

“Give Us A King!” – Politics Enters the Hebrew Bible

The discussion focuses on a close reading of I Samuel 7:15-8 -- the first text quoted below -- in its context. In this dramatic passage, biblical Israel demands of Samuel, its great leader, that he give them “a king such as those in other nations.” A scholarly consensus holds that “other nations” refers not to the sacral monarchies of the great empires -- Egypt and Mesopotamia -- but to the small polities in biblical Israel’s region, such as the Ammonites, Midianites and Edomites. I approach this text in the spirit of political theory, reading the narrative as an exercise in biblical political thought. I claim that the story addresses a problem posed by the entry of political authority into biblical Israel’s polity, which is governed solely by God through charismatically appointed agents, of whom Samuel is among the greatest. Indeed, Israel was founded by a covenant with God as its exclusive ruler – in Hobbes’ words, God’s was “a reall, not a metaphorical kingdom.” Why and how does it come about that biblical Israel has kings at all?

Religious, political and scholarly discourses have long interrogated this multiply ambiguous and puzzling passage. Why does God immediately (perhaps reluctantly) grant Israel’s request, while telling Samuel that “they have cast [Me] aside from reigning over them”? If kingship, even in part, displaces divine reign, why does God allow it and, indeed, not punish Israel for demanding it? Or are the king’s powers, of which God commands Samuel to “warn” the people, a punishment, because tyranny is intrinsic to kingly rule, from which neither kings nor God will respond to Israel’s pleas. Or are these powers the onerous but legitimate attributes of kings, indeed of any state? Does Israel’s call for a king “as in all the nations” resemble its many lapses into idolatry, as God seems to tell Samuel? Is kingship a kind of idolatry with no proper place in God’s polity? If so, why does God, though seeming to disapprove, instruct Samuel to accede to Israel’s demand? Is God’s permission for kingship reluctant or angry? If so, does this mean that kingship – or political authority in general – is a debased condition into which God’s chosen people fall by their own mistaken choice? Does the text convey a sense of the division between divine and political authority – as often claimed by medieval interpreters arguing on behalf of monarchs and popes? Does it anticipate Jesus’ radical teaching -- “Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 21:22; Mark 12:17)? Does the story adumbrate issues of church and state which arise much later?

From the long history of commentary on this passage, I draw briefly on the contest for its authority in the great debate on monarchy during the long English 17th century, and on Hobbes’ reading of the episode as political theory. However, my main goal is to offer a reading of the biblical narrator’s implicit political theory of kingship’s origins and nature.

I assume that the text’s narrator and audience share an understanding of biblical Israel’s history – hence awareness of that history is required to interpret it. Like some biblical scholars (Robert Polzin, others), literary scholars (Robert Alter, others) and political theorists (Michael Walzer, others), I consider the biblical text as the product of a Final Redactor -- persons or schools who shaped diverse, earlier materials into coherent literary wholes, despite remaining inconsistencies and abrupt changes of register. In this approach, the biblical text is read largely without regard to “source analysis”, with minimal reference to its diverse origins (Elohists, Priestly, Yawhist, Deuteronomist).

The talk focuses on I Sam. 7:15-8, No. [1] of the biblical materials following. It will also draw on some others, especially Nos. [2] and [3].

[1] I Samuel 7:15-8 -- Biblical Israel demands “a king as in all the nations”

7 *15* Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. *16* And he would go about from year to year and come round Bethel and Gilgal and Mizpah and would judge all Israel in those places. *17* And his point of return was Ramah, for there his home was, and there he judged [shafat] Israel. And he built there an altar to the Lord.

8 *1* And it happened when Samuel grew old that he set up his sons as judges for Israel. *2* And the name of this firstborn son was Joel and the name of the second was Abijah – judges in Beersheba. *3* But his sons did not go in his ways and they were bent on gain and took bribes and twisted justice. *4* And all the elders of Israel assembled and came to Samuel at Ramah. *5* And they said to him, “Look, you yourself have grown old and your sons have not gone in your ways. So now, set over us a king to rule us [melekh l’shaftenu], like all the nations.”

6 And the thing was evil in Samuel’s eyes when they said, “Give us a king to rule us.” And Samuel prayed to the Lord. *7* And the Lord said to Samuel, “Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for it is not you they have cast aside but Me they have cast aside from reigning over them. *8* Like all the deeds they have done from the day I have brought them up from Egypt to this day, forsaking Me and serving other gods, even so they do as well to you. *9* So now, heed their voice, though you must solemnly warn and tell them the practice of the king that will reign over them.”

