

# **THE ASSAULT ON KINGSHIP IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION:**

## **SEEDS OF A REVOLUTION**

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### **I**

In his very fine work, *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired*, Benson Bobrick declares that the translation of the bible into the vernacular and its dissemination by the printing press inspired a revolution in 17th century England on several levels. Once people could read the bible in their own language and see what it said, they felt encouraged to make their own decisions on the great issues of religion and life. An open bible fostered discussion about church authority, which ultimately paved the way for the emergence of constitutional government, which, in turn, evolved into democracy in America. Combined with the new science of astronomy and global exploration, the messages in the bible began to open the minds of people. In particular, English people became increasingly unhappy with their kings, and certain biblical texts, combined with the Protestant insistence upon the universal priesthood of all believers, led them to articulate liberal ideas. Puritan clergy increased this dissatisfaction by their fiery preaching and their deep self-identification with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible when it came to expressing judgment against the kings of the land. Those who held to the supreme authority of scripture called for the rights of conscience, free discussion, and an unrestricted press. Thus, the bible in general promulgated the belief in the equality of all people.<sup>1</sup> Bobrick is not the first to make such claims, but his book is the latest and a very clear defense of the argument that the bible laid the foundation for many of our modern assumptions about social justice and human rights. Let us consider the message of the biblical text itself, and see what raw biblical passages those English intelligentsia read three centuries ago, which led them to assail the institution of kingship.

### **II**

In the past generation of scholarship many excellent works, too many to cite, have assessed the social-political evolution of kingship in Israel. Among the many valuable insights they have offered to us is the realization that our biblical text is far less concerned with reporting the actual social, political, and economic details of state formation in

Palestine than it is in providing a very subjective religious commentary on those events from the perspective of the later monotheistic authors.

In their recall of the past, one of the motifs which was central for the theological historians was the importance of the prophets or the spokespersons of Yahweh. Such people spoke an authoritative word from Yahweh and could stand in judgment over the kings and leaders of the people because of their divine authorization. Their critique of kings became very meaningful in the Babylonian Exile, as religious intelligentsia looked back and sought the reasons for the destruction of their people and the state. The reason often given was the folly and oppression by kings. Had the kings listened to the prophetic representatives of Yahweh, the results of history could have been different; but the kings did not listen, and exile resulted.

When we read the memory of the Deuteronomistic Historians, who recalled the events of 1200 BCE to 560 BCE, we must remember that we are reading an idealistic vision by scribal intelligentsia who had the courage and vision to speak of an alternative reality to the political system of their age.<sup>2</sup> It is their vision which inspires us today, not the actual political realia of the ancient Israelites. The great ideas of Israel, not their social institutions, speak to us.<sup>3</sup>

Deuteronomistic Historians and theologians not only generated a history in Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, they also collected together the prophetic oracles during the Babylonian Exile and beyond, and their selection of particular oracles and possible generation of new oracles reflected their commentary on the pre-exilic world. Kings and priests were targeted for their religious and social sins which led to the ultimate fall of the monarchies of Judah and Israel.

Likewise, in the epic literature of the Yahwist and the Elohist (written down in the exile) we also discover a critique of the institution of kingship and an affirmation of the equality of all people. This critique is conveyed in subtle and symbolic ways in narratives which are crafted in brilliant polyvalent fashion; that is, they communicate many different meanings in addition to their critique of kingship. Often we have observed those other meanings and slighted the anti-royal sentiment.

When we turn to the legal tradition, the same warnings are in order. The legal corpora which we observe in the biblical text are not really the direct laws by which everyday courts functioned. Rather, they were an on-going and developing commentary on how justice should be administered in Israelite society in the opinion of religious scribal intelligentsia.<sup>4</sup> The fact that those codes may not have been used does not diminish their rhetorical value as religiously inspired visions of a just and fair society functioning under the rule of a gracious deity.

Consideration of these narrative, prophetic, and legal texts should unveil for us the realization that the biblical tradition contains a criticism of kingship which goes well beyond anything in the ancient Near East. To be sure, the biblical texts envision an ideal king, a messiah, who will come someday. But we should not let that cloud our vision. Many texts carry an implicit critique of the institution of kinship and its ideological underpinnings, while other texts recall an abrasive criticism of particular kings.

That these texts became part of the authoritative religious canon of Judaism and Christianity is significant, because they provided passages that average people could read. They planted the seeds of protest against authoritarian rule and played a role in the eventual demise of kings. After the printing press was invented by Gutenberg and great numbers of printed bibles were made available for average people to read, the revolutionary nature of these texts could be made available to a greater number of common folk. Let us consider some of those passages which may have inspired and still may inspire egalitarian concepts in the minds of people.

### III

In the Deuteronomic Reform Law Code we find legislation designed to limit the power of the king in Deut 17:14-20. Although the issues addressed by this law are not broad in their scope, nor do they provide the kind of rights for the common people which we in the modern era would wish to observe; nonetheless, it limits the power of kings in regard to matters of royal self-glorification. That fact that a law can even exist which attempts to limit the power of the king is revolutionary for the ancient world.<sup>5</sup> Nothing comparable may be discerned in other ancient texts. In fact, one would have to wait until the 13th century CE Magna Carta in England to find a comparable notion that royal power should be limited in some way. The text reads as follows,

14When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me," 15you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community. 16Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, "You must never return that way again." 17And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. 18When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. 19It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, 20neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendents may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.

