

8. The Emergence of the Monarchy

Arguably the most significant component of Israel's theocratic decline was the nation's call for a human king during Samuel's rule as judge. This development showed more than any other the nature and extent of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness to Yahweh and resulted in the disastrous shift in Israel from a true theocracy to a human monarchy.

- The way in which the judges functioned made it absolutely clear that Yahweh was King in Israel. The covenant had established the nation's unique identity and relationship with God as son to a Father. Israel was subject to Yahweh alone, and its human leaders had always served within this framework. William Dumbrell comments: "*The role of the judge... being episodic, non-transferable, and non-predictable, is antithetical to dynastic kingship*" (Covenant and Creation).
- The sons of Israel well understood that their judges were covenant mediators (whether acting as spiritual prophets or military deliverers) and not human rulers in the conventional sense. This is precisely why they asked for a king.

Many scholars have understood Israel's petition in a positive light, viewing the monarchy temporally as the best solution to the social and religious anarchy of the post-settlement period. However, the biblical narrative – not to mention Israel's theocratic constitution under the covenant – leaves no doubt that this was a negative development.

- a. The emergence of the monarchy brought the theocracy to its low point: Both Samuel and God Himself understood that Israel's call for a king represented its rejection of Yahweh as King (cf. 1 Samuel 8:6-8, 10:17-19, 12:12-17). This rebellious attitude toward God's lordship would later find its pinnacle expression in Israel's rejection of the incarnate Lord (John 19:12-15).
- b. Israel's demand for a human king effectively constituted an act of treason against the Lord of the covenant, and yet it was entirely according to divine plan:
 - 1) At the heart of the Abrahamic Covenant was the promise of a royal line of descent. The name changes associated with Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob all implicated the prophetic truth that kings would come forth from the patriarchal root (Genesis 17:5-6, 15-16, 35:9-11). The royal dimension of the covenant household was later localized in Judah's line in accordance with Jacob's prophetic blessing (49:8-10).
 - 2) And God Himself indicated the eventual emergence of the monarchy when He revealed to Moses instruction concerning the sort of man who should serve as king in Israel (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).
 - 3) But the greatest proof of divine intent behind the monarchy is that which the two observations above implicate, namely *the ultimate purpose of the Israelite kingdom in God's larger program of redemption*.

Like the creational kingdom centered in Eden, the Israelite kingdom was preparatory and promissory. It portrayed and represented in a typological way God's true and ultimate kingdom, but for that very reason was not that kingdom. The creational kingdom had God exercising His sovereign rule through man, the image-son, and so it was to be with the Israelite kingdom. In a sense, Israel's judges had performed that intermediary function during the early centuries of the theocracy (ref. again 1 Samuel 8:4-6), but the emergence of a king was a necessary step in the history of Israel if the Israelite theocracy were to fulfill its typological role.

This is perhaps most evident in the intimate connection the Scripture makes between David and Jesus Christ. David is the focal point of the royal aspect of Old Testament messianism, and David's typological contribution as king over the covenant household obviously depended upon the existence of the monarchy. Without a monarchy in Israel there could be no David, and without such a king or kingdom there could be no valid typological correspondence between Israel as covenant kingdom and the true kingdom as realized in Jesus Christ.

In the matter of the monarchy the biblical principle is again highlighted that the things men do for unbelieving and self-seeking reasons still work in God's hand toward the realization of His own larger purposes. Whether at the level of individuals, nations, or collective humanity, the Lord fulfills His eternal designs, not apart from, but through the free determinations and operations of men. *Natural circumstances and sinful desires motivated Israel's request for a king, but this alteration of the theocracy was a timely and critically important development in the upward movement of salvation history.*

- c. And so Israel's demand for a king was met with divine approval. Though it amounted to a treasonous act of unbelief, Yahweh would grant His covenant son its king. But Israel was also to understand the implications of its demand.
 - 1) The Lord made sure to communicate to His people His great displeasure with their request; by seeking a human king they were testifying to their rejection of His rule over them. And this rejection, in turn, signified their effective rejection of the covenant itself. For the covenant had established a kingdom where Yahweh was Father-King, so that any deviation from the covenant's prescribed theocratic form constituted an injury to it.