10 And Samuel said all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking of him a king. *11* And he said, “This will be the customary way [mishpat ha-melekh] of the king [melekh] who will reign [y’imloch] over you. Your sons will he take and set for himself in his chariots and in his cavalry, and some will run before his chariots. *12* He will set for himself captains of thousands and captains of fifties, to plow his ground and reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and of his chariots. *13* And your daughters he will take as confectioners and cooks and bakers. *14* And your best fields and your vineyards and your olive trees he will take and give to his courtiers and to his servants [avadim]. *15* And your best crops and your vineyards he will take and use for his tasks. *16* And your best male and female slaves and your cattle and your donkeys he will take and uses for his tasks. *17* Your flocks he will tithe and, as for you, you will become [as if] his servants [l’avadim]. *18* And you will cry out on that day before your king whom you chose for yourselves and he will not answer you on that day.”

19 And the people refused to heed Samuel’s voice and they said, “No! A king there will rule us [ushphatanu]! *20* And we, too, shall be like all the nations and our king will go out before us and fight our battles.” And Samuel listened to all the words of the people and he spoke them in the Lord’s hearing. *21* And the Lord said to Samuel: “Heed their voice and make them a king.” *22* And Samuel said to all the men of Israel, “Go every man to his town.”

[2] Judges 8:22-23 -- Gideon's refusal of rulership in its immediate context

This celebrated passage, in which Gideon – one of the charismatic leaders God “raises up” to save and redeem Israel – refuses acclamation as a dynastic leader, is often interpreted to express the Hebrew bible's fundamental animosity to kingship, and taken as a positive example with which the demand for kingship in I Sam. 8 is unfavorably compared:

Judg. 8 22 The men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us [moshal-banu]—you, your son and your grandson—because you have saved us from the hand of Midian.”²³ But Gideon told them, “I will not rule [lo emshol], over you nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule [yimshol] over you.”

I dispute this reading on several grounds, among them that the narrative preceding this famous passage is widely neglected. God calls Gideon to charismatic leadership to save Israel from the Midianites (Judg. 6:11-40). Successively reducing the size of Gideon's army, God makes it clear that Israel's victories result solely from God's actions (Judg. 6:33-7:15). Having defeated the Midianites, Gideon pursues their kings [malchei, plural of melekh, king], Zebah and Zalmunna. The men of Succoth and Penuel deny aid to Gideon, who vows to destroy them both – which he proceeds to do after capturing the enemy kings (Judg. 7:16-25; 8: 4-9; 10-16). The narrative continues, leading directly to Gideon's refusal:

Judges 8:18-21 ¹⁸ Then he [Gideon] asked Zebah and Zalmunna, “What kind of men did you kill at Tabor?” “Men like you,” they answered, “they were like sons of the king [b'nei ha-melekh].”

¹⁹ Gideon replied, “Those were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. As surely as the LORD lives, if you had spared their lives, I would not kill you.”²⁰ Turning to Jether, his oldest son, he said, “Kill them!” But Jether did not draw his sword, because he was only a boy and was afraid. ²¹ Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Come, do it yourself. ‘As is the man, so is his strength.’” So Gideon stepped forward and killed them, and took the ornaments off their camels' necks.

– New International Bible, some changes by AS.

Gideon says that he would not kill the enemy's kings had they not killed his brothers, yet the defeat of the Midianites, to which the death of their kings is essential, is Gideon's mission as God's agent. His reference to the Midianite kings having killed his brothers is a complete surprise – the text tells of no such incident. Gideon seems to conduct a personal vendetta. Moreover, his destruction of Succah and Penuel (Judg. 8:10-16) has the tone of personal vengeance, not punishment for neglecting a mission commanded by God.

Why do the “men of Israel” acclaim Gideon as leader? Does their act resemble or differ from that of the elders and people of Israel in demanding a king in I Sam. 8?

[3] I Samuel 8:7 “Heed the demand of the people in everything they say to you”

God’s reply to Samuel’s distress at the demand for a king is surprising in two respects. It not only conveys God’s immediate agreement to kingship, but announces a new relationship between Israel and its leadership. Samuel no longer only conveys God’s commands to Israel, but is in this instance commanded by Israel. “Heed the command of the people...” precisely inverts the long-established, multiply repeated formula by which God commanded Moses to convey God’s commands to Israel. (See below for some examples of many). Moses alone could speak directly with God (Exod. 24:1,2) and this was the basis of his authority over biblical Israel (Exod. 20:15,16). Samuel resembles Moses in also being alone able to speak directly with God (I. Sam. 7:7-9) and in combining the roles of prophet, priest, judge and war leader. In commanding Samuel, whose career is modeled on that of Moses – and arguably Israel’s greatest leader since Moses -- to listen to the voice of the people, God announces a new balance of power between the people and its rulers. Samuel seems to accept this reversal (“And Samuel listened to all the words of the people and he spoke them in the Lord’s hearing...” v. 20, and God repeats it at the episode’s end: “Heed their voice and make them a king” at the episode’s end (I Sam. 8: 21). “Heed”, “hear”, “listen” translate an imperative -- command and obedience are implicit in the act of receiving speech.

