and shortcomings, it is better, all things considered, than military rule, confederacy, or theocracy. At its best, Israel's monarchy provides an excellent form of national government. The author is so keen on the monarchy, in fact, that he enlists one of the basic principles of political legitimacy identified in the Eden narrative in support of this institution: the notion of consent of the governed.

The Israelites *consent* to monarchy—not once but four times under four different knowledge conditions. The assembly of elders requests that Samuel appoint a king to lead them (1 Sam 8:5). They repeat the request even after Samuel has warned them of all the bad things a king could do (1 Sam 8:19–20). A later assembly accepts the form of monarchy that Samuel has designed for the people, as recorded in a written constitution maintained by the religious authorities (1 Sam 10:25), and also acclaims Saul as the first king (1 Sam 10:24). Still later, the people reaffirm their support for the monarchy after Saul has proved his worth by winning a battle over the Ammonites (1 Sam 11:14–15).

These different acts of consent across a spectrum of knowledge conditions demonstrate the legitimacy of monarchic rule. We have seen that a problem with consent theory is that it involves a trade-off between fairness and accuracy. To achieve a consent that is fair *ex ante*, the theorist must deprive the parties of knowledge about their individual endowments; but if deprived of such knowledge, the parties must decide in an impoverished informational environment where mistakes are possible and where the lack of disclosure provides a fruitful ground for *ex post* rejection of deals. It is for this reason

that the author tells of two acts of consent to Israel's fundamental institutions: the first on Mount Sinai, where the people are shielded from knowledge of their endowments, and the second at Shechem, where the people know their allotments. In the case of the monarchy, the author provides for consent under not two but four different knowledge conditions—thus indicating the importance he places on establishing the legitimacy of monarchy.

“Anti-monarchic” Texts

It is obvious that the Bible contains texts that display a favorable view of monarchy. But the proposition that the Bible is *consistently* pro-monarchic is not widely accepted. Many scholars believe that the Bible contains an “anti-monarchic” source or tradition that is fundamentally critical of kingship.¹⁵ This view, if true, would contradict the thesis that the Bible contains a consistent political philosophy that considers monarchy to be a superior form of political organization.

We may distinguish three ways in which the Bible could display a negative attitude toward monarchy:

1. Clearly the Bible criticizes *particular kings*. Even David is not immune from blame: he receives a rebuke for his behavior around Bathsheba and Uriah. Solomon, another of Israel's greatest kings, is chastised for extravagance and for promoting the worship of foreign gods. Many other kings are singled out for even harsher rebuke. But a critique of a particular king is not a critique of monarchy, other than in the minimal sense

¹⁵ The thesis that the Bible contains an anti-monarchic strain extends back at least to the work of Wellhausen in the nineteenth century. The contemporary literature is enormous. For discussion, see, e.g., Trent C. Butler, “An Anti-Moses Tradition,” *JSOT* 12 (1979): 9–15; Keith W. Whitlam, “Israelite Kingship: The Royal Ideology and Its Opponents,” in *The World of Ancient Israel* (ed. Ronald E. Clements; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 119–40.

that monarchy does not prevent a particular occupant of the office from engaging in misconduct.

2. A second way a text can be “anti-monarchic” is in identifying structural defects or weaknesses in monarchy as a form of government. Such texts also exist in the Bible, although they are less frequently observed than texts that critique particular kings. Samuel’s warning about the ways of kings is an example. He asserts that monarchy has a structural flaw in that, given scope to exercise their powers, kings will tend to abuse their office. Yet this is not a claim that monarchy itself is fundamentally undesirable as a form of government. When Churchill remarked that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others, he was speaking in *praise* of the institution. Likewise, the biblical author recognizes that monarchy has many defects. But the other systems of government also have flaws—flaws that, in the author’s opinion, make them less desirable than monarchy as a system of practical governance.

3. The third way that a text might be anti-monarchic is by rejecting monarchy *altogether*. However, it is doubtful that the Bible contains any such arguments. The following considerations suggest that no text in the Biblical corpus from Genesis to Second Kings fundamentally disapproves of monarchy as a system of government.