The biblical author seeks to remind us of Solomon, who acquired many horses and many wives, as well as selling some of his people to foreign nations such as Tyre and Egypt. Solomon represented the evils of kingship, despite the fact that he gave Israelites a Temple and an era of national greatness. Solomon also had to be confronted by a prophet for his religious and social abuses according to the biblical narrative.

If these laws in Deut 12-26 were first written down in the time of Josiah in 622 BCE, and if they were the "Book of the Law" discovered in the Temple and read to Josiah, one can imagine the impact upon that young king. He was chided not to imitate the actions of his ancestor and predecessor Solomon. Even more dramatically, he was admonished to have a copy of this law made for his own personal reading, so that he would be reminded of what constitutes legal justice. The copy should be made in the presence of levitical priests, perhaps to insure that the entire code was copied. What is most revolutionary is the assumption that the king is subordinate to this law. In the ancient world kings portrayed themselves as the mediators of the lawcodes given directly to them by the gods; usually the sun god Shamash did this in Mesopotamia. Hammurabi is portrayed as receiving his lawcode from Shamash, and this gives the code special authority. In reality, the ancient kings were the authors of the codes, or they at least directed their scribes to generate these codes as a statement of their ability to rule the people. In this biblical text, however, the Deuteronomic reformers have cast an image of a lawcode which comes from God and is specifically binding upon the king also. What we must appreciate is the principle that such limitation may be put upon any king in the first place. Such a notion would become foundational for those early theorists of democratic thought in the 17th and 18th centuries CE.

Furthermore, an even more radical statement says that the king should not exalt himself above other members of the community, which implies that he stands before divine law as an equal to other people. The power of this statement cannot be underestimated. Not only is the king under the law, but he is equal to other believers who stand under the Law of God. This resonates with other texts in the Hebrew Bible which speak of human equality.

In the Deuteronomistic History we may observe additional texts which demonstrate a critical stance over against the ideology of kingship. Some of these come from the Deuteronomistic Editors who brought the diverse traditions together in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, so the texts are contemporary with the law limiting the power of kings in Deut 17. As such they tell us that Deut 17:14-20 is not an isolated text, but it reflects an ideology in the minds of the Deuteronomistic Historians.

The speeches of Samuel in 1 Sam 8 and 12 are recognized as editorial creations which reflect the theological agenda of the Deuteronomistic Historians. Like the law in Deut 17 they comment unfavorably on the absolute power held by kings, and they imply that a good king is one whose authority is limited by law and the prophetic word.

1 Sam 8:10-18 is a speech presented as an address given by Samuel to dissuade early Israelites from seeking a king. In subtle fashion it rehearses the activities which later kings, especially Solomon, would undertake that would oppress people. The implication is that these things should not be done by just kings. Samuel warns how a king will take young men and place them into the military (where they most likely will be killed fighting the superior force of a foreign army), and he will take other young men to work his farms and make his war implements (thus using them as virtual slaves). The king will take young women to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers in his palace (and potentially become objects of his sexual avarice). The king will seize produce from fields and vineyards, debt slaves from the people, and animals from the herds. Eventually even the free people will be reduced to become debt slaves of the king. This language clearly reflects the judgment oracles of the pre-exilic prophets, especially Amos, and it reflects the

historical experiences of many people from the period of the Divided Monarchies. In 1 Sam 12 Samuel gives his farewell address which includes historical memories and warnings. In particular, in 1 Sam 12:14-15, 20-25 Samuel warns the new king, Saul, and the people that God will punish them, if they do not obey the law. Thus, king and people both stand under the law and the prophetic word.

Both texts appear to be Deuteronomistic rhetoric designed to complement the law in Deut 17 which calls for the limitation of the powers of the king. To say that the king is under the authority of the law and the words of the prophets, both of which come from the deity, is a revolutionary religio-political assumption in the ancient Near East where kings were considered to be divine or semi-divine. The 7th and 6th century BCE cry of the Deuteronomic reformers against the institution of kingship reminds us of the Greek revolt against city tyrants in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE in mainland Greece and Ionia.

#### IV

The most significant text which speaks of human equality, especially in reaction to the so-called superior status of kings is found in Gen 1:26-28. In this text God is said to have made both the man and the woman (not just the man, as some people seem to think) in the divine "image" and "likeness" and given them the power to "rule" and have "dominion" over the world.

26Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." 27So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

In the ancient Near East terminology such as the "image" of the god or the "likeness" of the god were metaphors used to characterize the king, especially in Mesopotamia, where the king was the representative of the gods upon the earth. Literally, the terms meant statues, and the implication was that the king was the visible "likeness" of the deity upon the earth. Likewise, the king was said to "rule" or have "dominion" over both the world and his people as it was given to him by the gods. The powerful implication of this biblical language is that now the man and the woman, who symbolize all of humanity, are said to be kings (and queens). The old concepts are radically democratized by the biblical text, for now all human beings are said to be in the image of God. This is a major shift in ideology, for it moves away from old traditional royal ideologies to a new egalitarian one in which the common people are elevated to the status of the king and given not only royal status but perhaps even the old mythic semi-divine status once accorded to kings.