A few examples of the formula of command that is reversed in I. Sam. 8:

Exod. 25:1,2 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for me from every person whose heart so moves him...

Lev. 1:1-3 The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them: When any of you presents an offering of cattle to the Lord...

Num. 15:17-19 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat of the bread of the land, you shall set some aside as a gift to the Lord...

Num. 35:9-10 The Lord spoke further to Moses: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you cross the Jordan...provide yourselves with places to serve you as cities of refuge...

[4] Judges 3:7-11 – Basic pattern of charismatic leadership by the “Judges” [shoftim] – the story of Othniel, the first “Judge” [shofet]*

⁷ The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. ⁸ The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim,¹ to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. ⁹ But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb’s younger brother, who saved them. ¹⁰ The Spirit of the LORD came on him, so that he became Israel’s judge [shofet] and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. ¹¹ So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died. – New International Bible

The basic schema: (1) The Israelites lapse into idolatry and sin; (2) God punishes Israel by having an idolatrous power conquer them; (3) Israel “cries out” to God in suffering and repentance; (4) God charismatically “raises up” a “judge” to save them; (5) the shofet leads in a war in which Israel’s victory is caused by God; (6) Israel lives in peace and piety for a formulaic forty years of leadership by the shofet, (7) at the end of which the shofet dies. This pattern, with variations, holds for roughly the first half of Judges, and decays in its later portions.

* “Judge” for shofet is stamped into English by the King James Version, but shoftim do not only settle disputes -- they lead in war and seem to exercise general authority. Some translate as “chieftains.”

[5] How old is Samuel when he is asked for a king, how long has he led, what is his age at death? Such information is given for every leader prior to Samuel, but not for Samuel.

I Sam. 25:1 Now Samuel died, and all Israel assembled and mourned for him; and they buried him at his home in Ramah.

This brief notice of Samuel's death is abruptly inserted during the course of the struggle between Saul and David; unlike all preceding notices of leaders' deaths it does not forward the account of Israel's history. Uniquely, no indication of Samuel's age or the length of his leadership is given, and we cannot readily infer it from the biblical text. In I Sam. 3:1 he is "young Samuel in the service of the Lord under Eli..."; in I Sam. 3:19 "Samuel grew up and the Lord was with him." There follows a long narrative of the Ark and struggles with the Philistines (I Sam. 4:1-7:1). After its end, "A long time elapsed from the day that the Ark was housed in Kiriath-jearim, twenty years in all, and all the House of Israel yearned after the Lord." (I Sam. 7:2). Samuel's magnificent leadership brings Israel to success against the Philistines and he leads during a lengthy condition of piety: "Samuel judged Israel as long as he lived" (I Sam. 7:15). When Israel demands a king, Samuel is described by both narrator and Israel's elders as "old." In appointing his sons as "judges", Samuel seems concerned with the problem of succession, as are the elders who demand a king. The "twenty years" that passed after the Ark's return, though half the formulaic forty of many "judges'" leadership, do not clearly mark half of Samuel's rule, but rather measure a phase in Israel's history. In sharp contrast with all precedents, listed below, why is the temporal frame of Samuel's career so uncharacteristically vague?

Num. 33:39 Aaron was a hundred and twenty-three years old when he died on Mount Hor.

Deut. 34:7 And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab... Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died...

Joshua 29:30 After these things, Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. They buried him on his own property, at Tinnath-serah...

Joshua 24:33 Eleazar son of Aaron also died, and they buried him on the hill of his son Phinehas... [Eleazar's age is not stated, but can be estimated since his inheritance from Aaron.]

Judg. 3:11 ...the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.

Judg. 3:15, 30 The Israelites appealed to Yahweh, and Yahweh raised up a savior for them, Ehud ben Gera... And the land was calm for eighty years. And Ehud judged them until he died.

Judg. 4:31 And the land was calm, for forty years. [After Deborah and Barak defeat Canaan; their deaths are implied by the formulaic forty years, though not explicitly recorded.]

Judg. 10:1,2 After Abimelekh, Tola son of Puah son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, arise to deliver Israel. He lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. He led Israel for twenty-three years; then he died and was buried at Shamir.

Judg. 10:3 After him rose Jair the Gileadite, and he led Israel for twenty-two years... Then Jair died and was buried at Kamon.

Judg. 12:7 Jephthah judged Israel six years. When Jephthah the Gileadite died, he was buried in his own city in Gilead. [After Jephthah's defeat of the Ammonites and the refractory tribe of Ephraim]

Judg. 12:8-10 After him, Ibzan of Bethlehem...judged Israel seven years. When Ibzan died, he was buried at Bethlehem.