That Israel was effectively rejecting the covenant is evident in the people's repeated insistence to Samuel that they wanted to be like the other nations around them (ref. 1 Samuel 8:4-5, 19-20). Israel's unique identity and privileged status as "son of God" were bound up in its distinction from the other nations of the earth (cf. Deuteronomy 7:6-8, 14:1-2). By desiring to be like those nations, Israel was despising its privilege and rejecting its identity. Once again Israel was proving that it would not be Israel.

- 2) But obtaining a human king carried another implication, expressed by God under the descriptive phrase, *the procedure of the king* (1 Samuel 8:7-9). By means of a series of parallel proclamations, Samuel showed that the procedure of earthly kings is grounded in self-promotion (vv. 10-18). Royalty involves superior distinction and such distinction conveys authority and prerogative. And prerogative in the context of the human condition insures that earthly dominions are always consumptive and exploitative. Whatever may be the altruistic aspirations and commitments associated with it, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Implied in Samuel's affirmation of the procedure of the king – a manner of ruling that he importantly applies indiscriminately to all human sovereigns – is the fact that Yahweh is not such a king. Because of who He is and the nature and scope of His dominion, God is neither self-serving nor consumptive and exploitative. Samuel's point was that the benevolent and just lordship Israel had experienced and taken for granted under Yahweh would be lost under a human king. To reject Yahweh's rule was for Israel to put itself under a yoke of utilitarian oppression.

- d. Immediately following Samuel's declaration to the people of what their future would be like under a king, the narrative turns to the identification of Saul as the first of Israel's monarchs (9:1-12:25).

- 1) Saul was a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and the text's description of him spotlights its intent to show him eminently suitable to the kingship *based on the human sensibilities of natural wisdom*. In addition to having a striking and commanding physical presence, Saul was a man of valor and a great warrior in Israel. He was everything people would naturally seek in a ruler (ref. 9:1-2, cf. also 10:23-24).

Yahweh had revealed to Samuel that He would identify the man He had chosen to serve as Israel's king, and the circumstance of Saul's search for his father's stray donkeys provided the occasion for that disclosure. Saul sought out the seer Samuel to help him locate the lost donkeys; Samuel used that encounter to reveal to Saul God's intention for him (9:3-27).

Saul was to be Israel's king, and Samuel affirmed this choice by anointing him with oil before sending him back to his father's house. But Yahweh also affirmed Saul's appointment by giving him His Spirit and then openly testifying to that endowment by causing Saul to prophesy with His recognized prophets in the sight of the people (10:1-13). God would give Israel a human king, but that wouldn't set aside His own sovereign lordship over His covenant people: As it had been with His judges all the way back to Moses, Israel's king was to be the Lord's *undershepherd*, leading His people in His name and for His sake by His Spirit (ref. Psalms 23, 28:9, 95:6-7, 80:1, 100:1-3; cf. also Ezekiel 34:1ff).

- 2) God had promised a royal seed to Abraham in connection with his great-grandson Judah. The covenant house of Israel would be characterized by a regal aspect, but prior to this episode with Saul there was no indication of a particular king or the exact nature of his reign over the theocratic nation. But now Yahweh revealed that Israel's corporate "sonship" would find a corollary in His individual king. This ruler would follow in the steps of the judges by exercising the Lord's rule over His people in His name and on His behalf. In that way the basic nature and structure of the theocracy would be preserved. But unlike the judges, Israel's king was to be endowed with a kind of personal sonship by virtue of his royal status. In every culture, filial relation is the normative means for communicating royal standing and authority, and thus ancient rulers were commonly regarded as sons of a particular national deity. So it was that Yahweh's kingship would also now be realized through the rule of His human son.

The concept of Israel's king as Yahweh's son becomes explicit with David and the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:12ff; 1 Chronicles 22:6-10, 28:1-6; cf. Psalm 89:18-28), thereby providing a crucial development in messianic revelation. Moreover, the intimate connection between Father and regal son is suggested by God's bestowal of His Spirit (10:9-10). While the Spirit's presence was basic to the judges' rule, this endowment is invested with further meaning when applied to Israel's kings as *sons* of God.