(Such appears to be the implication of Ps 8, a text related to Gen 1, which speaks of people being a only a little less than God or the gods.) Perhaps such a new reconfiguration became possible in the exilic and post-exilic era for Jewish intellectuals, particularly the priests, once their own institution of kingship had disappeared.<sup>6</sup> This gives tremendous dignity and responsibility to all human beings regardless of social distinction. Their responsibilities entail protection of the land. They are not to struggle with the created order, but they are to struggle to protect the created order. Previously, such was seen to be the task of kings. Now such dignity and responsibility is attributed to all human beings.<sup>7</sup> Contrawise, the special position of power and privilege held by kings is accordingly undercut.

This theme is furthered in Gen 2 where the man and the woman are placed into the garden. The creation of garden was another prerogative of Mesopotamian kings who brought plants and animals from all over their empires and placed them into special royal gardens. The metaphor of the king's garden is applied also to the king's rule over his empire, for the king turns the entire land into his garden by wise rule. In Gen 2 Yahweh is clearly the king who creates such a garden for divine pleasure, but then Gen 2 also attributes some ruling function to the man and the woman as representatives of all humanity. The man names the animals and thus engages in an important creative function, even though scholars debate as to the degree to which this makes the man a co-creator with God.<sup>8</sup> His naming of the animals, however, at least signifies his importance in ordering the garden, which makes him appear to perform a function similar to the role of kings as gardeners for the gods. If we take the image from Mesopotamian political mythology, we may metaphor Yahweh as the king, or we may view Yahweh as the high god and the man (and woman) represent the king on earth.

Critical scholarship assumes that the account in Gen 2 is older than that of Gen 1. In its original form Gen 2 may not have had the idea of portraying the man as a king, but rather as a being who lives in harmonious relationship to Yahweh and works with Yahweh. However, when the later text in Gen 1 was added by Priestly writers in the Babylonian Exile or beyond, the democratizing of royal epithets in Gen 1 makes the reader more prone to see the image of the garden in Gen 2 as a royal park, Yahweh as the king who creates the garden, and the man (and woman) as sharing in those royal attributes of creation and rule, especially in the animal naming process. If the suggestion in the previous paragraph is correct, then Gen 1 may lead the reader to view the scene in Gen 2 as follows: Eden is the royal garden or the world, Yahweh represents the pantheon of Mesopotamian gods, and the man and the women rule the garden on Yahweh's behalf functioning like the Mesopotamian king.

These are all powerful statements to make in the ancient world where the assumption of the great cultures is that the king (or pharaoh) is either divine, as in Egypt where pharaoh was Horus and the son of Osiris, or a representative of the gods who could be adopted as divine, as in Mesopotamia. Now the biblical text declares that everyman and everywoman are equal to the king, and obviously equal to each other.

Texts which speak of average human beings as kings and queens have an indirect critique of kingship, even though that critique might be rather strong. A number of these may be found in what has been called the Primeval History of Gen 2-11, the work of the Yahwist from either the pre-exilic or exilic period.

In the ancient Sumerian King List there are a number of heros who lived before the flood, who lived for thousands of years, and who functioned as kings over the ante-diluvian peoples. The biblical text responds with its own list and ante-diluvian figures, the two lists of the descendents of Cain (Gen 4:17-25) and Seth (Gen 5:1-32). (Interestingly enough both lists contain the same names, perhaps implying that we are the descendents of both the bad Cainites and the good Sethites, which means we are a combination of good and evil.) But for our purposes it should be noted that none of the biblical personages lived more than a 1000 years; only Methuselah came close with 969 years. The point of the biblical author is that these personages died "young" because they were not divine or semi-divine kings, as the Mesopotamians claimed. The youngest of the Mesopotamian heros died at 36,000 years. Mesopotamian heros, who were kings, lived so long because they were semi-divine. The subtle undercurrent in the text is that later Mesopotamian kings shared at least in the semi-divine status, even if the longevity were lost. In response, the biblical text declares that the ante-diluvian personages were mortal and died "young." Furthermore, the biblical personages were not kings, but apparently pastoralists. From this perspective the biblical text is undermining the ideology of kingship by denying the royal and semi-divine status of the so-called earliest kings.

The ending to the biblical account of the flood contains critiques of Mesopotamian kingship. This is true of both the Yahwist ending in Gen 8:21-22, which promises that Yahweh will never destroy the world again, and the Priestly conclusion to the expanded flood narrative in Gen 9:1-17 which reiterates intensely God's promise not to flood the world. The entire biblical account of the flood appears to be a parody on Mesopotamian beliefs in many ways, especially the narratives about Ziusudra, Atrahasis, and Utnapishtim—the various Babylonian Noahs. But these endings critique Mesopotamian kingship in particular ways.

1) The Mesopotamians engaged in complex religious rites at the New Year Akiti or Akitu festival, led by their priests and the king, to avoid another flood. By these rituals they gave strength to Marduk, the god of Babylon, to defeat the power of chaos, the evil goddess of water, Tiamat, every year and thus avert the destruction of Babylon by floods. The possible re-enactment of this drama which may have featured the king annually in the role of Marduk gave tremendous psychological legitimation to the king as the representative of the divine realm. When the biblical narrative declares that a flood will never happen again, it makes the Babylonians and their king look foolish with this superfluous ritual. 2) The hero of the flood in one account, Ziusudra, is a king. His reception of the gift of immortality for surviving the flood further adds credibility to the divine status of the king. (Atrahasis and Utnapishtim also receive immortality in their versions of the account.) In the biblical account, however, Noah is not a king and he receives no immortality after the flood; rather, the blessing of God is for all people—the curse on the ground is removed (Gen 8:21) and people are enabled to eat meat (Gen 9:2-4), as well as the promise of no more flood. This further debunks the status of primordial heros who could be seen as ancient kings.