* * *

The following considerations suggest reasons to doubt that the Bible contains texts which are fundamentally critical of monarchy:

1. It is challenging to posit a setting in which such texts would have been written and preserved. What parties in ancient Israel were fundamentally opposed to monarchy? Even the prophets did not oppose monarchy as an *institution*, however much they may

have criticized the incumbent holders of the office. If anti-monarchic parties had existed, moreover, why would kings and other leaders have allowed them to publicize their views, much less permitted those views to be incorporated into the national epic? Even after the fall of Judah there is no evidence that the exilic community harbored anti-monarchic sentiments. Mostly they wished to preserve the ideal of Davidic rule. Similarly, after the return of the exiles to Jerusalem there is no evidence of a well-established party that benefited from attacking a monarchy that no longer existed. The proponents of an anti-monarchic source, in short, fail to propose a realistic setting in which such a document or documents could have been composed or preserved.

2. The supposed anti-monarchic tradition is also at odds with other biblical texts. Much of the Bible from Genesis through 2 Kings implicitly or explicitly promotes the Davidic dynasty as the divinely sanctioned and legitimate government. A source that rejects monarchy altogether would undermine this line of argument. While tensions and inconsistencies in a text as ancient and complex as the Bible are to be expected, vast chasms of ideological incompatibility, such as are entailed by the juxtaposition of pro-monarchic and anti-monarchic traditions, seem less plausible.

3. The Bible's endorsement of monarchy, moreover, is not limited to the idea of the divinely favored kingship of David and his line. Monarchy also provides a metaphor for the role of God in the cosmos. God is portrayed in the psalms and elsewhere as king of the universe and monarch of all creation. A notion that there is something fundamentally wrong with monarchy is at odds with this image of the role of the divinity. Such inconsistency is not to be expected—especially because the supposed anti-monarchic source is generally assumed to favor greater theological purity. If devotion to

God means opposition to monarchy, it would be a bit odd that paeans of praise to God would portray God as himself being a monarch.

* * *

None of the leading candidates for an anti-monarchic source is actually hostile to monarchy. Let us examine the two most frequently cited sources to see why this is the case.

1. One supposedly anti-monarchic source is the Gideon narrative in Judg 8-9:

(a) After Gideon saves the Israelites from the Midianites, the people ask him to rule as a dynastic king (Judg 8:22). Gideon rebuffs them, saying, “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you” (Judg 8:23). Because Gideon is a hero of the Israelite people, his brusque rejection of the people’s invitation can be interpreted as containing an anti-monarchic message: there must be something wrong with monarchy if Gideon, the hero judge, rejects the kingship in such a manner.

It is hardly surprising, however, that the author would portray Gideon as rejecting the call to be a king. The author wishes to justify a particular idea of kingship—namely the kingship of the Davidic line, a clan from Judah ruling in Jerusalem. Gideon is from the wrong tribe—he is a member of the clan of Abiezer from the tribe of Manasseh. And he is in the wrong place: his family seat is in Ophrah of the Abiezerites, not in Jerusalem. In having Gideon, an Israelite hero, reject a kingship offered on these terms, the author preserves and reinforces the legitimacy of the Davidic line in Jerusalem. But this is something done in *favor* of monarchy, not against it.

In context, moreover, the message of this narrative even on its own terms is not anti-monarchic. Gideon does reject the invitation to become a king, but not because he

wishes to avoid a leadership position. When he announces that “the Lord will rule over you,” he is referring to a theocratic rule of the type later instituted by Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 12:12). That Gideon wishes to be a theocratic leader is evident from the actions he undertakes after rejecting the kingship. In a narrative reminiscent of the golden calf episode, he asks the Israelites to give him their earrings so that he can forge an ephod, which he sets up as a sort of idol (Judg 8:25–27). In other words, Gideon attempts to establish himself as the theocratic ruler of Israel. In this he appears to have been successful, at least for a time; but the author’s judgment is harsh: “all Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping [the ephod] there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family” (Judg 8:27). Things do not go well in the long run: after Gideon’s death, the Israelites return to worshipping foreign gods, and nearly all of Gideon’s sons are slaughtered in a bloody contest for succession (Judg 8:33–35; 9:1–5). In context, therefore, Gideon’s rejection of the kingship is hardly a criticism of the monarchy, since he declines the office in order to be able to do something that is criticized as sinful and that works out badly for his posterity and for all Israel.

