

A Parable in Two Episodes

Israel, Samuel and the desire for a king

Samuel's life was drawing to a close, and his sons were proving themselves useless. Faced with this very real dilemma, the children of Israel, alas, took matters into their own hands. The elders laid their terms before the old man: 'Appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations' (1 Sam. 8:4). Samuel, grieved at their demand, prayed to the Lord, who told him to do as Israel asked. Israel have not rejected you, the Lord explained; they have rejected me:

Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them (1 Sam. 8:7-9).

Samuel faithfully warned Israel of the consequences of appointing a king, but Israel, refusing to listen, repeated their demands:

No! But there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles (1 Sam. 8:19-20).

Samuel repeated this to God, who told him, yet again, to carry out Israel's wish: 'Obey their voice and make them a king' (1 Sam. 8:22).

Long before, God had made provision for Israel to have a king when, in due time, they would be settled in the land (Deut. 17:14). Even so, he laid down the law: they were never to copy the nations in their religion (Lev. 18:3; 20:23-26; Deut. 12:30; 18:9). This command he would later repeat through the prophet (Jer. 10:2). Israel, however, would insist on having their way (Jer. 2:25; Ezek. 20:32). Abijah, king of Judah,

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(hypocritically) challenged Jeroboam and Israel: ‘Have you not driven out the priests of the LORD, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made priests for yourselves like the peoples of other lands?’ (2 Chron. 13:9). God, through Jeremiah, could complain:

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?
But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jer. 2:11-13).

How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me and have sworn by those who are no gods (Jer. 5:7).

Although these warnings and condemnations do not specify kingship, God always intended Israel to be different to and separate from the surrounding nations. The root problem was that Israel wanted a king to be like the nations. They saw what ‘worked’ for the pagans, and wanted the same for themselves. God would have none of it.

The result? Although the divided nation would have some good kings – a handful in the southern Judah, but none in the northern Israel – by copying the world, the people of God were heading into inevitable disaster.

Saul, David and armour to fight Goliath

As David prepared to fight Goliath (1 Sam. 17), Saul urged the young man to try and then use his armour and his sword. David initially conceded, but, after a few preliminary trials – clanking about in the unfamiliar paraphernalia – he soon gave up the idea, refused to use Saul’s armour, and reverted to his trusty staff and sling with five pebbles. And what was the outcome? The Philistine may have laughed in derision, but it wasn’t long before he was laughing on the other side of his face. Indeed, it wasn’t long before he never laughed again.

So, what are the weapons of our warfare?