The symbolic story of the building of the tower of Babel in Gen 11 is another anti-royal account. The sin of the tower builders is their desire to storm the heavens and make a name for themselves, which symbolically means that they seek to invade the divine realm and become immortal like the gods. Thus, they would avert the destruction of another flood sent by the gods, or they can avoid being scattered by Yahweh, as the text declares in v. 4. Put in other terms, the sin of the builders is tremendous pride, the desire to be like the gods, which in the opinion of biblical authors is the sin of the Mesopotamian kings.

Mesopotamian kings considered it one of their chief duties to build temple ziggurats in their cities. Especially great ziggurats were built by Ur-Nammu in Ur (2000 BCE), Hammurabi in Babylon (1750 BCE), Nebuchadnezzar I in Babylon (1100 BCE), and Nabonidus in Ur, Babylon, and Haran (550 BCE). Mesopotamian ziggurats were cosmic mountains which reached to the heavens, and the worshipping individuals—the king and priests—who could build and ascend such mountains had their authority on this world legitimated by such activity.

In response to such Mesopotamian imagery and obvious architectural propaganda, the biblical author painted a story of human pride and divine punishment to ridicule such Babylonian pretensions to power and self-proclaimed divinity. Yahweh comes down to the tower, the ziggurat, the cosmic mountain, and scatters the builders by confusing their language. Yahweh comes down to view the tower not because he lost his bifocals, but because the tower was too small to be seen from the heavens. This is humorous satire by the biblical author on how truly insignificant the so-called great works of the Babylonian kings really were.

Thus, the Primeval history contains powerful symbolic narratives which function with many levels of meaning. One of the several important motifs which run through the narratives is the critique of kings, and especially the arrogant claims of kings in Mesopotamia.

## VI

Direct criticism of kings may be found in narratives inspired by the prophetic movement as well as some of the prophetic oracles. Chronologically these texts are older than the narratives of Gen 1-11, but the prophetic texts were not written down until the exile. Needless to say, we cannot allude to all the prophetic accounts wherein a prophet challenges a king, for that is an outstanding motif which permeates the biblical narratives. But some accounts are truly worthy of special attention.

In Exod 1:15-21 we have the account of the midwives who defied pharaoh and refused to kill the baby Hebrew boys. Traditionally, we have assigned this narrative to the epic cycle called the Elohist, which scholars have sensed has affinity with northern prophetic traditions.<sup>9</sup> This powerful narrative reflects the theological agenda and emotions of prophets willing to criticize the kings of Israel for their abuse of people and the subsequent destruction they brought



upon the nation. The tyrant in this passage is called the "king of Egypt," not "pharaoh" as in Yahwist epic, for the author wishes the audience to think of their own kings.

15The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,  
16"When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." 17But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. 18So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" 19The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." 20So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. 21And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

This is an incredible story of civil disobedience. Two midwives, who might be either Hebrew or even Egyptian, have the courage to defy pharaoh. Midwives might be counted among one of the lower classes of society, and pharaoh in Egypt is accorded the title of god—the incarnate Horus. They are also women in a man's society. Such a gap in status is awesome. But the midwives "feared God" (v. 17), and this enabled them to have the courage to defy pharaoh. Would that Christians in the past two thousand years have had the fear of God to make them refrain from genocide.

Not only do the midwives disobey pharaoh, they play him for a fool to his face. They slur the ethnic identity of Egyptians before pharaoh, when they should be quivering with fear before him. But they fear God, not the king of Egypt. Egyptian women are weak, they say, unlike the Hebrew women who give birth and presumably must already be out in the fields working, so that the midwives cannot find them. (Their strong newborn babies are probably making bricks, too!) For the biblical author to portray such arrogance before the divine pharaoh in narrative form is remarkable for any culture in that ancient age. Furthermore, the king of Egypt is portrayed as a fool, for he believes the women. Secure in the delusion of his divine status, he assumes that no mere mortal, especially a woman and a midwife, would dare lie to him. But then such is the nature of tyrants, according to the biblical text, they are fools who wallow in the folly of their pretentious power.

Finally, we must remember that the account uses the expression "king" not "pharaoh," so that the biblical audience would sense that their own kings also receive the brunt of this theological sarcasm. It has been suggested that the Elohist tradition had a strong sense of obedience to God rather than kings and those in power. This would make the Elohist tradition an ethic of civil disobedience, a remarkable intellectual tradition to locate in the first millennium BCE.