- 3) Samuel's anointing and Yahweh's investiture with His Spirit provided the foundation for Saul's presentation to Israel and the nation's embrace of him as king (10:17-11:15). Most notable about this spectacle is the ground of Israel's acknowledgement and embrace of Saul. The text introduced him in terms of his temporal attributes, and now the reason has become clear: The sons of Israel regarded Saul and received him as their king on the basis of these attributes – how he appeared to them (vv. 23-24).

After his presentation to the people, Saul went on to solidify his recognition and acceptance as their king by his response to the Ammonite siege of Jabesh-gilead (11:1-11). This was an important step in the early administration of his reign, first because the kingship was an entirely new phenomenon in Israel's history and the nation needed confidence in it. But there were also individuals in Israel who were suspicious of Saul's reign and their suspicion threatened to undermine his rule and the unity of Israel under it. But, after decisively handling the crisis in Jabesh-gilead, there was no doubt in Israel that Saul was their man (11:13-15).

- 4) Saul's triumph had won the hearts of Israel, but Samuel tempered their exultation with a reminder of what Saul's reign signified and the proper role of the kingship under the covenant (12:1-25). Saul was legitimately Israel's king, having been anointed by both Yahweh and His prophet. Nevertheless, the kingship resulted from the nation's rebellion and would not alter the fundamental covenant truth that Yahweh was King in Israel.

God's granting of a king didn't in any way change either the nature of the covenant or the fact of Israel's great wickedness and guilt before Him (vv. 13-19). The "son" had despised the Father and the covenant, but Yahweh would preserve His covenant relation with His people *for His own name's sake* – for the sake of His integrity and faithfulness to His promise. At the same time, the Lord would not be mocked in His faithfulness: From that day forward, His covenant son must renounce his rebellion, cling to Him in single-minded devotion and serve Him with a whole heart. The God of unbounded *hesed* would not leave the guilty unpunished (vv. 20-25).

- e. Chapter 12 closes with Samuel's solemn warning that Yahweh would not tolerate treachery by His covenant son. Disobedience would be rewarded with destruction, and Samuel pointedly applied this truth to both nation and king. Yahweh would not spare even His chosen, anointed ruler – a fact immediately attested in Saul's reign; just as He warned, the Lord swept away His disobedient king (13:1-15:35).

The specific reason for God's rejection of Saul was his willful violation of the priesthood in connection with a previous prophecy of Samuel concerning a future event at Gilgal (10:8). When Samuel's arrival at Gilgal was delayed and Saul saw his fighting men departing from him in fear of the amassing Philistine forces, he determined to take matters into his own hands and present a burnt offering to the Lord, hoping thereby to gain His favor and support in the ensuing battle (13:5-9).

Soon after, Samuel arrived and declared to Saul that he had committed a grievous sin for which he would be sorely punished. Saul's kingdom was the administration of Yahweh's reign, so that the perpetuity of his kingdom depended upon his fidelity to Israel's covenant God (v. 13). He had violated that obligation by his presumptuous act of unbelief, and therefore the Lord determined to strip the kingdom from him and give it to another – a man after His own heart (v. 14).

Saul's deposition was a settled matter, and his rejection would later be highlighted through two further acts of selfish imprudence (14:24ff, 15:1-9). In the latter instance, God directed Saul to go out in battle against the Amalekites and utterly destroy everything that belonged to them. But motivated by self-promotion, Saul determined to spare the Amalekite king and the choicest booty in order to parade the fruit of his conquest before the sons of Israel. Once again Samuel confronted Saul in his self-serving disobedience and reaffirmed to him that the Lord had rejected him as king. Plead as he might, Yahweh would never relent (15:24-35).

God's choice of Saul and His promise to establish his kingdom were not inconsistent with His purposes in salvation history. He selected Saul because he epitomized *Israel's* ideal: Saul was a man after Israel's heart and the Lord wanted His people to learn what sort of man is suited to rule on His behalf. So also Samuel's declaration to Saul regarding his kingdom was not disingenuous (ref. again 13:13). Though Saul's lineage alone precluded his being Israel's true king, that didn't alter Yahweh's promise to grant an enduring dominion and dynasty to the royal son who served Him as a man after His own heart.