(b) The next stage of the Gideon cycle is also sometimes interpreted as reflecting anti-monarchic views. Gideon’s son Abimelech murders all but one of his brothers in order to eliminate challenges to his claim to rule the city of Shechem (Judg 9:5). The citizens of Shechem gather to crown Abimelech as king. His brother Jotham, who has escaped the purge, shows up at the coronation and shouts out a warning in the form of a fable. Jotham recounts how the trees decide to anoint a king over them.¹⁶ They offer the position to the olive, the fig, and the vine, but each refuses on the ground that it does not

¹⁶ See Lillian K. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Bible and Literature 14; JSOTSup 68; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 68–80.

want to give up what it is already doing (Judg 9:7–13). Then the trees offer the kingship to the thorn bush (Judg 9:14). The thorn replies, “If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thorn bush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!” (Judg 9:15).

There is no doubt that this story is a meditation on monarchy. And the text does have elements that could be interpreted as critical of kingship.¹⁷ The thorn bush is an unappealing figure—sharp, prickly, and lacking in productive capacities. The trees do not seem to value it very much since they offer the kingship to three other candidates before turning in its direction. The thorn bush’s offer to let the other trees “take refuge in my shade” appears cruelly ironic since thorn bushes do not offer much in the way of shade. And the image of fire consuming the cedars of Lebanon is violent and threatening—especially since these trees were much prized as building materials in the ancient world.

Notwithstanding these inferences, this fable is not hostile to monarchy. Jotham, the speaker, does not interpret the parable this way. After reciting the story, he provides an interpretation. If the people of Shechem have acted in good faith in making Abimelech king, then, he says, “May Abimelech be your joy, and may you be his, too!” (Judg 9:16–19). In other words, if the selection process is fair, then Jotham concedes that Abimelech’s kingship is legitimate. He is not against monarchy as an institution, only the means by which a particular king is selected. Jotham, of course, does not see process by which Abimelech was selected as fair, since it involved the murder of his brothers; but taken as a statement of political theory, his comment does not attack the institution of monarchy.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Karin Schöpflin, “Jotham’s Speech and Fable as Prophetic Comment on Abimelech’s Story,” *SJOT* 18 (2004): 3-32.

Even if, contrary to this interpretation, Jotham does oppose monarchy as an institution, this does not mean that the author of the Bible shares that view any more than we would attribute an “anti-attorney” bias to *Henry VI* when Shakespeare places the exhortation to “kill all the lawyers” in the mouth of Dick the Butcher. Jotham may not be as dubious a character as Dick the Butcher, but he still has a considerable personal interest in the subject matter.

But let us consider the story in its own right rather than through the lens of Jotham’s interpretation. Even in this case, the parable of the trees is not anti-monarchic. The fact that the thorn bush is the trees’ fourth choice for king can easily be interpreted as *favorable* to the monarchy. The trees’ persistence in seeking someone to rule over them indicates that they really want a king. There must be something good about monarchy if they desire it so much. The fact that the first three trees do not work out is no indictment of the monarchy, any more than the fact that Saul does not work out is an indictment of the kingship in Israel. Monarchy is a complex institution that may take a few failures in order to get right. Furthermore, there is no shame in being fourth. Many trees are not offered the position at all—including the cedar, a highly valued tree that appears in the same story. The fact that the thorn bush is the fourth choice suggests that it was actually pretty high up on the list. God himself does not seem to object to thorn bushes, even ones with fire coming out of them; he chose to inhabit such a piece of vegetation when he appeared to Moses in Midian.