The immediate cycle of Moses traditions contains a subtle commentary on the nature of kings and the real presence of divine power. Moses' biography moves progressively through five stages: 1) he is born of slaves, 2) he is raised in the palace, 3) he identifies with the slaves and goes to the wilderness, 4) he returns to the palace to confront the tyrant, and 5) he frees the slaves and takes them to the wilderness where they find God on a sacred mountain. This narrative pattern reacts against what must have been a popular folklore pattern about a hero common in the ancient

world. We suspect this, because Sargon the Great, ruler of Akkad in Mesopotamia, told the pattern of himself in 2300 BCE. He was 1) born in the palace at the city of Kish, 2) exiled to the wilderness by being placed in a basket which floated in the Tigris River until he was saved, and 3) upon raising an army of Semites in the wilderness, he returned to free Sumer from the tyrannical rule of Lugal-Zagessi. Sargon's propaganda was used to enamor him to the Sumerians he ruled, since he was a Semite. The biblical author appropriated the baby in a basket motif and applied it to Moses<sup>10</sup> to make a powerful theological statement.

The Moses tradition adds two new stages—1) Moses is born to slaves, and 5) he ultimately goes with the people to find God in the wilderness. The typical hero tale would have the hero born of royal blood and be exiled at birth, so that after the time of maturation in the wilderness, the hero returns to claim what is rightfully his and defeat the evil tyrant who exiled him and killed his parents. Home for the hero is the palace. But in the biblical story the hero's home is with slaves and ultimately with slaves in the wilderness at Sinai. For ancient Near Eastern people the abode of the gods is symbolically located in the "cosmic mountain," a Mesopotamian ziggurat or a grand Egyptian temple. For some ancients the abode of the gods would be the palace of the king. Both city temple and palace were the "navel" or center of the universe (depending upon your politics!). But in this new narrative format the biblical author symbolically maintains that God is not found in the king's palace or the priests' temple in the urban centers of wealth and power. God is found in the wilderness at the only true "cosmic mountain," Sinai, and God is surrounded not by the powerful elite but by real people, freed slaves. This Moses narrative provides a continuation of the critique of kings found in Exod 1. Again, in subtle narrative fashion a tremendous critique is laid at the feet of kings by the biblical authors.

## VII

There are other texts which recall a prophetic spokesperson criticizing the activity of a particular king, usually of Judah or Israel. We find such narratives about prophetic personages in the Deuteronomistic History as well as many prophetic judgment oracles in the prophetic corpus (which was edited by the Deuteronomic theologians). For our purposes only a few of these narratives and prophetic oracles can be mentioned.

Already in the pre-monarchic period we have an account which criticizes kings. In the period of the judges, Abimelech (Judg 9:1-57) attempted to make himself king over Israelites. Abimelech killed seventy of his brothers to insure his hold upon the throne (which made him unpopular at future family reunions). But Jotham, the youngest, escaped and uttered a parable (Judg 9:7-15) and a sermon (Judg 9:16-20) as an abrasive critique of Abimelech's kingship. In his parable the trees sought to find a king to rule them, but after being turned down by the olive tree, the fig tree, and the grape vine, the lowly and worthless bramble bush (Abimelech) accepted rule and then threatened to spew forth fire. Such was the ridicule of Jotham not only for Abimelech, but for the king-making process and kings in general.

The first king of Israel, Saul, found himself not only attacked by Samuel, but disowned (1 Sam 15:1-23). Saul failed to kill all of the Amalekites and their cattle, so Samuel "unmade" Saul as king, just as he had "made" him. Important in this account and other Samuel narratives is the theological concept that prophets "make" kings and speak an authoritative word to them. Elsewhere in the ancient world prophets might advise kings, but they did not make them and disown them. Samuel chose both Saul (1 Sam 9:1-10:16) and David (1 Sam 16:1-23) according to the biblical author, because he had a commission from Yahweh to make these men kings. God thus directed the king through the prophets and the prophetic word.

David, too, incurred the wrath of another prophet, Nathan, when he acted with the unbridled power that so often typified the actions of men once given the authoritarian powers of kingship. After having seduced or raped Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, David had Uriah killed and took Bathsheba as his wife. Then entered the prophet with another anti-royal parable (2 Sam 12:15) which symbolized David as the rapacious herdsman who stole the poor man's single sheep and butchered it for a meal. Unlike most of the kings who would follow him, David repented, and thus affirmed the ideology of the biblical authors concerning the religious authority of the prophet over the king. David is subsequently seen as superior to many of the other kings, because he could humble himself before God, and the prophet!

Jeroboam I was confronted by a "man of God" while standing by the altar in Bethel (1 Kgs 13:1-10). The "man of God" cursed the altar, caused Jeroboam's hand to wither, and then cured the hand (a rather generous act under the circumstances). The narrative is hauntingly similar to the confrontation of Amaziah the priest by Amos (Amos 7:10-17) some 170 years later,<sup>11</sup> although the story in 1 Kgs 13 may have been influenced by the Amos account when the Deuteronomistic History was generated in the late 7th century BCE. The image of a prophet storming into the royal sanctuary and confronting the king during ritual, which probably was an activity which legitimated the personal authority of the king, is one of powerful courage and also assumes the authority of the prophet over the king.