Judg. 12:11-12 After him, Elon the Zebulunite judged Israel. He judged Israel ten years. When Elon the Zebulunite died, he was buried at Ajalon in the land of Zebulun.

Judg. 12:13,15 After him, Adon ben Hillel the Pirathonite judged Israel... He judged Israel eight years. When Abdon ben Hillel the Pirathonite died, he was buried at Pirathan in the land of Ephraim, in the Amalequite hill country.

continued.....

Judg. 15:20 [*Samson*] judged Israel, in the days of the Philistines, twenty years [after Samson, charismatically commissioned by God to defeat the Philistines, succeeds in doing so].

Judg. 16:31 His [*Samson's*] brothers went down, and all his father's household, and claimed him. They brought him up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father Manoah. He had judged Israel twenty years" [after Samson prays to God for strength to bring down a building on numerous Philistines and himself].

I Sam. 14-18: ...*Eli*... was ninety-eight years old ... Eli fell backward off his chair... His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man, and he was heavy. He had led Israel forty years.

[6] Exodus 18:13-26 – Moses appoints as judges “capable men from all Israel”

¹³ The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. ¹⁴ When his father-in-law [Jehthro] saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, “What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?” ¹⁵ Moses answered him, “Because the people come to me to seek God's will. ¹⁶ Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and instructions.”

¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law replied, “What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. ¹⁹ Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. ²⁰ Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. ²¹ But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. ²² Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. ²³ If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.”

²⁴ Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. ²⁵ He chose capable men from all Israel and made them heads [*roshim*] of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

²⁶ They judged [*shaftu*] the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

– trans. Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses

[7] Deuteronomy 17:14-20 -- “The Laws of the King”

14 When you come into the land that the Lord your God is about to give you, and you take hold of it and dwell in it, and you say, ‘Let me put a king over me like all that nations that are around me,’

15 you shall surely put over you a king whom the Lord your God chooses, from the midst of your brothers you shall put a king over you, you shall not be able to set over you a foreign man who is not your brother. *16* Only let him not get himself many horses, that he not turn the people back to Egypt in

order to get many horses, when the Lord has said to you, ‘You shall not turn back again on this way.’

17 And let him not get himself many wives, that his heart not swerve, and let him not get himself too much silver and gold. *18* And it shall be, when he sits upon his throne of kingship, that he shall write for himself a copy of this teaching in a book before the levitical priests. *19* And it shall be 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, to keep all

the words of this teaching and these statutes, to do them, *20* so that his heart not be haughty over his brothers, and so that he swerve not from what is commanded right or left, in order that he may long endure in his kingship, he and his sons, in the midst of Israel. – trans. Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses

Note: Religious traditions and modern scholars dispute whether vs. 14-15 are divine commands or causative predictions.

[8] Numbers 27:12-22 -- Moses requests a leader to succeed him

¹² Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go up this mountain in the Abarim Range and see the land I have given the Israelites. ¹³ After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, ¹⁴ for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes.” (These were the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the Desert of Zin.)

¹⁵ Moses said to the LORD, ¹⁶ “May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community ¹⁷ to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.” ¹⁸ So the LORD said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him. ¹⁹ Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. ²⁰ Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him. ²¹ He is to stand before Eleazar the priest, who will obtain decisions for him by inquiring of the Urim before the LORD. At his command he and the entire community of the Israelites will go out, and at his command they will come in.”

²² Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole assembly. ²³ Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the LORD instructed through Moses. -- New International Bible

[Joshua’s succession to Moses is elaborately retold in Deuteronomy 31:1-8,14-31; 34:8-12]

[9] Judges 8:33-9 – Abimelech’s failed attempt to make himself king

A long, detailed story tells how Abimelekh, son of Gideon’s by a concubine, seeks to become king and ignominiously fails. The narrative’s style is palpably contemptuous, emphasizing its anti-monarchical attitude. The story includes a parable uttered by the only son of Gideon’s seventy, Jotham, to escape murder at Abimelech’s hands (Judg. 9:8-15). Jotham’s parable condemns kingship as abhorrently parasitic and useless, in contrast with the productive and fruitful life of patriarchal shepherds and farmers

[10] In Judges a “monarchical voice” comments four times as the regime of successive, charismatic leaders decays in growing disorder

17:6 In those days there was no king in Israel. Each one did what was right in his own eyes...
[a prohibited image is set up in Yahweh’s shrine]

18:1 In those days there was no king in Israel; it happened that in those days the Danite tribe was seeking for itself a place to live, since no plot had as yet fallen to it among the Israelite tribes... [trouble ensues]

19:1 In those days, there was no king in Israel, there was a man, a Levite, living as a resident alien in the remote hills of Ephraim... [a mounting series of horrors follows]

21:23 In those days there was no king in Israel, every man did what was right as he saw it.
[the final line of Judges, reflecting on ghastly events preceding]