The contrast between the thorn bush and the other trees is also not anti-monarchic. The difference lies in the fact that while the fig, the olive, and the vine produce fruit useful for human beings, the thorn produces nothing of obvious value. But this detail

need not be taken to imply that *kings* produce nothing of value. Every tree does what it does best. The text suggests that while the thorn does not yield fruit, it does produce something that the other trees cannot manufacture. That product is *governance*. The thorn is specialized at providing the services that the trees look for when they seek a king. The fact that governance cannot be seen or touched is a curious feature but not a basis for rejecting kingship. When Barack Obama sits in the Oval Office, he does not produce tomatoes or automobiles or lines of computer code. He produces governance, an asset that is intangible even if it is sometimes manifested in things like laws, decrees, or speeches. Similarly, the parable of the trees does not criticize governance for being intangible. Quite to the contrary, by analogizing governance to tangible goods such as figs, grapes, or olives, the parable asserts that governance does have value even if its benefits cannot be touched or tasted.

Consider also the thorn bush's invitation to the other trees to take shelter in its shade. An anti-monarchic interpretation observes that thorn bushes do not produce shade. The text then appears cynical and ironic. But we are talking about *trees*. Unlike people, trees do not want shade. Quite the opposite: they want and need sunlight. Even on the literal level, therefore, the thorn bush is not offering anything unfriendly when he invites the other trees into his shade. He has little shade to offer, but little shade is exactly what the other trees want. Of course, the thorn bush's invitation is obviously metaphorical. By "shade" the bush means the protection that a king can offer. But even on the metaphorical level, the text is not hostile to monarchy. The thorn does offer a figurative form of shade: its thorns can deter assaults from without. The biblical audience would have known this

fact because the thorns on such bushes would have made them difficult to cut down or clear away for agricultural purposes.

Consider finally the reference to fire going out of the bush and consuming the cedars of Lebanon.¹⁸ The symbolic meaning draws on the metaphor, attested elsewhere in the Bible, of “fire going out” as a form of consuming violence, as when holy fire goes out from God (e.g., Lev 10:2) or when fire goes out from a city in the form of aggressive war (Num 21:28). The message of the parable is that if the king is chosen and then rejected, the result is likely to be violence that consumes even parties who have not been involved in the conflict. This sounds harsh. But notice that the thorn bush is offering this statement as fair warning. It is saying, “If you want me as your king, I will provide the things that a king has to offer. But if thereafter you decide you no longer want me as a king, I will not give up my office peacefully. The result will be devastating for everyone. So think carefully before you act.” This warning, which is echoed in 1 Sam 8:18, turns out to be prescient in the case of Abimelech, since the people of Shechem do revolt against his kingship, resulting in a bloody conflict in which fire goes out from Abimelech in the form of burning trees used in siege warfare (Judg 9:22–56).

Perhaps the parable of the trees can be said to be critical of kingship in the following sense: kings once appointed do not relinquish power even if the people would be better off if they did. In this respect kingship may be less desirable than theocracy, confederacy, or military rule, since the leaders of Israel under these other systems do relinquish their powers to the next form of government. But, as already noted, the observation that kingship has flaws is not the same as rejecting the institution outright.

¹⁸ The immediate allusion is to fires in uncultivated lands (cf. Exod 22:6). Probably thorn bushes were associated with wildfires because they would erupt in spectacular flares visible from many miles away.

All forms of government have flaws; the challenge is to weigh the costs and benefits to determine which is best all things considered.

2. The second set of supposedly anti-monarchic texts is found in 1 Sam 8:

(a) Samuel is displeased when the people come to him with their request for a king. He consults with God about what to do. God responds, “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.” (1 Sam 8:7-9).

This text could be read to suggest that God disapproves of monarchy. But it does no such thing. On the contrary, it shows God as *favorably* disposed towards this system of government. God’s reaction when he hears about the people’s petition is not one of anger or blame. God does not tell Samuel to reject the people’s petition even though Samuel, who stands highest in God’s esteem, is very unhappy about the situation. On the contrary, God explicitly tells Samuel to “listen to all that the people are saying to you.” If God were fundamentally opposed to monarchy as a form of government, he would never tell Samuel to grant the people’s petition. God’s later conduct reveals that he regards kingship with favor. He watches over Israel’s kings, replaces Saul by David when the former proves unworthy, and even promises permanent kingship to David and his line—all actions inconsistent with the concept that God objects to monarchy as a form of government.