A truly dramatic scene is the appearance of Elijah before Ahab to condemn him for seizing Naboth's vineyard. This plot was hatched by the Phoenician princess and high-priestess of Baal who was married to Ahab and who was totally unconcerned with Israelite understandings of property. Naboth obeyed Israelite custom and refused to sell Ahab his ancestral property, which offended Jezebel, whose ideology was that the land of all the people was the feudal fief of the king and liable to royal disposal. The familial property of Naboth was seized after Naboth was unjustly accused of blasphemy and executed (1 Kgs 21:1-16). Elijah confronted Ahab and uttered an oracle of doom against his dynasty (1 Kgs 21:17-24). Ahab repented, but only part of the oracular judgment was withdrawn by God. This narrative portrays the prophet not only standing in judgment over the king but also as a spokesperson for the economic value system of pastoral Israel over against some form of merchantilism apparently advocated with the presence of the Phoenician political representatives in Israel.<sup>12</sup>

Many examples could be cited from the prophetic corpus wherein prophets indicted kings for their sins of oppressing the poor and sponsoring the worship of foreign gods. Often kings are indicted along with priests and other government officials as the prophets bewail the oppressive behavior of the "leaders."

In the 8th century BCE Hosea refers to the bad leadership of kings in several oracles. In Hos 5:1-2 we hear and indictment of both priests and the king,

1Hear this, O priests! Give heed, O house of Israel! Listen, O house of the king! For the judgment pertains to you; for you have been a snare at Mizpah, and a net spread upon Tabor, 2and a pit dug deep in Shittim; but I will punish all of them.

In Hos 8:4 a brief critique with profound implications is uttered, "They made kings, but not through me; they set up princes, but without my knowledge." This brief statement undercuts the entire ancient Near Eastern understanding of the king as a representative or an incarnation of the deity. Hosea declares that the kings of Israel become kings by human design and not even with divine approval; certainly divine presence does not reside in them. Such a statement guts the whole ideology undergirding the institution of kingship in the ancient world. In Hos 10:3-4 the prophet attributes words to the people which certainly reflect his feelings about kings,

3For now they will say: "We have no king, for we do not fear the Lord, and a king—what could he do for us?" 4They utter mere words; with empty oaths they make covenants; so litigation springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.

This particular translation attributes v. 4 to Hosea, so that the prophet describes kings as speaking mere words and empty oaths. The powerlessness or shallowness of kings is emphasized here. Hosea contains strong language against kings which would be recalled by later prophets and ultimately the Judeo-Christian tradition as a whole.

Isaiah makes critical references to the folly of the king and his royal counselors. But in Isa 1:10 he is particularly nasty when he addresses the rulers as though they were the "rulers of Sodom," an obvious allusion to corrupt leadership from the past. In Isa 7:15 he tells Ahaz that as king he "wearies" both humans and God. Such language from a court prophet may reflect the license that a court prophet could have had when addressing the king, but its preservation for all time in our written text provides a constant reminder that the prophet of God could stand in judgment over the king. Truly the king's power was limited according to the prophetic witness.

Jeremiah, in particular, was extremely bold and abrasive in his rebuke of contemporary kings. To the kings of Judah, and perhaps Zedekiah in particular, he says in Jer 21:12,

O house of David! Thus says the Lord: Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed, or else my wrath will go forth like fire, and burn, with no one to quench it, because of your evil doings.

For king Jehoiakim Jeremiah had the following oracle in Jer 22:18-19.

18Therefore thus says the Lord concerning King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah: They shall not lament for him, saying, "Alas, my brother!" or "Alas, sister!" They shall not lament for him, saying, "Alas, lord!" or "Alas, his majesty!" 19With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried—dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

This particular bit of invective came after Jeremiah described the righteous behavior of Josiah, the father of Jehoiakim, in judging the cause of the poor and needy (vv. 15-16). For over two thousand years Jews and Christians have heard Jeremiah declare that a king deserved the burial of an ass because of his unjust treatment of poor people. Is this not a text that could come to inspire revolution against kings and the creation of a democratic society?

Ezekiel's judgment upon the shepherds (or kings of Israel and Judah) in Ezek 34:1-10 furthered the rhetoric of Jeremiah and the previous prophets against kings. The shepherds or kings were metaphored as eating their sheep, the people, rather than protecting them (v. 3). Yahweh opposes the shepherds (v. 10) and promises to deliver the people from the hands of their kings. A much later generation could be inspired by this passage to overthrow the institution of kingship. Also, his oracle against the king of Tyre (Ezek 28) might be construed as adding to the general criticism of kings in the prophetic corpus.

Though there obviously are passages in the prophetic corpus which speak of good kings, and especially an ideal king who will come in the future (messiah), I wish to stress the presence of these negative comments upon the institution of kingship. They are uttered by the prophets, because the prophets believed that the kings failed in their responsibility to serve the people as true representatives of Yahweh. The prophetic oracles combined with the Deuteronomistic narratives give us the image of a prophet proclaiming a word from God which is to be regarded as superior to the authority of the king himself. The prophets have attacked the very assumptions upon which kingship, and divine kingship especially, are rooted. The biblical worldview separates the king from the divine, so that the king is not God, as in Egypt. But not only is God higher than the king, so also is the prophetic word, spoken by another human being. Thus, another human being can represent God to the people and claim to have a higher authority than the king. Once these prophetic oracles and stories were proclaimed, it would only be a matter of time before people figured out the implications and deduced that perhaps they might be well to do away with kings completely. Of course, the prophets themselves would not have considered the elimination of kingship. The first millennium BCE was not ready for that social-political advance. But their message would pave the way for such ideas someday.