God's problem in 1 Sam 8 is not that the people have made an unacceptable request. It is rather that while God wishes to accommodate the people's request, his designated representative opposes the idea. Samuel is frank about his feelings: the petition displeases him (1 Sam 8:6). It is hardly surprising that Samuel dislikes the request: the people's demand for a king constitutes both a rejection of the form of government which Samuel himself personifies and also a rejection of his sons as dynastic rulers. It would be natural for anyone in Samuel's position to feel upset under these circumstances. God's dilemma is that he needs to induce a reluctant Samuel to accept the idea of kingship, at least to the extent of cooperating with the people's request that he appoint a king.

God uses three strategies lessen Samuel's resistance to monarchy:

(i) He attempts to assuage Samuel's feelings of anger and rejection. When God says "it is not you they have rejected," he is offering support and comfort to Samuel by telling Samuel not to take the rejection personally. The people love Samuel as a godly figure and as their leader. Far from repudiating Samuel, they have trusted him and recognized his authority by bringing their petition to him and asking him to implement the requested change. Therefore, God suggests, Samuel need not feel personally aggrieved by their request.

God goes on to say that the people "have rejected me as their king." A casual reading might suggest that this comment is hostile to monarchy because the people are rejecting God. But this is an error. God does not say that the people have rejected him *as God*. He is careful to qualify the nature of the rejection: by petitioning for a monarchy, the people have rejected God *as their king*. But God does not insist on being a king.

What he does insist on is being *God*. These are two very different things. Why, then, does God make this comment about the people rejecting him as king, if not to denigrate monarchy? He does so in order to soothe Samuel's feelings by providing an explanation for what the people have done. It is obvious that the people have rejected something. If not Samuel, who or what *have* they rejected? God supplies an answer: the people have not rejected Samuel, but rather have rejected *theocracy*—the idea that God should be king.

God continues to manage Samuel's feelings when he says, "As [the people] have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you" (1 Sam 8:7). God is here manifesting empathy to Samuel by drawing a parallel between their situations. God cannot call up such empathy with respect to the people's demand for a king because God is not bothered by this demand. Instead, God turns to a different topic that *does* bother him: the people's persistent tendency to abandon him and worship other gods. The parallel between the people's infidelity to God and their behavior towards Samuel lies in the fact that in both situations the people are not treating their leaders as the leaders wish to be treated. God wishes to be worshipped, but the people forsake him; Samuel wishes to be accepted as a theocratic ruler, but the people demand a king. The nature of the parallel is the feelings involved. But although God empathizes with Samuel by displaying his understanding of Samuel's emotions, he does not agree with Samuel's judgment that the people behaved wrongly when they asked for a king.

(ii) God's second strategy in dealing with Samuel's resistance to monarchy is to *persuade* Samuel that the people's wish for a king is reasonable – not made impulsively,

foolishly or without due consideration of the pros and cons. God sets this strategy in motion when he tells Samuel to “warn [the people] solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.” (1 Sam 8:9). If the people, being warned, reiterate their demand for a king, Samuel cannot resist on the ground that they are making the decision rashly or without due deliberation.

(iii) Finally, God uses his *authority*: he simply instructs Samuel to grant the petition. To drive the point home, God repeats the command, first at the beginning of the conversation and then again when God tells Samuel to warn the people. God’s reiteration of the instruction further emphasizes the fact that God is not opposed to monarchy. It also illustrates God’s concern that Samuel, being hostile to the idea, must be induced to go along with the people’s wish. Even if Samuel detests the idea, he will undertake the actions necessary to appoint a king if God so commands.

(b) After receiving his instructions from God, Samuel convenes the people and solemnly warns them of all the oppressive things that a king will do to them (1 Sam 8:10-18; quoted above).¹⁹ This text is often seen as a definitive expression of the Bible’s anti-monarchical tradition. But it is not hostile to monarchy as form of government:

(i) Samuel dislikes monarchy and unhappy that the people have demanded a king. Even though God has done his best to assuage Samuel’s feelings, Samuel never brings himself to display a positive attitude about the idea. Even after the selection of Saul as king, Samuel cannot really bring himself to be enthusiastic. He continues to blame the people for rejecting theocratic rule (1 Sam 12:12). As for himself, the most that he can say with respect to the monarchy is that he will pray for the people—not because he likes

¹⁹ See Mark Leuchter, “A King Like All the Nations: The Composition of I Sam 8, 11–18,” *ZAW* 117 (2005): 543–58.

the idea of kingship but rather because he would be sinning against God if he did otherwise (1 Sam 12:23). Given Samuel's attitude, it is hardly surprising that he would express a negative view of monarchy when describing that institution to the people.

(ii) Samuel is speaking to the concept of monarchy *in general*—and is in fact offering a worst-case scenario of maximal royal powers. He is not discussing the specifically Israelite form of monarchy. As discussed above, the constitution of ancient Israel contained checks and balances which limited the king's power to abuse the people. Accordingly, even if the warning to the people were critical of some forms of monarchy, it would not necessarily be unfriendly to the monarchy in ancient Israel.

(iii) Although Samuel's comments about the ways of kings are negative in tone, there is a reason why he does not mention the positive attributes of monarchy: these have already been articulated by the people in their petition, are obviously known to the people already, and do not need to be repeated.

(iv) Samuel's warning is certainly an indication that monarchy has flaws. But all systems of government have flaws. The relevant question is whether the flaws of monarchy are worse than the flaws of the other systems. As described above, the author argues that despite its flaws, monarchy is better than the alternative forms of national government.

(v) The fact that the people opt for monarchy notwithstanding Samuel's warnings about its consequences indicates that in their judgment monarchy must be a beneficial form of government. The fact that the public after full disclosure elect monarchy as a form of government is certainly something that counts in its favor.

(vi) The text provides an answer to complaints people might make under actual kings. If someone objects that the king is oppressing them by excessive taxation or is wasting public money, the answer is that the people were warned that this would be the consequence of opting for monarchic government. Having insisted on a monarchy in the face of these warnings, the people should not be heard to complain if things predicted in the warning come to pass.

(c) When presenting Saul to the Israelites, Samuel says that the people did an “evil thing in the eyes of the Lord” when they asked for a king (1 Sam 12:17). Noting that it was harvest time, Samuel calls on God to send thunder and rain in order to show the people the evil they have done. God delivers a thunderstorm which threatens the harvest. The people all say to Samuel, ““Pray to the Lord your God for your servants so that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king” (1 Sam 12:19).

If any text from Genesis to 2 Kings is anti-monarchic in spirit, this is the leading candidate. Yet even this text is not hostile to monarchy.

(i) Note first what Samuel does *not* say. He does not say that kingship *itself* is wrong or evil. On the contrary, this text specifically endorses kingship. Samuel makes these remarks during an assembly that he himself has called to “renew the kingship” (1 Sam 11:14). During that assembly Samuel assures the people that they are getting exactly what they want—a king—and one, moreover, who is sanctioned by God: “See, the Lord has set a king over you” (1 Sam 12:13). This comment is hardly anti-monarchic in spirit.

(ii) Samuel’s comment that the people did an evil thing in asking for a king can be understood on psychological grounds. His criticism of the people’s call for a king reflects

his continuing resentment flowing from the people's rejection of him and his sons. But while this may be understandable from a psychological point of view, it is no reason to reject kingship as an institution.

(iii) Although God sends a thunderstorm at Samuel's request, he does not thereby manifest agreement with Samuel's characterization of the people's demand for a king. God sends the storm for a different reason: not to blame the people for asking for a king, but to make it clear that the transition from theocracy to kingship is not a license for idolatry. Samuel makes this point near the beginning of his farewell speech (1 Sam 12:14–15) and repeats the warning at the close: "Be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, *both you and your king* will be swept away" (1 Sam 12:24). In other words, the permission to institute monarchic government is conditional on maintaining fidelity to God.

(iv) In this context, the statement that the people have committed an evil in requesting a king is a way of stressing the idea that they are *on probation*. Their request for a king is evil if the demand for a king is an excuse for worshipping foreign gods. God is watching them; and if after crowning a king they return to idolatry, he will not hesitate to take away the benefits that kingship provides. If the people reject God, then God will remove the prosperity and security that come with kingship, just as a thunderstorm threatens to ruin the harvest. But this point is not intrinsically hostile to kingship; it is rather a way of emphasizing the need to maintain religious purity under this new form of government.