The prophetic critique of kings and the institution of kingship was rather unique in the ancient Near East. Other prophets, such as those at the ancient Mesopotamian city of Mari in the middle of the second millennium BCE, gave oracles which chided the king for his failure to attend to the shrine of the deity in some particular city or the failure to renovate a temple. But Israelite prophets were more radical in their critique, attacking the very assumptions of divine kingship and the concomitant right to rule people with absolute authority. Both the pre-exilic prophets who spoke these words and the exilic and post-exilic scribes who recorded and expanded them in our prophetic works exhibit a deep intellectual assumption concerning the finitude of the institution of kingship, which appears not to be

shared by any of their contemporaries in the ancient Near East and can only be paralleled by similar rhetoric out of later classical Greece.

## VIII

In the New Testament we find comparable concepts, but they reside in the texts in a more subtle fashion. The reason for this was the need of early Christians in the 1st century CE to spread their message among the masses and not to provoke the authorities to persecute them on this issue. Being persecuted for confessing Jesus as messiah and savior and refusing to worship the Roman emperor was a sufficient reason to die in the arena, but they did not wish to provoke the state for other reasons. Their willingness to oppose Roman law on certain issues is evident, such as Paul's advice to Philemon not to punish the slave Onesimus and thereby to defy Roman slave laws. But they were not about to engage in wholesale critique of the government in the manner of the Hebrew Bible prophets. First of all, they believed that Jesus would return shortly, and he would bring judgment down upon the oppressive Roman Empire. Second, they had not the power to effectively change their society, least of all remove kings and create a democratic society. They were the powerless people of the empire, and that is why the Christian message appealed to so many of those powerless folk. Early Christianity provided a hope for power to powerless people on another level of reality. Nor did they have the conceptual apparatus to envision a democratic society. That would come in time.

Having said this, I must confess that if you wish to discover a prophetic voice assaulting the prerogatives of kings, you need look no further than John the Baptist. He spoke against Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 BCE to 39 CE. Herod married the former wife (or mother-in-law according to Josephus) of his deceased brother, Philip, who was named Herodias. As a Jew he could or even should marry the woman, if she had no sons; but she did, so the marriage was illicit by Jewish standards. John the Baptist criticized him for that and probably for the typical kind of economic oppression that client kings of the Romans so often wreaked upon their own people. Because of his prophetic indictment John lost his head to the machinations of Herodias and her dancing daughter (whom Josephus calls Salome) (Mark 6:14-29, Matt 12:1-12, Luke 3:19-20, 9:7-9). Herodias manipulated Herod as Jezebel had power over Ahab, which then makes John parallel with Elijah once again in keeping with his other symbolic gestures and life style. But for our purposes it is worth noting how even John the Baptist in his ministry went up against the power politics of his age and condemned a king.

Jesus addressed the issue of how his followers ought to relate to kings. The saying, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's," is recalled in Mark 12:17, Matt 22:21, and Luke 20:25. Though historically Christians have taken this as a straightforward imperative to divide up one's obligations appropriately between church and state, the original context of the saying by Jesus may have had negative overtones. In essence, Jesus may have been telling his disciples to give no more to the government, and Caesar, than the state deserved. God had to be put before Caesar, and given Jesus' assumption about how much of our life was owed to God,

perhaps very little of life was to be left for Caesar and other rulers of that ilk. Jesus may have meant only that rebellion against Caesar should not be undertaken, but that all other meaningful aspects of this life fell under the guidance of God.<sup>13</sup> "Jesus' words set a limit on the legitimacy of the state" for obedience they owed those in authority.<sup>14</sup>

In other passages Jesus can be quite critical of rulers and leaders of this age whose time is limited before the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus also told his disciples not to lord it over each other as the rulers of this world did. In Mark 10:42-44 Jesus describes the relationship Christians were to have, and he contrasts it with the way of kings and rulers.

42"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. 43But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44and whoever wishes to become first among you must be slave of all." (cf. Luke 22:24-27).

As with the Hebrew prophets Jesus, too, maintained a critical stance over against kings.

When Christians spoke of Jesus as "Lord," they used an important political term taken from the language of that age. The Greek word, *kurios*, used by Christians to confess Jesus was also a political term used to describe the Roman emperor. It could be equated with the Latin title, Caesar. When Christians used the term for Jesus, they stepped on the prerogatives of Roman emperors. When Christians said there was no other "lord" under heaven whereby people are saved, they defied the religious-political associations made with the Roman Caesar. For Roman emperors wanted to be viewed as divine and also as saviors of the people. The Greek word for "savior," *soter*, was also a term used by Hellenistic kings in the Near East and Roman emperors, as well, to describe their roles in relation to the people whom they ruled. When Christians declared that these terms applied only to Jesus and no earthly ruler, they engaged in an act of civil disobedience by denying to the Roman emperors the honorific titles and adulation they demanded from their subjects. The refusal to call Caesar "lord" and pinch a bit of incense to burn in respect of his divinity is what earned many Christians a fast trip to the arena in those early centuries. To use the words *kurios* and *soter* for Jesus was a revolutionary act. Christians thus functioned indirectly as prophets condemning the arrogance of "kings."

Some Christians might appeal to Paul's discourse in Rom 13:1-7 about obedience to the authorities as an indication that Paul was not as critical of the government as Hebrew prophets had been. Christians have appealed to this passage when they condemn civil disobedience by other Christians in our modern age. But that reading fails to appreciate the sarcasm behind Paul's observations. He calls for obedience observing that the authorities are a terror to those who are evil (vv. 3-4), and he recommends paying taxes and giving respect. But we know that Paul also expects Jesus to bring the world to an end, and those very same Roman authorities will be the target of judgment and punishment on that day. Paul, like other Christians, probably recognized that until that time when God would judge the evil rulers of this world, those rulers at least prevented chaos in the world, and that was beneficial to the spread of Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Paul's Christian audience is powerless, and to encourage them to resist the government would be to send them forth in an act of self-destruction.

Paul probably believes that Christians should work with the government in the same way that they are to love their enemies also—not because government leaders are good, but because loving them might win some of them for Christ! We must not forget that the emperor at the time Paul wrote Romans was Nero, and he probably viewed Nero as a tyrant, though he does not say it directly.<sup>16</sup> Nor should we forget that his letter is written to people in Rome, who live under the very nose of that emperor. Nor has Paul ever seen this congregation; this letter is his "letter of introduction" to them. Paul, of course, will be politically astute about what he says in this letter, and he will not encourage his listeners to engage in foolish actions that would lead to their own self-destruction. Not too long before this letter was written, some Jews were expelled from Rome, perhaps because of controversies concerning the teachings of Jesus. Were his letter to fall into the wrong hands, his Roman Christian audience would suffer greatly. Thus, we must be careful in using this passage too strongly in our discourse about Paul's understanding of the relationship of Christians to those in authority or the modern ethical question of the Christian's obedient relationship to contemporary governments.

Though the New Testament literature is primarily interested in proclaiming the message and actions of Jesus, especially the universal significance of his death and resurrection for the salvation of all people; nonetheless, we still encounter significant images of prophetic critique of kings and emperors. This is impressive, since the authors assumed the imminent return of Jesus and therefore did not feel constrained to address social and political issues as directly as did the Hebrew prophets. The Christian assumption is similar to that of the Hebrew Bible. If all people stand before God as equals by virtue of their sinfulness and subsequent redemption by Jesus, then distinctions between the ruled and the rulers are inconsequential. Nowhere is this stated better than by Paul in Gal 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In time this concept would help translate into one of the many babbling brooks that would flow into the river of democratic thought.

## IX

For many centuries Christians would accept the rule of kings and even speak of the divine right by which they ruled. As with the acceptance of slavery, Christians did not at first realize the implications of their monotheistic faith. In part, a society has to be ready for revolutionary thought to transform itself into common social praxis. European society would not be ready to realize and actualize the biblical critique of kings and class systems until the last few centuries. Even more importantly, the radical concepts found within the biblical texts had to be made available for reading to a wider range of Christian believers, and this would take the invention of the printing press and the willingness of educated Christians to translate the bible into the vernacular languages that many more might read it. Such conditions did not exist until the 16th century and beyond.



Along the way there were Christian visionaries who sensed the radical implications of the prophetic message and the teachings of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament. There would be religious orders which would forsake the political and economic structures of this world to create a more humble and just society of their own. There would be Christian theologians, mystics, and other reflective thinkers who would sense that the ultimate implication of the biblical message was a society free from kings, classes, and economic oppression. But too often they could not obtain a hearing from the Christian masses, and their insights were lost in the crushing onward flow of history. Though they might be canonized as saints occasionally, and sometimes burned at the stake as heretics, their beliefs were regarded as too idealistic for the practical everyday world. Sometimes a two-kingdom theory would safely relegate their vision of society to an ideal Christian utopian vision, the ideal life of the church, or a reality to be fulfilled only in the afterlife, while the real world was to function with the hard, practical ethics of old—ethics hardly changed from the time when pagans ruled the world. At those times when idealistic visionaries tried to create egalitarian societies—peasants' movements in the Middle Ages, Hussites and Anabaptists in the early modern period, and so many other Christian experiments—they were silenced by the sharp sword of the "Christian" civil authorities (Catholic and Protestant alike) who saw them as a threat to social order. Only in the modern era have the Christian idealists bequeathed their legacy of equality to actual social-political entities, the modern democratic states.

#### Footnotes:

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3 Eckart Otto, "Of Aims and Methods in Hebrew Bible Ethics," *Semeia* 66 (1994): 162.

4 Otto, "Aims," p. 165; and Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley, *The Transformation of Torah from Scribal Advice to Law*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, vol. 287 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield, 1999).

5 George Ernest Wright, "Deuteronomy," *Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols., ed. George Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954), 2:441–443; Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, trans. Dorothea Barton (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), pp. 118–120; and Anthony Phillips, *Deuteronomy*, *Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ., 1973), pp. 120–122, all stress particularly the revolutionary nature of this legislation.

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7 Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 55-60; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, trans. John Scullion, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), pp. 151-161; and Karl Löning and Erich Zenger, *To Begin with, God Created . . .*, trans. Omar Kaste (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press/Glazier Press, 2000), pp. 108-111.

8 Vawter, *Genesis*, p. 74.

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13 Floyd Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 235; Dennis Nineham, *St. Mark*, *Pelican Gospel Commentaries* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), p. 316; Larry Hurtado, *Mark* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 181; and Lamar Williamson, *Mark*, *Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), pp. 219-221.

14 Hurtado, *Mark*, p. 181.

15 C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), pp. 244-249; William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), pp. 173-174; and Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, *Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), pp. 203-207.

16 Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 356.